



Kai's Hunger (Ravenbriar #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Lily

A fresh start was supposed to be simple—leave my toxic alcoholic mother behind. But smashing my van into a tree and confronting a massive, wolf-like creature wasn't part of the plan. When I wake under the intense gaze of Kai Ravenbriar, a surge of emotions ignites within me. Hes an enigmatic figure, part of the enshrouded Ravenbriar family. But before I can delve into the tantalizing chemistry between us, Im abruptly abducted by a sadistic scientist, turning my imagined adventure into a nightmare.

Kai

Sweet Lily. The instant I catch her scent I know she's my mate. Her beauty is beyond compare. My Yucilon hungers for her. The burning need to exchange blood and perform the ritual is all I can think about. The beast in me doesn't give a damn that she's human. Doesn't care about family law. But when Lily is brutally torn away from me, it awakens my primal instinct—and I will show no mercy.

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Two years earlier. ..

Kai

I crouched behind a row of potted shrubs, their foliage offering a thin shield from the late afternoon sun. The office building across the parking lot was a cold, glass-and-steel monolith, its reflective surface catching the muted colors of a cloudy sky. The parking lot was mostly empty now, save for a few scattered cars.

I pulled out my phone and called Wyatt. "I'm here now," I said, since my brother insisted on a blow-by-blow of what was happening. I watched Patterson exit the building, a box clutched in his hands, muttering to himself.

Gregory Patterson worked at Cedar Haven, a prestigious research facility known for its cutting-edge advancements in genetic research. The sprawling campus was nestled in a serene, wooded area, its modern architecture contrasting sharply with the surrounding natural landscape. The building's sleek design was characterized by large glass panels and stainless-steel accents.

It was a place where researchers pushed the boundaries of genetic science in pursuit of breakthroughs that could reshape the future. Patterson had been a prominent figure there, a scientist with a reputation for daring theories and ambitious experiments. However, his ambition had driven him down a darker path, it would seem.

"My source tells me that Patterson has been conducting experiments that pushed the limits of genetic research to dangerous extremes."

“I’m not surprised. The bastard is mental.”

“His latest painful and cruel procedures on animals were the last straw,” Wyatt muttered.

I cursed under my breath. “Results at any cost.”

“That about sums it up.”

“So, they got rid of him. The end of their problem.”

“Terminating Patterson’s employment is the end of their problem, but I doubt he’s going to retire and move to Florida.”

I watched as Patterson shoved the box into his trunk, then got into the driver’s side and revved the engine. “A once-respected scientist now facing the fallout of his reckless disregard for the well-being of his subjects, his career in tatters, who would work with him? Hire him?”

“You think he’s a loose cannon,” Wyatt surmised. “Fuck, that could bring more trouble.”

For me, the knowledge of Patterson’s transgressions only fueled my anxiety. Patterson was no longer just a dismissed scientist; he was a rogue element with a history of unethical behavior. The thought of him lurking in the shadows, potentially seeking revenge or continuing his dangerous experiments elsewhere, would keep me awake at night.

“I should end his life right now,” I bit out. “He’s a threat to us. Always has been.”

“No, damn it,” Wyatt shot back.

“Fine, at the very least we need to monitor him.” I was tempted to disobey Wyatt. Get rid of Patterson once and for all.

“Agreed,” my brother stated.

I peered through the narrow gap between two shrubs, my gaze fixed on Patterson. Patterson’s face, visible through the windshield, was a mask of frustration, his shoulders hunched as if the weight of his recent dismissal was pressing down on him physically.

“I’ll follow, see where he goes,” I offered.

“No.” Wyatt’s voice crackled through the receiver, barely audible over the static. “You need to come home. It’s too risky to follow him now. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

I gripped the edge of the shrub, my knuckles white. I watched as Patterson glanced around the parking lot, his eyes scanning the few remaining cars with an anxious edge. When his gaze almost settled on my hiding spot, my breath caught. I sank lower, nearly flattening myself against the ground, and whispered urgently, “You’re certain? I’m already here. He hasn’t spotted me.”

“Just get the fuck out of there,” Wyatt insisted. “We’re not taking chances. We have enough problems as it is. Just come home.”

I hesitated, my eyes never leaving Patterson. The man seemed to be a storm brewing on the horizon, and my instincts were screaming that he could bring trouble down on us. The thought of letting him slip away had the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

“I can’t just let this go,” I said, my voice firm but barely above a whisper.

“Patterson’s a wildcard. If he’s got anything on us, he’ll use it. We need to deal with him before he becomes a bigger problem.”

Wyatt’s sigh was heavy with frustration. “Kai, we’ve been through this. I know you want to protect us, but I know you. You’ll want to take him out.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, not bothering to deny it. My eyes darted back to Patterson, who was now driving out of the parking lot. Soon, he’d be out of sight. Forced to let him go, I straightened and headed for my truck. “I’m coming home,” I said, my voice low and strained. “Let’s hope he leaves the area for good.”

“Your lips to God’s ears,” Wyatt replied, his tone softening just a fraction.

As I got in behind the wheel, a gnawing sense of unease settled in my chest. I knew this wasn’t over. I could feel it. I revved the engine and made my way home, but every mile felt like a betrayal of my instincts.

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Lily

I glanced in my rearview mirror. There were no headlights. No one followed me. I wasn't sure what I'd expected when I left my hometown for parts unknown. The town lights behind me dwindled to pinpricks. I gripped the steering wheel of my trusty van with excitement and attempted to ignore my rising anxiety. The deserted roads stretched ahead, illuminated only by the van's headlights slicing through the darkness. The dependable hum of the engine cruising along was a testament to its age and the miles it had traveled. The sound was a blend of steady vibrations and the occasional sputter.

The night air was alive with the whispers of unseen creatures, a symphony of nature's secrets that accompanied my solitary journey. The road was a ribbon of uncertainty, leading me away from the familiar and into the unknown. Emotions intertwined in my chest—hope for the adventures awaiting me, anxiety for the challenges ahead. The open road was my canvas, and as I ventured forth, a new chapter of my life unfurled, a story of dreams pursued and fears confronted in the solitude of the night.

Walnut Ridge, Ohio, boasted a whopping population of just over two thousand. Two grocery stores, one bank, and all of three stoplights. During football season, the entire town could be found at the local high school on Friday night cheering on the Tigers. I hadn't hated small-town life. My job at the local bank afforded me a two-bedroom apartment in the center of town, which put me within walking distance of all my basic needs. I gassed up my van once every two weeks and splurged on Saturday mornings with a chocolate éclair and a cup of freshly brewed coffee from Daisy's Café across from my building. I'd enjoyed living in Walnut Ridge.

It had been my mother's alcohol addiction that had driven me away.

I'd made every attempt to be the good daughter. I'd managed to drag my mom to rehab. Multiple times. Only to be kicked in the teeth when she'd turn around and buy another bottle of vodka. My sister Veronica wasn't much better. The two of them could often be found getting drunk together. Every Saturday night it was the same routine. And any time I tried to get them to clean up their act, a lecture was my reward.

"Why can't you be more understanding?" Grace Hall would ask, slurring her words as usual.

Of course, my mother had always coddled Veronica. She'd been the pride and joy. Everything Veronica did was celebrated. If my sister screwed up, then Mom rolled out the excuses. Grace bragged to anyone willing to listen about her gorgeous Veronica. On the other hand, I had only managed to disappoint the woman. I was too plump. "It wouldn't hurt you to lose a few pounds, dear," my mother would say. My job at the bank had even garnered criticism. Mom had expected me to go into nursing. Sure, if I'd followed in her footsteps it might've gotten me a few points, but even that would've eventually disappointed her. The ugly truth was that I would never be smart enough, successful enough, or pretty enough to please Grace Hall. She'd already had her perfect daughter when she'd given birth to Veronica. I had simply been extra baggage.

After another blowup, I had finally had enough. I gave my two weeks' notice at the bank, then began boxing up my meager belongings. When the day finally arrived, I suffered a bout of anxiety. Was I making a huge mistake? Should I stay and try and repair the broken relationship with my family? It'd been the text from Veronica asking for money—money she would only blow on booze—that had cinched it.

It would never change. I'd always be the doormat for them, unless I did something

drastic. I had deleted the text and packed up my old red minivan, then drove out of town. I had no destination, but I'd scrimped and saved for two years in preparation for the day I'd have the nerve to leave my chaotic family behind and start fresh.

My cell phone rang and I checked the caller ID on my console screen display. Mom. I counted to ten, then hit the button on my steering wheel. "Hey," I mumbled.

"Where the hell are you?"

Oh, goodie, Mom was already plastered. I considered it a sign from the universe that I'd made the right decision to leave and never look back.

"Lily!"

"I left," I answered, keeping it vague. It wasn't anyone's business. I was an adult and didn't have to get permission to change my life.

My mother cursed. "Left where? Your sister needs you. What the hell is wrong with you?"

I sighed. "Look, I love you, Mom. I'll call you when I get there."

"Damn, it—"

I ended the call. It'd been the first time I'd ever hung up on one of my mother's tirades. "God, that felt good."

As I made my way down a lonely stretch of road in the middle of nowhere, I turned up my radio, enjoying a sexy tune by Jason Aldean. My heart beating a million miles an hour, I wondered if I'd made a colossal mistake. A woman alone in the big bad world was easy pickings. After all, it was a far cry from my safe and secure

apartment. Oh, sure, Walnut Ridge had crime. The occasional teenage shenanigans, stealing candy from the minimart. Or the time my mother had gotten drunk and plowed her sedan into MaryAnn's Laundromat. That'd been a fun day. But murder, robbery, arson? Nada.

As I contemplated what to do with my newfound freedom, I didn't see the giant beast leap out in front of me until it was nearly too late. A wolf? Its fur, as dark as the night itself, absorbed the feeble moonlight, rendering it a shadowy silhouette. Powerful muscles rippled beneath its shiny coat as it moved, each leap devouring the distance between us with a blend of elegance and ferocity. Its eyes burned like twin orbs of molten gold in the darkness. As it crossed the road directly in front of my van, our gazes locked, and I felt an inexplicable connection. It stopped, stared. I screamed, then swerved to keep from hitting it. My van plowed into an enormous pine tree. The front airbag deployed, slamming into my face, sending my head bouncing off the headrest.

"Oh, God," I groaned as I lifted a hand to my cheek. Pain radiated along my face, and I had to work to catch my breath. The airbag had knocked the air from my lungs. After a minute, I glanced around. My vehicle was totaled. The entire front end was bashed in, and my windshield was shattered from a tree branch driving through it on the passenger side. Glass was scattered all over. My purse and cell phone had hit the floor. The animal. What the hell was it? Had to be a wolf, but those weren't native to Ohio. I didn't know what it'd been, but I hoped it was okay. I stared out my side window and scanned the area for any sign of it. "I didn't hit it," I mumbled to myself. I was certain of that at least. "My poor van is toast, though."

I loved animals, but the furry beast had picked a terrible night to go for a run. "Now what?" I unbuckled my seatbelt, then bent to retrieve my phone. The screen was destroyed. "This is a test," I bit out as I tried to figure out my next move.

A knock on the driver's side window startled me. I jerked my head around, earning a

sharp pain in my neck from the swift movement. A man was standing outside my window, frowning at me. His rugged strength and broad shoulders strained against the fabric of a well-worn red flannel shirt, the vibrant hue contrasting against our earthy surroundings. The shirt's sleeves were rolled up to reveal powerful forearms, each sinewy muscle well-defined. A pair of old, faded jeans clung to his sturdy legs. Messy chocolate-brown hair framed his face. Dark facial hair covered his jawline, and he had a beard that needed to be tamed.

“Are you okay?”

Where had he come from? I scanned the area for any sign of another car but came up empty. Oh, sure, a stranger standing in the darkness on a lonely stretch of road wasn't at all suspicious. “Yes, thank you.”

He pointed at me. “You don't look okay.”

I waved my phone in the air. “I'm going to call for help,” I explained, though it was a lie. My phone was, like my van, toast. “Thank you for your concern.”

He tilted his head to the side. “I can't leave you out here alone. If you like, I can wait until help arrives...”

I started to turn his offer down when my vision blurred. I shook my head, and the pain in my neck intensified. I lifted a hand to my forehead and closed my eyes, waiting for it to lessen. Instead, a blast of white-hot agony shot through me, then everything went black.

K ai

“Shit,” I groaned, yanking on the door handle. The little redhead nearly toppled into my arms. I lifted her from the wreckage and held her against my chest. Her round face showed signs of bruising from the airbag. It was the gash just above her forehead that concerned me the most. Blood dripped down the side of her fair cheek. I sniffed the air, couldn’t help myself, taking in the sweet scent of peaches and vanilla. My cock lengthened beneath the fly of my jeans. Fuck, she smelled delicious. The blood on her face tempted me to taste her, but I couldn’t. It was against family law to exchange with a human. As enforcer, it was my job to uphold that law. Still, the longer I stared at the pretty bow of her mouth, the more easily I could imagine breaking that fucking law.

I dipped my head inside the open door. The contents of her purse were scattered all over the floor, but I didn’t have time to retrieve them now. I needed to get off the road and out of sight. I’d just have to send one of my brothers back later to gather her things.

I shifted her in my arms, then took off running toward the tree line. When I found the trail I’d taken hundreds of times over the years, I ran faster. Shifting into my Yucilon form would’ve gotten me home within minutes, but that wasn’t going to happen this time. Not with her in my arms. Two feet instead of four would have to suffice.

My breath quickened as I cradled the small female in my arms, each step deeper into the forest amplifying the wild instincts simmering beneath my skin. The moonlight pierced through the dense canopy, casting a silvery glow on her delicate features. Her scent, a tantalizing blend of peaches and something uniquely her own, overwhelmed my senses, making it hard to think, hard to breathe.

My claws lengthened involuntarily, grazing the fabric of her shirt. I shuddered, a growl rumbling in my chest. The urge to claim her, to mark her as mine, surged through me, drowning out rational thought. I wanted to take her far away, to a place where no one could find us, where I could awaken her properly, without restraint.

She stirred in my arms, her soft moan sending a jolt of electricity through me. My grip tightened, the pads of my fingers trailing against her skin. I fought to control myself, but the Yucilon within me was relentless, urging me to surrender to my desires.

I paused, leaning against a tree, breathing heavily. "I need you to wake up," I whispered, desperation spreading through my chest.

She stirred again, her eyes fluttering open, meeting mine with a sleepy confusion. "What?" she murmured, her voice barely audible.

"Shh," I replied, my voice a low growl. I leaned in, my lips caressing her ear. "You're safe."

She blinked, as if trying to process my words. Her scent filled my nostrils again, and I felt my control slipping further. My jeans were too damned constricting. Fuck, I wanted to take her right here, under the moonlight, to claim her as my mate. But I couldn't, not yet.

"Home," I said, my voice rough with need.

Without waiting for a response, I resumed my journey, my steps quickening. The forest seemed to close in around us, the shadows deepening as we ventured further from the road. The animal inside me howled in anticipation, urging me to hurry, to find a place where we could be alone.

Finally, we reached a clearing, bathed in the ethereal glow of the moon. I gently lowered Lily to a bed of clovers, my eyes never leaving her face. Unconscious. And my fault.

Claws retracted slightly as I fought to regain control, but the hunger in my blood was

unmistakable.

I breathed deeply, fighting for control. Soon, a sense of calm washed over me. The creature inside me quieted, soothed by her presence.

I picked her back up and rounded a bend, then spotted home a few hundred feet ahead. Home, right. More of a compound. It'd been built into a hillside, partially hiding it from view. We'd let the vegetation grow up around it to make it difficult for outsiders to find. To make it difficult for others of my kind to find. I stopped and glanced around, then sniffed the air for any sign of threat. The only thing within miles were various forest animals. My small bundle was so still I grew concerned. Shit, at least she was breathing. The fact that she hadn't been jarred awake by my dash through the woods worried me, though. She was injured worse than I'd first thought. As I approached the door and was about to knock, it was flung open. Wyatt stood on the other side, glaring at me. Fucking terrific.

"What the hell did you do?"

"It was an accident," I bit out. "She's injured. Let me in."

My brother didn't budge. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and ordered, "She's human, Kai. Get her out of here."

I wouldn't release the female. Not even for my alpha. "It's my fault she's hurt and I want Creeg looking her over."

"Take her to a hospital and leave her. She'll be fine."

"No," I ground out, tired of the argument. "We're wasting time chatting. I won't risk her life."

The bastard only shrugged. “Why do you care? She’s not our kind.”

I rolled my eyes. “Does she look like a threat to you?”

Wyatt’s lip curled up at one corner. “Looks can be deceiving.”

Enough was enough. The female was injured because of my reckless bullshit and I would damn well see to her care. “Let me pass!”

I heard a noise coming from behind Wyatt, then Creeg came into view. “What’s going on?”

“She’s injured. I want you to examine her.”

Creeg stared at her, his gaze raking up and down her body before he waved a hand in the air. “Bring her inside,” he ordered.

“I’m trying but big brother is afraid of the tiny human.”

“I’m not afraid of her, damn it.”

I let my facial expression do the talking for me. Wyatt finally relented and stepped out of the way. “She’s your responsibility. When she’s well, send her on her way. That’s an order, Kai.”

I couldn’t give him my agreement. Something about the female called to me. I wanted to know why I was so drawn to her. As I stepped inside, all my brothers descended at once. Like the dumbasses had never seen a female before. Jesus. I was fast getting irritated by their curiosity. “Move,” I ordered the lot of them.

Their attention was centered on the female, all but ignoring me. Miggs moved closer

and lifted a hand to touch her, but I quickly stepped backward. “Do not,” I growled, baring my teeth at my younger sibling. He got the hint.

“Why do you have a human and why is she bleeding?” Miggs sniffed the air and licked his lips. “She smells amazing.”

Creeg cleared his throat. “Come on, before there’s a riot,” he muttered as he led the way to the lower level. As we entered the area that my brother used as an onsite emergency room, I brought the female to the cushioned table and placed her on top of the cool surface. She didn’t stir, didn’t so much as flutter her lashes. “She’s too still, Creeg.”

My brother got to work, taking out a stethoscope and undoing the top two pearl buttons of her blouse. He pressed the metal disc to her chest and listened to her heart. “Steady, that’s good.” Next, he lifted one eyelid and shined an ophthalmoscope into her pupil.

I was on edge. Like ready-to-claw-my-brother’s-eyes-out on edge. I didn’t like Creeg so close to the female. I knew my rising anger was uncalled for, but I couldn’t keep the growl out of my voice as I asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m checking for a concussion.”

“And?”

“I want to do a scan,” he explained, “but first I need some information.”

“Anything,” I replied.

“Was she complaining of any pain?”

“No. I saw the cut on her head. It worried me, but she didn’t seem to notice it. Then she passed out.”

He touched the back of her neck, then her shoulders and arms. He pressed his fingers along her ribcage, then lower along her legs. “I don’t think anything is broken.”

“Why isn’t she waking?”

“It might be a concussion,” he answered as he began to lift her from the table.

I stepped in his way. “I’ll carry her.”

Creeg scowled at me. “What’s wrong with you? Were you hurt as well?”

“No.” I scooped the female into my arms. “She swerved to keep from hitting me and plowed into a tree instead.”

“You feel responsible for her,” Creed surmised, as he headed for the machine that would scan her brain.

I glared at the giant monstrosity. “I hate that thing.”

“Be glad we have it. It will give us answers.”

I placed her on the table and watched as Creeg went to work. It took too long and I was getting restless. When Creeg finally turned toward me and sighed, it worried me. “Well?”

“She will recover, but she has a serious concussion. She needs to be monitored for the next twenty-four hours. Maybe longer.”

Guilt washed over me as I pressed a palm to the female's forehead. "It's my fault. I was reckless."

Creeg went to a cupboard and pulled out a sheet, then moved to cover the female before asking, "Hunting?"

"Yes, but I shouldn't have run so far." I pressed a palm against the top of her head. Her hair was such a pretty shade of red. Deep. Nearly crimson. "I'm uncertain why I was on that side of the property." I'd been drawn in that direction. At first, I'd thought it was prey that had called to me. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Our Yucilon instincts don't always listen to reason, Kai." He nodded toward the female. "She'll be okay. She just needs rest."

"And the cut?"

"It's already stopped bleeding and it's not serious enough to warrant stitches. I'll put something on it to prevent infection, then bandage it."

I let out a heavy breath and made a decision as I watched on. "I'm bringing her to my room."

Creeg had a tube of ointment in his hand, but my words stopped him from administering it to the unconscious woman. "She should stay here," he growled. "I need to keep her under observation."

I knew Creeg would take that stance. I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at my doctorly brother. "Fine, then I'm staying here, too."

He shook his head and went to work spreading the antibiotic ointment to the cut. "That's unnecessary."

I glanced around the room and spotted a padded chair at Creeg's desk. It wouldn't be very comfortable, but it didn't matter. I'd make do. "It's not up for debate."

Creeg opened his mouth, no doubt to argue further, but a moan caught our attention. I looked down and saw the female shifting around. She blinked a few times, then her gaze landed on me, then Creeg. I sniffed the air. Fear. She was completely terrified. "You are safe," I rushed to reassure her. "I brought you to my brother's clinic."

Her pretty green eyes darted toward Creeg, then back at him. "Van," she mumbled.

"It's still on the side of the road." Her fear worsened and I reached for her, taking her hand in mine. "My name is Kai. You passed out."

Creeg stepped closer and smiled. "You have a concussion and a cut on your head. Is there pain anywhere else?"

She bit her lower lip and started to sit up. I placed a hand behind her back and helped her to a seated position. She pressed a palm to her forehead. "Sore."

I quirked a brow at her. "I imagine so after hitting that tree."

"There was an animal. I swerved."

"I'm sure he's grateful for your quick thinking." Guilt washed over me. "What's your name?"

"Lily." She glanced around the room and frowned. "My purse and phone?"

"Still in the car. I'll have someone retrieve it for you."

She shook her head. "Thank you, but I should be on my way."

Creeg spoke up then. “You suffered a very serious concussion. You shouldn’t be left alone.” He paused then asked, “Is there someone we can call for you?”

Sadness clouded her pretty eyes. “No, not really.”

There was more to that, I could feel it, but I didn’t think she was up to being questioned. “Just rest, Lily,” I urged. “You are in good hands, I promise you.”

She glanced around the room, then her gaze landed on Creeg. “Where am I exactly?”

“A private clinic a few miles from where you went off the road.” Creeg reached for her arm and took her pulse. After a minute he said, “Steady. That’s good, but you do need rest.”

“What’s your name?”

“Creeg.”

Her gaze darted back and forth between them. “Creeg and Kai. Very strange names.”

I winked at her. “We’ve been told.”

Lily sighed. “Well, thank you for helping me. I wouldn’t want to think what could’ve happened if you hadn’t come along when you did.”

“You’re welcome.” Hell, she’d only been injured because of my carelessness, but I kept that bit to myself. “Do you want to rest?”

“I’m thirsty.”

My brother patted Lily’s arm. “I’ll get you a bottle of water.”

I glanced over at Creeg. “And keep everyone out.”

He nodded, then went out the door, closing it behind him, putting me alone in the room with Lily. We watched each other and I could see the apprehension in her eyes. “You are safe, Lily,” I promised her. “No one will hurt you here. You have my word.”

She scooted farther to the right, putting more distance between us. “I’m alone with strange men in a place that I don’t recognize.”

I stepped closer, and the movement didn’t go unnoticed by Lily. When I reached up and touched her cheek with an index finger, she sucked in a breath. “What are you doing?”

“Easy,” I murmured, enjoying the softness of her skin. “Did you think my master plan was to help you, then kill you?”

She tilted her head, gauging my words carefully. “I suppose you have a point.” She crossed her arms over her chest, then asked, “So, Kai, do you have a last name?”

“Ravenbriar,” I answered, inhaling her scent again. That sweet combination of vanilla and peaches was stronger now. I wanted to taste her. All over.

“Well, Kai Ravenbriar, if you do decide to hurt me, just know that I’ve been trained in self-defense. I’ll put up a fight the likes of which you wouldn’t believe.”

My blood heated at hearing her warning. Lily had no idea just how enticing her words were to a Yucilon . If she did, she would run...

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Lily

I should be getting the hell out of Dodge. Offering Kai a quick thanks, then walking right out the front door. But to where? My car's totaled. My phone's useless. And even if I could call for help, who would I phone? My mom? Sister? Neither of those options appealed. Even if they were sober, they'd treat me like a runaway child. Tell me how stupid I'd been to think I could make it on my own. No, I'd rather take my chances with the big, muscular Kai. I pressed my hand to my forehead as another frustrating thought occurred. "My van."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think it's drivable," he muttered, as he shoved a hand through the thick mass of his chocolate-brown hair. It reached just above his shoulders and the ends were lighter, as if he spent a lot of time outdoors. He had a beard, too. I'd never quite cared for facial hair, but on Kai it was ... sexy.

Stop lusty after the guy! "My things. Everything I own is in there."

He nodded. "I'll have someone tow it. Will that ease your mind?"

"Yes," I answered. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"You needed help, Lily. I was nearby."

I smiled. "Well, I'm in your debt. Who knows what could've happened out there."

"Yes, who knows," he growled, his gaze deepening as he watched me.

My breath caught in my throat. Oh, God, what's happening to me? He moved with an effortless grace, a primitive power that both thrilled and frightened me. I barely knew him, yet I felt an inexplicable pull toward him, as if an invisible thread was drawing me closer, winding tighter with every heartbeat.

My skin tingled, a delicious shiver running down my spine. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him, the intensity of his gaze making my heart race. The juncture between my thighs grew hot, a throbbing ache that demanded my attention. I knew it was wrong, that I should turn away, but my body refused to listen. "Kai," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

His eyes locked onto mine with a heat that matched the fire inside me. "Lily," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent another shiver through me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I replied, though everything felt wrong and right all at once. I leaned a little closer, until we were so close I could feel the warmth of his body.

Kai reached out and pressed his thumb against my lower lip. The contact sent a jolt of electricity through me, and I sucked in a breath, my eyes fluttering closed. "Lily," he murmured, the sound of it sending my senses down an erotic path. "You're so pretty, so soft."

Without thinking, I leaned in, my lips finding his in a soft, tentative kiss. The world around us seemed to disappear, the room and its sterile instruments fading into the background. All that mattered was the heat of his mouth on mine, the way his hands gently cradled my face.

My upper body pressed against his, and I felt him shudder, as if his control had slipped for just a moment. His hands slid down to my waist, pulling me closer, and I moaned softly, the sound vibrating between us. It felt so right, so perfect, and yet a small voice in the back of my mind screamed that it was wrong, that I barely knew

him.

But my body wouldn't get the message. Every nerve ending was on fire, my skin tingling with need. I deepened the kiss, my tongue exploring his mouth, tasting him, craving more. Kai responded with a hunger that matched my own, his lips moving against mine with increasing urgency.

"Lily," he groaned, breaking the kiss to rest his forehead against mine. "So damn sweet."

"I don't know what's happening," I whispered, my voice trembling. "I-I've never done this."

His breath was hot against my skin, his hands still gripping my waist. "It's okay," he said, kissing me all over again.

I pulled away a few inches. "Is it?" I said, my eyes searching his. "Why can't I seem to stop?"

Kai closed his eyes, his jaw tightening. "It's the same for me," he admitted.

Then his lips were on mine. The kiss was demanding, urgent, a clash of need and desire that left me breathless. His mouth moved against mine with a fierce intensity, his tongue sweeping inside to claim every inch.

I responded eagerly, my hands gripping his shoulders for support. The taste of him was intoxicating, a heady fusion of warmth and spice that left me craving more.

"Fuck," he muttered against my mouth.

My fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer. Eager and needy. His teeth grazed

my lower lip, sending jolts of pleasure straight to my core. I gasped, and he took advantage, his tongue plunging back into my mouth with renewed fervor.

Every touch, every caress was electric, my body responding to him in ways I couldn't control. The ache between my thighs grew more insistent, a throbbing need that demanded attention. I arched against him, seeking relief, and he groaned, the sound low and savage.

"Lily," he murmured against my lips, his voice rough with desire. When he finally pulled back, we were both panting, our breaths mingling in the small space between us. His dark eyes kept me prisoner. "We need to stop," he said, though his voice lacked conviction. "Creeg," he explained.

The aftermath of our kiss left me breathless, my heart pounding as I leaned into Kai. My body still hummed with the intensity of our connection, but a creeping sense of embarrassment began to take hold. What had I been thinking? I'd practically thrown myself at him.

I moved back, my face burning with the realization of what I'd just done. "I ... I'm sorry," I stammered, unable to meet his gaze. "I don't know what came over me."

Kai's eyes softened, and he reached out to gently tilt my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "Lily, you have nothing to apologize for," he said, his voice a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves.

I bit my lip as confusion began to clear away the heat rushing through me "I just ... I don't usually act like this. It's like I can't control myself around you."

He smiled, amusement in his eyes. "Trust me, I know the feeling." His expression turned serious as he added, "But you don't have to be embarrassed. Not with me."

I glanced away, my cheeks still flushed. “Uh, yeah, I don’t know what to say to that.”

Kai’s hand moved to my cheek, his thumb tucking a stray hair behind my ear. “You don’t need to say anything. It’s okay.”

His reassurance calmed me, but the embarrassment still lingered. I took a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. “I just don’t want you to think I’m ... you know, easy or something.”

Kai’s eyes darkened, and he shook his head. “Never. You’re incredible. And this,” he gestured between us, “is real. Don’t doubt that.”

I nodded, still feeling a bit awkward but comforted by his words. “Okay,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Let’s just take it slow, all right?”

“Slow, good idea,” I agreed, relieved. Despite my lingering embarrassment, the chemistry between us was undeniable.

The door opened and we both turned to see Creeg walking toward us, carrying a bottle of water. He was every bit as big and muscular as Kai, except taller. And his black hair was down past his shoulders. He was clean-shaven and wore a navy blue V-neck t-shirt and jeans. Not exactly the attire of a doctor.

Creeg handed the bottle to me when he approached. “I could give you something for the pain if you like. Over-the-counter, nothing more.”

I shook my head. “I don’t like pills, but thank you.”

He shrugged and turned his attention to Kai. “Wyatt wants a word.”

I watched the pair exchange a look and I wondered what it meant. “Who is Wyatt?”

Kai scowled as he stood. “He’s my brother. I’ll be right back.” To Creeg, he grumbled, “No one enters.”

Creeg grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, you mentioned that already.”

Kai glared at his brother, then stomped out. I was alone with the doc now. “So, this is your clinic?”

“More or less,” he answered, as he pulled the desk chair closer and sat. “You were traveling alone?”

“Yes. I live in Walnut Ridge, but I’m moving to ... well, somewhere not Walnut Ridge.”

He narrowed his gaze at me. “Needed a change, huh?”

“Starting over, actually.”

He rubbed his jaw. “You didn’t get far. You’re in Sach Valley.”

“Next town over,” I concluded. “Your brother, he didn’t have a car. How’d he get me to your clinic?”

“He carried you. It wasn’t far.”

“Oh, wow. That was nice of him.”

“Leaving you out there alone and unconscious wouldn’t have been a good idea.”

“True. So, you’re a doctor?”

“No, but I’ve been trained.”

She glanced around the room. X-ray machines, CT scanner, gauze, and needles. “But this is a clinic? Surely there’s a doctor on-site?”

“Only me,” he explained softly. “This is a private clinic, Lily. Exclusively used by the Ravenbriars for generations.”

The name, now I knew why it’d sounded so familiar. “Your family owns half the county.”

He smiled and leaned back in the chair. “It’s closer to seventy percent.”

The Ravenbriars went back for generations. As far as I knew they were the first to inhabit the area. “Geez, your family is a legend around here. People tell stories,” I informed him.

He stiffened, his smile disappearing. “What sort of stories?” His entire demeanor changed. A minute ago he’d been all smiles and relaxed. Now he appeared ready to interrogate me.

“Uh, well...” I wasn’t sure how much to tell him. Offending the guy who’d helped me seemed a poor way to repay him for his kindness. Not to mention the fact that I was alone with him.

“You’re afraid,” he murmured as he reached up and patted my knee. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention.”

I took a deep breath, then let it out. “I think I’m just jumpy.”

He shrugged. “I would be too in your situation.” He paused, then asked, “So, you’ve heard of us?”

“Yes,” I hedged, “but I don’t want to offend you.”

He chuckled. “You won’t, I promise.”

He appeared sincere so I went on. “There are rumors that your family lives in the woods. Like survivalist types.”

“Not entirely untrue. What else?”

“Oh, uh, okay. Well, that you kill anyone who trespasses on your land.”

“I see.” Creeg stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his arms over his chest. “Like anyone, we do have the right to defend ourselves, but we’re not mindless killers. I assure you.”

I felt silly even saying it. “They’re just rumors. I don’t think anyone truly puts much stock into them. Like ghost stories. Seeing is believing.”

He cocked his head to the side. “And what do you believe?”

I sat up a little straighter. “I believe people can be terrible gossips,” I answered, thinking of all the nasty whispers I’d had to endure over the years because of my mother’s drinking.

His gaze warmed as he stared at me. “And gossip hurts in a myriad of ways, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

He grinned and stood. “Then we will both try and keep an open mind, yeah?”

I liked the guy. He was kind, but also forthright. It was refreshing. “Yes, I think that’s a very good idea.”

When the door opened, we both looked up and caught Kai coming toward us. He didn’t look happy. And was that blood on his lip? “What happened to you?” I asked, instantly worried about the man I was becoming entirely too fascinated with.

“My brother and I didn’t see eye to eye,” Kai answered as he approached me. His hand came to the back of my head, touching as if he’d been doing it for years. As if he had the right. I was about to move away when he asked, “Still in pain?”

I licked at my suddenly dry lips, then replied, “A little.”

He frowned. “You’re certain you don’t want something to take the edge off?”

“No. I don’t like drugs or alcohol,” I muttered, thinking of all the times my mother’s mind had been dulled by the awful stuff.

He dropped his hand, then stepped back. “My brother is retrieving your vehicle.”

I quirked my brow and pointed at the blood on his lip. “The one that gave you the fat lip?”

He touched a finger to his mouth, then stared at the blood coating it. “No, not that one.”

Good Lord, another family member? “Just how many brothers do you have and are

they all here at the clinic?”

Kai glanced at Creeg, before saying, “this isn’t just a clinic, Lily. It’s our home.”

“Your home,” I repeated, unable to understand what that meant. “A clinic and a home all in one?”

Kai was about to answer when Creeg interrupted. “This has always been our home. The clinic sort of evolved.”

I’d never met anyone quite like them. Their way of life intrigued me. “And you all live here together? Do you get on each other’s nerves?”

Creeg laughed, but Kai didn’t crack a smile as he grumbled, “More than you can imagine.”

“Creeg, Kai, and Wyatt,” I stated. “Are there more of you?”

Kai ran his fingers through his hair. I found the action incredibly sexy. “Miggs, Trakker, and our youngest brother, Cage.”

Six Ravenbriar brothers. All living under one roof. And if the others were as good-looking as Kai and Creeg ... damn. “And here I couldn’t get along with one sibling. If I had five, I’m pretty sure I’d lose my mind. I mean, I’ve been tempted to strangle Victoria. Shoot, we don’t even live together.”

Kai quirked a brow and he moved a step back. “You would kill your sister?”

I blinked. Jeez, he was totally serious. “God, no!” I rushed to clarify. “It’s just an expression. I mean, we fight. She annoys me. But I wouldn’t kill her.”

Creeg laughed. “We get it, Lily. We fight, too. A little too much sometimes. The injuries tend to keep me busy around here.”

I reached out and touched a fresh drop of blood on Kai’s lip, then stared at it on the tip of my index finger. “Maybe it’s a brother thing. Testosterone and all that.”

Kai and Creeg didn’t respond. When I lifted my gaze they were both watching me. Kai’s nostrils flared and he moved closer. His eyes brightened from a warm whiskey shade to a brighter golden tone. “Lily,” he growled.

Creeg reached out and took hold of his brother’s shoulder and shook him. “Chill, damn it,” he ground out.

Kai jerked away. “Leave us,” he ordered. “Now.”

“I can’t do that, brother. You need to relax.”

Kai swatted his brother’s hand away, then swung around. “I won’t tell you again.”

Creeg stood his ground, clearly not about to back down. “And you aren’t thinking straight or you would remove yourself from her presence.”

Kai glared, then closed the few feet between us. “Don’t interfere, Creeg. Go.”

Creeg held his ground. “Nope.”

A sound much like a low snarl emanated from Kai seconds before he leaped at Creeg. Fists flew and I had to scramble to get out of the way. Creeg hit the floor cursing and Kai crouched over him, lifting him by the shirt and delivering a vicious uppercut to his jaw. Bones crunched. The door slammed open and a roar filled the room. Another man ran forward, his eyes glowed red and his teeth ... big, like a ... a wolf.

Oh, God. What am I seeing?

I jumped off the table but tripped over the fallen Creeg and tumbled headfirst instead. My forehead connected with something sharp on my way down. When I landed on the floor, groaning, I saw blood dripping onto the white tile. I pressed a palm over the stinging pain. When I brought my hand away there was blood coating my fingers.

“Ow,” I whimpered as my vision blurred. I tried to stand, but a big powerful arm came around my back, then another reached behind my knees.

“Lily?”

Blinking rapidly, I tried to focus on Kai’s handsome face. His voice filled with concern as he watched me with those whiskey eyes of his. I sighed. “We seriously need to stop meeting like this.”

Kai brought me to the table and placed me on top of it. He glared at Creeg. “Get your ass over here!”

Creeg jumped to his feet. I could see him moving around the room. When he approached me, he glanced at Kai. “May I?”

“Yes, but carefully,” Kai replied.

Creeg nodded, then placed a cloth over the wound in my head. “It may require stitches, Lily. Can I give you something to numb the area?”

“No.” When Creeg started to argue, I bit out, “I’ve had them before. I can handle it.”

Creeg still didn’t budge. His gaze landed on Kai. “It will hurt,” he explained.

Kai scowled down at me. “Allow him to give you something, Lily. Please,” he pleaded softly.

I reached for his hand and squeezed. “Just do it. I don’t want drugs.”

Kai sighed. “Fine.” To Creeg he said, “You will be as gentle as possible, brother. I will have your word.”

He placed his fist over his chest. “As if she were mine.”

Kai waved at him. “Get it done. The blood is making me...”

“Yeah, it’s having that effect on us all,” Creeg grumbled as he went to retrieve a tray filled with metal instruments and sutures.

“As soon as she’s finished, we’re having words, Kai.”

It was the first time that I realized the other brother was still in the room. He stood near the door with an undeniable air of authority, his stance lending to the impression that he was used to being obeyed. His powerful physique, emphasized by a fitted black t-shirt that clung to his frame, showcased impressive biceps. Straight black hair, as dark as a raven, was pulled back in a tight ponytail, accentuating the angular planes of his face. His deep-set eyes strayed toward me for a moment, brooding and intense, piercing clear through me. A perpetual scowl appeared to have etched lines across his forehead.

His gaze landed on Kai again, dismissing me entirely. Kai didn’t respond, only offered a brisk nod. The brother quietly left the room.

I watched the closed door for a few seconds. “I could’ve sworn I saw...”

“What did you see?” Kai asked in a rough voice.

“Glowing eyes and ... teeth,” I answered, as I closed my eyes and let out a heavy breath. “This has been the strangest day of my life.”

Kai

Twice. Twice Lily was injured because of me. My control had slipped when I’d seen her touch my blood. The action had wrenched my Yucilon instincts to the surface. I’d already been drawn to Lily. Her scent, like a drug-induced euphoria that I couldn’t shake. But seeing my blood against the tip of her delicate finger had cinched it. It wasn’t a blood exchange, but for me, it was enough. She was my mate. A human. Never in my existence had a Yucilon mated a human. And if my brother had his way, none of us would break that tradition.

But I knew that instincts rarely listened to reason. All I wanted to do was get her alone. Complete the ritual. As quickly as possible so she couldn’t leave me.

“Kai, I’m ready,” Creeg cautioned.

I stared at Lily. Her gaze was on me. I didn’t see fear there. She was strong. Stronger than I’d first imagined. “You’re certain?”

She nodded, then gritted her teeth. “Don’t let go of my hand,” she muttered.

“I’m right here,” I promised as I brought her hand to my lips and brushed a kiss on her knuckles. I nodded toward Creeg. “Do it.”

Creeg took a deep breath and went to work. Three stitches in and a tear trickled down

the side of Lily's cheek and her face paled. It was the only sign of her pain. Courage, the woman had buckets of it. I raged at the pain she suffered. She should've allowed Creeg to numb her, but she was stubborn. I could force the issue, but if she was to be my mate, then I needed to let her have some leeway. Because there would be many things she wouldn't have any say over.

"Done," Creeg muttered. "And I hope to God I never have to do that again."

Lily smiled at his brother. "Surely, with five brothers, you've had to do stitches before."

Creeg placed a hand against Lily's cheek. "Never to a woman and never without something to dull the pain. You're very brave."

"Thank you, for everything," she whispered as she closed her eyes.

I watched as her breathing evened out. Asleep. The pain had worn her out. Thank heavens for that. I spared an apologetic look toward my brother. "I'm sorry."

Creeg was quiet as he sanitized his instruments. When he finished, he turned back toward me, leaning against the counter. "She is yours?"

I sighed, then released Lily's hand, placing it gently on the table alongside her body. "It's killing me not claiming her even now. My brain is telling me to hold off, she's injured and doesn't know about our kind."

"Wyatt will have your nuts in a vice, Kai," Creeg warned.

I shrugged. "You don't understand."

"Then explain."

I spared my brother a frustrated look. “She’s mine. Not even our alpha can go against nature.”

Creeg snorted. “He’ll sure as hell try though.”

I knew Creeg was right. Wyatt had a particular hatred for humans. None of us quite understood why and it’d never been an issue ... until now. Now, I knew that I’d do whatever it took to keep Lily.

Whatever it took.

I leaned close and kissed Lily on her cheek, then pulled back. “I need to go speak with Wyatt. Tell me when she wakes.”

“I like her for you.” Creeg grinned. “Good luck.”

I didn’t say anything else as I moved away from the bed and headed for the door. When I pulled it open, my alpha stood against the far wall, simmering with anger, his tall frame tense, fists clenched at his sides. I knew when my brother was ready to fight. I’d seen it plenty of times. Been on the receiving end. A storm was brewing behind Wyatt’s piercing gaze, and his eyes were fixed on me. An unspoken challenge hung heavily in the air.

“We need to talk,” I muttered, bracing myself for an attack.

Wyatt pointed to a closed door several feet away. “Office, now,” he growled, stomping away and expecting me to follow.

I had little choice. Once inside, Wyatt turned on me. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I refused to back down. “She’s mine,” I stated, the fact undeniable.

Wyatt closed the distance until we were practically nose to nose. “No, she’s human.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, staring down my alpha. “It doesn’t seem to matter.”

My brother cursed under his breath, then went to the small fridge and took out a beer. “So, you hear her in your head, do you?”

I rolled my eyes as I dropped into a chair. “You know I haven’t exchanged yet.”

“Then toss her,” he ordered, slamming his beer onto the desk.

I could feel my claws extending at Wyatt’s disrespectful tone toward Lily. “That’s not happening.”

Wyatt kicked his head to the side. “Are you challenging me?”

“I respect you too much for that, but I won’t lose Lily. If I have to leave the compound, then so be it. If I have to join another pack, so be it.”

Wyatt’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

I’d never threatened to leave before. As the enforcer in the family, I took pride in my position and responsibilities. But I’d never had a mate either. This was different. “She’s not just another woman, Wyatt. She’s the one .”

Wyatt took a deep breath, his gaze softening slightly. “We’ve segregated ourselves from the others because of our sister. Fostine is missing, but she’s still the key to understanding the virus. The only female of our kind. Or have you forgotten that? Forgotten her?”

My claws extended involuntarily, anger flaring at the suggestion. “Of course I haven’t forgotten her! She’s missing, not dead. But that doesn’t mean I’ll abandon Lily.”

Wyatt sighed, rubbing his temples. “We’ve already lost too much. We can’t afford to lose you too.”

I clenched my fists, struggling to keep my emotions in check. “I don’t want to leave, Wyatt. But I won’t let anything happen to Lily. She’s my mate, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.”

Wyatt looked at me for a long moment before nodding slowly. “All right, we’ll find a way to make this work. But you need to understand the risks.”

“I do,” I replied, my voice firm. “I’ll protect her with my life.”

My brother cursed a blue streak, then threw a marble paperweight across the room. It put a neat, round hole in the drywall. “How the hell is this going to work? She’s human, Kai. They cannot know about our kind. Not to mention having her around seems to be stirring up your hormonal brothers all to hell. Miggs is particularly intrigued.”

I got to his feet. “What the hell did he say?”

“Enough to earn a fist to that pretty face of his.” Wyatt waved a hand in the air. “I believe he’s nursing his wounded pride by hacking some government site in that freakish room of his.”

Miggs. The computer genius of the bunch. Always cracking a joke and often getting a beatdown because of it. “He’s going to push a little too far one of these days.”

Wyatt glared. “He’s not the issue. Lily is. What are you planning? The instant she sees your Yucilon form she’ll lose her shit. You do realize that, right?”

Tension skated along my spine. My brother was right, but that didn’t mean I needed to admit it. “She’s my mate,” I firmly stated. “She’ll get over it.”

He snorted. “I’ll allow this only because I don’t want to lose my enforcer.”

That had been the last thing I expected. A beatdown at the very least, possibly banishing me from the compound. “You will?”

“Listen closely, Kai. She stays in your quarters. And if she runs, you’d better catch her.”

“She won’t run,” I vowed, though even as I said it I knew I wasn’t so sure. Lily might be brave, but would she accept me when she saw me on all fours?

“And if she tells anyone about us, I will end her life myself,” Wyatt warned. “I won’t put this family in jeopardy. Not even for you.”

My teeth extended at the image of Wyatt tearing out Lily’s throat. I barely kept my ass in the chair. It was only Wyatt allowing me to keep Lily that calmed my beast. It would be my job to keep Lily alive and by my side.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:55 pm

Lily

I woke with new aches and pains, thanks to the hard table. The cold clinical surroundings sent a shiver down my spine. Confusion and a growing unease gripped me as I tried to piece together how I had ended up here, my memory a hazy fog. The stark, white walls closed in, and a sense of vulnerability settled over me. I'd been having the strangest dream. A wolf-like beast with glowing red eyes. The image instilled fear in me. I started to sit up, but the big, warm hand closing around my forearm prevented me. Kai. He sat next to the table, visible tension creasing his brows. He absently fiddled with a small object in his hand, his fingers moving restlessly. I cleared my throat and Kai's head shot up. His smile sent all my erogenous zones into a tizzy. Oh, boy. I'd have to be very careful with that devastatingly sexy grin.

"You were out for three hours," he explained softly, tucking the object into his pocket. "Feel better?"

"The headache isn't so bad, but I'm sore everywhere else," I admitted. "A combination of lying on this table and the car accident, I suppose."

Kai helped me sit up, then asked, "You hungry?" Right on cue, my stomach chose to embarrass me with an obnoxious growl. Kai chuckled. "I think that's a yes."

My cheeks heated. "I am, but I feel like I've put you out long enough. I can be on my way if you'll let me borrow a phone."

His smile disappeared and his brows drew together. "Do you have someplace to go?"

Family? Definitely not. A friend or two, but they were back in Walnut Ridge. And I'd promised myself I wouldn't go back. I let out a heavy sigh. "No, but I could get a hotel or something. Until I figure out what to do about my van."

He reached up and touched a lock of my hair before saying, "There is no need to spend money on a hotel room when you can stay here. I have a guest room."

Jeez, he's offering his home to me? "Seriously, why do you even care? I'm a stranger. You know nothing about me. And I don't know a thing about you."

His head tilted to the side. "You can't guess?"

My heartbeat sped up at his seductive tone. It awakened all sorts of images inside my head. "I don't—"

The door swung open, putting a stop to my blundering. Creeg walked in and grinned when he saw me. "You're up."

Kai didn't take his gaze off me. Didn't even acknowledge his brother at all. I attempted to ignore the heat arcing between us and focused on Creeg instead. "I was just telling Kai that I need to use a phone."

Creeg's smile fell as he glanced at Kai. "Yeah?"

"I told her she could stay with us."

Creeg nodded as he lifted my wrist and checked my pulse. After a minute he said, "A little fast, but steady." He placed a palm on the back of my head and tilted it until he could stare into my eyes. "Any blurred vision? Headache?"

"None. I'm feeling much better."

“She’s hungry,” Kai said as he got to his feet. “She can eat with us.”

“Of course. You’re in luck, it’s Miggs’ turn to cook. He made pot roast.”

“I haven’t agreed to stay with you.” I glared at Kai. “You’re a little pushy, do you know that?”

“Yes, but it’s a good plan. You can rest here while your van is being fixed. A friend of ours has a shop in town. He’ll give you a good deal.”

“Did you ignore the part about how I don’t know you? You’ve been very kind, but I’d be stupid to take you up on your offer.”

“Why? We already established that you’re safe here,” Kai ground out.

Creeg cleared his throat. “I believe she feels awkward about staying with six strange men, Kai.”

I waved a hand toward Creeg. “Finally, someone more reasonable.”

Kai ran a hand through his hair, mussing it beyond hope and somehow making it look even sexier. “I understand your concerns,” he acknowledged. “I do. But we are an honorable family. My brothers wouldn’t hurt you.”

I could see I’d somehow injured his pride. It was clear in the way he took a step back, his spine stiffening. Why did I even care? I didn’t know him and yet it bothered me that I’d doubted him. If I were thinking logically, then Kai did have a point. He’d taken me in. His brother had stitched me up. They’d watched over me while I’d slept. Not once had I felt as if I were in danger. Did I dare trust him?

On impulse, I said, “How about we start with dinner and see how things go?”

Kai's eyes widened, clearly taken off guard. "You trust me?"

Did I? "You had lots of chances to do all sorts of evil things to me and yet you didn't," I stated, keeping it vague. As I started to get down from the table, Kai closed the distance and put an arm around my back, helping me. Once I was on my feet, I looked at the pair and asked, "So, do I get a tour of this place, or what?"

Kai's eyes warmed and his lips tilted up into a sideways grin. God, that was hot. "I look forward to showing you our home, Lily."

Creeg pointed toward the door. "I'm going to let Miggs know to set another plate."

After he left, I glanced down at my disheveled clothing and grimaced. "I must look like the walking dead. I need a shower and a fresh outfit. My suitcase is in my van though."

He cleared his throat. "I took the liberty of bringing it in for you."

Exasperated with the man, I sighed. "It's in the guest room, isn't it?"

He had the intelligence to look apologetic at least. "I was hopeful," he murmured as he stroked his index finger down my cheek, distracting me beyond reason. "You are very pretty. And I would like to spend more time with you. Are you angry?"

Out of self-preservation, I reached up and gripped his hand. That small connection between us intensified and I had to concentrate on my words to keep from stuttering. "I should be. I should leave right now."

Kai turned his hand over and entwined our fingers. As if he had the right. "But?"

My breathing increased and tendrils of heat unfurled inside me. "I've never done

anything even remotely impulsive or adventurous. My entire life has been spent in Walnut Ridge. I've never ventured outside my safe little world." I smiled at him. "I like the idea of being spontaneous."

He winked and tugged me closer. The nearness, his manly scent, it all overwhelmed my senses. "I will make you glad you chose me to be spontaneous with."

I believed him. Kai was sweet and kind, but there was a wildness to him, too. An untamed part of him that lay just out of my reach. What would it be like to watch him lose control? Maybe I was biting off more than I could handle, but for once I wanted to take the leap. Damn the consequences.

Kai escorted me out of the clinic and into a large foyer. I noticed three closed doors. "Where do those lead?"

He pointed to the one on the left. "That's Wyatt's office." He nodded toward the middle door. "That's Creeg's bedroom. He prefers to be close to the clinic in case of emergencies."

That made sense, I supposed. Pointing to the third door, I asked, "And that?"

"Is where we're headed," he explained, taking me there. He pulled it open to reveal a staircase on the other side. Kai smiled. "This leads to the main floor."

I scanned the area, seeing it differently now. There were no windows and the tan walls were stone. "We're in a basement?"

He started up the steps, but he didn't let go of my hand. I was glad. My nerves were rattled, and I wanted to lean on him for strength. "Tell me more about your home," I urged, curious about him.

“Our house has three levels,” he began. “The main level is the kitchen, living room, and game room. The upper level houses our apartments.”

Surprised, I asked, “Apartments?”

When we reached the main floor, Kai stopped and turned toward me. “We choose to live here together, but we prefer to have our own living spaces.” He gestured toward the large room we’d entered. “The living room.”

Brown leather chairs and a large couch were situated around an entertainment cabinet and bookshelves. A wet bar in the far right corner held delicate crystal glasses and several bottles of alcohol. The dark, wide-plank flooring looked expensive. Most of all though, the room appeared lived-in. As if Kai and his brothers spent countless hours together. What would it be like to be a part of a close-knit family like the Ravenbriars? I had no experience with that sort of life. I roamed around the room and noticed several framed photos on shelves in the entertainment cabinet. A few I recognized of Kai and Creeg. Then I saw one with three men standing together, laughing at something. All had dark hair and similar facial features to Kai, but they appeared younger. I picked up the picture and showed it to him. “Are these your other brothers?”

Kai closed the distance and took the picture from me. “Miggs and Trakker. That’s Cage in the middle. We were celebrating Cage’s birthday.” He replaced the photo on the shelf. “If I remember right, Cage had a few too many drinks and woke up with a nasty hangover.”

“You all look so much alike,” I replied, staring at his mouth. “Except for the chipped tooth.”

“Got it in a fight with Wyatt when we were younger.” He shrugged. “Anyway, the house is more of a compound. The clinic, the common area, and our personal

quarters.”

Strange that anyone would choose to live like that. “But why not have your own homes?”

His brows drew together. “That’s a discussion for another time. Allow me to show you to your room.”

He was keeping something from me, I could feel it. I let the subject drop for now, but no way was I letting Kai off the hook entirely. As we headed for another set of stairs, I couldn’t help but watch Kai move. His jeans molded to his backside. And he had one fine butt. Firm and squeezable. As we reached upstairs, Kai gestured to a door to our right. “That’s your room,” he said, turning the knob and allowing me to precede him.

I flipped a switch on the wall to my left and stared around the room. A king-sized canopy-style bed with a fluffy white comforter in the center. A six-drawer dresser and mirror on the opposite wall had my suitcase sitting on top. I quirked a brow at Kai. “I can’t believe you brought that in without asking me.”

His cheeks reddened and he tucked his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

I snorted. “Uh-huh,” I crossed the room and pointed to a closed door. “Bathroom?”

He gave me a brisk nod. “Would you like to freshen up?”

“I’d love a hot shower.” I groaned. “I feel gross.”

“Come downstairs whenever you’re ready. The kitchen is to the right.” He headed for the door, then stopped and peered over his shoulder at me. “I’m glad you chose to

stay, Lily.”

I bit my lower lip to keep from blurting out how terrified I was that I’d made a colossal mistake in trusting him. He lingered a few more seconds, then left, closing the door behind him. “What the hell am I doing?”

K ai

I stared at the closed door, wishing I had the right to open it and help Lily bathe. I’d take my time about it, too. Wash every pretty inch of her curvy body, then I’d make love to her. All night long. To hell with dinner. I’d rather feast on Lily. But she was human and needed time to accept me as her mate. She would get there; I would see to it. For now, I’d work on slowly removing the barrier separating her from my world.

“You have a mate?”

The question jarred me out of my musings. Cage watched me with the annoying curiosity of a younger brother. I stepped closer to him and ordered, “She’s human and doesn’t know about our kind. Take care that you don’t slip up until I have time to explain.”

Cage’s eyes widened. “And Wyatt has approved this?”

“He has.”

The sound of running water had us both staring at the closed door. I caught Cage sniffing the air and I punched the dumbass on the shoulder, hard.

Cage stumbled a few feet, then glared. “What the hell was that for?”

“Don’t act innocent. You were sniffing her.”

“She smells—”

My fist shot out, connecting with a satisfying crack to Cage’s jaw. “Mine. Keep your damn nose to yourself.”

Cage cursed and rubbed his chin. “Shit, chill. What’s gotten into you?”

I took a deep breath and let it out. If I was going to make it work with Lily, then I needed to learn a little fucking patience. Especially with my youngest sibling. Pain in the ass or not. “You’ll understand one day, but for now, you’ll remember that Lily is not to be touched or sniffed by anyone other than me. Got it?”

He held up both hands in surrender. “Okay, whatever,” he muttered before stomping off.

I waited until Cage was out of sight before lifting my head and inhaling. Fuck, she smelled delicious. It didn’t matter that Lily’s door was closed, her scent still lured me. My body hardened. I’d need to take her soon or risk losing control and hurting her. Damn, mating a human was not going to be a walk in the park.

I forced one foot in front of the other, taking the stairs. I reached the kitchen and found Miggs stirring something on the stove while Creeg got out soup bowls.

Creeg saw me and smiled. “Lily settling in okay?”

“Yes. She’ll be down after she showers.”

Creeg grinned. “Wish you were there, huh?”

“You have no idea,” I admitted, heading for the fridge and grabbing a bottle of water. After drinking half in a few swigs, hoping it’d cool me down, I leaned against the counter and waited for Lily.

“So, our guest is a human,” Miggs stated, moving to the table and placing a giant white serving dish filled with roast beef and potatoes in the center. When my brother lifted his head, our gazes collided.

I pushed away from the counter and glared at him. “You have a problem with that?”

Miggs didn’t have the good sense to back off. “She shouldn’t even be here.”

“Bullshit.” I closed the distance in two strides, facing off against my normally good-natured sibling. “You will treat her with respect or you will answer to me.”

Miggs moved back to the stove. “How the hell are you going to explain when you shift? Got that all figured out, do you?”

Yeah, that had me worried, too. “It’s not your concern.”

Miggs spooned green beans into a bowl. “It’s not just your life you risk, Kai,” he muttered.

“Did you forget my position? I’m the enforcer. The safety of this family is always my top priority.”

He shot me a glare. “No, now that you have a mate, your top priority is her . We just took second place.”

I started to argue, but another voice intruded on our discussion. “Kai and I have discussed the situation already,” Wyatt warned, his voice quiet and even. “Unless you

wish to challenge me, shut the fuck up.”

Miggs stood his ground, watching Wyatt, calculating his odds. Finally, he offered their alpha a jerky nod. “Sorry.”

Cage and Trakker strode into the room, then stopped and looked at Wyatt. Trakker cleared his throat. “Uh, what’s going on?”

Wyatt turned and motioned to all of us at once. “I’ll say this once. Kai’s found his mate. She’s human. He has my permission to keep her at the compound. If any of you have a problem, speak up now.”

Trakker’s eyes widened. “The little redhead you brought in earlier?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “She’s mine.”

“Damn, congrats. She’s cute.”

Ah, hell. “Yeah, see, that shit needs to stop. I’m already on edge. If you all want to keep your balls, then I suggest you put some fucking distance between yourself and Lily.”

Trakker whistled low as he pulled out a chair at the table and sat. “That bad, huh?”

I wasn’t sure how to explain the out-of-control mating hormones running amok. Thankfully, Wyatt took pity on me. “Look,” my oldest brother growled, “Kai is going to be a total dick to live with until he makes the exchange. Heed his warning. His Yucilon instincts won’t care that you’re family. He’ll go for the throat if you touch a single hair on her head.”

Miggs grumbled under his breath, then asked, “And you know this how?”

Wyatt's attention strayed toward me. "I've seen it happen," he muttered. "And I won't step in. Mates are off-limits. Keep your junk in your pants, boys."

Everyone in the room agreed. Miggs was the last to nod. I would need to watch him closely—I had a feeling he'd cause trouble for Lily. A sound caught our attention, and everyone turned to see Lily striding through the door. She wore a fresh pair of jeans, tight with little tears at the knees, a black blouse with pearl buttons down the middle tucked into the waistband, and she was barefoot. Her toenails were painted bright red. Damn, that's adorable. Her hair was damp and hung down around her shoulders. Her pretty face free of makeup showed off the freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose.

I crossed the room and took her hand, then leaned close and whispered, "You are beautiful, Lily."

She smiled up at me, then whispered right back, "Everyone is staring."

I chuckled. "Because they also think you're beautiful." I pointed toward my brothers. "You already met Creeg and Wyatt."

Lily shuffled a little closer to me. "Hi, again."

Creeg grinned. "You are feeling better?"

She ran a hand through her hair. "So much better. Thank you again."

I began introductions. "Trakker is the big brute with the shaggy black hair in desperate need of a trim, sitting at the table and staring at you as if he's never seen a woman before. He's a year younger than Wyatt."

She chuckled. "It's nice to meet you, Trakker."

Trakker tipped his head upward a second. I could see arousal flare to life as my brother sniffed the air. “Welcome to our home, Lily.”

I moved on to Cage. “And Cage, the softer, younger version of me with the brown hair that he thinks looks cool hanging in his eyes, but it actually just makes him look homeless.”

“What Kai meant to say is that I’m the best-looking of the bunch.” The idiot winked at Lily. “It’s the eyes. They tell me the blue is mesmerizing.”

Lily quirked a brow at him. “The crazy sibling. I suppose every family has one.”

Everyone laughed, except Miggs. The way he watched Lily, as if she were prey ... it pissed me off.

Lily nudged me in the ribs. When I peered down at her, she said, “You missed one.”

Standing apart from the others, Miggs possessed a distinct aura of trouble. His closely cropped black hair and stocky build gave him the look of a battle-hardened marine, lending an air of both strength and readiness.

Before I could answer, Miggs stepped forward and replied. “Miggs,” he said, a slow smile lifting his lips. “Your cook this evening.”

Lily sniffed the air. “Well, Miggs, I’m honored. It smells amazing.”

He tilted his head, then his gaze landed on me. “Yeah, it does.”

A growl started in my chest at hearing Miggs taunt. My teeth elongated and I stepped forward. I’d damn well warned Miggs. Wyatt had warned him. Enough. Just before I could leap at my mouthy brother, Wyatt stepped in my path. “I got this,” he growled

low. “Cool it.”

I closed my eyes tight and willed my mind to calm. It took several seconds, then I felt Lily squeeze my hand. I stared down at her. She watched me with concern. I offered her a smile of reassurance, then said, “Let’s eat.”

Wyatt crossed the room until he was standing in front of Miggs. He whispered something into his ear, then the pair left the kitchen. When I saw Lily’s confusion, I shrugged. “They’ll be along in a minute.”

Everyone went to the table and sat. I put Lily between myself and Creeg. She talked with him about her concussion and the stitches, until soon everyone was asking Lily about the accident. The conversation strayed to her life in Walnut Ridge. I watched the door, waiting for Wyatt and Miggs to return. Wyatt would straighten our brother out, but I still wondered just how big a problem Miggs would be. When Lily caught my attention, I stared down at her. Those pretty blue eyes caught me, and I knew I’d do whatever necessary to keep her with me. Miggs had one thing right at least: Lily, my mate, had just taken the top spot in my life. As it should be.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:55 pm

Lily

Creag was giving me tips on what to look for if my concussion worsened and I tried to pay attention, but I kept getting distracted by Kai. His back was stiff and he glanced at the door repeatedly. Since I'd walked into the kitchen, there'd been tension. Kai had tried to cover, but I could see something was going on. He nudged my shoulder and I peered over at him.

"You haven't touched your food," he replied, pointing at my plate. "Are you feeling unwell?"

I picked up my fork and speared a piece of beef with it. "I'm fine, but you don't seem to be," I said under my breath.

He watched me bring the meat to my mouth before asking, "What do you mean?"

I chewed. It was savory and tender. "There seemed to be something going on between you and your brother when I came in."

Kai shrugged. "It's nothing," he reassured me, his gaze straying to the doorway again.

I decided not to push. It was none of my business. As I scooped up a chunk of potato, commotion from the other side of the room caught everyone's attention. I looked up to see Wyatt and Miggs coming back into the room. Neither of them appeared too happy, but at least no one was bleeding. I supposed that was a good sign. Wyatt took the seat at the head of the table and Miggs sat in the chair across the table from me.

He glared at me a moment, then dug into the roast. Everyone started talking at once and soon the earlier tension dissipated.

Kai cleared his throat and pointed his fork at the quieter brother at the far end of the table. “Trakker towed your van to a local garage.”

I peered down the length of the table and saw Trakker smiling at me. “Uh, thank you for doing that. To be honest, I’m a little worried about the cost.”

Trakker winked and dug into his potatoes. “Bridger is reasonable. He’ll give you a fair price. Won’t he, Kai?”

My shoulders slumped. “Jeez, my insurance is bound to go up after this.”

Kai nudged my shoulder with his. “You don’t need to worry about all that right now.” He glared at Trakker. “Drop it.”

“I can’t drop it,” I complained. “I need that van if I have any hope of starting a new life.”

“New life?” Cage asked, his curiosity obviously piqued.

I didn’t see what it would hurt to tell the guys my plans. Considering we were about to be roommates for the time being. “I’ve decided to leave Walnut Ridge. I’ve lived there my entire life and I wanted a change. Lately, it became ... difficult because of my family.”

Cage snorted. “Yeah, family can be a pain in the—”

“Cage,” Kai warned. “Clean up your language or I’ll muzzle you.”

I laughed. “It’s fine. Your brother is right. I’ve been under my mom’s thumb for too long. Partly my fault, I suppose, for being such a pushover. She and my sister know how to manipulate me. Leaving that toxic relationship behind seemed to be my only way to find myself.” I looked around the table and realized everyone had stopped eating and watched me. My cheeks heated. “Does that make sense or am I just rambling?”

Kai reached for my hand and squeezed. “We understand, Lily. It’s not always easy to cut ties. It takes a lot of courage, I think.”

His praise swept through me and it felt good. “I don’t know if it’s courage or desperation that drove me.”

As I broke off a bit of beef with my fork and started to bring it to my mouth Wyatt, the oldest brother, asked, “Where were you headed?”

I cringed. “It’s embarrassing to admit, but I didn’t have a destination. I just wanted out.”

Miggs cleared his throat, catching my attention. When our gazes met, he asked, “They made it that hard for you?”

What harm could it cause to tell them? I’d gotten this far with my pathetic life story. In for a penny. “My mom is an alcoholic and prescription drug abuser. My sister has shown signs of following in her footsteps. I’ve tried to get them help, to be supportive. I’ve even brought my mom to an alcoholics anonymous meeting.” Remembering the hate-filled lecture from my mother on the drive home that day would be etched into my memory forever. “Needless to say, it didn’t take.”

Miggs’s gaze warmed. “I’m sorry. A mother is supposed to nurture and love their children. Yours doesn’t sound like she did a very good job.”

That was putting it mildly. “Yeah, so, I guess I got tired of cleaning up her and Victoria’s messes.”

Kai patted my arm. “That life is behind you now. You have a bright future to look forward to.”

“If I can get my van fixed,” I muttered.

No one said anything more and the conversation turned to chores. Cage was complaining about doing the dishes, but Wyatt shut him down with a look. It intrigued me that all the brothers seemed to look to Wyatt as more of a father figure rather than a brother.

Kai stood, then he reached for my empty plate. “Finished?”

“I am, but please let me clean up,” I implored, snatching my plate out of Kai’s grasp. “It’s the least I can do considering all you’ve done for me.”

Kai glared down at me. “It’s Cage’s turn to clean. Besides, you’re injured, Lily. You should rest.”

Cage cleared his throat and offered me a lopsided grin. “Hey, if the lady wants to clean, who am I to stand in her way.”

A few of the guys laughed, but not Kai. “She isn’t your maid,” he grumbled before turning his attention to Creeg. “Shouldn’t Lily be resting?”

His brother tilted his head at me. “Still no headache?”

“No,” I replied before shooting a frustrated glare at Kai. “And I really would like to help out.”

“Fine.” Kai waved a hand in the air. “You wash, I’ll dry.”

“Works for me,” Cage shouted as he started out of the kitchen.

“Not so fast,” Kai called out. “You can take my day since I’ll be helping Lily tonight.”

His smile vanished. “Oh, come on!”

“Fair’s fair,” Kai stated as he pushed away from the table.

Everyone stood and brought their dishes to the sink, then filed out of the room. Cage complained, which earned him a slap on the back of his head from Wyatt. Now I was left with Kai. Alone. I cleared my suddenly very dry throat. “I really can get this. You don’t have to hang around. I mean, I’m sure you have better things to do.”

His lips lifted and he reached a hand toward me, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. “Trying to get rid of me?”

He was teasing me, but I still felt compelled to answer. “It’s just that I’ve dominated your time since you brought me here.”

“I enjoy being around you,” he said, his voice low and rough. “Unless you’d prefer to be alone.”

“No, I wouldn’t prefer that,” I admitted. God, he was so close. He played with a lock of my hair. For some reason that innocent touch seemed intensely intimate. I inhaled his scent. Woodsy and masculine and addicting. I’d never met anyone like Kai. There was a wildness just below the surface. As if he had to work very hard to appear civilized. And why was that alluring?

He snatched the plate from my hand, then winked. “Let’s get this done. I want to show you something.”

“Yeah?”

We gathered dishes from the table, then brought them to the sink. Kai looked over at me and grinned. “There’s a place close by. It’s pretty at night when the moon is high.”

He wanted to go on a hike through the woods at night? “Is that a good idea? I mean, there could be coyotes prowling. Actually, the furry beast I nearly hit is probably out there right now.”

Kai stared at me, his eyes brightening to that liquid gold color I’d noticed before. “You’re safe with me, Lily. The beast can’t hurt you.”

Why did I trust him? The effect Kai had on me was unnerving. “You seem very sure of that.”

He started to run water in the sink before saying, “I’ve lived here most of my life. Trust me, there’s nothing out there on four legs that would dare come near you.”

I nudged him with my shoulder and teased, “If anything decides to turn me into a nighttime snack, I’m blaming you.”

“A snack? No.” His gaze raked down my body and he licked his lips. “But dessert? Definitely.”

And there went my pulse, hammering out a rhythm that would make a drummer in a rock band proud. Flirting with a guy like Kai could very well get a woman burned.

K ai

Images of Lily naked beneath me as I mounted her bombarded my mind. I was too close to dragging her off to my bedroom. I could have us both undressed in seconds. The hunger to watch her submit to me grew. She's human, I warned the raging beast inside me. She'd need time to accept me. Accept our ways. My Yucilon form would no doubt terrify her if I didn't get her there slowly. She'd run and I'd be forced to track her down and bring her back. I didn't want that. She was my mate and her happiness was all that mattered, but beneath that was the driving need to claim her. To seal our bond. Talking about creatures of the night had nearly made me laugh. If she only knew that the most dangerous creatures on our one-hundred-acre property had been sitting around the dinner table with her listening as she chatted about her life goals.

After we finished up the dishes, I took her hand and led her from the kitchen. When we reached the front door, I looked her over. "You might need a jacket. It's supposed to be a chilly evening."

She pointed toward the ceiling. "I have a hoodie in my suitcase. Let me grab it."

When she turned to go, I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Wait." She frowned at me. I snagged my leather coat off a hook on the wall and held it out. "Wear this," I offered, eager to see her in it, knowing her scent would linger on the silk lining for days.

She shrugged and plucked it from my grasp. "If you're sure."

"I am," I murmured, watching her slip into it. It fell to just above her knees and she had to roll the sleeves several times to free her hands. God, she was cute. "Perfect," I

praised, grinning down at her.

She laughed. “Liar. I look silly, but you’re right. It’s warm.”

“Good.” I needed to get her out of the house or I’d kiss her and never stop until she was naked and beneath me.

Once outside, the cold night breeze blew across my face. I lifted my nose and inhaled, searching for anything that could pose a threat to Lily. Only the usual nocturnal creatures could be detected. I reached for her, entwining our fingers, and explained, “The place I want to show you is just a few minutes’ walk to the south.”

She kept stride beside me, scanning our surroundings. “And what is this amazing place that couldn’t wait until daytime?”

I tsked. “It won’t be any fun if I tell you.”

Lily was quiet as we strode down the path I’d taken a thousand times, passing giant pine trees, thick walnuts, as well as the occasional tall sycamore. When we were near our destination, I stopped, waiting for her to look at me. When our gazes connected, I stated, “This place is sacred to my family, Lily.” I pointed to the clearing ahead. “For generations, Ravenbriars have come here to seek solace.”

“Oh,” she replied, her curiosity evident in the way her gaze lit with excitement. “Like a place of worship?”

“No, more like a place to ... think. We believe that nature grounds us. In times of strife or chaos, we come here and we’re once again centered.”

“Why are you showing me this? We barely know each other.”

“I feel connected to you.” I cupped her cheek. “Don’t you feel something for me? Perhaps a spark that you’ve never felt with another?”

“It’s strange, but I do feel as if I’ve known you forever. Like we’ve met before. Or...” She ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know. It’s difficult to explain.”

My heart swelled at her confession. “I understand.” I gave her a gentle tug. “Come, before it gets too late.”

We continued the short journey, dead leaves crunching beneath our feet, until we reached Sarafin Falls. Clovers covered the ground and a stone bench sat next to a bubbling brook. But it was the waterfall that deserved praise. Even after hundreds of years, its beauty hadn’t faded. Amidst the tranquil embrace of the moonlight, the breathtaking scene unfurled before us. The waterfall, hidden amid towering trees, glistened under the soft glow of starlight, its crystalline waters shimmering as it descended gracefully into a pristine pool below. The chill in the air carried the hint of impending winter. The serenade of the falling water blended harmoniously with the rustling of trees and the occasional hoot of an owl.

Lily stopped, then gasped. “Oh, my God, Kai, it’s amazing,” she softly exclaimed, all her attention on the magical sight less than a hundred feet in front of us.

“When our ancestors first purchased the land and discovered the falls, they declared it a sacred place. Since then we’ve taken great strides to maintain it, hoping future generations would get to experience it as well.”

Lily moved to the bench and sat, pulling the coat tighter around her body. “When you talk about your family it makes me a little envious. I have no experience with that type of bond.” She sighed. “I used to wish for a bunch of siblings and the kind of parents who tucked their kids in at night and read them stories.” Her gaze lifted to mine. “Dumb, huh?”

I heard the sadness in her voice and it angered me. Her life in Walnut Ridge sucked and she deserved better. I closed the distance between us, then sat next to her. “You left your home because of your mother and sister, but in doing so you found me. You found my brothers. Perhaps your wish has been granted, Lily.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m asking you to stay,” I gently explained. “Get to know me. Get to know my family.”

She shot off the bench and glared at me. “Again, you are a stranger. I can’t just shack up with you, Kai. It’s absurd.”

I wrapped an arm around her middle and tugged until she was standing between my widespread thighs. “You set out for adventure, right?”

She bit her bottom lip, a sure sign of her frustration. “Well, partly, yes,” she admitted. “And partly because I was desperate to escape.”

“Let me be a part of your adventure then,” I persuaded, watching for any hint that she was wavering. “Let me give you a place to escape to.” When she started to protest, I lifted my other hand and cupped her chin. “Just say you’ll consider it. You won’t be disappointed.”

Her silence stretched on for so long that I was certain I was about to be shut down. Instead, she narrowed her gaze and muttered, “You like to get your way, don’t you?”

If she only knew how pushy I could be, she’d run for the hills. “Only when I see something I want. Then I will move heaven and earth.”

“And you want me,” she whispered. “A woman you’ve only known a few hours.”

“Time means nothing,” I ground out. “Trust me on that.”

“I don’t even know if you have a girlfriend.” She looked me over, then crossed her arms over her chest and asked, “Do you?”

I could give her the absolute truth, for once. “There are no women in my life. Only you.”

She covered her face in her hands and groaned. “I should have my head examined for even considering this.”

I pried them away, then waited until she graced me with her pretty gaze, and asked, “Is that a yes?”

“I’m willing to see where things go between us. Only because I’m curious about you. About our connection. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Like what?” Her cheeks turned pink and my blood heated in my veins at the becoming sight. “Lily?”

“The last time I dated it was a disaster,” she blurted. “Not because he was a bad guy, but there weren’t sparks. I’m not sure there have ever been sparks with any of my past relationships. With you, the sparks are enough to set this entire area ablaze!” She flung her arms in the air. “I honestly don’t know what to make of it.”

Damn, her confession had my dick as hard as a lead pipe. I pressed a palm to the back of her head to hold her still. “I have a few ideas,” I murmured as I brought her closer for a kiss. Ah, yes, so many ideas.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:55 pm

Lily

Kissing a strange man in the middle of the woods was easily the worst idea I've had yet, but something about Kai made me want to throw caution to the wind. Why did he have that effect on me?

His lips were firm and insistent, and I couldn't seem to put a stop to it. He tasted good. A sizzling-hot and uncontrollable wildfire. And I was running full speed ahead. His head angled to the left and thick fingers gripped my hair tighter. When his tongue teased at the seam of my lips, I whimpered, letting him inside. Just this once I wanted to be spontaneous and reckless. Not the responsible daughter. Nor the sister who was always on call. With Kai, I was wanted. He'd called me beautiful. All but begged me to stay. When was the last time anyone had been so eager just to be in my company?

I let my fingers sift through the soft, dark strands of his hair, enjoying the rumbling sounds coming from his chest. When his hands coasted downward to my hips, fingers digging into my jeans, I could swear I felt the sharp bite of nails. When his mouth released mine, then skimmed along my cheek to my neck, suckling at the skin just below my ear, my pussy flooded with liquid heat.

"Oh, God," I moaned, tilting my head sideways, giving him better access to me. He groaned my name and nipped at my skin, sending me into another realm, as erotic thoughts overwhelmed me at once.

I could barely catch my breath as Kai's whispering voice sent shivers down my spine. "You have such a gorgeous ass, Lily," he murmured into my ear. "So sweetly rounded, just full enough to fill my palms."

My body quivered under his touch, his words igniting a fire deep inside me. I could feel his hard, muscular frame pressed against every inch of my back. Slowly, teasingly, I moved my hips back and forth, rubbing my bottom against the head of his erection. The sensation of him sliding between the globes of my buttocks made me shudder with pleasure. When I heard him emit a low growl, I felt a surge of triumph.

His hands, rough yet tender, gripped my hips firmly. He began gliding his rigid length up and down in that sensitive seam, sending us both into a frenzy of scorching need. The soft, cool sound of water trickling and the wild symphony of the forest surrounded us, drowning out all rational thought.

My pants and panties were pooled around my ankles, each sensation magnifying the burning ache inside me. The tall, wild plants and trees enveloped us, creating a cocoon that made it feel like we were the only two people on earth.

I wiggled and pleaded with Kai, desperate for him to enter me. I reveled in my own wantonness, a sultry temptress demanding what she craved. His tongue flicked against the pulse in my neck, and his hand slid around to cup my right breast. He licked and squeezed, but never once allowed his cock to move lower, to slip inside me where I needed him most. When he pinched my nipple, I lost control.

I reached back, grasping his throbbing heat in my hand and squeezing hard. “Christ, Lily. That feels so damn good.”

His guttural words made me revel in my power, but I needed more. “I want you. Inside of me. Kai. Now.”

He chuckled, his breath hot against my ear. “Not just yet, baby.”

I moaned in frustration, hating him for denying me what I craved so desperately. Then his other hand released my hip, drifting around to cup my mound. I pushed

against his hand, yearning for something just out of reach. My fingers gripped his length tightly, pumping him with an urgent need.

Kai retaliated by teasing my clitoris with his thumb. Sharp sparks of arousal zipped through me, and I felt a bead of moisture gather at the tip of his penis. My body began its wild climb toward rapture, when suddenly a hand shook my shoulder, jarring me from my sensual haze.

I blinked, the forest around me coming back into focus as reality crashed in.

Kai stiffened, his head lifted and his hold on me tightened almost painfully.

“Kai?”

“Clothes,” he quietly urged. “Quickly, Lily.”

We both fumbled around until we were dressed. My fear ratcheted up. “Kai?”

He turned his head to the right, and ignored me completely. He slowly got to his feet and took hold of my hand. “Stay close,” he ordered, his voice rough and cold. He’d gone from practically devouring me to a steely calm in a heartbeat. The swift change stunned me to silence.

When he started walking out of the clearing, with me tucked close to his side, I jarred myself out of my shock and yanked on him hard enough to earn a glower. I ignored it and bit out, “What’s gotten into you?”

He sniffed the air, a frown marring his handsome features. “We aren’t alone,” he answered. “Someone else is out here with us.”

“Someone? Like one of your brothers?” Please, say yes.

He shook his head. "I need you to stay quiet, Lily."

It wasn't so much the words as the way he spoke. As if my very life depended on cooperating. We walked swiftly down the path, heading back to the house. I had to jog just to keep up with him. When Kai went rigid, then glared over his shoulder, my fear soared through the roof. Without warning, he shoved me behind him, one arm around my back to anchor me against his body.

"Step out now or you will die!" Kai raged at the dark forest beyond.

I worried he'd lost his mind. Nothing was out there. Hell, I couldn't even hear the crickets anymore. It was as if the entire forest had gone silent. I couldn't see anything or anyone in sight. When I was about to insist he bring me back to the house, a low rumbling came from his chest. From one breath to the next a huge four-legged beast leaped from the woods, landing directly in front of us. Thick white fur and glowing eyes. Jesus, what the hell is with the teeth? Big, sharp canines protruded from the beast's mouth. Like a saber-tooth tiger had just emerged from the past. I trembled and wrapped my arms around Kai's middle, praying he had some way to defend us. To keep us both from being torn to shreds.

"Fostine?" Kai's voice held a wealth of anger and I was tempted to peer around him to see for myself how the animal reacted to the single word, but fear kept me from making that idiotic decision.

A loud howl rent the air and I couldn't tell if it was a happy response or a deadly one. I loved animals, but I'd never even owned a pet. And the wild variety was way out of my comfort zone.

"I know it's you, damn it. Stop," he ordered, "you're frightening Lily."

A sound, much like a disgruntled snarl, sent shivers down my spine. Kai turned

toward me, cupping my chin in his steady, warm palm, and said, “She won’t hurt you.”

“She?” I did sneak a peek at the furry animal this time. It stared back at me with eyes that glowed green in the darkness, all the hair on its back standing on end. And it definitely wasn’t a happy stare. “Please tell me that thing is a pet .”

Kai’s lips kicked up sideways. “Uh, not exactly,” he answered, turning his head toward our unscheduled visitor. “Wyatt will be expecting you. Go now.”

As if Kai had so much control, the animal took off at a sprint. After it disappeared out of sight, I let out a heavy breath. “What in holy hell was that?”

“It’s a long story.” He took my hand in his. “Come on. I’m going to need to meet with my brother.”

“Whoa!” I pulled out of his grasp and pointed a finger at him. “A huge wolflike creature bounds out of the woods and just when it’s about to devour us, you call it by name and control it like it’s a trained puppy. Answers, Kai. Now!” I paused, then thought to add, “And don’t tell me you’ll explain later. I want to know now.”

He bent close, nearly nose to nose. “It’s no longer safe out here, Lily. I need you back inside.” He shoved his fingers through his unruly hair. “I swear you will get your answers, but I need you away from here first.”

Safe, yes. That was the important thing. But once that was established I’d damn well get my answers. Or I was leaving. Him. His house. The beast. All of it.

K ai

The timing couldn't have been worse. Lily had just agreed to stay, to get to know me, then my sister popped up out of nowhere. And where had she been for the last two years? That was a question I needed answered immediately. My brothers and I had thought she'd been captured by another clan. Or died, much like the rest of the females of our kind. But there was no mistaking her scent. It was definitely Fostine. Back from the dead, more or less.

When we reached the front of the compound, I stared down at Lily. She was pissed and had a right to be. I was keeping things from her. I'd planned to bring her into my world slowly, but thanks to my sister's untimely arrival, I wouldn't have that luxury any longer. But how would Lily handle the truth?

As we stepped inside the foyer, I helped Lily with the coat, putting it back on the hook. "Wyatt will be waiting for me. I know it's asking a lot, but please go up to the guest room. I'll find you when I'm through and we'll ... talk."

She licked her lips, watching me as if ready to cut and run. "I don't understand any of this. Why is Wyatt waiting to speak to you, anyway? What does he have to do with what happened back there?"

I couldn't explain, not without explaining everything. Instead, I replied, "When we were at the waterfall, you spoke of a connection between us."

"Yes, but—"

"That connection is true, Lily. You can trust me. I just need a little time."

She wrapped her arms around her middle and grumbled under her breath before shaking her head and saying in a firmer voice, "You have one hour. After that, I'm out of here. Even if I have to ask one of your brothers to take me to the nearest bus station."

My brothers wouldn't dare, but I was smart enough not to tell Lily that. "Thank you," I murmured, leaning down and kissing her cheek. She turned, muttering to herself about irritating men as she took the stairs to the upper floor. I waited until she was out of sight before I headed for Wyatt's office. When I opened the door, I found all my brothers there, as well as Fostine.

I rushed up to her and hugged her tightly. "Fostine, never thought I'd see you again. We've been searching for you and Father for years."

She pushed her long black hair away from her face and smiled wearily, flopping into a straight-back chair. "Glad to see you, too, big bro."

I gazed at Fostine, my expression softening. "Why did you leave? We've been worried sick."

Fostine's eyes narrowed as she met mine. "Why did I leave? You should ask Creeg. He's the one who couldn't stop using me as a guinea pig."

Creeg flinched, guilt written all over his face. "I was trying to understand your immunity to the virus. It was for the good of the pack."

She scoffed, shaking her head. "Good of the pack? Or good for your research? I was your sister, not some lab rat."

Wyatt's eyes widened, realization dawning on him. "We pushed you too far. We made a grave mistake."

Fostine's shoulders slumped, exhaustion evident. "You think? Every day it was another test, another vial of blood. I couldn't take it anymore."

Trakker stepped forward, his voice thick with regret. "We were just trying to protect

you. You're the last female Yucilon left. The other packs want you."

She looked around at us—her brothers—and her expression softened. "I know you were trying to protect me, but it felt like a prison. I had to get away."

Miggs nodded, understanding clear in his eyes. "We're sorry. We didn't see how much we were hurting you."

Creeg sighed deeply, his head hanging low. "I never wanted to drive you away. I just... I thought I was doing what was right."

Fostine looked at Creeg. "I know you meant well, but it was too much. We need to find another way to protect our pack without tearing each other apart."

Wyatt nodded, his determination clear. "We will, Fostine. We'll make it right. You're home now, and we'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe and happy."

Fostine gave a small, tentative smile. "Thank you. I just want to feel like I belong here again."

I stepped forward, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You do belong here. We're family, and we'll figure this out together."

The room fell into a heavy silence. We had made mistakes, but now, we had agreed to make amends and protect our sister, not as a specimen, but as the cherished member of our family that she is.

I cleared my throat and asked, "Where have you been anyway?"

Before she could answer, Wyatt cleared his throat. Everyone turned toward him, waiting for our alpha to speak. "Fostine has just been telling us that she was a hostage

of Gregory for the last two years.” His gaze landed on me when he added, “And according to her, our father is a prisoner as well.”

The knowledge had me stumbling backward. “That’s not possible. You’re sure?”

Wyatt nodded solemnly. “Pretty much what I said, too.”

Fostine shot out of the chair and closed the distance between her and Wyatt. “I’m telling the truth. Father is being tortured as we speak!”

The air in the room thickened as the pair faced off. Wyatt’s expression softened, and he gently took her hands. “Fostine, I’m not doubting you. Easy. We’re just so relieved you’re back. Please, tell us everything.”

She collapsed back into her chair, tears swimming in her eyes. “You don’t know what it was like. Patterson used us like lab rats. Test after test.” Her gaze landed on Wyatt, tears shining. “He’s twisted, Wyatt. Completely insane.”

Wyatt took a tissue from the box on his desk and pressed it to one of the wounds on our sister’s neck, before crouching in front of her. “How did you escape?”

She clasped her hands together in her lap and answered, “Dad helped me. I couldn’t get him to come with me, though. I tried, I swear I did.”

Miggs spoke up for the first time from his position near the door. “Why would he stay? That makes no sense.”

“Dad thought that as long as Patterson had someone to experiment on, he’d leave me alone. Wouldn’t send his goons looking for me. I’d be free.”

I cursed and said, “Dad had to know you’d come back here. That we’d go looking for

him.”

Fostine shrugged. “Yes, but it doesn’t matter. Patterson moved us around. He has loads of money and he never kept us in one place for long.” Her gaze went to Wyatt again. “I-I think there might have been others.”

My shock mirrored my brothers’ expressions. “Others of our kind?”

Fostine trembled, as if all the bravado had vanished at once. “I don’t know, but I heard talking sometimes. And screams. I don’t think it was just Dad and me.”

I cursed. “I thought we’d seen the last of Gregory Patterson when he was fired from Cedar Haven.” I spared my sister an apologetic look. “I guess not.”

Wyatt snorted. “Cedar Haven was only interested in sweeping it all under the rug. Patterson was an embarrassment. I’m betting they paid that bastard off to stay silent about what kind of shit they were doing behind those walls.”

“I heard some folks in town say they do biological experiments there,” Creeg added. “Real horror movie stuff.”

“I’ve heard that, too,” Cage replied.

“We’re getting off topic,” Wyatt said gently. His gaze went back to Fostine. “Can you show us on a map where you were being held?”

She nodded. “I can do one better. I can take you there.”

“No,” Wyatt stated firmly, his tone offering no room for argument. “You aren’t going anywhere near the place ever again.”

“How in the hell did you survive?” Miggs asked, looking her over. “You look as healthy as the last time I saw you.”

She snorted. “Don’t let the clothes fool you.” She stood and lifted her shirt, showing us her back. It was like someone had carved a twisted and elaborate road map into her flesh. The sight had us all going silent. Fostine shoved her shirt back down, then fell into the chair. “Anyway, Patterson let Dad and me stay in the same cell.” She closed her eyes tight. “It helped to lean on each other. During the worst of it, Dad would tell me stories about the old days to distract me. I pretended that it helped, but Patterson is clever. He’s figured out a way to inflict the kind of pain and damage to our bodies that won’t heal quickly. The last time I was on his table, he cut me up so badly that I was unconscious for days.”

“Fucking hell,” Trakker muttered.

“I-I think he might have discovered something about our genetic makeup,” Fostine added. “And Dad was getting worried. I could feel it.”

“Like he knew time was running out,” I surmised.

“Yeah. He wanted me out of there before that happened.”

I quirked a brow. “And how did he accomplish that?”

“He made friends with one of Patterson’s guards. Ricky. He helped us.”

“Will this Ricky help us get Dad out?”

She bit her lip and stared at her lap. “Ricky is dead. Patterson shot him in the back.” She closed her eyes tight. “I saw Patterson smile as he hit the ground.”

“And he didn’t send anyone searching for you? To bring you back?”

“No.”

“That’s suspicious as fuck,” I muttered. “Could he have followed you here?”

“No. I was careful.” Fostine stared up at Wyatt. “I swear, I wasn’t followed.”

“Easy, you’re safe now.” Wyatt looked over at me. “I want you and Trakker out scouting just in case. You see anything at all, report back to me.”

I nodded. “I need to speak to Lily first. She saw Fostine.”

Fostine snorted. “I didn’t shift in front of her,” she muttered. “Just tell the little human it was a wolf and send her on her way.”

“That human is my mate,” I said, trying to stay calm. “You will treat her with respect.”

“This is my home!” She shot to her feet and got in my face. “Or have you forgotten?”

“I’ve forgotten nothing,” I replied. “You left here of your own free will. Wyatt warned you what could happen. Father warned you.” I closed the distance separating us. “Dad is a prisoner because he went after you!”

She started to speak, but Wyatt stepped between us. “Fostine, calm down.” He turned toward me. “Go, let me know what you find.”

“Anything to get away from her.” I turned to leave, Trakker followed close behind. One more thought occurred. I scowled back at my sister. “Stay away from Lily.”

Fostine's smile was reassuring this time.

Wyatt saw my hesitation. "I will watch over her personally," he offered.

I didn't want my brother near Lily, but her safety overrode my possessive instinct. "Thank you," I replied before leaving the room. When Trakker and I reached the door leading upstairs, I glanced over and said, "Give me a few minutes to speak to her."

"You have my sympathies, brother," Trakker replied as he followed me to the upper level. "I can't even imagine how freaked out she was when she saw Fostine."

I could still see the terror on Lily's face. "She was more upset by the fact that I was speaking to a seemingly wild animal, and it obeyed."

Trakker slapped me on the back. "Yeah, good luck explaining."

"I don't have time for that now. I just want to make sure she doesn't try to leave before I have a chance to..."

"A chance to tell her we're a race of shifters that can breathe underwater and need blood to seal a mate bond?"

I glared at my older sibling. "Thanks for summing it up for me," I ground out. "Super fucking helpful."

He chuckled. "That's what family is for."

I watched my brother saunter off toward the kitchen, wishing I had the time to slap him upside the head, before taking the stairs two at a time. I could admit that I was too eager to see Lily. To reassure her. How I was going to do that was still a mystery. When I approached her door and knocked, she yanked it open and glared at me. "I

thought you'd forgotten about me." She moved back to let me enter.

I smiled at the ludicrous idea. "I could never forget you, Lily." When I noticed her suitcase sitting near the door, I pointed at it. "You said you'd give me a chance to explain."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So, explain. I can't wait to hear this."

I ran a hand through my hair, then strode to the bed and sat. "Fostine is ... family."

"Like a beloved pet?" She shuddered. "That's one scary-looking pet, Kai."

"More wild than tame," I clarified. "And she's been missing for two years. We didn't think we'd ever see her again."

"And you spoke to her as if she were a person. Stranger still, she obeyed. I've never seen a pet do that." She narrowed her gaze. "There are things you're keeping from me. I can feel it."

She'd moved closer. Close enough for me to touch. I reached out and took her hand in mine and tugged until she was standing between my widespread thighs. "It's true. There are things I'm keeping from you. But in time I promise to tell you everything."

Her shoulders slumped forward and she let out a heavy sigh. "Why can't you just tell me now? Are you into some sort of illegal exotic animal trade? Because there's no way Fostine is a wolf. I'm not sure I've ever seen anything like her before. What is she?"

"We aren't into anything illegal. You have my word on that. Fostine is unique, that's true. She's what's known as a Yucilon."

“I’ve never heard of that breed.”

Breed . I worried Lily would always view my family in that light. “No, you wouldn’t. The Yucilon dates back to prehistoric times. Today there aren’t many left in existence.”

“And if someone found out about her they’d want to take her,” she surmised. “Maybe even study her.” She cursed under her breath. “I’m emphatically against animal abuse of any kind.”

My time was running short. I could hear Trakker downstairs pacing. Our exceptional hearing had always been an asset. Now it felt more like a burden. “I need to go. My brother and I are searching the woods. We think the one who kept her might be out there.”

Her eyes widened. “So someone did take her?”

“Yes. We didn’t know that until now. We’d thought she ran off.” I stood, then cupped her cheek in my palm, enjoying the silky softness of her skin. “It’s late. You need to get some sleep, Lily.”

“I’m going to worry about you. Are you sure the authorities shouldn’t be notified? I mean, if someone is out there snatching exotic animals, then someone should be told.”

“No, we need to handle this ourselves.” I saw her concern and rushed to add, “We could get into trouble for having her.”

“I see.” She yawned and stared at the bed. “Will you at least let me know when you return?”

“It could be late.”

“I don’t care.” She pointed to her suitcase. “I have a new book I’ve been anxious to read anyway.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I know there’s more you’re not telling me.” She reached up and touched a finger to my jaw. “I won’t push, but if you truly want us to get to know each other better, then we need truth between us.”

She was right and I dreaded it. Lily was open and giving and she wore her heart on her sleeve. But when she saw my true form, that could all change. I leaned down and kissed her. “I want nothing more than to bare my soul to you. For now, rest. I’ll return as soon as I can.”

She nodded and followed me to the door.

When I turned the knob, I glanced back at her. “Lock it behind me.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Probably not, but I think you’ll feel better, yes?”

“You’re right. No offense to your brothers, but...”

“I get it.” I smiled, then thought to add, “If you need anything, Wyatt will be close by.”

“Thanks, but it’s been a long day. All I need is my comfy pj’s and my book.”

Her words brought up an adorable image. It was tempting to stay. Just slip beneath the covers and spend the night with her tucked up close. But I had duties to perform. And I couldn't ignore them. The safety of my family—including Lily—was at stake.

I left her to it, then waited until I heard the lock slide into place before I went in search of Trakker. I found him at the refrigerator guzzling apple juice straight from the jug. "Wyatt'll kick your ass if he sees you doing that."

"So, don't be a tattletale and we're all good." He put the jug away, then pointed toward the ceiling. "Got her all squared away?"

I nodded and led the way to the back door. "She's staying. That's all that matters."

When we reached the back porch, Trakker turned to me. "All teasing aside, I hope you can make it work. She's sweet and you're different around her."

My brother's words confused me. "Different how?"

Trakker began to remove his shirt. "Less intense."

I stiffened. "What's that supposed to mean? I'm not intense."

He laughed so loud that I was tempted to slug him. "Damn, the only one more intense than you is Wyatt. And I don't mean that as a compliment either."

"Can we focus here?" I stripped out of my clothes. I'd done it a thousand times, but this time it felt different. And I knew why. Lily. She was close and the Yucilon part of me wanted to get down on all fours and seek her out. The animalistic instinct to mate with her was already hard to resist, but in my shifted form it would become damn near impossible. Still, I couldn't let myself think about anything except hunting. And if there was anyone on our land searching for Fostine, then the fuckers

would be dealt with. Our very existence hinged on secrecy.

When I was naked, my clothes in a pile on a bench near the door, I closed my eyes and let instinct take over. Bones shifted and my claws extended. Within minutes my brother and I were off and running. Trakker was bigger, his black streaked with silver, and his eyes glowed a bright blue. I sniffed and detected the faint scent of something unfamiliar hovering in the night air. I nudged my brother with my snout to gain his attention before heading south. If Gregory Patterson's lackeys had been foolish enough to follow Fostine, then their deaths would be on his head.

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Lily

Over a hundred pages into the new romantic suspense and the sixth time I'd yawned. I felt like giving up and turning off the light. Out of curiosity, I picked up my cell phone from the bedside table. The shattered screen made it difficult to see the time in the left-hand corner. Four in the morning. Or was that a five? At any rate, the sun would be coming up soon. Because I'm a glutton for punishment, I tapped on my messaging app. Two from my sister, but I couldn't make out the words. Probably the usual demands for money. Ah, a voicemail from Mom. This should be fun. I clicked on the voicemail from my mom.

"You let your sister down. You've let me down. You can just go to hell!"

"Nice," I muttered, dropping the phone back onto the nightstand. "Nothing quite like a mother's love to give you the warm fuzzies."

A knock at my door jarred me out of my miserable thoughts and I scooted off the bed, then jogged across the room. I started to open the door, but I remembered Kai's order to lock it behind him and I hesitated. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Lily," Kai called back, his voice hoarse.

I yanked on the knob and pulled the door wide. Kai leaned against the door frame, one hand in the front pocket of his jeans. He looked me over, then smiled, the whiskey shade of his eyes darkening. "You look cute in your pajamas."

Too late I realized what I'd put on and my face heated. "Make fun if you want, but

these bad boys are warm.”

“I like them.” He chuckled as he tapped on my thigh. “Especially the mommy bear riding the skateboard.”

His laugh was infectious, and I found myself joining in. “What can I say? They were on sale.”

He pointed behind me. “Did I wake you?”

“No, I was reading still. How did it go? Did you find the people that took Fostine?”

“No sign of them.” He stretched his neck from side to side. “If they’re smart they’ll keep it that way.”

He had dark circles around his eyes and his hair was a disheveled mess. “You look beat.”

“It’s been a long day for both of us, huh?”

“It has.” I covered a yawn, then reached out and placed a hand against his cheek. “Thank you for letting me know you were back. I would’ve worried.”

Kai leaned toward me, his eyes dark with intent. My breath caught in my throat as I felt the pull of his presence. “You know what I think, Lily?” he whispered, his voice sending shivers down my spine.

“W-What?” I stammered, my heart pounding in my chest.

“I think if I don’t kiss you, I’ll die,” he murmured as he closed the gap between us and pressed his lips to mine.

I gasped in surprise, and he inhaled it, pulling me close. His tongue dipped inside my mouth. The kiss was potent, electrifying. I couldn't think, couldn't move. His lips played and teased, turning my body to liquid fire in two seconds flat. I should push him away, send him on his way. Instead, I lifted my arms and wrapped them around his neck. Kai groaned as if pleased with my response, slid his arm beneath my knees, and pulled me into his arms. I heard a door slam shut. My body felt so light against his power and strength, devastating my senses.

He lifted his mouth from mine and whispered something against my skin, then moved his lips downward, teasing me beyond measure. I leaned back, giving him permission to lick a fiery path along my chin and collarbone. He zeroed in on the neckline of my shirt, leaving little kisses along my skin, and his talented tongue slid beneath the fabric and teased at my cleavage. I arched against him, desperate for more, hungry for his touch all over. We'd started something at the waterfall and I needed him to finish it.

Kai cursed, then stopped long enough to murmur, "Easy, Lily. We'll get there, I promise."

I didn't like that answer to my body's demands. "I don't want easy. I want you."

Kai stopped his ministrations and stared at me in the dimly lit room. What went through his head at that moment was anyone's guess. When he touched my cheek, I practically melted at the tender caress. "There's nothing I want more than to make love to you. All night if I had my way."

I clenched my eyelids shut and admitted, "I feel like this is all happening so fast."

Kai's lips against my forehead forced me to open my eyes once more. His gaze held a wealth of tenderness. Butterflies came to life inside me, an entire swarm of them fluttering around in there.

“I like you like this. Anxious, wanting me. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you.” He paused as if carefully choosing his next words. “Rushing isn’t an option. Not for me. When we come together, I’ll need time. Weeks, even.”

I liked the thought. Too much, probably. “You talk too much, Kai. All talk, no action.”

“I like you this way.” He grinned and let his gaze travel over my torso. “Fuck, you’re a vision.”

I wanted to speak, say something sexy and flirty. But he effectively cut me off with a press of his lips to the pulse in my neck. “Oh, my God,” I moaned as I dug my fingers into his mass of dark hair, holding him firmly while he suckled my skin. I ached to feel those lips and that tongue lower. Much lower.

As if I’d spoken the thought aloud, Kai lifted his head, then crossed the room. He placed me on the bed, then said, “This needs to go,” he explained, as his big, capable hands went to the hem of my shirt. Air brushed against my stomach, then my breasts. I watched as his gaze darkened, his nostrils flaring. “Pure beauty.”

When his tongue flicked over one hard, I nearly shot off the couch. I forgot my hesitations. My body craved his touch. It’d been so long since I’d had sex. So damn long since I’d derived any real pleasure from a man’s body. And I knew instinctively that no other would compare to Kai.

As if afraid I would break, Kai lightly ran his tongue back and forth over my areola seconds before sucking my nipple into his warm mouth. He hummed in satisfaction, and the raspy vibration of his voice tormented me. Somehow I found myself sprawled, Kai’s hands on either side of my body effectively pinning me to the mattress. He surrounded me. His lethal strength and intoxicating scent filled my vision and my senses.

While he switched to the other breast, I marveled at his patience. He sipped at my skin and toyed with erogenous zones I wasn't aware I possessed. When he appeared to be settling in for a meal, I urged him lower with a tug on his hair. He obliged and moved his loving torture south. My body reacted with a flow of heat to my center. Every inch of me was ready for him to take me. He'd be hard and savage, I knew it in my bones.

"Please, Kai."

A grunt was the only indication he'd even heard my plea. By tiny increments, he tugged my pajama pants down, and with each piece of flesh he exposed, he sprinkled kisses. By the time the material was off, my pussy throbbed with need.

He sat back on his haunches, his gaze devouring me. "You don't wear panties?"

Embarrassment flooded me, making my cheeks burn. "Not to bed."

He passed a hand over his face and grumbled, "If you were in my bed you'd wear nothing at all."

In his bed. God, why did I want to be there so badly?

Kai reached down and cupped my mound. "This is mine," he vowed.

His statement brought a forbidden image to my mind. His. Yes. My clit swelled. I tried to maintain my cool composure, but when his middle finger found its way through my curls and sank all the way to the knuckle inside my heat, I gave up any pretense of control.

"Mmm, just look at you. Your pussy is ripe for the plucking. I think I'm going to really enjoy making you scream with pleasure."

When a second finger joined the first, my hips began to move, matching his pumping rhythm. After thrusting several times, Kai brought both fingers out. I wanted to beg him to come back, but my words died on my tongue as I watched him suck my juices off each digit.

“Tangy, but I’m going to need a little more to be sure.” He spread me wide and dipped his head between my thighs, sweeping his tongue over my swollen clit.

I arched upward, and he was there, holding me down with a hand splayed across my belly. I moaned and writhed under his assault. His tongue dipped in and out, tasting and sweeping me into a different realm. I went wild when he sucked my clit into his mouth and nibbled it. Once, twice, and I suddenly burst apart, shouting his name and flowing into his greedy mouth.

He stayed there for long seconds after my orgasm ended, relishing the little aftershocks. Then he lifted his head.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmured. “So fucking beautiful, Lily.”

Amen, was all I could think as I let my eyes drift closed. Then his weight lifted, and I opened them again, curious about what he was about to do. I watched him standing beside the bed, an impressive erection tenting the front of his jeans and some unnamed emotion on his face.

K ai

I felt like shouting out my victory. At long last, I had her taste on my tongue, the tang of her climax tantalizingly mixed with the sweet flavor of her. My animal stirred, the base instincts roaring to the surface. My claws extended, my teeth elongated, and I

struggled to keep control. To hide my nature from her. I quickly turned away from her. Counted to ten to gain control. I needed, wanted, to make love to her. I wanted to feel her wrapped around me, snug and deep. I craved her. Now. In fifty different ways.

“I should go, let you sleep,” I muttered, fear of losing control foremost on my mind.

“Kai, look at me,” Lily urged.

I turned and watched her sitting on the edge of the bed. “Did I do something wrong?”

I ran a hand over my face. “Nothing could feel more right, Lily. You are everything. You bring me to my knees with your cries.”

“Good, then I think it’s my turn.” She stood, her curves, taunting me. My mouth watered. I needed to taste her again. To bite into her let her blood coat my canines. Seal our bond.

“Turn?” I couldn’t seem to stay on track. My need for her drowned out all rational thought.

“Yes,” she whispered, “I want to taste you. Will you deny me?”

“I would never say no to you,” I promised, meaning it. “I’d give you eternity if I could.”

Her hum of approval lit me on fire, my inner Yucilon snarling with impatience. I stood and yanked my t-shirt over my head before starting on my boots and jeans. When I was naked, Lily stood back. Her gaze traveled the length of me, but when she stopped and stared at my cock, I had to hide a grin. “Like what you see?”

“I knew you’d make me drool if I ever got a good look at you.” She licked her lips. “I wasn’t wrong.” When she slowly melted to her hands and knees, my pulse went haywire. With her head back, Lily stared up at me, waiting. I ached to break the chains binding me. To claim, to mate, to bond. The urge to mark her as mine was almost overwhelming.

Almost.

“Fuck, you’re pretty.” I took hold of my cock in a tight fist and pumped it once, twice, then demanded, “Suck it for me, Lily.”

Lily crawled toward me, her chin tilting upward when she looked from my face to my groin. Mouth wide, she took me in and clamped her lips around the head so tight I nearly came.

I wrapped the length of her hair around my fist so there was no slack, no way for her to retreat. Then, with my other hand, I took hold of her chin and guided her head farther onto my throbbing cock, showing her how I liked it. She managed half my length, and I wanted more.

“Come on, sweetness,” I murmured, “just a little more. Let me feel your throat.”

She frowned and tried to take more, but gagged. She pulled back and stared at my cock as if trying to figure out a way to do what I wanted. To please me. “You’re ... big.”

I drew my hand from her hair and stroked her throat. “It’s okay. The feel of your lips and tongue is enough to drive me over the edge.”

“I want to do this right,” she explained, frowning up at me. “I want to make you feel good.”

“You already do,” I said in a voice gone hoarse. “Just looking at you is making me half-crazed here.”

She nodded and licked her lips. I cupped the back of her head and nudged her forward. She swept her tongue over the engorged tip and hummed eagerly before sucking me in deep. She angled her head, and a few more inches disappeared inside her mouth. Soon, I was balls deep. My entire body shuddered. Her head bobbed back and forth, her tongue circling the head of my cock. Her eyes drifted closed, face flushed.

“Jesus H,” I groaned. “Such a pretty little mouth.”

She moaned and brought me all the way out before sucking me in again. The slurping sounds she made had my sac drawing up tight. Her tits pressed against my thighs as she fucked me with her mouth. I swallowed howls of pleasure, dug my claws into her scalp a split second before quickly retracting them. Fuck, that was close. Too close.

“Son of a bitch, you’re about to get a mouthful, Lily,” I warned. Soon the choice would be taken away from her, because I was fast losing my mind.

Her only response was a delicious humming sound as she continued her sweet torture. I flung my head back and closed my eyes, savoring every second of having Lily’s mouth on me, taking me straight to paradise. I slammed my claws into my thighs, burying them into my skin to keep from hurting her, my preternatural nature barely held in check.

When her tongue probed the slit at the end of my cock, I stiffened. My animal snarled, the urge to mate, to seal the bond, overwhelming.

“Lily,” I warned, my voice a deep, guttural growl.

She sucked harder. Two more strokes of her tongue and I erupted, pouring my hot come all over her tongue and down her throat. The need to bite, to mark her as mine, surged through me, but I held back, barely. For now.

When she released me and stood, my breathing labored and cock still hard as a damn hammer I growled, "That was ... fuck."

Lily smiled and I knew I'd need to see that joy on her face for the next fifty years at least.

Lily

Kai took my hand in his and placed a kiss against my palm, warming my insides, then placed me back on the bed. I watched him pull on his jeans and boots, then he turned to me and smiled. "I want to stay," he quietly confessed. "All damn night. But I think you need a little time to ... process. Yeah?"

He was right. My mind was firing all sorts of warning shots and I needed a minute to think. To stop the rollercoaster and breathe. "It has been ... a lot."

He swallowed hard, then leaned close and kissed my cheek. "I'll see you in the morning," he murmured. "Breakfast is usually around nine. Is that okay?"

"That's great." I bit my lower lip, savoring his taste. "Sleep tight."

He pointed to his left and said, "I'm right next door if you need anything. I'm a light sleeper. Call my name and I'll hear you, okay?"

"I'm sure I'll sleep like the dead." I winked, then added, "You saw to that."

Kai offered me a jerky nod, then crossed the room. One last glance back, then he closed the door and was out of sight. Seconds drifted by as I lay there staring at the light oak wood six-panel, wishing I had the courage to open it and go to him. Plead for him to make love to me. Sleep in my bed, hold me in his arms. We'd taken each other to heaven and beyond. Yet my awareness of Kai and the desire to touch him, undress him, do wickedly erotic things to him hadn't abated. I'd never felt so hungry before. My body was an inferno and nothing short of an ice bath would cool me down now.

I was still trembling from the intensity of our encounter, but a wave of uncertainty washed over me. What had I just done? I had only just met Kai, and yet I had allowed things to escalate so quickly, so passionately. The heated things we had done together felt surreal, almost dreamlike, and now that the initial haze of desire was lifting, doubt crept in.

What did it mean? Why was I so drawn to him?

I glanced over at the spot on the bed where he'd taken me to paradise just moments before, his powerful form still radiating heat beside me. His touch, his taste, his very presence had ignited something within me, something wild and uncontrollable. I couldn't deny the magnetic pull between us, the way my body responded to his every touch and command. But was it more than just physical?

The way he looked at me, with hunger in his eyes, made my heart race. Tenderness followed, softening the intensity. It was as if he could see right through me, past all the walls I had built around myself. There was something otherworldly about him, something that both excited and terrified me.

Was it just lust? Or was there something deeper, something more profound that I couldn't yet understand?

I worried I had made a mistake, letting things go so far, so fast. But then I remembered the way his eyes softened when he looked at me, the way his hands gentled even as his desire burned bright. There was a link there, something that felt fated, as if we were meant to find each other.

Still, the rational part of my mind couldn't help but question everything. What if this was all a mistake? What if I had misread the situation, let my desires cloud my judgment?

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm of thoughts swirling in my mind. I needed to talk to Kai, to understand what he felt, to see if he was experiencing the same inexplicable connection I was. Only then could I begin to make sense of the whirlwind that had swept us together and decide what it meant for us moving forward.

Sleep, that's what I needed. It'd been a weird day. A delicious, crazy, adventure of a day. But no less weird. Leaving home for the first time in my life, then the accident. Meeting a big, gorgeous man who hung on my every word. It was bound to confuse a woman. Tomorrow things would settle down. "A vacation," I told myself. "At a lovely bed and breakfast. In the woods. With six mysterious men and an exotic beast with big teeth." Oh, sure, as if I wouldn't see those teeth in my nightmares. Definitely not.

I let out a heavy breath, then reached over and set an alarm on my phone. I placed it back on the table and switched off the light. The minute I closed my eyes, Kai's image slammed into my mind. His big, muscular body wrapped around me. The kisses and strokes and erotic journey he'd taken me on. I could still feel him on me. Surrounding me. Questions swirled around inside my head, keeping me awake another hour before exhaustion finally won.

Kai

I placed dishes on the table and listened to Cage tell Fostine that it was her turn to go into town for groceries. He even made a point to inform her that she needed to catch up on her chores since she'd been gone so long. As if she'd been away on holiday, for Christ's sake. Fostine's rebuttal was a hard jab to Cage's stomach. I knew Fostine had won that round when I saw Cage double over. Sure, she was still recovering, but that didn't mean she was going to take any shit.

When Lily entered the room, my attention centered solely on her. Her hair was in a ponytail and it accentuated the elegant length of her neck. And damned if she didn't fill out the white V-neck t-shirt and black leggings. Fuck, I wanted to take her to my bed. Make love all day. Then when I had her good and satisfied I'd share the truth with her. All of it.

"Wow, something smells amazing," she praised, sniffing the air. "You guys are great cooks. I can't make a microwavable meal without burning it."

Unable to stand the distance, I moved toward her and took her hand in mine. I needed that small contact like I needed air. "Creag made sausage gravy biscuits, scrambled eggs, and bacon, and the coffee just finished brewing."

Lily offered my brother a smile. "I'm going to get fat if you guys keep cooking like this."

"Hey," Fostine called out from across the room. "Aren't you going to introduce me to our guest, Kai?"

Damn, I hadn't considered my sister's name. "Uh, Lily, this is my sister. Fostine."

Lily's gaze widened. "You named your pet after your sister?"

Fostine closed the distance between us, her eyes blazing with unleashed fury. “Pet?”

I heard Creeg and Cage attempt to stifle a laugh and I glared at the pair before saying, “Yes, Lily was there last night when Fostine returned home.”

Fostine was about to speak, but I glared, promising retribution if she revealed the truth. It appeared to work. “Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Lily.”

“Thanks. You, too.” Lily elbowed me in the ribs. “You never told me you had a sister.”

“She was out of town and it slipped my mind.”

“And she shares the same name as that huge animal from last night.” She narrowed her eyes. “I’m sure there’s an interesting story there. One you’ll share later.”

“Yes. For now, I think we should eat. Creeg went to a lot of work and we shouldn’t let it go to waste.”

Her stomach grumbled, charming me further. “Okay, fine. But if I get fat it’s your fault.”

I let my gaze travel down her body, then offered a hum of approval. “You have nothing to worry about, Lily.”

She blushed and I wanted to forget about food and satisfy a different appetite instead. When Wyatt, Trakker, and Miggs entered the kitchen, everyone started talking at once. After our meal was served, Lily peered down the length of the table at Fostine. “So, you were out of town?”

“Yep.” Fostine snorted, as she shoved another spoonful of eggs into her mouth. “A

lovely trip full of fun and adventure.”

“I see. I left Walnut Ridge to travel. An adventure was at the top of my bucket list.”

Fostine’s gaze collided with mine. “Oh, you’ll get lots of adventure here. Trust me.”

“Well, it’s very kind of your brothers to give me a place to stay, but I can’t sponge off them forever.”

Fostine stopped chewing and stared at Lily. “You aren’t planning to stay?”

“Oh, no. Maybe Kai didn’t tell you, but I was in an accident.” Lily went on to explain about the giant beast she’d swerved to avoid, earning a chuckle from my annoying sister.

“That must have been quite frightening for you,” Fostine replied, grabbing another biscuit from the basket. “I wonder what happened to the animal.”

If I’d been sitting closer to Fostine I would’ve kicked her in the shin. “I don’t think Lily needs to dwell on it. The whole evening was difficult enough.”

Lily reached for me, placing her hand on my forearm. “It’s okay.” She frowned down at her plate. “Now that I think about it, the animal looked a lot like your pet. Just a different color.”

“You were injured. Perhaps it just seemed that way at the time. I’m sure it was a wolf or coyote.”

She shook her head. “No, it was bigger than either of those.” She rubbed at her forehead and added, “I wonder if there are more of those exotic Yucilons . You said your pet was the only one, but what if those awful people found others like her?”

“You told Lily about the Yucilons ?” Wyatt asked, his gaze filled with ice-cold fury.

Oh, hell. “I explained that Fostine is a rare breed known as a Yucilon , yes. And that she was taken from us by people trafficking in exotic animals.”

“Right,” Wyatt bit out. “We’re just happy she’s back with us.”

“But what if there are others?” Lily frowned in concern and she pushed her plate away. “They could be doing all sorts of awful things to them. I saw a documentary once where people pay huge amounts of money to buy exotic animals to eat. Like a delicacy or something. It’s despicable.”

Everyone went silent, staring at Lily. Her compassion for my kind had the entire family viewing her in a different light. She was no longer the human outsider, but a woman willing to stand up for us against the evils of the world. My heart expanded and I wrapped an arm around her back, drawing her attention. When her pretty gaze connected with mine, her eyes filled with unshed tears, I said, “My brothers and I are looking into it,” I vowed. “We don’t want any Yucilons caged and tortured either. I assure you.”

She nodded. “If I can help in some way, please let me know. The thought of what your pet Fostine went through gives me nightmares.”

“It should,” Fostine stated. “And the ones who took her deserve death.”

I glared down the table at my sister. “I think there’s been enough talk about torture and death.”

She started to say something, to argue no doubt, but Wyatt put his hand over hers and she went quiet.

Creeg cleared his throat. “You should eat,” he advised Lily. “After breakfast, I’d like to check that wound in your head.”

My attention went to Lily’s forehead. It was red and appeared swollen. “Does it hurt?”

She reached up and gently touched it with her index finger. “A little tender. That’s to be expected though, right?”

Lily had directed the question to Creeg, but my worries intensified. I should’ve left her alone last night. Let her sleep. But I hadn’t been able to keep my hands off her. “It could be infected.”

“I can put some antibiotic ointment on it.” Creeg put his fork down, then glanced at me. “If you want I can take care of it now.”

I was about to jump on the offer, but Lily beat me to it. “It can wait. It’s not exactly life-threatening,” she teased, offering my brother a smile.

Fostine cursed and shot to her feet. “I feel sick to my stomach. Excuse me while I go throw up now.”

Wyatt called her name, but she only stalked from the room, leaving her breakfast plate half full. I wanted to go after her. Her sarcasm toward Lily was unnecessary and it was pissing off my protective side.

Lily cleared her throat. “I wondered if there was any progress with my van.”

Trakker nodded. “It’s still at the shop. He’ll give us an estimate later today.”

“Thank you for doing that.” She glanced at me and smiled. “I wonder if you could

give me a lift into town. I need to replace my phone. It works, but the screen is shattered.”

Part of me balked at giving her access to the outside world, but I couldn’t keep her locked away. As appealing as the idea sounded. “Sure,” I replied, then caught Wyatt staring at me. “Unless you need me today.”

“No. Take care of Lily. We can handle things here.”

Wyatt would go searching for our father. And as enforcer I should be by his side. In normal circumstances, I’d insist on it. But that was before Lily. Miggs’ words the night before came back to bite me in the ass, and I shot my brother a glare. The smirk on his face made me itch to land a right jab.

Lily swiped a napkin over her lips, then sat back. “That really was delicious.”

Creeg beamed at her. “Thanks. Our mom taught all of us how to cook.”

“Oh? Does she live near here?”

Everyone fell silent and stared at Lily. I nudged her shoulder. When she was looking up at me, a smile lifting her lips, I explained in a low voice, “Our mother died several years ago. A virus.”

Her face paled and her smile disappeared. “Oh, no, I’m so sorry.” Her attention went back to Creeg. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” Creeg rushed to reassure her. “You couldn’t have known.”

Wyatt got to his feet and picked up his plate. “Trakker, Miggs, when you two are finished meet me in my office.”

Cage stood. “Hey, what about me?”

“We’ve discussed this. I won’t go over it again.” When Cage started to argue further, Wyatt gestured toward Lily. Cage caught the hint and fell silent, then shoved away from the table. He was muttering under his breath as he cleared away his dishes.

Creeg glanced at Lily. “I’ll meet you in the clinic when you’re done.”

I tapped Lily’s plate. “After you’re done with Creeg, we can go into town. There’s a great little café. They serve the best lattes.”

“That’s perfect.” She scanned the table and frowned. “Can I help with dishes?”

“It’s Cage’s turn.” And before she could argue, I said, “You already took his turn once.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, but I’m pulling my weight around here. Even if I have to clean toilets.”

Creeg laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think Kai’s going to allow that.”

“Well, Kai doesn’t speak for me,” Lily replied, as she snatched my plate and headed toward the sink.

I was too distracted by the way her ass moved in the leggings to care about her frustrated response. When Fostine strolled into the room and headed for the refrigerator, I stiffened, waiting for another jibe from her. She only flipped me off and sauntered out, carrying the half-full jug of apple juice.

I stood and moved up behind Lily, placing my hand on her shoulder to gain her attention. When her pretty gaze landed on me, I said, “I need to take care of a few

things. I'll meet you in the clinic."

She nodded. "I hope I'm not keeping you from anything."

I cupped her cheek, anxious to kiss her, every bare inch of her, but I knew better. I'd take her to bed if I let our mouths touch. "The only thing on my agenda is spending time with you."

She blushed and my body hardened. "I'm looking forward to our trip into town."

"Me, too, Lily," I murmured, meaning it. I wanted to show her around, and if I was being honest with myself, I was anxious to show her off a little.

I forced my feet to move, putting distance between us, then gave Creeg a nod and left the room. The first order of business was Fostine. She needed to tone it down or she'd wish she'd never come back. I found her in her room. I didn't bother knocking.

"Gee, come on in," she grumbled.

I slammed the door behind me before closing the distance. "Stop with all the shitty comments toward Lily. She is not to blame for what Patterson did to you."

"She's human," she spat back. "They're all the same. We're nothing but animals to them."

I got close, nearly nose to nose. "Beat on me if you need a punching bag. I won't mind. But Lily isn't your enemy. I promise you. She's not like Patterson."

Her eyes widened. "You care about her, don't you?"

"Yes. More than I ever thought possible." I took a few beats to keep from losing

control. The need to destroy any and all threats toward my mate was paramount. “Cut her some slack, yeah?”

She swallowed hard and looked away. “I’m sorry. I’ll be nice to Lily.”

I’d expected a fight. Maybe bloodshed. Her apology took me by surprise. “You’ll back off?”

Fostine curled her lip. “She’s actually kind of sweet. Like a puppy.”

I cursed under my breath and tried to remember that Fostine wasn’t in her right mind. “See, that’s the kind of shit that needs to stop. Like now. I’m barely in control here, sis.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “Jesus, what’s her deal anyway?”

I explained why Lily had left her hometown and the family that treated her like dirt. Fostine’s gaze softened and she dropped into the oversized chair near her dresser. “Damn, her mother and sister sound like real bitches.”

Finally, something we agreed on. “So perhaps you could give her a break. I don’t think she deserves to have another female in her life treating her with such disrespect, do you?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her gaze at me. “How are you going to make this work?” Before I could answer she added, “And I’m not trying to be an ass here. She’s human. The minute she sees you shift...”

I ran a hand through my hair. “I have no idea. But the tie is there. Even without the blood exchange. It’s strong. She’s mine.”

“I don’t envy you, brother.”

“You’ll go easy on her?”

“Sure. Just don’t expect us to braid each other’s hair.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, that’s just too weird to even imagine.” I turned to go, but Fostine called my name and I turned. “Yeah?”

“Wyatt is going after Dad, isn’t he?”

I shoved my hands in my front pockets. “He is.”

“We exchanged blood, you know.”

“You and Dad?”

She nodded.

“Why would you do that?”

“I was close to death. Patterson had gone too far one day. I was losing too much blood. Dad ... Dad saved me.”

I crossed the room and put my hand on my sister’s shoulder. “You aren’t to blame for what that bastard did.”

“Dad is there because of me. He’s being tortured because of me.”

“And Wyatt will burn that place down to get him out. Have faith in our brother, sister.”

She nodded, then stared down at the floor. “He’s stronger than I remembered.”

“He had to be after you and Dad left. He stepped up and kept us from falling apart. He’s a true alpha, Fostine. And he deserves your respect.”

She bit her lip and gave me a jerky nod. “Go, see to Lily.”

I watched her for another few seconds, then turned and left, closing the door quietly behind me. I stood in the hallway for a moment and heard the faint sounds of her sobs. She’d endured too much, and I worried my sister would never be the same again.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:55 pm

Lily

I sat on the cold metal table while Creeg dabbed a cotton ball soaked in peroxide onto my head wound before applying the antibiotic ointment. It stung a little, but I still considered myself lucky. The car accident could've turned out much worse. He placed a bandage over the area and stepped back, his brows scrunching together. I realized just how much he resembled Kai. Only difference was, Creeg didn't set my blood on fire with a mere touch. I took a deep breath and asked, "Well, what do you think? Will I live?"

He grinned. "You will, but after your trip into town, come straight here and I'll change the bandage and use a little more ointment."

I started to speak, but the door swung open, Kai standing on the other side. He glared at Creeg, then strode across the room and cupped my face in his palm. "Are you well?"

His concern went straight through me, threatening to turn me into a puddle of goo. "All good." I offered Creeg a smile. "Your brother took good care of me."

Kai's gaze landed on Creeg. "Did you, now?"

Creeg chuckled and cleaned up the used swabs. "A little peroxide and some antibiotic. I'll need to see her when you two get back as well. I want to change that dressing and put more antibiotics on it." He pointed toward my forehead. "It's inflamed, but there's no blood or pus so that's good."

Kai's gaze softened as he watched me. "Does it hurt? Are you certain you shouldn't rest?"

I rolled my eyes and scooted off the table. "Your brother just told you I'm fine. Besides, I seriously need to replace my phone."

Kai ran a hand through his hair. "Fine, but if it starts to hurt, you'll tell me."

"Sure," I lied, smiling up at him.

He rolled his eyes. "You could at least try to look sincere." He took my hand and we headed out of the room. When we reached the upstairs landing, he said, "You'll need your coat. The temperature dropped below thirty today."

I nodded. "Be right back." I jogged up the stairs to my room and grabbed my puffer coat from the suitcase, then slipped it on before heading back down to Kai. He wore a leather jacket and oh Lord he looked yummy in it. His hair was a wild mess around his shoulders and he wore a pair of black jeans and work boots.

When I got within a few feet of him, Kai smiled. "You look very pretty in blue."

I could feel the blush filling my cheeks and wanted to kick myself for the telltale reaction. "Thank you."

He put an arm around my back and headed for the front door. When we reached the porch, there was a black SUV sitting in the driveway with the engine running. "Is that yours?"

"Yeah. I came out early and started it up so it'd be warm."

Geez, I'd never met anyone so thoughtful. "That was very sweet, Kai. Thank you."

He grinned at me and held the passenger side door open for me. “I’d be a terrible chauffeur if I let you freeze to death.”

I laughed and got in, then stared over at him. “First you rescue me, then you give me a place to stay, now a chauffeur. A girl could get used to being spoiled like this.”

“Good, then my plan is working,” he murmured as he winked and shut the door. I watched him jog around to the driver’s side, then get in behind the wheel. He put the vehicle in gear, then took off down a long gravel driveway. Once we were on the road, Kai glanced over at me long enough to say, “That café I told you about is right across the street from a shop that sells cell phones. I believe they carry the same type as yours.”

I reached into my purse and pulled it out. “I wasn’t able to read the texts I got last night,” I muttered, thinking of my lovely family. “But I did listen to a voicemail from my mom. Unfortunately.”

Kai stiffened, his hands clenching the steering wheel tighter. “Your mom called you?”

I sighed and dropped my phone back into my handbag. “Yes. It wasn’t a pleasant message either.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I like your mom very much.”

I laughed at his vehemence. “Yeah, well, that makes two of us.”

We were quiet for a few miles and I enjoyed the scenery. Sach Valley, the area where Kai lived, was breathtaking with mature trees and rolling hills. The quiet beauty made me feel at peace, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I thought of the kiss I’d shared with Kai in the woods the night before—as well as his promise to

tell me the truth. No time like the present.

I turned in my seat, angling my body toward Kai, then asked, “Last night, you said you’d tell me the truth.”

He didn’t speak, a clear sign that I’d hit a nerve. A muscle in his jaw twitched and his gaze narrowed.

“There are things about you, about your family that you aren’t telling me,” I went on. “That much I’m certain of.”

“It’s true.” His shoulders bunched and his fists tightened on the steering wheel. “We’re very private, Lily. For good reason.”

I mulled that over. Several wild scenarios sprang to mind. Top of the list, they were into something illegal. “Drugs?”

His gaze shot toward me. “You think we’re drug runners?”

I slapped my hand on my thigh. “Look, you live in the woods, basically on a compound. You have a hundred acres. And you’re extremely secretive. What else can I think?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “I see your point, but we don’t deal in drugs. I swear we aren’t into anything illegal.”

Frustration mounted and I blurted, “Then what is it? Why the secrecy?”

He was quiet for a few minutes before saying, “Do you believe that there are things of this world that mankind has yet to discover?”

“Uh, I suppose. I’ve never given it much thought, I guess.” I remembered him telling me about the Yucilons . “I didn’t know anything like Fostine existed.”

“Exactly. And we both agree that if the government found out about her, she’d be caged up in some laboratory.”

“Yes. It’s despicable but true. Although, I don’t understand what that has to do with your secrets.”

He took a turn and I could see the town coming into view. “My family, the Ravenbriars, have been around for generations.”

“I know,” I replied. “Creeg told me something similar when he treated me last night in his clinic.”

“What he didn’t say is that we aren’t like you, Lily. We aren’t...”

He was on the verge of sharing something vital, I could feel it. Why he hesitated concerned me. “I’ll keep whatever you say in the strictest confidence,” I offered, hoping to ease his mind. “I’m no gossip.”

“It’s not that.” He smiled over at me, before turning his attention back to the road. “I know you would never betray my trust.”

I began tapping out a rhythm on my leg. “Okay, then why is this so hard for you?”

“I’m afraid you’ll think I’m nuts.”

“Try me.”

His cell phone rang, cutting off his confession. He cursed and picked it up from the

middle console and read the screen. “I’m sorry. It’s Wyatt.”

Wyatt. Anytime the man spoke, the rest of them jumped. It was strange how they all treated their oldest brother. I watched him answer the phone with a curt “yeah.” Whatever Wyatt had to say caused Kai to hit the brakes. My body jerked forward from the momentum. “We’re on our way,” he muttered.

When Kai ended the call and did a U-turn I had to grip onto the dash to keep from flailing about. “What on Earth is going on?”

“I’m sorry, but the trip to the store will have to wait,” he muttered, his gaze snaring mine. “Wyatt just learned that a man fitting our father’s description has been murdered.”

“Your father?” I blurted, digesting his words.

“It’s a long story, but to sum it up, our father left when Fostine went missing. He went looking for her. He hasn’t been back since. We’ve searched, filed a missing person’s report. But nothing.” He swallowed hard. “Until now.”

I wrapped a hand around his forearm and squeezed. “Have faith. It might not be him.”

A muscle in Kai’s jaw jumped wildly. “Yeah, I’m hoping that’s the case. Wyatt and I need to go identify the man.”

“Does your brother know what happened?”

He swallowed hard before saying, “A friend of ours found the man behind an old building.” His voice shook when he added, “Next to a dumpster. He’d been shot in the head.”

“Oh, Kai,” I replied, sorrow tightening my chest as I imagined what that must have been like for Wyatt. “Police?”

“They’ve been called to the scene. Wyatt is on his way.” He cursed under his breath. “I need to drop you at the house, then head over there.”

“Take me with you,” I offered, wishing I could just hold him. The pain Kai attempted to keep hidden broke my heart. “It’ll take more time to go home first. Just take me with you.”

Kai’s gaze widened. “Are you certain? I’m not sure what I’m walking into, Lily,” he bit out. “Things could get ugly. It’s a crime scene, after all.”

“I’m sure,” I swore. “I’ll wait in the car if I have to.”

He slowed the car to a crawl, as if thinking over my suggestion. “Wyatt might not approve, but what the hell,” he muttered, then turned the car around and headed to town.

I didn’t much care if Wyatt approved. I wanted to be there for Kai. I kept that bit to myself and asked, “Where did they find him?”

“Behind a warehouse.” He shook his head. “Something doesn’t feel right though.”

I watched Kai. He was deep in thought. I couldn’t imagine what he was going through. The fear that it could be his father, shot and killed, then left like trash. “I take it you know where we’re going?”

“Yeah, I know the place,” he groaned.

Fifteen minutes later, we were approaching the edge of town. I saw large buildings up

ahead, but Kai slowed, then made a right before we could reach the town limits. Another mile and I saw police lights. Three squad cars and a few other vehicles were all parked in front of a three-story building. I reached for him and offered a smile. “Deep breaths,” I murmured.

He gave me a jerky nod, then pulled into a spot next to a big, black four-wheel-drive truck. “Wyatt’s,” he explained, as he killed the engine. “Wait here.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am. I don’t want you anywhere near this place, Lily. Please, wait here.”

I nodded. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He shoved open the door, then slammed it closed. I watched on as Kai jogged toward the building. I sighed, feeling helpless. There had to be something I could do. Anything. I clasped my hands together, then hung my head and prayed. Hopefully God is in a listening mood .

K ai

I approached a group of police officers, most of whom I recognized. When everyone turned my way, one of them closed the distance between us and held up both hands. “It’s messy, Kai.”

“Let me through, Brandon,” I bit out.

He sighed. “Just ... brace yourself.”

I shoved past him, then saw Wyatt standing next to the dumpster. To his right was the body of a man sprawled out on the blacktop. Jeans, old black work boots, and a grey, short-sleeved t-shirt. The face unrecognizable. Blood and pieces of skull and brain scattered around. “Jesus,” I muttered, my stomach churning at the sight.

“No ID, no wallet. Nothing.”

Wyatt turned toward me, his lips thinning in an angry line. “It’s not him.”

I moved closer, then gave the body another inspection. I noticed the left arm. “No scar,” I said, relief swamped me.

“Yeah, but there was a note,” Wyatt replied, nudging his chin toward Brandon. “Show him.”

Brandon pulled a plastic bag from his shirt pocket, then held it in the air. “It was pinned to his chest.”

“ You’ll never find him ,” I read aloud. “What the hell?”

“He’s taunting us,” Wyatt shot back. “Bastard killed this guy just to prove a fucking point.”

Brandon shoved the note away and cleared his throat. “I need to know who you think did this.”

The pair stared at each other. Wyatt didn’t say a word. Brandon shook his head. “You can’t go off on your own here.” He pointed to the dead man lying on the ground. “This is a murder investigation. If you have information that could aid us, then you’re obligated to tell us.”

“You want the truth?” Wyatt yelled, getting in Brandon’s face. “Gregory Patterson did this!”

“That weird little fella from Cedar Haven?”

“Yes. He’s your murderer,” Wyatt ground out. “And you’d better find him before I do.”

Wyatt turned and walked away, leaving Brandon to shake his head in frustration.

I tried to smooth things over. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Good, because I don’t want to arrest him for some vigilante bullshit. I truly don’t.”

I didn’t say anything else. What could I say? I agreed with Wyatt. One way or the other, Patterson would be found. I hoped it would be before the son of a bitch killed our father.

When I caught up to Wyatt, I asked, “What is the point Patterson is trying to make with all this?” Rage threatened to consume me. “That he’s a fucking psycho?”

Wyatt shoved a hand over his face, then leaned against the front bumper of his truck. “Patterson lost Fostine. He’ll make Dad pay for that.”

I gave that some thought, then said, “I wish I’d gotten a picture of the dead guy. We could’ve shown Fostine. Maybe she’d recognize him.”

Wyatt yanked his cell phone out of his back pocket and waved it in the air. “I got a picture, but there’s not much left of his face to recognize.”

There went my stomach again. “Send it anyway,” I muttered. “It’s worth a try.”

Wyatt tapped the screen and hit send. Seconds was all it took for Fostine's reply. Wyatt sighed. "She says it's Ricky, the guard who helped her," he explained. "She recognizes the clothes. They're the same clothes he had on the night she escaped."

"Fuck! That bastard's had it out for our family for years." I groaned. "There's no telling where he took Dad."

"Yeah, and all we have is a first name for the guard. It won't help the police." Wyatt's gaze went back to the crime scene. "But I had a chance to check out the body before Brandon and his buddies showed up."

Had Wyatt caught a scent? "Yeah?"

He pulled his hand out of his pocket. A small teardrop-shaped leaf in the palm of his hand. "That's from an Osage Orange tree. I also caught the scent of honeysuckle."

"There are a lot of both on the south side of town."

"Yep. I'm going to make a trip out that way. See if I can spot any abandoned buildings."

"I'm coming with you. Let me take Lily home first."

Wyatt's eyes widened and he searched the area until his gaze landed on Lily seated in the SUV. "You brought her here?"

"She wanted to be with me in case..."

His steely eyes drilled into me. "Damn it, Kai. It's a fucking crime scene."

"I know." I didn't bother to apologize. "She's my mate."

His oldest brother quirked a knowing brow at me. “Have that talk already, did ya?”

“You know I didn’t have time for that yet,” I answered. “Enough about that. If you’re going after Patterson, then I’m coming, too.”

“A scouting mission,” Wyatt warned. “Nothing else.”

“Until you find him,” I argued. “There’s no way you’ll call for reinforcements. I know you. You’ll charge in and take on Patterson alone.”

“Whatever. I’m just saying that this might lead to nothing.” He held up the leaf. “Hell, my only lead is from a tree that grows all over this area.”

“And the honeysuckle,” I reminded him. “I think you’re onto something here.”

He threw his hands in the air. “Fine, do something with your mate. I’ll meet you at the café in one hour.”

Another thought hit me. “I’m bringing Miggs.”

Wyatt’s lips lifted at the corners. “Only because you don’t want him anywhere near Lily.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “He’s got an attitude about her,” I admitted. “I don’t trust him.”

Wyatt’s smile disappeared. “Yeah, I’m concerned about that, too. He nearly took me on yesterday and that’s not like him.”

“So, he’s coming with us. If we find Patterson, then Miggs can let out some of his pent-up rage on him.”

“Sounds good to me.” He pulled his key out of his front pocket, then got into the truck. “One hour.”

I nodded, then headed for my own vehicle. I got in behind the wheel and smiled over at Lily. “It wasn’t him.”

“I’m glad, but do they know who the victim is?”

“No,” I answered. Some poor schmuck who’d crossed paths with Patterson. Another innocent victim. “There was no ID on him.”

She gazed out the windshield. “That’s so sad.”

I reached for her, squeezing her hand in mine gave me strength. “I’m sure the police will do everything they can to find out who he is and locate his family.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “And you still don’t know where your dad is.”

“No, but we have a lead. Wyatt wants us to check into it.” I sighed. “I’m afraid I need to take you home, Lily. He’ll need my help.”

“Of course,” she offered. “Actually, I still need to replace my phone. And check on my van. Maybe I could do that while you’re with Wyatt.”

I smiled. “That’ll work. In fact, I’m meeting him at the café. When you’re finished with your errands I can meet you there later. And you can use my car.”

“Are you sure?” She grinned. “I mean, I might decide I like it better than my old clunker of a van and drive off with it.”

“I’d find you, Lily.” I winked at her, then put the SUV in gear and took off out of the

parking lot. “Have no doubt of that.” I tried to keep the conversation light, but I was too wound up by the knowledge that Patterson was off somewhere torturing my father. The only thing on my mind was getting him back. And making the sick bastard pay.

Lily

I saw the tension in Kai. His shoulders were stiff and his hands held the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grip. “So, your dad went searching for Fostine and got tangled up with a bunch of people that sell exotic animals?”

“Something like that. And there’s no telling what they’ll do to keep their operation safe.”

I didn’t know where to begin. How deep was I getting with Kai and his family drama? My brain was warning me to get out now while I still could. After all, I had my own family ugliness to deal with. But my heart was the one calling the shots and I didn’t have it in me to leave Kai. Not when he needed me the most.

“You’re quiet,” he murmured. “I’ve thrown too much at you.”

“No, it’s just, this is serious stuff, Kai. I mean, could you be in danger, too? Your brothers?”

“We’re safe,” he promised. “It’s Patterson who will suffer.”

“Patterson?”

“He’s the one who did this.”

“Did your brother give the name to the police?”

“Yes.” He scowled at me, his eyes ice-cold. “But we take care of our own.”

He was talking vigilante justice and I couldn’t condone that. “An eye for an eye is not the way to handle this. The police can bring this Patterson person in. Question him.”

“And when there’s no proof, then he walks.” He shook his head. “We cannot let that happen. Dad would be the one to suffer.”

I knew he was worried, but the urge to reason with him wouldn’t go away. “Taking the law into your own hands? You think that’s a good idea?”

He turned onto the street heading into town. “I think if we don’t act fast, then Dad could end up dead. We won’t sit back and do nothing.”

“But the police—”

“Have their hands full looking for a murder victim’s identity. Locating family. Waiting on an autopsy.”

When we reached a little rundown auto repair shop, Kai pulled up close to the front, then killed the engine and turned my way. “I know the things I’m saying seem barbaric to you, but please be patient with me.”

“I just think there is a right way to handle this that doesn’t get you hurt. Or killed.”

He cupped my cheek in his palm. “I don’t want to frighten you off,” he murmured. “I need you, Lily.”

Need . There it was again. Capturing my heart and leading me down a dangerous

path. Good or bad. Right or wrong. I wasn't leaving Kai. Not now. Not when he was practically begging. I unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned closer to him, then placed my hand on his chest. "I'm not going anywhere. I might be seriously crazy, but I'm staying."

His eyes warmed and he lowered his head to brush his lips across mine. It was such a small taste of him and I ached for so much more. It left me desperate.

"My brothers will be waiting," he explained, as he opened the door and jogged around to my side. He placed the key in my hand and smiled. "I'll see you later. At the café." He pointed across the street. "Ask for Tessa. She works there and knows us. She'll take good care of you."

"An ex-girlfriend?" The ugly green monster reared its head.

"No. A friend only."

"Of course." I tried to take a step back, but Kai's warm, calloused hand on the back of my neck stopped me. I glanced up at him and caught the heat of his gaze on me. "What is it?"

"Thank you for giving me a chance," he growled. "In the midst of all this, you could've insisted I drop you off at the nearest hotel, and yet you chose to stick it out with me."

I smiled, as my heart did somersaults. "You and I still have things to talk about, remember? I'm not letting you off the hook that easily."

His lips tilted up sideways. "Good, because I want you to know me. Everything about me. And when you do, then we can continue what we started last night by the waterfall."

My blood turned to molten lava at Kai's quietly spoken promise. Speechless, utterly speechless, I watched as he crossed the street and entered the little café.

Oh, yeah, I was definitely heading down a dangerous path. And yet I wasn't running in the opposite. Why wasn't I running? Simple, Kai brought out something in me that I hadn't known existed. It was thrilling and scary all at once.

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Kai

Wyatt watched me enter and frowned. “You let Lily drive the SUV, I take it?”

“Yeah.” I stared out the window and saw Lily enter the shop. My gut tightened. She was too far from me. It took all my strength not to go to her. I suspected it would be this way until I could make the exchange.

Wyatt took a sip of his coffee before asking, “You’re in pain, aren’t you?”

I stiffened. “Huh?”

“Don’t fuck with me.” He pushed his cup away, then leaned close and whispered, “You’ll be in pain until you mate with her. And if you think it hurts now—”

“Drop it,” I bit out, tired of everyone inserting their two cents. What happened between me and Lily wasn’t anyone’s business. “I can handle it.”

Wyatt reached across the table and dug an extended claw into my forearm. “You need to do it soon. It’ll drive you mad if you wait too long.”

“I’ll handle it. Leave it alone.” I jerked out of his hold, then searched the room to see if anyone had seen my alpha unsheathe his talons. Everyone was too absorbed with their phones to notice. The one time I was glad that the annoying devices existed.

“It’s your funeral,” my brother muttered, then looked toward the parking lot. “And where the hell is Miggs?”

“I sent him a text,” I explained. “He’ll be here any minute.”

A few minutes of frustrated silence drifted by, then a sweet, blonde-haired waitress approached their table. “Hey, Kai.”

“Tessa. Looking pretty as ever.”

She grinned, then propped her hand on her left hip. “And you’re full of it, as always.” She took out her order pad and tugged a pen from behind her ear. “What can I get you?”

“Nothing for me. We’re just waiting on Miggs.” I remembered telling Lily about Tessa and added, “A friend of mine is coming here later. Name’s Lily. She’s new to the area.”

“Got ya.” Her smile widened. “I’ll take good care of her. Don’t you worry.”

“Thanks.” Tessa had only been in the area for a few years, but already folks treated her like a local. I winked. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Always, darlin’,” she replied, then smiled over at Wyatt. “A refill?”

“No,” he grumbled, staring at her as if he wanted to strangle her.

She gave me a curt nod, then left us alone. I leaned forward. “What the hell is your problem with Tessa?”

“She doesn’t need to flirt with every goddamn male customer who comes along.”

Seriously? “She wasn’t flirting and you know it. Tessa is always friendly. She’s the same with the women who come in here. It’s just her nature.” I shook my head.

“Jesus, Wyatt, stop being a dick.”

Wyatt turned his rage on me. “And what’s your deal? You have Lily, remember?”

“I was being nice . It’s what people do.” Then a thought struck. “You know, it occurs to me that you’re always kind of a dick toward Tessa.” I narrowed my gaze on him. “Why is that, I wonder.”

Wyatt’s jaw tightened, his fingers drumming against the table. “I don’t hate her,” he muttered, not meeting my eyes.

I raised an eyebrow. “You sure have a funny way of showing it. Every time she’s around, you act like she’s the plague.”

Wyatt sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s not that simple, Kai.”

“Then explain it to me,” I pressed. “Because from where I’m sitting, it looks like you’re hiding something.”

Wyatt’s gaze finally met mine, and for a moment, there was a flicker of something—regret, maybe even longing. “I made love to her,” His confession was barely above a whisper, but that didn’t lessen the hostility.

I blinked in surprise. “You what?”

Wyatt looked away again, staring at the scarred table. “It was a mistake. I didn’t mean for it to happen, but ... it did.”

I leaned forward, my interest piqued. “A mistake? Wyatt, come on. There’s more to it than that.”

Wyatt's shoulders slumped. "I took a little of her blood. Just a bit. I couldn't help myself."

My eyes widened. "You took her blood? Wyatt, that's—"

"I know what it is!" Wyatt snapped, cutting me off. He lowered his voice, glancing around to make sure no one was listening. "I know what it means, and I regret it. But it happened, and I can't change it."

I studied him, and the pieces started to come together in my mind. "Wyatt, could she be your mate?"

Wyatt's eyes flashed with anger. "No," he said firmly. "She's not."

"But what if she is?" I insisted. "It would explain why you're so drawn to her, why you can't stand to be around her yet can't stay away. Why you took her blood."

Wyatt shook his head, his expression hardening. "Drop it, damn it."

I frowned, but I knew better than to push Wyatt when he was like this. "Fine," I said reluctantly. "But you can't keep running from this forever. If she is your mate, you owe it to both of you to figure it out."

Wyatt didn't respond, his eyes fixed on the table. I sighed, taking a sip of my coffee. The conversation was over for now, but I knew this was far from the end of it. The truth had a way of coming out, no matter how deeply it was buried. And when it did, I just hoped Wyatt would be ready to face it.

Wyatt pointed toward the parking lot. Miggs had pulled up in his '67 red Mustang. And he wasn't alone. Fostine got out of the passenger seat. Even from a distance, I could see the stubborn expression on her face. Great, let the fun begin.

“I’m going to kill him,” Wyatt muttered. “She has no business here.”

“She could help us, Wyatt,” I offered, hoping to smooth the waters. “She spent time with Patterson, remember? A shit-ton of time. She could recognize scents that we can’t.”

“Catching a scent that reminds her of the hell she went through?” He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and how’s that going to go? She’ll either panic or go into a rage. Neither are good.”

My brother had a point. Still, I remembered the scars on Fostine’s back. “She deserves to see this through. We both know she does.”

Wyatt let out a heavy breath. “You’re right. I hate when you’re right.”

“Look, she’s not the silly little girl who left us, brother,” I replied. “She’s strong. Been through something that we could never imagine. Give her a chance.”

Wyatt watched me for a few tense seconds, as if weighing my words, then nodded. “She’s changed. I worry about her.”

As Miggs and Fostine approached, Miggs held up both hands as if in surrender. “There was no stopping her.”

Fostine crossed her arms over her chest. Her glare was so like Wyatt they could’ve been twins. “Dad saved my life. I owe him.”

Wyat slid out of the booth, then came nose to nose with Fostine. “You obey my orders or I’ll hogtie your ass and throw you in the trunk. We clear?”

Her head tilted and I held my breath, hoping she wouldn’t say something that would

get us all in trouble for causing a disturbance. Finally she nodded. No words of consent, but the nod would have to be enough. Without another word, Wyatt walked out of the café, leaving me to pay for the coffee. I tossed a few bills onto the table, then followed him, with Miggs and Fostine in tow. When we reached Wyatt's truck, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Miggs nearing his Mustang. "Stay close," I shouted.

We tore out of the parking lot and headed south. I glanced in the side mirror, noticing Miggs' car not far behind, then turned toward Wyatt. "I can't stop thinking about that guy by the dumpster. His face was mutilated. That's next-level crazy."

"Puts new meaning to the word 'psycho.'"

"Jesus," I muttered.

"Keep your eyes peeled. We're looking for any building that appears abandoned. Something isolated."

"If he was smart he would've left the area. He has to know we're coming for him."

Wyatt shook his head. "He won't do that. He thinks he's God. That he can't be stopped." He paused before adding, "Besides, he wants to be close to us in case he needs another subject to experiment on."

"As if losing his job at Cedar Haven wasn't enough. Even the government didn't want anything to do with his twisted shit."

"I've been thinking about that."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“How is Patterson funding all this?” He glanced over at me for a second, taking his eyes off the road. “He has to have someone backing him.”

“True,” I agreed. “The equipment. The warehouse. The hired help. It all costs money.”

“Yeah, and hiring the kind of people willing to keep their mouths shut isn’t cheap.”

I cursed under my breath. “So, there’s someone else out there as crazy as he is. A wealthy nutjob. Terrific.”

“Or several someones.”

I slapped a hand against my thigh. “Even better.”

“I’m just saying, this could be deeper than one guy with a Frankenstein complex.”

As I mulled over Wyatt’s words, thinking of the ramifications, my phone rang. I yanked it out of my pocket, then frowned. “Fostine?” I listened a few seconds, then ended the call.

“What is it?”

“To the right, she said,” I replied, repeating her words.

Wyatt glanced out the side window. “There’s nothing there but trees.”

“I see that.” I shrugged. “But she says we need to go right.”

My brother cursed a blue streak, then slowed the truck until a dirt road came into view. He turned onto it. “Stay alert.”

Minutes later a large metal building came into view. A factory of some kind. Long rusted chimneys stuck out the top. It was rundown and appeared as if it'd been decades since anyone had used it. Weeds covered the walls. The concrete parking lot was littered with cracks and partially destroyed by time. As if Mother Nature had taken ownership. "What is this place?"

"Used to be a paper mill. A long time ago it was the main source of income around here. Employed over half the county. When it shut down everyone expected it to be bought up, reopened."

"Well, hell, that never happened." I whistled low. "No cars in sight. You think Patterson could be inside?"

"We won't know until we search the place." He pulled up at the front, then killed the engine. "Come on."

Miggs and Fostine pulled up next to us. We all got out. No one spoke. Miggs scanned the surrounding trees, while Fostine stared at the building, tense and alert. I nudged her shoulder. When her attention was on me, I asked, "You okay?"

She nodded. "Something is here. Be careful. Patterson enjoys playing games."

I stiffened. "You think it's a trap?"

"Definitely. But Dad might be in there. We don't have a choice."

Miggs shook his head. "Like some kind of fucking cat and mouse bullshit?"

"Exactly like that. He enjoys it. Watching people suffer." Her gaze darted to the right, staring at the tree line. "He'll be close. So he can watch."

Wyatt stepped in front of Fostine, breaking her from the predatory hunt. “Can you smell anything?”

She shook her head and lifted her upper lip at one corner. “He would’ve expected me. Would’ve stayed far enough away. Fucking coward.”

“But he’s still close enough to watch us squirm,” Wyatt quietly surmised.

Her eyes lit with fury as she leaned around Wyatt and continued to stare at the woods. “Pretty much.”

I cleared my throat. “We need to shift. Our Yucilon senses are better.”

“Agreed,” Miggs stated. “And we split up. I’ll go around the back.”

“Fostine, you’re with me,” Wyatt ordered. When she started to argue, Wyatt grabbed her by the shirt and dragged her up close. “It’s that or I shove your ass in the trunk of Miggs’ car.”

“Fine,” she relented. “But I’m the one who spent time with Patterson. I’m the nose we follow.”

“I have no problem with that. But use your head here or you could get Dad killed. Get it?”

She nodded, then stared at the ground. I unsheathed my claws. “I’m keeping watch out here,” I stated. “We don’t need any surprises.”

Wyatt agreed. “I wouldn’t put it past him to plant a bomb the minute we’re inside.”

“No,” Fostine argued. “He’d consider that wasteful. And he needs all the guinea pigs

he can get.”

“Jesus.” Miggs ran a hand over his face. “Someone needs to put a bullet in that fucker.”

“After we get Dad,” Wyatt agreed. “Then we can each take a turn.”

“Yeah, well, me first,” Fostine stated, her voice devoid of emotion.

I snorted. “Like there’ll be anything left.”

Fostine chuckled. Wyatt held a fist in the air and we all went silent. “Shift once we’re inside.” He glanced at me. “Do it there,” he said, pointing toward the far side of the building. “Out of sight.”

I headed off in the direction Wyatt indicated, watching as Miggs jogged around to the back. Wyatt and Fostine headed straight for the front door. I prayed we weren’t making a terrible mistake. Was our father in there? Waiting, hoping to be rescued? Or was this just another of Patterson’s sick games?

Once I was out of sight, I stripped out of my clothes and boots, then shifted. On all fours now, my senses on high alert, I sprang out into the open. First, I looked toward the area Fostine had been so interested in. I saw movement, but it was small. Squirrels and groundhogs most likely. I looked up at the building next, seeking out anything that didn’t fit, anything that didn’t seem right. Alert and watchful, eager to eliminate the threat to my people. In a perfect scenario, we’d get our father back and end Patterson’s miserable life in one swoop. But we were Ravenbriars, and we rarely had that kind of luck.

Lily

“You’re staying with the Ravenbriars?” Jake asked, his eyes wide in surprise.

“Yes, is that a problem?” I answered, feeling exasperated by the question. The man at the auto shop had asked the same thing. As if it were completely ludicrous.

“Oh, I see.” The slim blond teen shifted from one foot to the other. He’d been helping me for fifteen minutes. He’d explained that my phone was beyond repair, and after checking my account realized I was due for an upgrade anyway. Now, as I started to check out, Jake stopped and frowned at me.

I was confused by the guy’s hesitance. “Is there a problem with my account?”

“Uh, no, not at all. I just never ... well, I’ve never known the Ravenbriars to allow strangers out there.”

I smiled. “Well, Kai’s the one who found me after I wrecked my van.”

“Van? That was you?”

“It was.” I knew too well how quickly gossip spread in a small town. “Not my finest moment beyond the wheel, I admit.”

Jake cleared his throat. “I think I’d better put this on the Ravenbriar’s tab.”

It took a moment to digest what the clerk said. “Wait, what?”

“They’d want this taken care of,” he explained. “It’s just how things around here are done.”

“Look, I had the same conversation with the guy at the auto shop,” I complained.
“No, absolutely not. I broke the phone. I’ll be the one to pay for it.”

“Um, yeah, let me, let me get my manager,” he stuttered out, before nearly tripping over his own feet to run toward the back of the store.

“Wait!” I called out, but it was too late. Several long seconds drifted by, then the clerk returned with a balding, overweight man who appeared to be in his late fifties.

He smiled, then offered his hand. “I’m Ron. Jake here tells me you’re staying out at the Ravenbriar place.”

Here we go again. I tried for patience, then answered, “I am, but I don’t see how that matters. I’m just trying to get my phone replaced.”

“We’ve been doing business with the Ravenbriars for years. The rules are very clear.”

“What rules?”

“Their account is one of our biggest and we wouldn’t feel right charging you. Not if you’re a friend of theirs.”

“Well, I only just met them recently.”

He smiled wider. “But you are staying there? At the house?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then the phone is paid for.” I started to protest further, but the manager held a hand in the air, stopping her mid-complaint. “You’ll have to speak to the Ravenbriars, Ma’am. In the meantime, Jake will be glad to finish ringing you out.”

I knew when I'd been beaten. Still, I intended to take it up with Kai when I saw him. After Jake rang up the purchase, it took some time to transfer everything from my old phone to the new one. When it was finished, I thanked him and left the shop, then headed across the street toward the café Kai had told me about.

When I entered the little building, a blast of warm air hit me. It felt good. I hadn't realized that the temperature was dropping. I scanned the room, noticing the checkerboard linoleum floors, red leather booths that bore the marks of countless conversations, and a long counter punctuated by chrome stools.

The aroma of comfort food wafted through the air, mingling with the chatter of only a few patrons and the sizzle of the grill. The last rays of daylight filtered through the lace curtains, casting a warm glow over the cozy space. Behind the counter, a friendly blonde waitress in a retro uniform jotted something onto a pad, while the sound of clinking dishes echoed from the open kitchen.

The walls were adorned with framed photographs capturing snippets of the town's history, telling stories of generations. The jukebox near the entrance hummed with a nostalgic melody, adding to the ambiance.

I saw a clock on the wall behind the cash register. Five in the evening. It'll be getting dark soon. How long would Kai be? I worried about him. Worried about his plans toward the mysterious Patterson.

"Are you Lily?" the pretty blonde waitress asked, smiling at me.

I smiled back. "I am. Are you Tessa?"

"Sure am." She pointed toward a stool at the counter. "Does that work?"

"Of course," I answered, following the tall, voluptuous woman. What exactly was her

relationship with Kai? I was tempted to ask.

Tessa leaned closer. “What can I get you?”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “I’d do just about anything for a black coffee.”

She laughed. “Feeling like you need a fix, huh?”

“So much,” I sighed. After Tessa placed a cup in front of me and poured a portion of the dark brew, I decided to ask the big question. “So, you and Kai are friends?”

“Sure are.” She poured herself a cup, then replaced the carafe. “He’s sweet, but just a friend.” She winked. “In case you wondered.”

Relief swamped me. “He’s helped me out since I wrecked my van. They’ve all been so gracious actually.”

“That was you?” At my nod, Tessa replied, “I saw them bring it to the shop. Looks like you’re lucky to be walking.”

“Very lucky.” My experience at the auto shop and the phone center prompted me to add, “What is it with the Ravenbriars around here? They seem like...”

“Legends,” she supplied. “I’ve only been here a few years myself, but everyone seems to respect them. And the Ravenbriars have done a lot for this town. My understanding is that the town fell on very hard times when the paper mill closed down. Put a lot of folks out of work. But Kai’s grandfather bought up a bunch of land, opened up several businesses, and got the town back on its feet.”

“Wow, I’ve never known anyone to do something like that.”

“No, but the Ravenbriars have called this place home for generations. I suppose they felt it was their duty to step up and do something.”

“I’m staying with them,” I blurted out. “That fact seems to have garnered a fair amount of shock from some of the townspeople.”

“Uh, yeah, I’d say.” Tessa moved closer, then whispered, “No one goes out there. Not ever. They’re mighty private. Sort of survivalist types, I hear. Their daddy taught them everything. Fishing, hunting, trapping. From what I’ve seen, there ain’t nothing those boys can’t do.”

“Including medicine,” I added, tapping my brow. “Creeg fixed me up, even gave me a CT scan.”

Her eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Yep. They have their own clinic. It’s kind of crazy.”

Tessa glanced out the front window. “And you’re driving Kai’s SUV. Ain’t never seen him hand over his wheels to a woman.”

I could feel my face heat. “He’s, uh…”

Tessa laughed. “Yeah, enough said. Those boys have all the women around here drooling, let me tell you.”

“And you? Got your eye on one of the Ravenbriar men?”

She snorted. “Are you kidding? I have enough problems without adding one of them to the pile.”

The woman's assessment of Kai's family surprised me. "You think they're trouble?"

"I think they're mighty intense. And I can't let myself get derailed by all that."

"Got plans to skip town?"

"Something like that. Been trying to save up." She let out a heavy breath. "I've already stayed too long as it is."

I tilted my head to one side. "Sounds like a woman of mystery."

Tessa's face fell. "Put it this way, the longer I stay in one place, the more I'm in danger."

"Someone's after you?" I asked, then realized I was prying into things that Tessa probably didn't want to share with a random stranger. "I'm sorry. Please don't feel like you have to answer that."

She tapped the countertop with a manicured fingertip and said, "Let's just say that it's better for you to be in the dark about my crazy life." She quirked a brow. "What's your story? What brings you to Sach Valley?"

I sighed. "I needed a change. My entire life has been about taking care of my mother and sister. I woke up one day and realized I'd become an enabler. Enough was enough." My phone dinged and I pulled it out and stared at it. My sister, asking for money. "I think it's time I live my own life, ya know?"

"I do know." A haunted look came over Tessa's face. "Parents can sure be a pain, huh?"

"Amen to that," I muttered, as I proceeded to block my mom and sister's numbers.

“I’d like to have kids someday, but I worry. I don’t want to be like her.”

“Hey,” Tessa said, reaching over and patting my hand. “You won’t be because you recognize the way she treated you was wrong. That’s already a step in the right direction.”

I shook the maudlin thoughts away. “How’d we get on this topic?”

Tessa laughed. “I don’t know, but it’s good to talk about this stuff with someone who gets it.”

“It is,” I agreed. Excitement skittered through me. “I blocked them. Their numbers. I feel... free.”

Tessa grinned, raising her cup in a toast. “To fresh starts and taking control of our lives.”

I clinked my cup against Tessa’s, the sound a small celebration of our shared triumph. “To fresh starts.”

We both took a sip, savoring the moment of camaraderie.

A loud noise from behind interrupted the happy moment. I turned in my seat to see three men entering the café. Two of them were tall, muscular, and wore all black. Their gazes scanned the room, landing on me. Ice-cold eyes, soulless. Shivers ran the length of my spine. The man in front of them had on a white dress shirt and black slacks. Blond hair with a receding hairline that he attempted to hide. It didn’t help. Wire-rimmed glasses and a goatee. When he followed the other men’s line of sight, catching me staring at him, a smile crossed his face. Something was off about it. Sinister. I started to turn back toward Tessa, when the glint of metal stopped me. From one second to the next, guns were drawn.

“This isn’t a robbery,” Goatee said. “If everyone could please remain seated, this will be over quickly and painlessly.” Someone in a booth near the back started to stand. “No, no, none of that hero stuff. My men will shoot, I promise.”

Several customers gasped. Tessa started to shuffle around the counter, but Goatee cleared his throat and warned, “I wouldn’t do that, Ms. Ashe.”

Tessa went still. “How do you know my name?”

“Never mind that.” His gaze went to me. “You’ll come with me.”

I clutched my purse in a tight grip. “I don’t even know you.”

Goatee nudged his chin and both men went into action, closing the distance and grabbing me, forcing me off the stool. I kicked one of them in the shin, earning a curse, and the other slammed a fist against my cheek, nearly knocking me to the floor. Tessa screamed, ran at one of the men, and took the butt of the gun to her temple for her efforts. She hit the floor. I screamed, terrified when she didn’t move. “What did you do!”

“She’ll live,” one of the black-clothed thugs muttered. “Now, you can move on your own or we’ll drag you.”

“Why are you doing this?” I shouted to Goatee Guy. “I’ve done nothing to you!”

“You’ll get all your answers later,” he said, smiling at me as if he’d lost his mind. “For now, we have things to do.” He stared at the men. “Immobilize her for the trip.”

“Yes, sir,” one of them answered. He spared me a glance, hatred blazing in his eyes, as he whispered, “The fun is just beginning.”

I kicked and screamed, but it was useless. They were bigger, stronger, and the guns in their hands ensured no one would be coming to my rescue. Just before they shoved me into the back of a white van, I looked back at the café. Tessa. Please be okay. Please.

A sharp sting at the side of my neck tore my attention back to the men holding me between them. “What...” My vision blurred and my legs felt numb.

“Sleep tight, sweetheart,” one of them muttered, before throwing me into the van and slamming the doors shut. Just before darkness sucked me under, I thought of Kai. Would I ever see him again?

K ai

I leaped into the woods surrounding the mill. Alert for any movement, any hint that Patterson was nearby. The only things I sensed were the forest animals. I glimpsed behind me, curious if Wyatt was having better luck, when the feeling of dread filled me. My stomach churned, a low growl reverberated inside my chest, and the hair on my back stood. Something wasn't right. I took off toward the building and headed for the front, before shifting. I spotted my clothing next to the tree and quickly pulled on my jeans, then ran for the doors. When I entered the large foyer, I stopped and listened hard for my brothers and sister. I could hear them above, two or three floors up. I spotted a door leading to the stairwell and ran for it. It didn't take me long to find Wyatt and Miggs.

Wyatt saw me and frowned. "What is it?"

I didn't know how to answer him. The feeling hadn't subsided. "Where's Fostine?"

"Here," a soft voice said from behind. I turned my head and saw my sister moving toward me. "I thought you had sentry duty?"

"Something's wrong," I bit out, fighting off the urge to throw up. "Did you find anything?"

"Nothing tangible," Wyatt grumbled. "There was something on the second floor though. A scent."

"Dad's?"

“Yeah,” Miggs answered. “He might’ve been here, but he’s not now.”

My heart sped up. “How long ago do you think?”

“The scent was no more than a day old,” Miggs answered, watching me as if I’d lost my mind. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Fuck!” The knife-to-the-gut feeling intensified, and I let out a howl of rage, then punched the wall.

Wyatt closed the distance between us. “What is it?”

I shook my head, attempting to clear the fog. It didn’t help. “I don’t know.”

“The separation from Lily,” Wyatt mused, offering that as a reason for my sudden freakout session.

“Lily,” I breathed her name, let it linger in my mind. I closed my eyes and reached for her, but there was nothing. Only a black screen. I hadn’t made the exchange. Could that be why I wasn’t able to feel her presence? “We need to go back,” I announced, the feeling of dread gathering so fast it nearly suffocated me.

Wyatt nodded, ushering Fostine and Miggs to follow. “You think something happened to her?”

“I—I don’t know,” I answered. And the not knowing was killing me. “I just feel...”

“Listen to your gut, brother,” Wyatt urged, picking up his pace.

Soon, we were on the road back to town. The closer I got, the better I should’ve felt. The tension only continued to build until an imaginary freight train sped

uncontrollably through my brain, splitting my skull in two.

By the time we reached the café, I'd driven my claws into the armrest, shredding the leather. As the front of the little diner came into view I saw police lights and a paramedic in the parking lot. Several people stood around, trying to get a glimpse inside the small restaurant. "What the hell?"

Wyatt cursed and shoved the car into park. "Remain calm," he warned.

My only thought was of Lily. I tore out of the vehicle and ran for the front doors. I pushed an officer out of the way and yelled, "Lily!"

"Kai," a shaky, feminine voice whispered.

I looked to my left and saw Tessa on a stretcher, reaching for me. I moved up beside her, took her hand in mine. She shook, tears were on her cheeks. And there was a large bump on the side of her face near her eye. "What happened?"

"Three men. They had guns." Her lower lip trembled. "They took Lily."

I cupped her cheek, noticing bruises forming around her left eye. "They did this to you?"

She grimaced and looked away. "I'm sorry. Tried to stop them."

Wyatt drew up next to Tessa. "Was one of them wearing glasses and sporting a goatee?"

"Yeah, that's him," she answered, her troubled gaze landing on Wyatt. "Seemed like the boss."

I stared at Wyatt. “Patterson,” I bit out. “And he has Lily.”

Wyatt stiffened, then turned his attention back to Tessa. “Do you have somewhere safe to stay?”

“I’ll be fine,” she replied, frowning at Wyatt. “I’ve told the cops what I know, but I’m worried for Lily. It was like they knew her.”

They knew she’d been staying with me, more like it. And took her because of it. What was Patterson planning? The terrifying possibilities were endless. I stifled the urge to howl and instead focused my energy on finding her. My mate. I strode into the café, ignoring the police attempting to stop me, then inhaled. Too many scents lingered in the air. Above them all was Lily. The sour smell of her fear nearly sent me into a rage. I closed my eyes and focused, separating her from the others. A few seconds passed before I was able to catch it. Musky. Damp, like wet moss. “Patterson,” I mumbled. The bastard’s days were numbered.

“Kai,” Fostine whispered, gaining my attention. When our gazes connected, she said, “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. I should’ve ... I should’ve—”

“Survived,” I stated. “And you did. Your knowledge will lead us to him. And Father.” I paused, then added, “Patterson took Lily to get to me. That’s not on you, little sister.”

She wrapped her arms around her middle, then uttered, “I smell him. It sickens me.”

“Me, too.”

“And the other two that he was with,” she confided, her face pale. “I recognize them as well.”

My gut clenched at seeing my sister's reaction to the men. "And?"

"They are the worst of the bunch, Kai." She stared down at the scarred tile floor.

"The sooner we find her the better."

Images of Lily being tortured fled through my mind, nearly crippling me. "There will be no easy death for them."

"Good," my sister shot back, "we're on the same page then."

I closed my eyes again and tried to connect with Lily. I hadn't made the blood exchange and I didn't truly believe I could reach her mental pathway, but something zipped over my nerve endings, startling me. Lily? Fear slammed into me. Not mine. Hers. For the first time in my existence, I embraced my dark nature, and left the cage door open. There would be no mercy.

"You have her scent," Fostine reminded him. "Maybe get a direction from that?"

"No," he ground out, "I smell her inside, but in the parking lot there was nothing. Like there's something blocking it."

A commotion in the parking lot spurred me and Fostine into action. Once outside I caught Wyatt lifting one of the officers into the air. "Wyatt!"

My brother spared me a look filled with ice-cold fury. "Stay out of this."

In two strides I was beside him. "Let Brandon go, goddamn it. What the hell has gotten into you."

Brandon cursed. "All I said was that Tessa needs to be seen by a doctor."

Fostine sidled up next to Wyatt. “Why is that a bad thing?”

“Creeg will see to her.”

Wyatt’s reaction was so out of character that we all just stared, unsure how to defuse the situation. Then it struck me. Could Tessa be Wyatt’s mate? “Miggs, call Creeg and tell him to be ready.”

“Yeah, sure,” he quickly agreed, pulling his phone out of his jacket pocket.

“Tessa,” I said, gaining her attention. “Creeg has all the latest equipment. You’ll be in good hands, I assure you.”

“I don’t doubt that, but—”

I leaned closer in order to keep my next words private. “Wyatt needs to see to your care. He won’t relax until you agree to go with us. I promise, you are in no danger.”

She glanced back at Wyatt, who still held Brandon off the ground, then let out a heavy sigh. “Fine, whatever.”

I looked at Brandon, as well as the EMT. “You heard her. She’s refusing treatment.”

“That’s not wise, Ma’am,” the young EMT said. “She could have—”

“Kid, if you value your life, stop talking,” I ordered.

Tessa seemed to catch onto the severity of the situation and reached for Wyatt, clutching his forearm. “Wyatt, won’t you please take me to your clinic?”

My brother’s head snapped around, as if coming out of a trance, then dropped

Brandon on the ground. “You agree?”

“I do.” Tessa smiled, although I could see it was forced. “Always wanted to see the infamous Ravenbriar estate anyway.”

“It’s more of a compound,” Miggs argued. At Wyatt’s glare, Miggs shrugged and kept his mouth shut.

I nudged my chin toward Brandon. “I know you need a statement from Tessa. Would it be possible to come out to the house?”

“Fine.” He threw his hands in the air. “This is nuts, but fine!”

“In about an hour,” I added. “Give Creeg time to assess her injuries.”

Brandon nodded. “Wyatt, do I have your permission to come onto your property?”

Wyatt nodded, his gaze stayed on Tessa. “You will come alone, Brandon.”

It wasn’t a request and Brandon knew it. The officer shuffled off, then went to work dispersing the crowd of onlookers. Wyatt gently lifted Tessa off the gurney and into his arms and made his way to the car.

“Go, both of you,” I muttered to Miggs and Fostine. “We’ve made enough of a scene.”

Fostine seemed frozen though. “I’ve never seen Wyatt lose control in public like that. What’s gotten into him?”

Miggs snorted. “You can’t figure it out?”

Fostine stared, dumbfounded.

Miggs nudged his chin toward our alpha. “I’m thinking she’s not just any old waitress to him.”

“His mate?” Fostine inquired, her gaze straying toward Tessa. We all watched as Wyatt gently placed Tessa into the backseat of the car, then slid in beside her and slammed the door shut. “Geez, our house is going to get mighty crowded.”

I didn’t care about the house. The only thing that mattered was Lily. I needed to get to her, but there were zero leads. The horrors she would endure at the hands of Patterson turned my stomach. I started toward the diner again, but Fostine stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. I turned and glared. “What?”

“There isn’t much you can do here.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I pointed toward the waiting car. “Let me know if Tessa has any information that could help.”

She nodded. “Good luck, brother.”

Once she was gone, I went back into the diner. There had to be something. Anything. I couldn’t lose her.

Lily

“Oh, God,” I groaned, blinking to bring the room into focus. A prison cell? I was on a cot, covered in a grey wool blanket. A toilet in one corner and bars. The walls were cement blocks. No window. No way to tell if it was day or night. It all came back in a

wave of images. The diner. Seeing Tessa go down. Men carting me off. What the hell was going on?

An imaginary axe hammered at the back of my head over and over, bringing tears to my eyes. “Kai,” I breathed out.

“What did you say?”

I stiffened. That voice, so like Kai’s, but deeper, rougher. I slowly sat up, then put my feet on the floor and stood. The room tilted like I was on a teeter-totter. I reached for the wall and steadied myself, then went to the bars. “Who are you?” I called out, unable to see anyone. Only a hallway. I craned my neck and spotted a metal door at the far right end.

“You know my son,” the voice stated. “I can smell him on you.”

Son? “Are you ... are you Kai’s father?”

Silence met me. The other man was suspicious of me.

“Kai saved me. I was in a car wreck and he pulled me out, got me medical help.”

“Creeg?”

Now I was the suspicious one. What if it wasn’t their father? What if it was a trick to pry information out of me? “What is your name?”

“Calm yourself. I mean you no harm.”

“I’m in a cage. Hard to be calm under the circumstances.”

“Yeah, I know,” he grunted. “I’m Lucian Ravenbriar.”

“You could just be telling me that to get me to confide in you.”

“Smart woman,” he mused. “I can understand what Kai sees in you.”

“Tell me something only Lucian Ravenbriar would know.”

A beat of silence filled the area. Just when I thought he wouldn’t answer, the mystery man said, “Did Kai tell you how he got the chipped tooth?”

“He did,” I answered, still suspicious.

“Fighting with Wyatt. He fell face first, landing on a rock sticking out of the ground.”

I knew the man could’ve heard the story from someone else. A friend of Kai’s. Even one of the people at the diner. I didn’t think that was the case. He sounded too much like Kai. “You’re their father,” I surmised. “The one who’s been missing.”

“I am.”

“They’ve been searching for you. They haven’t given up. They won’t.”

“Thank you for telling me that,” he replied, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Are they well?”

“They are.”

“So, Kai saved you, huh?”

“He did. Gave me a place to stay, too. They’ve all been wonderful.”

“How did Patterson get his hands on you?”

“He ... he came to the diner. Attacked the waitress there and grabbed me.” I pressed a hand to the back of my head. “I think I was drugged.”

“Yes. He’s fond of needles.” He paused, then added, “Do you care for Kai?”

My face heated. Even though I couldn’t see the man it was still embarrassing to discuss my budding relationship. “I do. He’s more than a helpful stranger.”

“What is your name?”

“Lily Hall.”

“Well, Lily, it’s nice to meet you. The circumstances are unfortunate.”

“How long have you been here?”

“At this particular location? Only about twenty-four hours. A prisoner of Patterson’s? I believe a little over two years.”

“God, I’m so sorry,” I quietly offered. “Why did he take you?”

“That’s a much bigger discussion. For now, I need you to do something for me.”

“I’m not sure what I can do.”

“Closer your eyes and reach for Kai.”

“Huh?” Had the man lost his mind? Possibly, considering all he’d been through. I didn’t want to imagine the awful things Patterson and his sick goons had done to the

man.

“Just trust me. I need you to do this.”

“Close my eyes and reach for Kai? Like telepathically?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“I don’t believe in all that stuff, but it’s not as if it could hurt.”

“You have nothing to lose,” Lucian replied. “Try to focus on his face. Picture him in your mind. What he was wearing when you last saw him. The way he makes you feel. Open your heart to him.”

“Okay, here goes,” I answered, feeling ridiculous that I was listening to a faceless stranger in the hopes that I could call Kai with my imaginary mind-cellphone. I let my eyes drift shut, then did as Lucian suggested and brought up an image of Kai. The way he’d kissed me when he’d dropped me at the auto shop. The feel of him in my arms. His strength. His taste. Like a wild thunderstorm.

“Say his name in your mind. Over and over, like a chant.”

Kai, can you hear me? Kai, please, I’m scared.

“Keep going, Lily. Don’t stop. His name. Imagine his touch. Picture his dark eyes, the way they watch you.”

I drifted into a meditative state. Saying Kai’s name until I was practically screaming it inside my head. A tingling sensation washed over me, and something brushed my mind. As if I wasn’t alone. As if...

Kai?

Lily? You're alive?

Yes. How is this happening?

Later for that. Where are you?

It's like a prison. There are cement walls and bars for doors. I hesitated only a moment before adding, Your father is here. He's alive.

Good. How long were you in the van? Minutes? Hours?

My hopes plummeted. I was drugged, Kai.

Warmth filled me, as if Kai had embraced me. It chased the chill away. I'll find you, Lily. Stay strong. I'll find you both.

I'm scared. I hated to admit my weakness, but being caught by a crazy scientist was way out of my realm.

I know, my love, but you must stay strong. Listen to my father. He will help you.

I thought of Tessa. Seeing one of Patterson's men hit her with the gun. Is Tessa...

She's alive. Creag is treating her.

A noise in the hallway broke my concentration, then the connection was lost. Kai? Kai! It was useless. The only link I had to Kai, severed. God, he could be a million miles away for all I knew.

“Don’t let Patterson know you can reach Kai,” Lucian said in a rushed whisper.

“I won’t,” I promised, listening as footsteps grew closer. I went to the back of the cell, pressing my body into the far corner, then waited. Dread filled me when one of Patterson’s men came into view. The one who had hit Tessa. He saw me hovering like a cornered mouse and smiled.

“Patterson wants to see you,” he explained, pulling a set of keys from his pocket.

“Why?”

He never answered, simply unlocked the cell and slammed it open. “Let’s go.”

I didn’t budge. Whatever lay outside the cell was far worse. I could feel it.

He rolled his eyes. “Always the same bullshit.” In two strides he was standing in front of me, blocking my exit. The fist came out of nowhere, sending me to the floor. A kick to my middle had me doubling over. Bile rose and tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Get up!”

I forced my body to comply, getting to my feet and pushing down the pain. I watched the man in front of me. He liked it, I realized. Enjoyed hurting me. The knowledge turned my fear into anger.

He shoved me from the room, prodding my lower back with his gun. “Go,” he ordered. “The doc is eager to play with you.”

When we passed the other cell, I turned my head and saw the man calling himself Lucian. He had a skeletal build and dark hair that hung limp and greasy past his

shoulders. His pale skin was a testament to the many days spent confined to the darkness. God, he didn't look much older than Kai and I didn't know how that could be possible. He stood in the middle of the cell next to mine. Rage in his light-grey eyes as he watched the man drag me away. Lucian Ravenbriar had survived two years. Two long years at the mercy of monsters. The very least I could do was fight to stay alive.

I could hear Lucian screaming at the guard, goading him to turn and take his anger out on him instead. The guard was impervious to Lucian's taunts. He only kept walking, his gait steady and his gleeful expression unwavering.

They walked up a set of stairs to another floor. Another row of cells. All appeared empty until they reached the last one. A tall, muscular man stood against a wall, his arms stretched above his head, chains wrapped around his wrists. A pair of filthy, worn jeans his only clothing. Black hair draped around his shoulders and fell in limp clumps. I had to be imagining things because his eyes were the brightest shade of purple I'd ever seen. He tilted his head toward the ceiling and a low growl emanated from his chest, then I was jerked swiftly away.

"Trust me, he's not someone you want to make friends with," the guard muttered, his eyes wide in fear, sweat beading along his forehead.

I wondered if I'd ever see the man again. If I'd ever see Lucian again. Would any of us even survive? I forced my focus back on Kai. He would find me. I had no doubt. And I would help him by learning everything I could about the place Patterson was holding me. Every little detail, and I would relay it all back to Kai. At least it was a link. It gave me an advantage. And in the end, that link would be Patterson's downfall.

Kai

I screamed Lily's name inside my head, but only silence met me. Time seemed to freeze as I waited for it to happen again, all my senses sharpened and alert. It was gone, but the fact she'd reached me at all was a small miracle. The mind link shouldn't have been possible before making a blood exchange. And yet it'd happened. Which meant it could happen again. I just needed to be patient. She was alive and with my father. The knowledge gave me a sense of peace. At least she wasn't alone. My father would protect her with his life, this I was sure of.

Until she could link with me again, I had work to do.

I headed for the back of the diner, then went into a small room marked OFFICE. As I'd suspected, there was a monitor. I pulled out a chair at the old wooden desk and sat, then hit the power button on the computer beneath the desk. The monitor came on, but I could admit when I was out of my element. Computers were foreign to me. I pulled out my cell and called Miggs.

"What's up?" my brother asked, answering on the first ring.

"There's a computer monitor at the diner," I explained. "How do I access the security feed?"

"Good thinking," my brother praised. "I should've thought of it."

"Just tell me what to do with the pile of junk and all's forgiven."

Miggs walked me through the steps of getting access to the cameras. “Got it?”

“Yeah, I’m looking at the parking lot now.” I fast-forwarded until I saw the white van, then stopped and hit play. Seconds passed before the three men got out. I zoomed in, tried to see the license plate, but the camera wasn’t the best quality. I watched as Patterson and two men headed for the front doors. I could see one of the men with his hand inside his jacket. Clutching the gun, no doubt. Subtle. Minutes drifted by before I saw them exit. One of the men carried Lily. The bastard tossed her into the back of the van, then took off out of the parking lot. “Fuckers,” I groused, clenching my fists tight enough to draw blood from my claws digging into the skin.

“Well?” Miggs asked. “Anything?”

“I can’t get a plate number, but they drove south.”

“Tessa got a partial plate,” Miggs informed me. “She’s in with Creeg now.”

“Good,” I replied. “Did you give the information to Brandon?”

“We did. They’re running a search.” Miggs sighed. “A white van and a partial plate. It might be enough to narrow down an address or something.”

I agreed. “Miggs, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything,” he offered. “Name it.”

I stood, heading for the front. “Can you do a search of Patterson’s properties?”

“We did that before, Kai,” he reminded me. “We searched all his known properties. Nothing.”

“I know.” I shoved the front doors open, then glanced across the lot. Lily’s van was still at the shop. I headed for it. “Just do it again.”

The clacking of keys on a keyboard came through the line. “You think he bought something recently?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” I hedged. “He’s got them somewhere. My bet is he’s not that far from town either. He’s comfortable here. Has everything he needs. And he wants to be close to us. To his source of guinea pigs.”

“Sick bastard,” he growled. “Okay, there’s something here.”

“Yeah?” I picked up my pace, running across the street to the front of the auto shop.

“I’ll shoot you an address, but you should wait for backup, Kai. He’ll have the place locked down.”

“Update Wyatt. I’ll meet you guys there.” I ended the call on Miggs’ tirade. I wouldn’t wait around with my thumb up my ass while Lily was being tortured by Patterson.

When I entered the shop and located Bridger under the hood of an old pickup truck, I called out, “Bridger.”

He lifted his head and smiled. “Hey, Kai.”

“Where’s the van?”

“Done, waiting for you to pick it up.” He went toward a workbench, then grabbed a set of keys off a wallboard with nails sticking out. “Heard all the commotion at the diner. What happened? Robbery?”

“No.” I caught the keys in midair. “Kidnapping.”

His gaze widened. “Damn, never heard of anything like that in these parts. Who got taken?”

“I’ll have Miggs wire the money,” I called out as I left, clutching the keys in my hands. I got into Lily’s van, then checked my messages. Miggs had come through with an address. Forty-five-minute drive. Tops. I prayed it was the place Patterson had Lily.

Before I could get the van in gear another text came through. This one from Wyatt:

On our way

I shoved the van into drive, then sped off. Patterson’s reign of terror was nearly at its end. The bastard just didn’t know it yet.

Lily

The guard escorted me into a small room with a desk and a couple of filing cabinets. Patterson sat behind it, staring at a computer screen. As we entered, he glanced up and smiled. “Ms. Hall, please have a seat.” He gestured toward the chair across from him. The guard shoved me onto it and left the room. Now, I was alone with a man capable of torturing another person. Capable of murder. The knowledge sent shivers down my spine.

“Why have you brought me here?” I asked, getting right to it. “I’ve done nothing to you. I don’t even know you.”

He steepled his hands in front of him. "But we do have a mutual acquaintance, yes?"

"I don't know what you mean." Dodging the question was the only thing I could do.

"I'm only passing through this area. I'm not staying."

"You are from Walnut Ridge. Your mother's name is Grace and you have a sister named Victoria." He sat back in the chair, his brows pulling together. "I know all about you, Lily."

He'd researched me. Jesus, did that mean my mother and sister could be in danger?

"Great, then you know I'm telling the truth."

He waved a hand in the air. "I also know that you are staying with the Ravenbriars. My understanding is that Kai has taken quite a liking to you."

And how could he know that? Was someone watching Kai? Supplying Patterson with information? "He helped me with my van. That's all." I tilted my head to one side. "I don't see how that's any business of yours."

"Everything about the Ravenbriars is my business." He tapped his bottom lip with his index finger. "What do you know about them?"

"I know they were kind enough to help me out when I wrecked my van."

"I see," he mused. "Your knight in shining armor."

"Why are you so interested in them?" It was time to get some answers of my own.

"What do you care what they do?"

"They've become a rather important project of mine. A very personal project."

Project? Nothing sinister about that. God. “Yeah, see, that’s super creepy.” I curled my lip to show my distaste. “A grown man, focusing so much time and energy on a family that—by all accounts—this town looks up to. Admires.” I narrowed my gaze. “Almost like you have a grudge against them. Why is that, Mr. Patterson?”

He slowly got to his feet. “Doctor Patterson,” he corrected me, moving slowly around the side of the desk. When he was standing in front of me, caging me in and purposefully making me feel cornered, he warned, “You should address me properly.”

“Doctor Patterson,” I said, using his name like a slur. “What is your specialty exactly?”

“I’m researching tissue regeneration in animals,” he answered, his entire face filled with excitement. “The lifespan is of particular interest to me. As is the reproduction cycle.”

“Fascinating,” I replied, my tone dripping with sarcasm. “That doesn’t explain your bizarre interest in the Ravenbriars.”

He chuckled. “They’ve really told you nothing, have they?”

“Like I said, they helped me out.” Maybe if the freak thinks I have no romantic interest in any of the guys, then he’ll release me. Slim hope, but something to grasp onto. “That’s all. I’m not their confidant. I’m not their anything .”

His facial expression changed so fast that it was as if I were watching a magic show. One second he was the indulgent doctor, then the next an evil demon. “You’re lying. I detest lying.”

“I told you, I’m only in Sach Valley because I’m waiting for my van to be repaired.

That's it."

"Raymond!" he bellowed, fists at his sides.

When the guard opened the door, pulling his gun, I knew I'd made a grave error.

"Please show our guest to the medical bay. I'll be along shortly."

"Sure thing, Doc," he joyfully agreed, yanking on my arm so hard I screamed from the pain radiating down my arm. Just before being dragged from the room, I peered over my shoulder at Patterson. His eyes were glassy. I let my gaze travel downward. An erection pressed against his slacks. My pain gave him pleasure. Who the hell was this monster?

The guard leaned close to my ear. "You'll wish you were dead by the time he's done with you." His hold tightened, threatening the fragile bones in my forearm. "But that's when the fun truly begins. You see, Doc promised to hand you over to Harry and me when he's through."

"No!" My knees gave out at the horrifying reality of it, earning me a punch to my lower spine.

"Don't make me drag you, bitch," he warned. "After all, Doc never said anything about keeping my hands to myself."

The threat sucked the air from my lungs. As we reached another room, this one bigger, I saw several shiny metal instruments on trays. I didn't want to imagine what they were used for. A large operating table situated in the center of the room with black straps dangling off the sides sent me into a panic. I yanked and kicked, screaming for my life. Raymond punched me again. This time his fist connected with my chin, throwing my head backward and stunning me.

Raymond took advantage, picking me up and throwing me onto the table. My head struck the hard surface, causing my vision to blur. I struggled and fought, but Raymond was stronger, bigger. Once he had me strapped down, my arms pulled tight above my head and secured by another strap, he placed a hand on my breast and squeezed hard enough to draw tears to my eyes. “No one is coming for you,” he grunted. “No one is saving you. The only way out of this place is in a body bag.”

I didn’t speak, only closed my eyes tight, refusing to give the sick bastard the satisfaction of witnessing my terror. I heard the ripping of cloth, then a rush of air blasted over my chest. He’d torn away my shirt. Raymond’s fondling continued, twisting and pinching until I was forced to turn my face to the side and vomit from the pain of it.

“Bitch!” he yelled, slapping me across the face. “Those are new shoes.”

“Raymond!” Patterson warned. “I need her coherent, you fucking idiot.”

The room fell silent, and I knew I was alone with Patterson. I could smell his pungent odor. I opened my eyes and saw his gaze trained on my bare breasts. A glob of spit at the corner of his mouth dropped to the floor. “Let me go,” I pleaded.

He laughed. “You are quite a sight, Lily.”

“They’ll come for you,” I warned through clenched teeth. “And there will be no mercy.”

His glee turned to hatred. “Who? The Ravenbriars?” His hand wrapped around my chin and squeezed. “I’m always one step ahead.”

“You know, in movies, the guy that thinks he’s the smartest person in the room is always the first to die.” I went silent, letting the words hang in the air between us.

Then I saw it. A tiny hint of fear reflected in his eyes. Patterson might hold all the cards now, but not for long. Soon, it would be his screams echoing inside the cold cement walls.

Patterson walked out of sight for a moment. When he returned there was a long metal object in his hand. At the end of the device was a pronged tip. Oh, God, a cattle prod?

“What are you doing?”

He waved the evil thing in the air. “I’ll get my answers, Lily. It can be difficult or easy. The choice is yours.”

“What answers?” I yelled. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Patterson flipped a switch on the handle, then he jabbed it into my ribcage, sending a current of electricity through me. I screamed and he did again and again. Finally he switched it off and asked, “Now, let’s start over, shall we?” He placed the device aside, then picked up a scalpel sitting on a metal tray. He held it to my cheek. “Kai Ravenbriar, what is he to you?”

“I just met him,” I cried, every muscle in my body twitching from the shock from the prod. “He’s been very helpful. Offered me a place to stay while my van gets fixed.”

He tsked. “Now, now. We both know there’s more to you two than that.” A thin slice was my reward. I screamed, but the sound was drowned out by the laughter from the guard across the room. “Have you two had intercourse?”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Please, you don’t have to do this. I’m not who you think I am.”

Patterson gripped my chin and forced my gaze to his. “I have all the time in the

world, sweetie. We're going to get very well acquainted."

"You're sick!" I shouted, jerking against the restraints. "What if this was someone you love on this table? Your daughter being tortured!"

Patterson jerked his head back as if I'd slapped him, his eyes wide. "What did you say?"

I stayed silent, unwilling to provoke him further. Patterson's face had gone ashen, and I would've sworn he looked afraid. Afraid when I'd said the word daughter. Interesting. I stored the information away.

"You will talk to me," he said, spit flying from his mouth. "You'll tell me everything I want to know. Everyone always does. Eventually."

I closed my eyes and clung to the knowledge that Kai would find me. As Patterson's twisted interrogation continued to include his fists, a monkey wrench, even a ball-peen hammer, I slipped outside myself. Where pain no longer existed. And all that mattered was Kai.

Two hours later, Raymond dumped me on top of the cot in my cell, then shut the door with a loud clang. Patterson was methodical. A psychopath, but methodical. He'd known exactly how to inflict pain without causing me to pass out. Thin, small cuts with a scalpel, followed up with strokes of his hands along my body. The jolt of a cattle prod to my private parts until my screams reverberated inside my own skull, then more fondling, massaging. I was forced to lie there and endure it all. Helpless. And in the end, I'd been forced to listen to the grunts of his orgasm. The only satisfaction was the frustration on his face when he hadn't gotten the answers he'd wanted.

A feathery touch along my cheek caused my eyes to pop open and fear filled me all

over again. I glanced around the small cell and realized I was alone. Kai? I said his name inside my mind, not expecting an answer.

I'm close, Lily. Stay awake.

A shot of adrenaline flooded my system and I forced myself to sit up. Was I hallucinating from the pain? How could Kai know where I was? I slowly got to my feet, cradling my left arm with my right palm. I was certain it was broken, as were several other bones. I stared down at myself. Stripped of my clothes, I had full view of the bruises forming all over my ribcage, abdomen, and lower. I bent and snagged the sheet off the bed, then wrapped it around my body, before gingerly walking to the bars. "Lucian?"

"Lily?" he replied, his voice rife with surprise. "You ... you're okay?"

"Not really," I answered, then cleared the emotion from my throat. "Kai says he's on his way."

He was quiet for a moment, as if weighing the truth of my words. "Lily, I've had visions, too. Patterson has a particular talent for making his prisoners see hope where there often is none."

No! My mind screamed the word. It was Kai. I was sure of it. It'd been his touch I'd felt. His warmth filling me. "It was him."

I shuffled back to the cot and sat. He could believe me or not. I closed my eyes and attempted to find that link again. Inhaling deeply, then exhaling slowly. Kai?

Lily?

Your father thinks I've lost it.

Something similar to a growl filled my head. Tell him it was I who wrecked the Mustang. Not Trakker.

“Lucian.”

“Yeah?”

I repeated the confession, then waited. Lucian chuckled. “Damn, he really is coming.”

“I don’t know how he knows where we are, though,” I said, voicing my fears aloud. “What if he’s going to the wrong place?”

“He must’ve found something to lead him here. He wouldn’t have given you such hope otherwise.”

I stared at the cell door. “And if Patterson comes back before Kai gets here?” I didn’t want to admit it to Lucian, a man who’d endured two years of torture, but I didn’t think I was strong enough for another session with the sadistic man.

“He won’t,” he swore, his voice firm. “He’ll let you recover before he starts on you again. Patterson likes to wait until you’re fully healed before he goes for round two.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Thank you. For ... for helping me.”

“I would’ve killed them if I could’ve,” he admitted. “I’m sorry for what they did to you.”

“We’re both getting out of here,” I promised. “That’s all that matters.”

“You’re strong,” he praised me. “Kai chose well.”

“There are a lot of things about your family that I don’t know. For instance, how can I speak to Kai in my mind? That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“Kai will explain everything,” he said, after a beat of silence. “Have patience with him. He’s going to be ... agitated when he sees what they did to you.”

“Why is Patterson so interested in your family?”

“He believes our DNA holds the key to many of the answers he seeks.”

“That’s crazy. He talked about reproduction and the lifespan of animals. Their ability to heal. How can your family help with that type of research? You’re human, for crying out loud.”

“Lily, no one deserves to know the truth more than you, but it cannot come from me. Speak to my son.”

“Believe me, I intend to.”

He chuckled. “I think I feel sorry for Kai.”

A small smile played at the corners of my mouth, but it was painful. I winced, touching my lips with a fingertip. Blood. The horror swept over me in waves and this time I let the tears fall.

K ai

I stood outside of Wyatt’s SUV, staring at the building. “She’s here. I can feel it.”

Miggs cleared his throat. “He bought the place a month ago. That’s why we never knew about it.”

“An old prison?” Wyatt asked. “I don’t remember it.”

“It was barely used,” Miggs explained. “Not enough funding, the website said.”

Wyatt caught up to me, then said, “Kai and Fostine, go around back. Trakker and Creeg, scout the area. I don’t want any surprises.” He pointed at Miggs. “You’re with me.”

Creeg ran a hand through his hair, then shot a concerned look toward me. “I may be needed inside.”

A muscle in my jaw flexed at the implication. “Trakker, you good on your own out here?”

“Yeah. Just go. Bring them home.”

I nodded, then took off in a sprint, Fostine keeping pace beside me. We stopped near the tree line and I waited while she undressed and shifted. Within seconds we reached the back of the building. I saw the guard, but not before Fostine.

Tonight, my sister was on a mission, and I was here to make sure nothing went wrong.

She was a sleek, powerful figure moving stealthily. Her snowy white fur glinted in the moonlight, and I felt a surge of pride and concern. Fostine was relentless, but she was also reckless. I needed to be ready to step in if things went south.

The guard on patrol was oblivious to the predator stalking him. He moved casually,

his flashlight sweeping lazily over the area. I watched as he paused to light a cigarette, the flicker of the flame momentarily illuminating his face. Fostine's eyes narrowed, her claws extending as she prepared to strike.

In a blur of white, she lunged from the shadows, her powerful legs propelling her forward with astonishing speed. The guard barely had time to react. His eyes widened in horror as he fumbled for his gun, but it was too late.

Fostine collided with him, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He stumbled backward, struggling to raise his weapon, but she was relentless. Her large canines sank into his shoulder, tearing through flesh and muscle with ease. The guard screamed, a sound that sent a shiver down my spine. This was Fostine at her most uncivilized, her most deadly.

The guard managed to lift his gun, pointing it shakily at her, but Fostine was faster. With a swift, powerful swipe of her claws, she knocked the weapon from his grasp, sending it skidding across the ground. The guard's eyes were wide with terror as he realized his fate.

Her jaws closed around his throat, cutting off his screams and replacing them with a gurgling choke. Blood spurted from the wound, staining her fur a dark crimson. I watched in awe, and no small amount of horror, as the life drained from him, his struggles growing weaker with each passing second.

With a final, vicious bite, Fostine ended the guard's life. She stepped back, panting heavily, her eyes wild with the thrill of the hunt. Her chest heaved as she looked down at the lifeless body, satisfaction and grim determination warring within her. Fostine had sent a message tonight, but the real mission was far from over. She glanced up, her eyes locking onto mine for a brief moment, a sense of triumph in her gaze.

As she melted back into the shadows, I followed suit, my own senses alert for any sign of danger. The hunt had only just begun. Fostine was determined to make sure Gregory Patterson paid for his crimes.

As we moved, I couldn't help but feel a swell of admiration for my sister. She was all grown up, a total badass, and the realization hit me hard. Gone was the girl who needed protecting, replaced by a fierce warrior who could hold her own. Watching her in action, I was impressed by her strength and skill. Fostine had become someone to be reckoned with, and I couldn't have been prouder.

We entered the building, Fostine went on a search while I was dead set on finding Lily. I caught up to Wyatt. "The back is clear," I stated. "Fostine saw to that."

Wyatt nodded. "Reach for Lily," Wyatt urged.

I closed my eyes, slipping into my mind. The delicate brush of her fingers. I inhaled Lily's peach scent, then lifted my head to the ceiling. "Up there. Three floors at least."

Wyatt nodded, then headed for the stairs and stopped. "I'm shifting. I'll be able to reach her faster that way and I can warn you if there's danger."

I itched to shift too, but I needed to stay upright for Lily. I had a feeling she'd need to be carried, and she wouldn't recognize me in my Yucilon form. "Go," I ordered, then my gaze landed on Creeg. "What about you?"

"She might need medical treatment," he reminded me.

I let a growl escape before taking the stairs two at a time. A gust of air was my only warning as Wyatt leaped past me.

Creeg whistled low. "I always forget how fast he is."

I didn't speak, my entire concentration on Lily. When we reached the third floor, I stopped, using my senses to locate her. I heard a low howl to the right. Wyatt. I'd recognize my alpha anywhere. Creeg and I took off toward our brother. A row of cells. One after another, all of them dark and empty, until they reached the last two. Wyatt sat on his haunches staring at the first cell. When we reached Wyatt, we both stumbled in shock at the sight of our father. Two more steps and I saw Lily, and what Patterson had done to her. She lay there, on a dirty old cot, utterly unresponsive and completely unconscious. Her body was wrapped in a tattered white sheet, while her left eye appeared swollen and bruised, accompanied by a cut on her lower lip. I snarled, then gripped the bars and yanked, snapping the lock in two and letting it fall to the floor.

"Lily," I murmured, entering the room and slowly pulling her into my arms. "What did he do to you, my love?"

She lifted her gaze to mine. "You came."

"Always," I swore, holding her tighter. She rested her head against my chest, and I could feel her body trembling as silent tears soaked my shirt.

I stood in the cell, my normally composed demeanor shattered by the sight of her. My towering, muscular frame caused the small space to feel suffocating. My fists clenched, knuckles turning white as the anger within me surged like a tempestuous storm. My jaw was set and my eyes blazed with an intensity that could ignite a fire.

Every fiber of my being burned with a fierce instinct to avenge. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, my heart pounding like the beat of war drums. My protective instincts roared to life, a primal force that overwhelmed reason. It was as though an ancient guardian spirit had awakened within me, ready to unleash its fury upon any

who dared to harm my beloved.”

At Creeg’s urging to hurry, I pulled Lily away a few inches, then bent and lifted her carefully off the floor. “We’re going home.”

Creeg cleared his throat. “Patterson and the guards, they might still be here.”

“Fostine took care of one of them.” I wanted nothing more than to tear them all apart with my bare hands, but my first priority was getting Lily to safety. “We’ll deal with Patterson later.”

Without warning, Fostine leaped around a corner and headed straight for us. There was blood around her snout. “Perhaps the bastard is taken care of already,” Creeg mused as he gripped the lock on our father’s cage and yanked. It fell to the floor and he shoved the door wide.

“I never thought I’d see you boys again,” our father groaned, walking slowly from the room. He’d lost at least fifty pounds and was nothing but skin and bone. His careful movements and the stiffening of his shoulders were proof of the pain he was in.

“I take it you can’t shift?” Creeg whispered to keep Lily from overhearing.

“No,” he answered. “Drugs.”

I had seen enough of the place and I needed to get Lily away. “Let’s go.”

Wyatt led, heading back the way we came. When we stepped outside and spotted a van tearing out of the parking lot, I cursed. “Patterson,” I groused, tightening my hold on Lily.

“Where’s Trakker?” Creeg asked, staring at something on the ground.

I followed his gaze. Blood, a pool of it. I sniffed the air. “Fuck!”

Wyatt and Fostine disappeared around the corner. Within minutes the pair emerged, dressed. “They couldn’t have gotten far,” Wyatt bit out, heading toward the SUV. “Didn’t bother to slash the tires. Definitely in a hurry.”

“Lily needs medical attention.” I looked at Creeg for confirmation. “You agree?”

“Yes,” he reached out a hand. “Toss me the keys. I’ll drive her van.”

I didn’t want to release her. Didn’t want to put her down long enough to fish around in my pocket. “In my jeans. Front left.” After Creeg retrieved them, he got in behind the wheel.

“Lily,” I breathed out, staring down at her. God, she barely stirred. I needed her close. Feeling her heartbeat, the steady rhythm calmed me. Kept me from losing my shit. I held her against my chest and got into the passenger side of the vehicle. Before I could slam the door shut, Wyatt stepped up close, Miggs, Dad, and Fostine at his back.

“How is it possible for that bastard to have grabbed Trakker?” Wyatt bit out. “No way.”

“He must have tranked him,” Dad growled. “Patterson has a drug that he’s been perfecting for the last two years. One dart would’ve taken him down.”

Miggs leaned over and stared at our father. “What the hell is it?”

Dad shook his head and grimaced. “I don’t know, but it’s fast-acting and burns like acid in your veins.”

“Jesus,” I muttered, staring down at Lily. Her ashen face and still form sent fear barreling through me. What the hell had they done to her? “Creeg, maybe you should look her over now. Here.”

Creeg nodded, then leaned across the middle console and put his palm on her forehead. He frowned, then felt his way over her arms, then lower to her abdomen. “Multiple bruises are already forming,” he stated. “Her arm might be broken. But I need to get her to the clinic, Kai.”

Wyatt cleared his throat. “Go, we’ll video call from the truck.”

After he slammed the door shut, Creeg took off. I watched Lily. She was my world.

Creeg’s phone chimed. He tapped the screen and Fostine’s face appeared. She swiped sweat off her brow. I noticed my sister’s talons were still extended, blood dripping from the lethal tips. “What happened back there?” I asked, curious how many men Patterson had stationed around the building.

“One guard. Had a nice little reunion, right before I slit his throat,” she explained, her voice devoid of emotion. “He won’t be a problem anymore. Didn’t see anyone else.” She frowned. “You?”

On the phone in the background I saw Miggs open the side window, then sniff the air. He cursed. “Only the sounds and smells of the forest,” my brother muttered. “I’m not picking up anything.”

Wyatt cursed. “Yeah, I’m not seeing their van either. Bastards.”

Father reached for Fostine and squeezed her shoulder. “You recovered, sweetheart?”

She nodded. “Getting there. I’m sorry I couldn’t—”

“Don’t,” Dad warned. “You did exactly what you needed to do. What I wanted you to do.”

“Goddamn it!” Miggs yelled, pounding a fist against the back of Fostine’s seat. “How did the son of a bitch get away so quick?”

“He would’ve seen you guys arrive,” our father stated. “He hooked up cameras out front. He hadn’t bothered with the rest of the building. I got the feeling the place was a temporary holding facility.”

I stared at our father, noticing his hollow cheeks and gaunt appearance. He’d suffered greatly at Patterson’s hands. “He was taking you somewhere else?”

He rested his head against the back of the seat and let out a heavy sigh. “I heard the guards discussing it. I think it’s further away. Different county.”

Wyatt watched out the windshield. “As much as I hate to admit it we’ve hit a dead end. No scent. No sign of them at all.”

“We can’t abandon Trakker,” Fostine yelled. “Patterson will—”

“Quiet!” Wyatt shot back. “No one is abandoning him, but we need to use our heads right now.”

“I say we keep looking,” Fostine muttered.

“Damn, straight,” Miggs answered, his gaze boring into the back of Wyatt’s head. “Patterson isn’t torturing another member of this family. We’re getting our brother back.”

Dad cleared his throat. “That might not be so easy. I have a feeling the other facility

is more secure. The guard said Patterson's been working on the place for six months, getting it ready for something big."

When we hit the driveway leading to our compound, Creeg spoke into the phone, "we can pick your brain about Patterson later, Dad. First I think you should head home. I need to run some tests on you too."

Father smiled. "She's tough, Kai," he praised. "Not many humans could handle what she went through."

I watched Lily sleep. "Patterson will pay for touching her," I promised, allowing the rage to filter into my voice.

"Kai," my father said, gaining my attention. "You have her back. Focus on that."

"And the waiting is over," Wyatt added. "You need to make the exchange."

"Speaking of exchange," my father said. "She was able to link with you. That's one hell of a bond, son."

I smiled. "The minute she wakes, she'll hammer me with questions about that."

"I suggest you take her to the cabin," Father said. "Complete the mating there. In private."

"Please do," Miggs groaned. "The rest of us don't need to be privy to that."

Wyatt glared at Miggs in the rearview mirror. "Shut up for once in your life."

Creeg ended the call. Neither of us said anything else. The only thing that mattered to me was Lily. Suffering through Patterson's torture would take years to work through.

That it was because of me, my kind, would surely send her running. The thought of never seeing her again, never holding her close, never tasting her soft breath against mine was not an option. Wherever she went, I would follow. I had no choice.

Lily

I saw Patterson come toward me. The gleam of a metal scalpel clutched in his left hand sent shivers running through me. With each step, his twisted smile grew wider, until I could see his perfectly white smile. As the razor-sharp edge touched my cheek, I screamed.

“Lily!” a voice shouted as if at the end of a long tunnel.

I calmed my breathing and listened more closely, warmth spreading through me as the voice spoke again, gentler this time. I recognized the deep baritone. Kai. My mind conjured up an image of him and it calmed me. My lids fluttered open, slowly allowing the room to come into focus. Creag’s clinic. Not the cold, dank prison. Not Patterson’s awful, clammy hands. Kai’s large, calloused palm rested against my cheek, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lily?” Kai murmured, his index finger stroking absently.

I looked him over. He had dark circles around his eyes and his shirt was torn at the neck. Dirt smears down the front completed the look. “What happened to you?”

Kai’s gaze widened. “Me? I think we should concentrate on you for now.”

The prison. Patterson and his guard torturing me. I closed my eyes tight to fend off the images slamming into my mind. It did no good. “Oh, God,” I groaned, covering my mouth with my palm.

“Easy,” Kai warned. “You are safe, I swear it.”

Safe . I let the word bounce around in my head, wondering if I’d ever feel that way again. That’s when I remembered the café, and Tessa. My eyes popped open and I turned a pleading gaze toward Kai. “Is Tessa ... is she—”

“She’s well,” he quickly reassured me. “She’s here, actually. In one of the bedrooms upstairs.”

Creeg cleared his throat. He stood directly behind Kai. I hadn’t noticed him there before. But I knew what his presence meant. “I need to examine you, Lily.”

He would attempt to mend the physical wounds that had been inflicted upon me, but as Creeg approached, my attention went back to Kai. “It’s not ... you might want to leave.”

He stiffened. “I will turn around, but I’m not leaving this room.”

“Brother,” Creeg warned, “she needs privacy.”

Kai wavered, as if unsure what to do. “Lily? Do you wish me to leave?”

Did I? He’d saved me. And for whatever reason, I felt connected to Kai. And having him close gave me comfort. “No, don’t go,” I answered. I reached for his hand, entwining our fingers. My panic subsided. “Please don’t look, though. I-I don’t want you to see ... my injuries.”

A muscle in his jaw flexed and he offered me a jerky nod. “You have my word.”

I took a deep breath. “Thank you,” I replied, turning my attention to Creeg. “I’ll need help. My arms ... I can’t lift them.”

Creeg's eyes warmed and he stepped around Kai. "I'll be as quick as possible," he promised, his voice soft. After Kai closed his eyes, Creeg inched the sheet open. When cool air hit my belly and chest, humiliation suffused me. He cursed under his breath and I quickly looked away. I didn't want to see the horror on his face. Didn't want to see what Patterson had done.

A shuffling of feet tore my gaze back to Creeg and I watched him open a tube of cream or ointment. He held it in the air. "It'll help with pain and stave off infection."

I nodded, squeezing Kai's hand tighter. "There are also cuts lower."

A growl emanated from Kai's chest, and a change came over him. I instinctively knew he was about to lose control. "I'm alive, Kai. And I'll heal."

Kai's nostrils flared and he threw his neck back, face toward the ceiling. "I'll tear him apart for what he's done to you."

"Talk to him, Lily," Creeg urged, as he spread the ointment on my exposed wounds. "Keep him calm."

I obeyed, offering Kai soothing words, even as Creeg slowly peeled away the sheet that clung to my battered body. The pain intensified with each movement. My fingers trembled, and my breath hitched as Creeg revealed the extent of the damage that had been inflicted upon me. Ribs were marred by deep, angry cuts that oozed blood even now, and my chest bore a tapestry of bruising that spoke of Patterson's violence, the kind that defied comprehension. But it was the marks on my breasts that cut the deepest—the stark evidence of a violation that made my stomach churn with nausea and my heart ache with a wounded vulnerability.

Tears welled in my eyes as I looked down at my own body, a landscape of suffering that echoed my inner turmoil. I held back the sobs that threatened to escape my

throat, fighting to be brave in the face of unimaginable horror. I had always prided myself on my resilience, and yet in this moment, I felt like a shattered mirror reflecting a distorted image of myself.

As my gaze shifted to Kai, and the helplessness etched across his features, a pang of guilt joined the storm of emotions within me. Rage radiated off him like heat waves, an almost tangible force that made my heart ache in sympathy. I couldn't help but feel responsible.

Tears spilled down my cheeks. I wanted to reach out, to comfort him in the midst of my own suffering. A fierce determination surged within me—the need to ease his burden.

Summoning all the strength I could muster, my voice barely more than a whisper, I spoke. "I'm ... I'm going to be okay. I promise."

He flinched as if I'd struck him. "You never should've suffered. Patterson will pay for touching you."

I'd wanted to soothe the storm of emotions that were so clearly raging within Kai, but it'd had the opposite effect. "You saved me, Kai," I explained, aching for him to understand that he'd torn me away from the darkness.

"Lily," he groaned.

"Look at me," I urged, no longer caring that I was nude. No longer worried about my appearance. All I wanted was to see Kai's eyes. His beautiful golden gaze. That's what I needed.

When his eyes met mine, a tempest of emotions swirled within their depths, and I saw his anger waver. My heart swelled. We had a connection that went beyond words. In

that moment of shared vulnerability, we were united in a way that only true soulmates could understand.

With my body marked by pain and my heart aching, I realized that together we would face the monster. I would heal from my wounds and emerge stronger than ever before. And as I reached out my trembling hand to touch his cheek, something inexplicable passed between us. My gaze shifted from Kai to Creeg, my breath shaky as I tried to calm my racing heart.

Creeg's expertise was a beacon in a sea of pain. Kai's protective instincts might have flared at Creeg's proximity, but I was grateful for his presence. His expertise was vital, his touch a source of hope amid my despair. As he assessed my injuries, I winced at his touch along my wounded ribs. A hiss of pain escaped my lips, but I forced myself to remain still.

Tears welled in my eyes once more, but this time they were born not only of pain but of gratitude. Creeg's calm demeanor and practiced movements eased the tension within me, offering a semblance of control in a situation that had spiraled beyond my grasp. This was about healing, nothing more.

As Creeg cleaned and bandaged the cuts along my ribs, his touch careful, I clenched my teeth to stifle the groans of pain that threatened to escape, my fingers gripping the edges of the examination table as if it were my lifeline. Each movement amplified the fiery ache in my body, but I reminded myself that Creeg was not Patterson. That I was no longer in that hell.

When he offered me pain medication, I eagerly accepted this time. The prospect of a reprieve from the unrelenting agony was a small comfort, yet one that I welcomed with gratitude. As the medication took effect, a soft sigh of relief escaped my lips, and my muscles relaxed from their tense state. I closed my eyes to let the soothing embrace of the medication dull the edges of my pain.

Throughout the process, Kai's presence was beside me, his silent support a constant reassurance. The tension in his frame hadn't fully dissipated, his protectiveness still simmering just below the surface, but I knew that his anger was not directed at me. As my eyes met his, I smiled in gratitude.

In that moment, as Creeg continued his work and Kai stood steadfast, I felt a glimmer of hope flicker within me once more. I was safe. Kai would keep me that way. Of that I had no doubts.

Kai

My arms crossed tightly over my chest, and I clenched my jaw. Every movement of Creeg's hands, every pained wince from Lily, fanned the flames of my protective instincts and anger.

Once Creeg had finished bandaging the wounds and offered Lily pain medication, he turned his attention to me. "Her injuries are serious, but with proper care, she should be able to recover fully," he said in a calm tone.

My response was a low growl. "I need to feel my claws around Patterson's throat," I practically seethed, my voice laced with barely contained fury. "I won't rest until I find him and make him pay. With blood."

Creeg's gaze met mine, and there was an understanding there—an acknowledgment of the fire that burned within me. "I understand your anger. I feel it, too," he replied softly, his voice tinged with empathy. "But right now, her recovery is the priority. The emotional trauma of what she went through can be just as damaging as the physical injuries."

My fists clenched at my sides, knuckles turning white. “You think I don’t know that?” I practically spat. “They hurt her. They violated her. I won’t let them get away with it.”

My words hung in the air, heavy with a promise of vengeance that reverberated throughout the room. Creeg’s expression remained compassionate but firm as he said, “I’ll be right by your side, brother. Let us find Patterson.”

A muscle twitched in my jaw, my gaze never wavering from Lily, who had since closed her eyes. She was asleep, thanks to the meds. I lowered my voice to keep from waking her and replied, “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect her, to help her heal. But that bastard will die by my hand.”

Creeg placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “I believe you,” he said, his voice rife with understanding, as well as caution. “For now, we’ll be glad we got her back. Got Dad back.”

My brother was right, but all I could see were those cuts and bruises. Lily’s tears. Some of my anger was tempered by my deep concern for my mate’s well-being. Creeg’s words had struck a chord—the balance between vengeance and healing was a precarious one. With a determined resolve, I turned my attention back to the woman who had captured my heart. I knew that the journey ahead would be arduous, but I was ready to face it.

“Go, see to Dad,” I ordered. “He’ll need you.”

Creeg nodded, then stared down at Lily. “Let me know if she wakes.”

“Yeah.” I took the chair next to the table and sat. The soft rise and fall of her chest took me down a few notches. When she woke, we would have to talk. And I would need to tell her everything. No more secrets.

As I sat by Lily's side, my gaze unwavering, the door creaked open and a figure stepped into the room, drawing my attention like a magnet. Fostine, always a striking woman and so like our mother in appearance. Her long, flowing black hair cascaded over her shoulders like a waterfall of darkness. Her attire was a blend of casual and edgy—fitted jeans ripped at the knees showcased her slim figure, while a black tank top accentuated the curves of her body. A leather jacket, worn with an air of effortless cool, completed her ensemble. Her creamy alabaster skin was a stark contrast to the blackness of her clothing.

Her eyes, the same shade as mine, widened as they landed on Lily. Her lips parted, but no words came out as she took in the sight before her—Lily lying battered and bruised, a testament to the violence she had endured. The room grew still as my sister's gaze moved toward me.

“Did you need something?” I asked, frustrated that she was interrupting Lily's recovery.

“I won't ask if she's okay,” she bit out. “I know what Patterson is capable of.”

I nodded, my voice laden with fatigue, “Physically, she'll recover. But it's been ... a nightmare.”

Fostine's steps quickened as she moved closer, her leather-clad arm reaching out to touch mine. “I know how much you care about her,” she said softly, her voice carrying the weight of her understanding.

I'd always had a bond with Fostine. One that I'd thought had been severed when she'd left. But in the quiet exam room, our kinship felt stronger than ever. It went beyond mere siblinghood. Maybe it was because Fostine had suffered at Patterson's hands as well. I didn't know. But her presence eased the tension riding me.

Her concerned gaze returned to Lily. “I know what she went through. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.” Her heart clearly ached at the sight of Lily’s injuries.

“Perhaps when she wakes you could speak to her,” I replied. “I think she would like that.”

She nodded, then reached out, her fingers gently brushed against Lily’s hand. “I will.”

My eyes softened as I looked at my sister, gratitude filled me. I had always known that Fostine was strong, and I also knew that she was currently battling her own inner demons, but to see her facing down this new challenge filled me with pride. That she was willing to help Lily warmed me.

“I’m sorry you were forced to endure Patterson’s torture,” I offered. “And since you’ve been home, all we’ve done is offer a bunch of bullshit.”

She took a deep breath, her gaze returning to Lily, as she spoke with a vulnerability that surprised me. “Look, I can’t fault you for the way you reacted when I returned. I put everything through hell when I disappeared. Especially Dad.”

“That’s over. We’re together now.”

“Yeah. A family.” She wrapped her arms around her middle, then added, “Lily will have nightmares. You’ll need to be patient with her.”

Fostine’s revelation caught me off guard. “Do you have them?”

She offered me a jerky nod. “So much so that I don’t want to close my eyes.”

I’d known that Fostine had been through something I couldn’t fathom, but to hear her

speaking of nightmares, hearing the pain in her voice, sent a shockwave through me. My sister's strength had always been an inspiration, but now it took on a new depth.

"Look, I'm not the sharing-is-caring type, but I want you to know that I'm here for both of you," she continued, her voice steady. "I know how hard it'll be to heal from something like this."

Sorrow welled up within me. I reached out and pulled my sister into a tight embrace. "Thank you," I whispered, my voice choked. "I'm in your debt, sister."

Fostine returned the embrace, her presence a soothing balm for my creature's rage. As we pulled apart, she offered me a small, sad smile, her voice carrying so much sadness that I felt it like a gut punch. "We'll get through this, together. And we'll make sure that Patterson pays."

A renewed determination flickered inside me as I stared down at Lily, still asleep and vulnerable. With Fostine's support and my own unwavering resolve, I knew that we could face the darkness that had descended upon our lives. And in that moment, a tighter bond formed. After Fostine left, I began to form a plan. Soon, Lily would belong to me. And no one would separate us ever again.

Lily

The room was shrouded in shadows, the only source of light coming from a lamp positioned on a desk across the room. The soft glow cast elongated silhouettes on the walls, lending an ethereal quality to the space. I blinked, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dimness as my consciousness fully returned. I was still in the clinic, my surroundings familiar yet surreal.

Turning my head slightly, I saw Kai seated nearby, a reassuring presence in the darkness. My lips curved upward, and as our eyes met, his gaze warmed.

“Hey,” he said softly, his voice deep and rough.

“Hey,” I whispered in reply. “Time?”

He glanced at the far wall. “Three in the morning,” he answered, his hand reaching out to touch mine, a gesture of comfort that I needed.

I nodded, my fingers lacing through his as I found myself drawing strength from him. “Where’s Creeg?” I asked.

“He was just here. Checked on you, then stepped out,” Kai replied, his gaze unwavering as he studied me. “He’ll be back with something to eat.”

My mind wandered, thoughts drifted back to the painful memories that lingered just beneath the surface. Fingers that caused pain, a diabolic mind that enjoyed hearing my pleas. Images that were like ghosts haunting my consciousness. I closed my eyes,

taking a deep breath in an attempt to steady myself.

But the memories were relentless, clawing at my mind, threatening to engulf me in their darkness once more. The violation, the loss of control, it all came rushing back, as vivid and painful as if it were happening all over again.

Kai's hand tightened around mine, his touch holding me in the present. "You're safe now," he murmured, his voice filled with empathy. "You're not alone in this."

Tears welled in my eyes. "I feel so ... violated," I confessed, my voice quivering with the weight of my words.

Kai leaned in closer, his eyes filled with fierce determination as he looked at me. "You're not defined by what happened to you. You're strong, and you're a survivor. You're already taking steps toward healing by sharing your feelings with me. And I'm here, every inch of the way."

His words gave me courage. I'm not alone in my pain. "You saved me."

"We'll face this together," he continued, his voice unwavering.

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice filled with emotion. Kai had found me. Against all the odds, he'd found me.

Kai flinched, then looked away. "Don't thank me. It never should've happened."

As we sat in the dimly lit room, our hands intertwined, a renewed sense of strength filled me. There was still so much left unsaid between us. And I knew it was now or never.

"Kai," I began, my voice carrying a firmness that mirrored my resolve, "we've both

talked about not keeping secrets anymore. It's time for you to tell me everything. I need to know what you've been keeping from me."

Kai's expression flickered with apprehension. And is that guilt I'm seeing? He sighed, his fingers tightening around mine. "You're right. I should've been honest with you from the start."

I nodded, a sense of validation washing over me. "Start with Patterson. Why did he target me? Why is he so interested in you and your family?"

Kai took a deep breath, his eyes clouded with anger. "He's not just some random psycho. He used to be part of Cedar Haven. Government experiments. Top secret type shit."

"He asked me odd questions. Wanted to know if you and I had ... mated. He used that term. Why, Kai? What is Patterson to you?"

"Patterson has it in his head that my DNA holds the key to something he's been after for years."

DNA? I couldn't have heard correctly. But something Patterson had said weaved its way through my mind. I'm on the brink of something profound, he'd said. "What is he after?"

"Immortality," Kai answered, a crease forming between his eyebrows. "Lily, you've been pulled into this because of me."

I didn't have time to be angry with Kai. Yet. "Patterson is insane. Immortality isn't possible. Why would he think your DNA holds the answer, Kai?"

He ran a hand over his face and sat back in the chair, his legs spread wide. "My

family ... we aren't like you. We're different."

I watched him carefully, noting the fear in his gaze for the first time. I would've thought Kai impervious to such emotions. "You're survivalists. That's a very different way to live, sure, but nothing about that would make someone like Patterson so obsessed with you."

"We aren't survivalists. We're ... not human."

My brow furrowed as I processed the information. "Kai, you aren't making any sense."

He took a deep breath, then held up his hand, spreading his fingers wide. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

I swallowed hard, apprehension swamping me. "Okay."

Kai flicked his wrist and claws appeared at the ends of his fingers. They were long and lethal talons, appearing as sharp as blades. What is happening? Had I somehow lost my mind? Was I still in that cell, unconscious, my brain misfiring? "What..."

"Easy." He groaned. Another flick and the claws disappeared. "I won't harm you."

"What are you?"

Kai's gaze dropped, his voice thick with the weight of long-held secrets. "Yucilon."

The term sent me back to that moment in the woods when the wolf-like animal had leaped into the clearing, baring its teeth at me. "You said..." It all made so much more sense. "Fostine. Your sister and that creature are one and the same," I surmised. "Oh, God."

He hesitated, as if grappling with the truth. “Yes. You would call us shapeshifters. Our family has been around for a very long time.”

Time. Suddenly the word held so much more meaning. I struggled to contain the fear riding my spine. “Just how long is a long time?”

“My father is over three hundred years old.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth, then instantly regretted the action as pain sliced a path from my forehead to my lip. “This can’t be happening.”

“I know this is overwhelming, but you need to understand that we aren’t savage beasts, Lily. I won’t hurt you. My family would die to protect you.”

“Why? Why me?”

“Because you and I have a bond.”

The memory of being able to communicate with Kai with only my mind slammed into me. “That’s how you did it. That’s how I was able to speak to you telepathically.”

His eyes darkened. “Yes. Normally that isn’t possible until after the mating is complete. Somehow you managed it, though.”

The note of pride in his voice was woefully inappropriate considering the out-of-control rollercoaster barreling through my head. “You might look a little less excited right now.”

“What you were able to do has never happened before. Linking your mind to mine before the mating is complete shows how strong our bond is already.”

“Bond. Mating,” I groused. “I’m still trying to figure out what you are, Kai.”

“I’m the same man who tasted your lips last night. The same man who made your heart race.” He leaned closer, his finger touching my chin, distracting me beyond reason. “Admit it, Lily. You feel something for me.”

“I do, but...”

“I’m throwing too much at you. You need rest more than explanations.”

I shook my head. “No. I need to know why Patterson tortured me. I deserve that much.”

“You do, but you’re exhausted. And I’m not going anywhere. You will get the truth. All of it. I swear it.”

All the fight in me disappeared. I shut my eyes and attempted to block out the last twenty-four hours, but it was no use. Patterson’s twisted smile stayed at the forefront, taunting me. “He took my blood,” I whispered, my lower lip trembling. “He took so many things. And I’ll never be the same again.”

“Because he knows about us, about our relationship,” Kai explained. When I opened my eyes again, our gazes met. His jaw clenched in fury. “He believed that by hurting you, he could control me. He wanted to use you as leverage.”

My heart raced, a rush of fear mingling with the determination that burned within me. “So, all of this ... everything that’s happened ... it’s not over, is it?”

Kai shook his head, his grip on my hand reassuring. “No, but I won’t let him near you. Ever again. Patterson’s a dead man walking. He’s driven by his twisted fantasies. But you’re safe, Lily.”

Tears welled in my eyes as emotions swirled within my chest. I was glad for his honesty, for his willingness to share the truth. The weight of it threatened to drag me under, though. Kai had a mad scientist gunning for his family. And I had just been thrust into the middle of it all.

The air was thick with the weight of the conversation that had just unfolded. My eyes fixed on the ceiling, our words hanging in the air like the remnants of a storm just passed. The pain medication that Creeg had given me, offering a respite, was starting to wane, allowing the persistent ache of my injuries to creep back into my awareness.

“I do think I need time to figure this all out,” I admitted grudgingly. “After all, it’s not every day you meet an immortal shapeshifter.”

“I’m sorry,” Kai murmured. “I wanted to ease you into my world. It wasn’t my intention to have you dragged into it this way.”

“I know. It’s not your fault that Patterson kidnapped me, Kai. I know you think it is, but it isn’t.”

“It never would’ve happened had you not met me,” he grumbled. “There is no one else to blame here.”

I smiled over at him. “I don’t regret meeting you.”

His hand reached for me, cupping my chin gently. “No?”

“I’m not sure what happens next. I’m not sure what role I play in this, but Patterson won’t come between us.” My fingers traced the edge of the blanket that covered my legs as thoughts swirled like leaves caught in a gust of wind. Knots tightened in my stomach, a visceral reaction to the secrets Kai had shared. The truth was both a balm and a torment.

The door swung open, revealing Creeg with a tray in hand. The rich aroma of something hearty permeated the air, providing a stark contrast to the emotional intensity that lingered. My gaze flickered to the tray, my appetite grappling with the tumult within me.

Kai nodded toward his brother. “Thank you,” he offered, his tone conveying his gratitude. For the food or the reprieve from the conversation? I wondered.

Creeg’s gaze warmed with a touch of compassion, then shifted to me, lingering for a moment before placing the tray on the small table beside the bed. “Bone broth will nourish you, and I brought you a cup of hot tea to soothe your nerves,” he explained, his words filled with the reassurance only a doctor could provide. “Are the pain meds wearing off?”

“A little, yeah.”

Creeg nodded, then picked up a bottle sitting on the desk and brought it to me. “I know you don’t like pills, but these aren’t addictive, I promise.”

“Under the circumstances, I’m perfectly happy to shelve my normal contempt for those things.”

Concern furrowed his brows as he handed me two small round pills. “I didn’t get a chance to say this before, but I think you’re very brave, Lily.”

I didn’t speak, couldn’t without crying. Instead, I snagged the pills, popped them into my mouth, and swallowed. After Creeg departed, my fingers trembled as I reached for a cracker. My body felt heavy, a manifestation of the pain and the weight of the revelations I’d just heard. I took a tentative bite, my eyes distant, as if staring into the depths of my thoughts.

Beside me, Kai's presence grounded me. He reached over, his touch gentle as it covered my hand. Our fingers intertwined and my breathing slowed.

"Take your time," he whispered, his voice a calming murmur. "There's no rush."

Tears welled in my eyes. I was grateful that I was no longer in that dark, cold cell. Thankful that Kai had come for me. That he appeared content to watch over me like a dark guardian. I met his gaze, my heart raw with the intensity of my emotions. "Thank you," I breathed, my voice tinged with a fragile sincerity.

"I will keep you safe, Lily."

I leaned in closer, my forehead resting against his, our breaths mingling in the stillness of the room. "We'll face whatever comes our way together."

He nodded, his eyes locked onto mine, determination burning within his gaze. "Together," he echoed, his deep voice carrying an unwavering promise.

As we resumed eating, I felt stronger. I wasn't sure if it was the food or Kai. Both, I suspected. The darkness began to recede. Ironical that in the depths of Patterson's prison, the bond between me and Kai had strengthened. Patterson only wanted to destroy, but that plan had backfired. The thought made me smile.

Kai

I watched as Lily slept. It'd been an hour since she'd finished eating. She seemed more at peace now. The pain medicine had kicked in and she'd nodded off, the spoon still clutched tightly in her hand. I released it from her grasp and placed it aside, then covered her with a thicker blanket, content to watch her sleep. All that she'd been

through, the pain and the revelation of my true nature, and yet she hadn't run screaming. Her strength was admirable.

The door behind me creaked and I craned my neck to see Fostine entering the room. I quirked a brow. "What is it?"

"Wyatt wants a meeting." She nodded toward Lily. "I'll sit with her in case she wakes."

Reluctant to leave Lily even for a moment, I asked, "Is there news of Patterson?"

She shrugged. "Wyatt didn't go into detail, but he wants you in his office now." When I still hesitated, Fostine nudged my arm. "I won't leave her, Kai. Swear it."

I slowly got to my feet, then bent and placed a gentle kiss on Lily's forehead. She didn't stir. A testament to her fatigue. "If she wakes, I want to be alerted."

"Of course." Fostine fell into the seat I'd vacated. She crossed her legs at the ankles and added, "I'll text you."

I made my way to Wyatt's office. When I shoved open the door, I found my brothers filling the room. Our father sat in a chair near the desk. He bore the visible marks of being at Patterson's mercy. His face, once full of life, now carried a pallor. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, telling of sleepless nights. Bruises adorned his skin like morbid artwork, mottled shades of purple and blue that stood out starkly against his complexion. Everyone watched the man, who was once their alpha, with equal amounts of concern and curiosity.

I cleared my throat. "What is it?"

Wyatt stood in the center of the room, his overwhelming presence setting me on edge.

“Dad’s been filling us in on Patterson’s motives.”

“He wants our DNA,” I replied. “This isn’t new information.”

“It’s more than that,” Wyatt explained. “He isn’t just after immortality. He wants to create his own army of super soldiers.”

“That’s nuts,” I grumbled. “Even for that crazy bastard.”

Wyatt nodded. “That’s what I said, but it’s true.” He glanced at our father. “Tell them all what you told me.”

He shifted in the chair, his movements slow. “He didn’t just have Fostine and me prisoner. He had others. Humans. He’s been experimenting on them. Injecting them with our blood. I think he’s made some kind of breakthrough, because he’s been different lately.”

“Different how?”

“Like he won the fucking lottery,” he muttered.

I ran a hand through my hair. “There was only you and Lily at that old prison. No others. We would’ve picked up their scent.”

“Not there,” our father said. “The last place Patterson had me. The place Fostine escaped from.” He sighed. “I think Patterson moved them to the new facility. He kept me behind when he went after Lily. I think ... I think I was bait.”

My chest tightened. A feeling of impending doom filled me. “Bait for what?”

“I think he’d gotten all he could from me.” He waved a hand over his body. “I mean,

look at me, he's all but drained me dry." His lower lip curled in disgust. "He wanted a fresh guinea pig."

"Jesus," Miggs grumbled, running a hand over his short spiky hair. "Sick fuck."

I ignored him, keeping my attention on our father. "He was going to kill you once he got his hands on fresh meat," I surmised. "Trakker."

"That son of a bitch!" Cage roared. "Our brother is at the mercy of that maniac."

"Shut up, Cage," Wyatt ordered the youngest of us. "There's more. We were correct about there being others involved in this."

"Patterson has help," Father said, adding fuel to the fire. "People are funding his experiments. Maybe even military. Black ops kind of shit."

It was far worse than I feared. I braced my feet apart, staring at our dad. "So even if we shut down Patterson, it wouldn't matter. Our DNA is already in enemy hands."

"That's the gist of it," Wyatt grouched. "Regardless, we have a lead on Trakker."

"Yeah?" It was a small piece of good news, but we all needed it, clung to it.

"Miggs found a few new sites under Patterson's name," Wyatt replied, nudging his chin toward our computer genius brother. "We're leaving in an hour to scout them out. With any luck, Trakker is being held at one of them."

I was skeptical. Patterson wouldn't risk losing his latest catch. "Think he'd be dumb enough to put the place in his own name? Again?"

Dad spoke up. "I think he'll have the place as secure as Fort Knox. And he's arrogant

enough to believe we won't be able to get over the wall."

"He'd be wrong," Wyatt assured us. "We're getting our brother back. Tonight."

Several grunts of agreement filled the room. After everyone settled, I said, "I'll be ready. Let me talk to Lily first."

"No, you're staying behind," Wyatt ordered. When I would've argued, my brother let out a low growl of warning. "This isn't up for debate. We got lucky when we found Dad and Lily. Your only job now is completing the bond. She needs to be brought into our world, Kai. No more waiting. You put her at risk if you do."

Creag cleared his throat and spoke up for the first time. "It's a good idea," he said, adding his weight to Wyatt's. "The transformation will aid in her healing. She'll be stronger. With your blood flowing through her veins, she'll be less vulnerable."

I knew my brothers were right, but it still rankled to be sitting on the sidelines while my family went into battle. Wyatt seemed to sense my apprehension and closed the distance separating us. "I'm not leaving you behind solely to complete the bond. I also need you to watch over Tessa. I need to know she's safe, Kai. She cannot leave here. It wouldn't be safe for her."

"Terrific," I groused. "And if she insists on leaving, you'd like me to tie her to the bed or what?"

Wyatt's gaze went cold. "Do whatever you have to. Tessa doesn't leave this house until I return."

"I was sort of hoping to take Lily to the cabin," I replied, needing to be alone with my mate. Needing to feel her close. "I can't do that if I'm babysitting."

“Hey!” Dad exclaimed. “I might be injured, but I can still keep a small human female from bolting. Shit, I’m not dead yet, boys.”

Wyatt nodded. “And Fostine is staying, too,” he announced. “She’s needed here. I know she’s going to bust my balls about this, but Fostine has seen enough of Patterson’s depravity to last a lifetime.”

“Agreed,” I replied. “Besides I think it’ll be good for Lily to talk to another female who understands what she went through.”

Wyatt nodded, then pulled out his cell phone and checked the screen. “Now, let’s go find Trakker and bring him home.”

Everyone filed out of the room, but before Wyatt could leave, I caught him by the arm. He quirked a questioning brow at me.

“I should be going on this mission with you. We both know it.”

“No, you should be taking care of Lily.” My brother’s gaze softened. “You found your mate, Kai. There’s nothing more important than her right now.” He paused, then added, “Before she arrived, I believed that our family wouldn’t live to see another century. Her presence here changes everything. For the first time in a long while, I have hope.”

“The next generation of Yucilon s, you mean,” I concluded. And how did I feel about being a father? Petrified pretty much covered it. But there was also excitement. And if the child looked like Lily...

“Maybe,” Wyatt replied. “It’s never been done before, but Lily is strong and your bond is powerful.” He clutched my shoulder and squeezed. “Protect her with your life.”

I didn't need to be told. Lily was my life. And I wouldn't lose her again.

Lily

The sterile white room blurred and shifted as I slowly regained consciousness. The remnants of my ordeal with Patterson haunted my every sensation. My body ached, and each breath was a reminder of the pain I had endured. I tried to blink away the haze, struggling to piece together my surroundings. As my vision steadied, a figure came into focus by my bedside. It was Fostine. Kai's sister. My conversation with Kai came back. Yucilon. Fostine and the creature from the woods were one and the same. As I stared at her, my brain couldn't quite make sense of it.

My eyes locked onto Fostine's face, reading the same conflicting emotions that stirred within me. Fostine's guarded expression reflected the shadows of her ordeal. I felt a pang of empathy; I knew that Fostine had suffered the same atrocities at Patterson's hands.

"Hey," Fostine's voice was soft, though there was unease beneath its surface. "You're awake."

My throat was dry, my voice barely a whisper. "I see him when I close my eyes." Silence hung between us, heavy with the weight of unspoken words.

Fostine's features tightened, her jaw clenching as she struggled to contain the emotions that threatened to spill over. "Me too." Her voice trembled. "I know the kind of monster he is."

My eyes welled with tears. Pain and sorrow mingling. "I'm so sorry," I choked out. "I'm so sorry that you went through this, too."

Fostine's shoulders tensed, her gaze averted before returning to mine. "Don't do that. Don't pity me," she said, her voice tinged with bitterness. "Pity is for the weak. You and I, we aren't weak."

I nodded, my heart heavy with the weight of our shared trauma. "I don't know how to ... how to heal from this."

Fostine's expression softened, a flicker of understanding breaking through her armor. "One day at a time," she said quietly. "I've been down this road, Lily. It's going to suck for a while. But we can walk it together, right?"

"Right." Tears streaked down my cheeks as a sense of companionship settled over me. Fostine's vulnerability, beneath her guarded exterior, was a quiet haven. "He's evil. I've never known such evil."

Fostine patted the back of my hand. "He'll get his," she promised, her voice raw. "Until then, we aren't going to let him define us. Get it?"

My hand squeezed Fostine's. "Thank you," I whispered.

Fostine's lips quirked into a faint, understanding smile. "Let's take this one step at a time," she said, her tone gentle. "We'll heal, and we'll show the world that survivors are more than their scars."

In that moment, as our hands held tight, the room felt a little less cold.

"Fostine." My voice trembled. "I've been thinking about Kai."

Fostine's gaze shifted from the window to me, her expression guarded but attentive. "What about him?"

I hesitated, playing with the edge of the blanket. “He saved me from Patterson. He’s been so kind, and he’s helping me through all of this. But I’m worried ... about what he might do to Patterson.”

Fostine’s eyes darkened, her jaw clenched. “Kai has every right to want vengeance,” she said through gritted teeth. “He’s angry for what Patterson did to you, to both of us.”

I shook my head, as conflicting emotions warred inside me. “I can’t let him do something that will ruin his life, Fostine. I don’t want revenge. I just want him to be safe.”

Fostine’s eyes held a wealth of frustration, as well as understanding. “Lily, he’s not like other people. He’s determined to protect you, to make sure Patterson can’t hurt you ever again.”

I took a steadying breath, my gaze unwavering. “But I don’t want his life to be consumed by that darkness. He’s already been through so much.”

A shadow of contemplation passed over Fostine’s features before she spoke, her tone softer. “You care about him a lot, don’t you?”

I nodded, my lips curving upward. “More than I thought was possible after everything.”

Fostine’s shoulders relaxed, her expression softening. “I think you need to have an honest conversation with him,” she advised. “Tell him how you feel, and maybe you can find a middle ground.”

My brows furrowed as I tried to imagine that conversation. “You’re right.”

“I usually am.”

My fingers traced the pattern on the bed sheet before I looked up. “There’s something else, something Kai told me. He revealed a family secret.”

Fostine grinned. “Oh, yeah? And what secret might that be?”

I took a deep breath, my voice steady. “That you’re shapeshifters.”

Fostine winked. “He finally told you, huh?”

I nodded, my eyes shimmering with wonder, and no small amount of uncertainty. “He explained it to me. About your family. Not much, but we haven’t quite had time to really talk.”

Fostine’s lips twitched. “I suppose secrets have a way of being revealed when they’re needed most.”

“I don’t know much about it, but it’s a lot to take in.”

Fostine’s expression grew more serious, her gaze holding a determined spark. “If you’re willing, I can help you understand more about our abilities. I can even teach you to defend yourself. To ... to protect yourself from anyone who might want to hurt you.”

Surprised by the offer, I asked, “You’d do that?”

Fostine sat up straighter, her demeanor one of control. “I’ve learned that facing our fears and embracing our strengths is the only way to truly heal. If you’re willing to learn, I’m here to help you every step of the way.”

As the conversation between us flowed, the room's atmosphere radiated a sense of newfound understanding. Just as the warmth of our sisterhood settled in, the door creaked open, and Kai stepped in. His eyes found mine, and he grinned. As if happy to see Fostine and me getting along.

"Am I interrupting something?" Kai's voice was laced with a playful tone as he entered the room.

I exchanged glances with Fostine, our expressions softening. "No, not at all," I replied.

Kai's attention shifted to Fostine, his smile lingering. "I'm glad you two are talking."

Fostine's response was a nod, a guarded but acknowledging look in her eyes.

Kai's demeanor shifted as he continued, his tone growing more serious. "I wanted to let you both know that Wyatt and the others are going after Patterson."

Fostine's gaze hardened, a flicker of anger surfacing. "What? Why wasn't I informed?"

Kai let out a heavy sigh. "It was Wyatt's decision," he answered, his tone firm. "He believes they might be able to retrieve Trakker."

Fostine's hands clenched into fists. "And you're just leaving me behind, like I can't handle myself out there?"

Kai took a step closer, his eyes locking onto Fostine's. "No, it's not about that. Wyatt thinks you're needed here, at the house. Our father is still recovering, and Tessa needs someone looking after her, and Lily..."

As my gaze met Kai's, I understood what he wanted from me. "I need someone here, too," I added softly.

Fostine's shoulders slumped, her anger giving way to a begrudging acceptance. "Fine," she muttered. "But I don't have to like it."

Kai's smile returned. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm staying behind too."

"Good. If I can't be in on the fun, then neither should you," Fostine muttered, her shoulders relaxing a fraction.

"Figured you'd say that," Kai grumbled as he glared at his sister.

Fostine stood, then pointed a finger toward the door. "I'm going to go see if Dad needs anything."

I swallowed back a lump of emotion. "Thanks. For everything."

Fostine shrugged, then left the room.

Kai and I stared at each other, as if neither of us were sure what to say or do. I broke the silence. "You and I have a lot to talk about, but I'm tired of this room. Tired of these cold white walls and this awful table."

He nodded. "Let me check with Creeg to see if it's safe to move you," he offered, pulling out his phone. I waited, only hearing Kai's side of the conversation. When he tucked the device back into his pocket and smiled, I knew it was good news. "Can you walk?"

"I'll do anything to get out of here," I replied, gently moving to a seated position. I clutched the sheet to my chest, aware of my undressed state. "Uh, I might need some

help.”

Kai closed the distance and wrapped one arm around my back, steadying me with his big powerful frame, then helped me off the table. I wobbled and the room spun.

“Whoa, easy,” Kai murmured.

“The meds,” I explained. “I think they’re making me lightheaded.”

His eyes darkened, worry etched into his rugged features.

I rushed to reassure him. “I’m fine, really. Just need to get my sea legs.”

“I can carry you if you—”

“No. I can do it,” I assured him, my voice harsher than I’d intended. “Sorry, it’s just ... I hate feeling so helpless.”

“You are anything but helpless,” he swore, his voice filled with pride. “You’ve been through so much since meeting me. Most would’ve buckled under the pressure by now.”

“You’ve brought color to my life, I’ll give you that,” I teased, thinking back over the last few days. “God, has it really only been two days?”

“Time doesn’t matter,” he replied, leading me out of the room and up the stairs. “All that matters is that you are alive.”

We reached the third floor and the room I’d been using. “A shower sounds amazing right now,” I breathed out. “I want to wash away the feel of that place.”

“Let me help,” Kai urged. “I’ll be discreet.”

I could feel my cheeks heat at the idea of Kai seeing my nude body. Bruises, cuts, and all. Still, I didn’t relish the idea of being alone with my awful thoughts. “Okay,” I rushed to agree. At his surprise, I added, “I trust you.”

“You won’t regret it.” He pushed open the door and flipped on the light, bathing the room in a gentle glow.

My suitcase sat open on top of the dresser, clothes sticking out in a bundle of wrinkles. I made my way toward it and picked out a pair of soft, grey jogging pants and an oversized hunter-green sweatshirt. I remembered when my friend Lisa had gotten it for me. It’d been Christmas time and we’d gone shopping for last-minute gifts. The sweatshirt had been in the clearance bin. I hadn’t wanted to spend the money on myself so Lisa had snatched it up and bought it. It made me smile to think of the happy moment amidst all the chaos surrounding me now.

“Lily?” Kai’s deep, calm voice tore me from memory lane. He stood in the doorway leading to the bathroom. He’d already turned on the water.

I smiled. “I’m okay,” I replied, hoping to relieve his worries.

He stepped out of the way, allowing me to enter the small room. “It’s warm, but not hot. You’ll want to ease into the water because of your cuts.”

Kai stood at the doorway, commanding attention with his powerful presence. His sculpted body, every contour of his muscular form, was etched with determination. The faded jeans he wore clung to his legs, accentuating his well-defined thighs and calves, as if tailor-made to showcase his physical prowess.

A long-sleeved black shirt hugged his torso snugly, emphasizing his broad shoulders

and chiseled chest. The fabric strained against the tension of his muscles, speaking to a life dedicated to physical activity. The shirt's sleeves bunched up at his biceps, hinting at the raw power he possessed.

His hair was as usual a wild, shaggy mess that fell over his forehead and tumbled down to the nape of his neck. The unkempt strands framed his ruggedly masculine face. His intense gaze exuded an aura of brooding complexity. His facial hair lined his jaw, adding to his enigmatic allure.

However, the intensity in his eyes was momentarily softened by concern as they locked onto me. I stiffened. Concealing the bandages and bruised skin wasn't going to happen. "Don't do that," I warned. "Don't look at me as if I'm about to break."

Kai's brows knitted together, the anger plain to see in the tenseness of his jaw. "I see strength, Lily. Strength and beauty. That's all I see when I look at you."

Despite his words, his imposing presence, his concern for me was still evident. As if he were fighting to keep his emotions in check. He stepped forward, his movements deliberate, as if seeking to bridge the emotional distance that had suddenly grown between us.

"Kai," I breathed his name, letting it linger in my mouth.

"Lily," he murmured, his arms at his sides, fists clenched as if having a difficult time staying still.

I could relate. My emotions were swirling like a hurricane inside. His big muscular body filled the space and I felt small in comparison. I lowered my head, staring at the floor. Shyness clung to me like a second skin, my natural inclination to be bold overshadowed by a suffocating apprehension. "I can still feel him," I confessed, desperately aching to meet Kai's gaze, to show him the strength I knew that I

possessed deep inside, but my confidence had abandoned me.

“Would you like my touch instead? Feel my hands along your skin? Would that chase away that haunted look in your eyes, my love?”

Did I? Would I panic if he held me close? “The pain from his torture is one thing. I can handle that. But the emotional hurt that accompanies it is gnawing away at my need to move on. I don’t want this to define me.” How could I make Kai understand that Patterson had left his mark on my psyche, and the humiliation sat like a heavy weight on my shoulders?

A touch along my chin forced my gaze upward. Kai stood in front of me, his eyes filled with something very close to love.

“I’m sorry,” I groaned. “Fostine, your father, they were put through much worse, and they aren’t bellyaching about it.”

“Fostine cries,” Kai admitted. “And father has a long recovery ahead of him. Trust me, they are very much affected by what they went through. Don’t doubt that.” He paused, then added, “Get angry, Lily. Scream and curse, but don’t let that bastard steal your spirit this way.”

Anger coursed through my veins like fire, directed not only at Patterson and his goons, but at myself for allowing the situation to unfold. “I am furious. In that room, I begged, Kai. Begged him to stop. Begged to be released. I hate myself for that. I hate him.”

“Look at me, Lily,” he urged, his voice dark.

Summoning a smidgeon of fragile courage from deep within, I looked up slowly, meeting his eyes. They burned with an intensity that I’d never seen before. With a

trembling hand, I reached for him, cupping his strong chin. “You give me strength, Kai.”

“You will never suffer his touch again,” he swore. “That’s the truth.”

“I believe you,” I whispered.

When I grasped onto the edges of the sheet, Kai’s eyes quickly closed. He really was a man of his word. Something shifted inside of me. I didn’t want to hide from him. We’d started a relationship before Patterson had swooped in and attempted to destroy it. I wouldn’t let the bastard win. I dropped the sheet to the floor. “Kai,” I urged. “You can look.”

He never hesitated to lift his eyelids. Now, with his gaze on me, raking over my body, a bout of uncertainty washed over me. His intense eyes stopped on my chest and a low growl emanated from his chest. “I’ll make him hurt a thousand times before I grant him death.”

As I stood there, even the room seemed to hold its breath, tension thickening the air. Kai watched me, fury radiating off him in waves. As if the sight of my injuries had intensified the savage instinct within him, a fierce possessiveness that only fueled his determination to make things right. His jaw clenched, and his fists involuntarily curled as he appeared to battle against the surge of anger that coursed through his veins.

He stepped forward, his movements controlled but purposeful, his expression hardening. “You are such beauty,” he praised, his voice softening, taking away some of the tension with its sincerity.

I swallowed down my reservations and stayed still while Kai stroked me with his heated gaze. “Maybe you could undress,” I teased. “You know, so it’s fair.”

“Being with me isn’t the same as being with a human,” he warned. “I need you to accept me. All of me.”

“What does that mean?”

He shifted from one foot to the other, as if nervous all of a sudden. “I want you, Lily, as my mate.”

“Mate,” I repeated the word, unsure exactly what he was saying. “Like for life?”

“Yes,” he growled. “When we make love, it will seal the bond between us. Tying us together.”

“I think I need more information,” I said hesitantly.

Kai nodded, then stepped away. The hurt in his gaze couldn’t be hidden, though. “I’ll help you wash, then we can talk.”

“Kai, I—”

“It’s okay, my love,” he assured me, smiling for emphasis. “I’m in no hurry. When we come together, it’ll be because you ache for me the way I do you. Because you need me the way I need you.”

I reached up, cupping his unshaven jaw. “I do need you, but I’m kind of in the dark here. Your world is new to me.”

“And you need time to adjust. For now, let me tend to you. I only want to make you feel better.”

“And we’re not going to let Patterson intrude. Not here. I don’t want to think of that

monster. I only want to think of you. Feel you. There's only us. No one else."

"Only us," he repeated, his voice wildly sexy. A twinge in my back tore me from my erotic musings. The pain was another reminder that I needed time to heal and come to grips with what I'd endured. I needed to be whole, for Kai. And for myself.

I stepped away from him, then got into the shower. Warm water sluiced over my skin, soothing the aches. Kai stayed outside the tub, my ever-present guardian, keeping the monsters at bay. The thought filled me with love. I closed my eyes and let the water wash away the pain.

Kai

The room seemed to crackle with an electric charge as I watched Lily settle into bed, her body stiff, gaze fixed on me with curiosity. The shower had revitalized her, cleansing away the remnants of her ordeal, but now it was time to cleanse the connection between us. Too many lies. Too many half-truths.

“Feeling better?” I asked, my voice a low rumble, hinting at something deeper.

A subtle nod and a delicate smile. “I am. I needed that.”

When Lily’s pretty green eyes caught mine and held, it fueled my hunger. The mating would need to happen soon. My Yucilon side was about out of patience.

I sat on the edge of the bed, keeping the covers between us. A barrier. I needed it. “I should let you sleep. The sun is nearly up and you’re exhausted.”

She grabbed my forearm, holding on tight. “I don’t want you to go. I want to know about you, Kai. About your family.”

“Okay,” I replied. We were about to delve into the depths of my shapeshifter heritage, a secret that had remained hidden from the world. From humans. Until now.

“You said you shift. I saw the claws. Does that mean you have teeth like a wolf, too?”

The fascination edging her voice gave me hope that she wasn’t going to lose her shit the minute she saw me change. With her damp hair cascading like silken threads

around her face, I allowed myself a moment to appreciate her presence, her beauty. A moment to steady myself before revealing the truth about my family's extraordinary nature.

"We do have teeth like a wolf. Bigger, though," I began, my gaze an unyielding anchor as it locked onto hers. "Our animalistic nature is intricately woven into the fabric of our being. Fostine has a slightly smaller body and lighter fur than the rest of us. But she's just as capable as me, as any of us. Wyatt is our alpha, our leader."

"That's why you all defer to him," she concluded. "I wondered about that."

"Father was our alpha, but he left in search of Fostine. Wyatt took his place, kept us together, kept us whole."

She frowned. "Now that your father is back, will he resume his place?"

I had wondered that myself. "I don't know, but that's a problem for another day."

"You're right," she waved a hand toward me. "So, are there others like you? And what about your mom? I haven't heard you mention her."

"There are others. Other families." My jaw stiffened as memories surfaced. "Our mom ... the virus killed her. It swept through our kind like a plague." I sighed, remembering it as if it were yesterday. "Only the females. The disease spread quickly. No one knew how to stop it. It took them, one by one."

Lily's eyes filled with sympathy, as if her heart ached for the loss of my people. "I'm so sorry, Kai."

I took a deep breath, my grip on her hand tightening. "Fostine is the last female. We're not sure how she survived when so many others didn't. She's different

somehow.”

Lily’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Different? In what way?”

“We don’t know yet.” I ran a hand over my face. “She hasn’t shown any signs of illness, and she seems ... stronger. But it’s a mystery. Creeg was trying to figure it out before she left here two years ago. Now that she’s back, I assume he’ll get back to work on it.”

Lily reached out, cupping my cheek in her hand, her touch a soothing balm for my pain. “You and your family have been through so much.”

I leaned into her touch, my eyes locking onto hers. “Our very existence hinges on secrecy. My kind goes back to prehistoric times. Sharing our world with outsiders is entirely forbidden. I’m sharing it with you because you’re my mate.”

A charged silence hung in the air like a promise yet to be fulfilled. Her gaze deepened, her lean toward me indicating a growing urgency. “But we aren’t ... can’t be.”

“I knew you were mine the moment we met. It’s a scent. To a mate, it’s unmistakable. And absolutely intoxicating.”

Her face turned a pretty shade of pink at my words. “My scent. Oh, God, what do I smell like?”

“Like peaches and vanilla,” I groaned, closing my eyes tight against the need to taste her. “I crave it. Crave you.”

“Kai,” she whispered.

“When two shapeshifters unite as mates, a potent bonding ritual is invoked,” I explained, as parts of my body reacted to the idea. “It’s an intimate exchange that fortifies our connection and weaves our abilities together.”

Her eyes widened, the weight of my words sinking in as she absorbed their significance. “But I’m human. Surely that changes things.”

“It does, but we’ll navigate that when the time comes,” I assured her. “Through this bonding, the shared essence sparks a profound metamorphosis. Our abilities mesh. Your aging process is altered. A prolonged life span will be one of the benefits.”

“And I’ll be able to shift? Into an animal form?” she asked, her brows furrowed.

“Possibly, there’s a risk that you won’t be able to shift,” I continued, my voice gentle. “No human has ventured into this bonding territory. The interplay between your humanity and our shapeshifter essence is an unknown, and that unknown carries with it inherent dangers.”

Lily clutched the blanket in a firm fist. “Could it ... could it kill me?”

“No, I won’t let that happen. I would never harm you,” I swore, reaching for a lock of her damp hair and teasing the strands. “There are unknowns here, but I won’t hurt you.”

Uncertainty played across her face. My own emotions intensified, as a possessive hunger clawed at the edges of self-control. The connection between us was undeniable, but now it was as if every nerve in my body was charged.

“I want you to understand something,” she began hesitantly, her voice soft, almost a caress. “My feelings for you are evolving. I think I might be falling in love with you. But I’m still afraid here.”

Her admission was like a symphony of desire ringing in my ears, setting every fiber of my being ablaze. I found myself aching to take our relationship to a more profound level. “There is no one more important to me than you. No one that I care for more,” I confessed, my voice husky, laced with longing. “But even amid these emotions, the uncertainties persist. Your concerns hold merit, and whatever your decision, I’ll respect it.”

Silence swelled between us, an unspoken dialogue of raw emotions hanging in the air. And then I knew it was time to reveal another truth, one that had clawed at my conscience. “There’s something else,” I admitted, my voice heavy with guilt.

Her left brow quirked upward. “More revelations?”

“The night of your accident—the one that altered the course of your life—it was my doing. I was the beast you were trying to avoid hitting, Lily.”

Her eyes widened. “You were the black wolf?”

I glanced away, unable to look her in the eye. “Yeah, I was on a hunt. I wanted to tell you before, but...”

“Kind of hard to explain that one,” she surmised, her lips twitching. “I seriously would’ve thought you were nuts.”

I winced. “Yeah, and then I smelled your blood and I knew.”

She stiffened. “Blood?”

“The scent I told you about,” I explained, shifting around on the bed to get more comfortable. The conversation was doing things to me. Things Lily wasn’t quite up to seeing. “When we mate, I’ll take a little of your blood, and you’ll take mine. It’ll

anchor us together.”

“A blood exchange,” she repeated, her voice a tremor. “Okay, see, that’s starting to sound a bit scary, Kai.”

I cursed and ran a hand through my hair. “I know how this all must sound, but I promise it’s not as Bram Stoker as you’re imagining.”

She took a deep breath, then let it out. “How about we table the blood talk for now? What else should I know? Do you have abilities?”

“We’re stronger, faster, and our hearing is better than any other creature on earth. We can breathe underwater. And we can heal ourselves. It’s why Dad wasn’t killed by Patterson. A human wouldn’t have survived what my father endured these last two years.”

She touched an injury on her forearm. “So, if we mated right now, all these bruises and cuts would be gone,” she said, almost as if thinking aloud.

“Yes,” I bit out, hoping she’d say yes. I hated seeing her in pain. Hated seeing Patterson’s marks all over her. “They’d heal completely. And any other human ailments you suffer from.”

She yawned and laid her head against the pillow. “I think I need time to process everything, to understand my emotions, and to come to terms with all this.”

I nodded, my heart pounding with the need to claim her now. Seal our bond. Keep her from leaving me. But I refused to entertain that side of my nature. Lily would accept me in her own time. “I’ll let you rest. Come downstairs when you feel up to it or I can bring food up.”

When I started to go, to leave her to sleep, a delicate finger touched the back of my hand. “Don’t leave, please.” Her voice broke with unspoken pain. “I don’t want to be alone tonight. Not tonight.”

Our bond was defined by desire, uncertainty, and a hunger that refused to be quelled. I walked around the side of the bed, then laid down on top of the comforter. I propped my head against the headboard and smiled down at her. “I’ll keep my hands to myself,” I teased. “Sleep, Lily. You’re safe.”

She let out a sigh and closed her eyes. Minutes later she was snoring, her hand resting on top of mine as if unable to let me go. As if needing the contact. I knew the feeling well.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Fostine, letting her know where I was. She offered to bring us food around noon and I accepted the offer. This was what Lily needed. To feel safe again. To recover in peace. There would be plenty of time to figure the rest of it out. For now, I would watch over her. And with any luck, Wyatt would find Trakker. We’d kill Patterson. Only then would Lily’s nightmare truly be over.

And yet something deep in my gut told me we weren’t going to be that fortunate.

Lily

The night was restless, fraught with shadows and echoes of what Patterson and his guard had done to me. I jolted awake, heart racing, breath ragged, my mind still trapped in the clutches of a nightmare. The memory of my ordeal with Patterson had sprouted new tendrils of fear, creeping into my subconscious and tightening its grip on me even in my sleep. The moonlight filtered through the window, casting ethereal

patterns on the walls as if the night itself were whispering reassurances.

Beside me, a comforting presence stirred. Kai was there, his warm gaze focused on me, concern etched into the lines of his face. “Are you okay?” he murmured, his voice a soothing balm against the lingering echoes of my nightmare.

I managed a shaky nod, my throat constricting as I fought to calm my racing heart. I struggled to shake off the remnants of the dream, and hearing Kai’s voice dragged me back to reality.

A gentle stream of light spilled into the room, casting a golden glow that gently pushed back the darkness. I swallowed, my voice barely a whisper as I croaked out, “What time is it?”

Kai shifted slightly, his gaze still fixed on me. “It’s two in the afternoon.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. I’d slept for hours, the weight of emotional turmoil pulling me into a deep slumber. I couldn’t believe I’d slept so long, losing track of time in the process.

As realization settled in, the conversation we’d shared before I’d drifted off flooded my mind. The revelations Kai had shared about his Yucilon heritage, his family, and the intricate details of the mating bond. It was a lot to process, but strangely, the fear that had initially gripped me had softened. There was intrigue now, a growing fascination with this world beyond the ordinary.

He watched me. “You’ve been through so much,” he murmured, his voice gentle. “Rest was what you needed.”

I nodded, my head a swirling mess. “I ... I appreciate you being here.”

A glimmer of affection lit his gaze. “I’ll always be here for you, Lily.”

The sunlight streaming through the window infused the room with hope, a fresh start after the trials of the past. I took a deep breath, allowing myself to bask in Kai’s presence.

His voice was soft. “You know, we have a cabin not too far from here. It’s a private place, away from the world. I thought, if you’re up for it, we could go there. Spend some time away, just the two of us.”

My heart skipped a beat. The idea of a secluded escape sounded tempting, a chance to explore the bond we shared without the prying eyes of the outside world. Without the interruptions of his family.

I peered into his eyes, then proceeded to take the plunge. “I think I’d like that.”

A genuine smile blossomed on his lips, and he reached out to gently brush a strand of hair from my face. “You know what this means?”

As I nodded in agreement, a sense of possibility bloomed within me. “I do, and I’m ready.”

“I don’t want to rush you. If you need more time I—”

“I don’t,” I interrupted him. “The world is always going to be a place of uncertainty, but with you by my side, the journey ahead seems less daunting. I won’t let Patterson steal another moment of my life.”

His grin widened. “You amaze me. With everything that happened, I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to lock yourself away and never leave.”

As the sunlight danced on the edges of their shared space, I thought of Kai's words, his praise. "I could do that. But the whole reason I left my life behind was to start a new one. On my terms. I want to do that with you, Kai."

"No more waiting," he murmured, cupping my cheek in a gentle hand.

"No more waiting," I repeated, lifting up so I could feel his lips against my own.

Our mouths met in a soft, lingering kiss. The tenderness was a balm for the wounds we both carried, physical and emotional. Kai's hand gently grazed my cheek, as if he was worried about opening the wound in my lip. I leaned into his touch. I needed more. The world around us faded and our closeness provided solace.

As the kiss grew more passionate, a fire ignited between us. But just as our bodies responded to the rising heat, a flash of memory pierced my mind.

Gasping, I pulled away, my eyes wide with realization. The room blurred around me as the memory resurfaced, horrifying. I'd learned something during my captivity, something that could tilt the balance in our favor, something about Patterson that could lead us to him.

I pushed back a few inches, my heart pounding, lips tingling from the feel of Kai's mouth against mine. I met his concerned gaze, my voice trembling as I found the words to speak. "I remember something," I whispered, my voice barely audible above the rush of blood in my ears.

His worried gaze lingered as he reached out to me. "What is it?"

"Patterson," I began, steadier now as the importance of my revelation sunk in. "I got him talking at one point. He revealed something I don't think he intended to tell me. It might help find him, and, hopefully, Trakker."

Kai's eyes widened, shock mingling with caution. "Are you sure?"

I nodded, swallowing hard. "Yes, I think it could be essential. We should tell your family."

"You need to get dressed first," he said, staring at my nightgown. "No one gets to see you this way. Except me."

My face heated. "You won't get any arguments from me." I shoved the covers off, then stood. The room tilted, but the pain wasn't as severe. The sleep had done me good.

"You need meds, too." He watched me, his brows furrowed. "We do that before we talk to my family. Your health comes first."

"Text Creeg and have him bring them to the kitchen." I went to my suitcase and pulled out a pair of black leggings and an oversized grey concert tee. "I don't think this should wait."

A sense of urgency hung in the air as I quickly dressed. Kai had to help me with the shirt. My arms were still too sore to lift above my head. Kai's hungry gaze lingered on my chest, and it made me anxious to get to the cabin. To feel his touch everywhere. I wanted to make love to Kai. To erase the memory of Patterson's hands against my flesh. I was desperate for it.

As we made our way to the kitchen, the warm light from the overhead fixtures spilled across the worn wooden table, casting long shadows on the faces gathered around it. Kai's family. The ones who had rescued me. And now Trakker, their brother, was suffering. I felt responsible.

As we sat down, Creeg placed two pills in front of me, along with a cup of coffee. I

thanked him and swallowed them down, my fingers traced the rim of the mug, my gaze distant as I recounted the information I'd gained. "Patterson was eager to know all about your family," I began, not waiting another second. "He asked questions that made no sense to me at the time. At one point I decided to appeal to his conscience."

Lucian snorted. "Bastard has no conscience."

I sent him a look of understanding. "True, but I did get him to reveal something about himself."

Wyatt sat at the head of the table, his intense gaze trained on me. "What?"

I swallowed hard. Letting my mind recall the moment was difficult enough, much less sharing it with everyone. "I asked how he'd feel if someone he loved was on that table. If his daughter was the one being tortured." I sighed. "He gave me the strangest look. Almost as if he were afraid. Like I'd hit a nerve."

"A daughter," Wyatt quietly repeated. "I'd never considered it."

"He was so angry with me. His interrogation technique was bad, but after that he dropped all pretense of kindness."

Kai snarled a curse. "I want to feel my claws dig into his throat."

"We all do, brother," Wyatt muttered, then stared at Miggs. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Hell, yeah." He leaped to his feet. "I'm on it."

As Miggs rushed from the room, my control snapped. "What? Can someone please fill me in?"

Kai reached for me, then explained, “If Patterson has family, then it’s possible he’s put his new facility in their name. To keep us from finding it. Miggs can do a computer search. He’s a whiz with that shit.”

Silence hung in the air before I recalled another detail of my captivity. “Did you get the other guy out of there?”

Kai frowned. “Lily, there was no one else. Only you and Dad.”

I shook my head. “No, there was another man. On a different floor. He was chained to the wall.”

Kai exchanged looks with the others. “Did any of you—”

“No, and we searched that place well,” Wyatt bit out, his gaze on me. “What did he look like? Can you remember?”

“Long black hair and ... well, purple eyes.” I sighed. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’d swear he had purple eyes.”

Everyone fell silent. Fostine finally broke the tension. “That sounds a lot like Malachi.”

“No, the Georgionis are dead,” Lucian explained. “Look, I never saw anyone except Lily, but I suppose it’s possible Patterson had another there.”

I cleared my throat and all eyes turned my way. “The guard seemed afraid of this guy. Like really terrified.”

“Sure as hell sounds like Malachi,” Wyatt grumbled. “If he was there, then Patterson got him out before we arrived. We searched that place top to bottom.”

“Let’s hope he’s not still a prisoner.” Kai groaned.

“If he is, then he’s probably being held in the same place as Trakker. If Miggs finds anything, we’ll leave immediately. We’ll get them both free.”

Lucian placed a steady hand on my shoulder, his eyes filled with gratitude. “Thank you for sharing this with us.”

Around the table, the others expressed their commitment to bringing their brother home, their voices a resolute chorus. They were united in purpose, ready for battle. I’d never seen anything like it.

“Was there more?” Wyatt asked me. “More that could help us?”

“That’s all,” I replied, regret weighing me down that I couldn’t do more. “I’m sorry.”

Wyatt’s features softened. “You’ve provided us with more than you know.”

Surrounded by Kai and his family, I felt the warmth of unity. Something I’d never had before, not even with my own mother and sister.

A charged silence lingered as the information took hold of the room. Yet, beneath the table, Kai’s hand rested on my thigh, threatening to distract me. Hidden from the prying eyes of the others, a different kind of tension simmered. I glanced over and saw the heat in his gaze, the sexy lift to his lips. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Our shared kiss upstairs was burned into my mind. The heat in my veins intensified with every passing second, and I struggled to keep my focus on the matter at hand. How would I handle it when we were alone at the cabin? Kai was more than I’d ever known before. A kernel of fear surfaced at the thought.

K ai

My inner beast roared, and the sound nearly drowned out all rational thought. Instincts pushed me to claim Lily, to complete the bond that had been forming between us since day one. My senses were flooded with the feel of her soft skin against mine, her nearness, as well as her desire. It'd changed her scent to a deeper, stronger temptation, and I craved her. Every fiber of my being ached to respond to those primal urges, to yield to the raw intensity of our mating.

But I fought against it, my restraint a testament to my love for her. I didn't want to add another layer of complexity to our already intricate situation. I didn't want to hurt her or push her beyond her comfort zone, especially now, when we needed to focus on saving Trakker.

My grip on the mug tightened, knuckles turning white as I tried to channel my hunger into something more manageable. Lily's green gaze filled with awareness. She seemed to sense the internal struggle I was grappling with, and her hand cupped my thigh under the table, a subtle reassurance that she was there with me. It cooled me down a notch.

As the conversation continued around us, I turned to find Lily watching me with longing. Her soft smile about did me in. She gave me tenderness, while a beast raged for release inside me.

I took a deep breath, focusing on the task at hand, pushing aside my Yucilon nature that threatened to consume me. I listened to the plans to rescue Trakker, and in the midst of it, Miggs returned. His voice rang out, capturing our attention. "Listen up, everyone. I've got a lead on Patterson's daughter." He waved a white sheet of paper in the air with a woman's image printed on it. "Her name is Angel West. She's taken

her mother's maiden name."

My focus narrowed on the picture. She appeared to be in her twenties, with an ethereal presence that contrasted sharply with the darkness that her father had embodied. Her long blonde hair cascaded down her shoulders in gentle waves, framing a delicate face.

I frowned. "That's Angel West?"

Miggs nodded, placing the picture in the center of the table. "Yeah, that's her."

My gaze went to Fostine, then our father. "Does she look familiar to you two?"

"No," both said in unison. Dad leaned forward, his attention lingered on the photograph. "She seems so ... different from the man who raised her."

Miggs tapped the picture, his expression contemplative. "Yeah, she seems so sweet. And yet her father is a fucking monster."

I nodded slowly, my thoughts racing. "Could be she's innocent in all this."

Wyatt snorted. "Appearances can be deceiving. Her smile is soft, and her eyes have this depth that's hard to reconcile with the evil shit her father's involved in, but it could all be fake."

My lips tightened in a determined line. "Then we find her. Use her to get to him."

Fostine cleared her throat, and everyone looked her way. "Find her, find Patterson."

"Seems to be the gist of it," Wyatt muttered, running his fingers through his thick black hair.

“We have addresses—it’s something,” Miggs said, offering Lily a grateful smile. He continued, urgency lacing his tone. “Based on recent activity, I’ve narrowed it down to a few locations. She has an apartment about an hour from here, and there’s a warehouse in her name as well. She’s an administrative assistant. So, it’s unlikely she’s earning enough to purchase a warehouse the size of this one.”

As the room buzzed with conversation, my mind wrestled with an internal conflict. On one hand, the pull to complete the mating ritual and strengthen my bond with Lily surged through me with furious intensity. On the other, Trakker’s rescue weighed heavily on my conscience.

Lily’s knee nudged my leg. The reminder of our shared strength settled me a fraction. But my sense of responsibility gnawed at me.

Amidst the planning, a commanding voice cut through the air—Wyatt, our oldest brother. As always, the voice of reason amidst the chaos. “Hold on a moment.”

All eyes turned toward our alpha. My heart squeezed tight. Wyatt had been our rock after Fostine and our father had disappeared. Our leader. We all valued his guidance above all else.

Wyatt’s gaze settled on me, his tone firm yet compassionate. “Listen, little brother. I know how much you want to join us, but you have other matters to tend to here.”

I started to speak, but I knew that my internal struggle was plain for all to see. I wasn’t fooling anyone. Knowing that Wyatt’s words carried the weight of experience, helped ease my conscience.

Wyatt continued, his words resonating with authority. “We’ll handle the search. You focus on Lily. We’ll inform you the moment we find something substantial.”

As Wyatt's directive settled over me, the tension in my shoulders slowly eased, replaced by a renewed sense of purpose. I met Wyatt's gaze. "Understood," I groaned. The weight of responsibility still bore down on me, but now I had a clear path. A clear purpose. Lily.

As the meeting dispersed and tasks were assigned, I turned to Lily, my gaze steady. "How are you feeling about all this?"

She bit her bottom lip, a sign I was beginning to associate with nervous tension, and said, "Worried for you brother, frustrated that I can't offer more insight, and I guess hopeful that Patterson might actually be caught."

"Trust me, you've helped more than you can know. Besides, Trakker isn't an ordinary man. He's strong. Patterson might have drugs, men with guns, but Trakker is immortal. He won't go down easily."

"I hope you're right. I pray your brothers get to him soon," she replied softly.

I took hold of her waist with my right hand and squeezed, a subtle touch that conveyed my yearning. I could feel the energy between us, a magnetic pull that had only grown stronger over time. The thought of sealing our bond, completing the mating ritual, ignited a fire within me.

I leaned in closer, my breath mingling with hers, my gaze locked onto her lips. "I want you, now. More than ever." My voice was low, charged with desire. The urgency of our situation had transformed into a deep ache, a need that demanded fulfillment. Passion burned between us, creating a heady cocktail.

My cock thickened as I imagined having Lily all to myself, away from the prying eyes of the world. I was ready to claim her, to solidify our bond in the most intimate way possible.

“Let’s go to the cabin,” I murmured, my voice a seductive whisper. “Seal our bond, complete the mating ritual. I don’t want to wait another moment. It’s now or never.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to go with them? I can wait. I’m not going anywhere, Kai.”

“No, my love,” I murmured. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned living for centuries is that we grab onto the good when we can. And we don’t let go.”

She offered me a shy smile, and it sent fire licking through my veins. “Okay.”

My heart pounded, not just with the anticipation of being with the woman I loved, but because our bond was about to reach a new level of intimacy that I’d never experienced before. The rush of adrenaline racing through my entire body wouldn’t be contained any longer. The time had finally arrived.

Lily

When we arrived at the remote cabin, a sense of tranquility enveloped the surroundings. The small, intimate building nestled amidst the trees, with wisps of smoke spiraling from the woodburning stove's chimney. Kai held the door for me as we stepped inside, the scent of pine and the crackling warmth of the fire immediately embracing us.

The interior of the cabin exuded rustic charm. A king-sized bed with a log headboard dominated one corner, dressed in soft white linens. A small kitchenette stood against one wall, complete with a stove and a small fridge. A cozy seating area by the fireplace was adorned with a large white rug, inviting us to unwind and revel in the peaceful atmosphere.

"It's beautiful," I praised, charmed by the romantic vibe. My nerves tingled beneath my skin as my blood raced. My feelings for Kai had deepened, my heart confessing a love I hadn't anticipated. I wanted to be his mate, to embrace the connection we shared, but the unknowns cast a shadow of uncertainty over me. What did it entail? Would there be pain, a transformation, or something else entirely?

The questions churned in my mind like a slowly building thunderstorm, and as Kai's gaze met mine, my stomach filled with anticipation.

Kai seemed to sense my unease. The fragile bond between us had somehow revealed my emotions to him. His fingers reached out, gently intertwining with mine. "Lily," he said, his voice a soothing murmur, "I can feel your questions, your worries. I understand this might be overwhelming for you."

I didn't know how to put it all into words so I stayed silent. Unwilling to say the wrong thing. Again Kai understood my unease, and led me to the seating area by the fire. We sat next to each other, our eyes locked. "Being a mate, sealing our bond," he murmured, "it's a profound step. It won't be without challenges, but we'll face them together."

My gaze softened, my heart finding solace in his words. "I want this, Kai. I want to be with you, to be yours. But I'm scared. You have to understand that, right?"

He cupped my face in his hands. "I won't lie to you. There might be moments of discomfort, of change. But remember I'll be right here. Me. You trust me. I know you do."

My fears began to melt, replaced by a growing sense of security. Kai's touch, his words, reminding me that we were in this together. I leaned into his touch, my eyes searching his for certainty.

Kai's gaze held unwavering determination. "Our bond will only enhance what we already share. And when it's done, you'll feel the depth of our love on a whole new level. Trust me, Lily."

A smile tugged at the corners of my lips, my heart fluttering as his words resonated within me. Having Kai by my side, the romantic setting, and being surrounded by nature's serenity allowed me to let go of some of my uncertainties, replaced by a profound yearning for the future we would forge together.

As the flickering fire bathed us in a warm glow, my gaze wandered around the cozy space, taking in the rustic charm and the inviting atmosphere. I turned to Kai, my curiosity piqued by the unexpected comforts that greeted us. "How is there already a fire?" I asked, my voice tinged with surprise. "Did you set it up earlier?"

Kai's eyes twinkled. He followed my line of sight, then a soft smile played on his lips. "No, I didn't. It looks like my sister must've been here."

My brows furrowed in confusion. "Your sister? But why..."

Kai gestured to the wine bottle that graced the small table along with a set of glasses. "It seems she anticipated our arrival. She must've cleaned up, changed the sheets, and even left us the alcohol."

Understanding slowly dawned. "She did all this for us?"

Kai nodded, a fondness in his expression. "Seems so. She has a way of knowing things. She's always been perceptive."

As I absorbed the thoughtful gestures, a warmth spread through my chest. I glanced around the cabin, the touches of consideration making it even more inviting. And as my gaze returned to Kai, gratitude swelled within me. "It's really sweet of her," I murmured, a smile tugging at my lips. "It's like she knew we needed this."

Kai entwined his fingers with mine, his gaze tender. "Yeah, but if you thank her she's liable to say something sarcastic."

I turned my attention to the crackling fire, the flames flickering with a gentle, almost ethereal grace. I let out a soft sigh, then leaned into Kai's side, contentment settling over me. "Well, I'm grateful for her thoughtfulness. It's made this moment even more special."

Kai wrapped his arm around me, pulling my body closer. My curves fit neatly against the muscular length of him. Like fitting pieces of a puzzle together. "I'm glad. I want you to feel special, Lily."

We sat and listened to the crackling fire, and I couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of connection—not only to Kai, but to his family as well. The cabin, Fostine's gestures, and the promise of sealing our bond all converged to wrap around my heart.

Kai pulled back a fraction and stared down at me. His eyes filled with concern. “Are you hurting? Do you need any more pills?”

I was touched. Despite his hunger for me, he still prioritized my well-being. It was a testament to the depth of his feelings for me, and it warmed me the way nothing else could.

I let a soft smile play on my lips. “No, Kai, I'm fine. Really. No pain, and I don't need any more pills.”

He exhaled a breath he seemed to have been holding, easing the lines of his masculine features. “Good,” he murmured, licking his lips. “You've been through so much. I don't want to add to your pain. Ever.”

I reached out, my fingers finding Kai's cheek, the warmth of his skin beneath my touch grounding me. “I appreciate your concern. It means a lot to me.”

His hand covered mine, his gaze unwavering. “I'll always worry about you. You mean everything to me.”

When had I ever heard those words? No past boyfriend had ever expressed such emotion. Certainly not my own family. The sincerity in Kai's statement sent a rush of excitement through me. I leaned in, our lips meeting in a gentle kiss.

As we pulled apart, our foreheads touching, I whispered, “You know, all I need, all I want is you.”

Kai's eyes deepened. "Lily..."

I silenced him with another kiss, our lips meeting in a flash of longing. It was a kiss that held the promise of our future, a future filled with challenges, yes, but also with love that could conquer anything. As our lips parted, we remained close, our breaths mingling, hearts beating as one.

Kai

As I stared down at Lily, the air itself felt charged with rabid energy. Our fingers were intertwined and my damn fingertips itched, a sign of my growing hunger for Lily.

"Lily, there's something I want to talk to you about. It's about the mating, about sealing our bond," I warned, my voice taking on a predatory edge.

The curiosity in Lily's wide gaze gave way to trepidation. "Okay, what is it?"

"What we're doing isn't simply making love. It's a primal connection between mates," I explained, unable to keep the possessiveness from my tone. "And then there's the exchange of blood."

Lily's brows furrowed. "Yeah, this is starting to sound a lot like a movie scene, Kai."

My fingers trailed a teasing path up her arm. "It's a way to merge our essences, to bind us on a soul-deep level. Our desires, our passions, all mingled together."

Lily's doubts lingered, and she swallowed hard. "I'm a little scared."

“I know.” My hand cupped her chin, even as I tried to hide the blaze of hunger engulfing me. “My desire for you, my need to claim you, runs deep. I’m drawn to every part of you, body and soul.” My lips brushed against her ear. “But when the time comes, I’ll make sure you’re well prepared, that you’re ready for the wild intensity of our bond. Each time we take from each other will feel like an inferno.”

Lily met my gaze, her apprehension dissipated, replaced by something else even more tangible. Arousal. I could smell the scent of it, and it brought out my Yucilon like nothing else could. A red flag in front of a bull.

The tension in the room thickened, even the air between us sparked like a live wire. She nodded slowly. Nervousness, as well as a budding sense of surrender shone in her eyes.

Surrender. Yes, I needed that from her.

“All right,” she said. “As long as it’s with you, I’m willing to ... explore.”

I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face if I’d tried. “You won’t regret it, Lily. I’ll make sure of that.”

I glanced toward the small window, my thoughts momentarily distant. The predator in me prowled, and my fingers tapped an impatient rhythm against my thigh. All signs of the mounting tension that coiled within me. Patterson. That bastard was still out there. As long as Lily was with me, then she would always be in danger. The thought threatened to destroy the moment. I stood and paced the room, agitated all over again that Patterson still lived. I could feel the ache of desire, the urgent need to claim, to complete the bond that had been growing between me and Lily. The scent of her fueled the beast that lurked just beneath the surface. But what cost will she be forced to pay as my mate?

With each turn I took, my agitation intensified. A wild frenzy resonated with the cabin's rustic surroundings. A reflection of the untamed energy that surged within me. My gaze darted toward Lily. So beautiful. So innocent. Our eyes locked, and a growl of hunger escaped.

"Lily," I began, my measured words heavy with the presence of the creature riding me. "I'm desperate for you. Our connection, it's become a fever, an ache that refuses to be denied, but you'll be tying your life to someone with a target on their back. You understand this, right?"

Lily's eyes widened, as if recognizing the storm of passion that raged within me. "You're talking about Patterson, and I think you're wrong. I think he's done with me. And besides, we aren't letting him decide our future for us. Right?"

The room was charged with a magnetic pull that tried to draw me closer to her. I held back. Barely. I fought to contain my Yucilon nature, keeping my voice even. "You aren't afraid?"

Lily rose from her seat and closed the distance separating us, her gaze unwavering as she reached out to touch my arm. "Kai," she murmured, her voice a soothing melody, "I'm safe as long as I'm with you. I know that. I'm not afraid."

I cupped her cheek. "Then no more waiting." The Yucilon within me roared for release, beating at an imaginary cage binding him, but Lily's presence reined in the savagery that threatened to consume me.

"I'm ready," she assured me, moving backward a few feet, then stripping out of her clothing. "Make me yours, Kai."

The cabin's warm firelight cast an enchanting glow, illuminating the room in a dance of shadows and softness. In its center stood Lily, bathed in the golden radiance, a

vision of vulnerability and raw beauty. Her body, stripped of all barriers, was a canvas of truth, adorned with a constellation of healing bruises and bandaged cuts.

My eyes traced her form, every curve and contour a testament to strength. The genuine reverence in my voice broke the hushed silence. “Lily, you’re breathtakingly beautiful to me.”

Lily’s gaze met mine, a teasing smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she gestured to her injuries. “Oh, really? Even with all these imperfections?”

My steps brought me closer to her, my eyes burning with intensity as I replied, “Especially with those imperfections. ” My voice was a low, seductive murmur. “They tell a story of your strength, of the battles you’ve faced and the courage you’ve shown.” I reached out, letting my fingers trace a path over her skin with featherlight touches. “To me, every part of you is a masterpiece, a testament to the remarkable woman you are.”

The teasing facade in Lily’s expression gave way to vulnerability. My words seemed to wrap around her like a comforting embrace, dispelling the doubts that had lingered. “You make me feel ... seen,” she whispered, “cherished, in a way I’d never experienced before.”

As my fingers lingered on her skin, Lily’s gaze shifted, taking in my presence. She bit her lower lip and frowned. Concerned she’d changed her mind, I asked, “What is it?”

“You’re so powerful,” she admitted in a soft voice. “So intense, as if barely containing the desire to make love to me.”

“I am,” I groaned. “You go to my head, Lily.”

“I like that.” Her smile teased my senses. And she watched as I removed my shirt, the

fabric falling away to reveal my chest and abs.

“You like what you see?” I asked, my gaze fixed on hers as I continued to undress, my movements unhurried. One by one I unlaced my boots, and they dropped to the floor, followed by my jeans. I stood before her nude and let her eyes journey over me.

I reached out, my arms circling her waist, and lifted her effortlessly into my embrace. Cradling against my chest, her skin pressed against mine, I could feel the heat of her body, an undeniable force drawing me to her.

I carried her to the large bed, its inviting expanse adorned with crisp white linens that contrasted against her flushed skin. Gently, I placed her in the center, the mattress cradling her form as I stepped back, my gaze fixed on her.

My chest rose and fell with a deep breath, my eyes watchful. “The silky cascade of your long red hair against the white bedding, and your pretty green eyes set my body ablaze.” I took another breath, making a conscious effort to steady the torrent of desire that roared within me. “I need you, Lily.”

“Take me then, Kai,” she murmured, her arms outstretched.

I approached the bed, each step a measured choice. My fingers grazed her cheek, my touch both tender and possessive. “Sweet Lily,” I whispered, “you’re a flame that ignites my soul, a force that consumes me. I want this to be perfect for you.”

“It will be,” she assured me.

Her words hung in the air, a testament to her trust in me. I intended to make every moment meaningful, but I knew that as soon as she was beneath me the chain on my beast would snap. With the fire’s gentle crackle as our backdrop, my fingers brushed against her skin, our connection deepened.

I joined Lily on the bed, keeping my movements easy, though the simmering hunger gnawed away at my control. As I lowered myself onto the mattress, Lily's legs widened in invitation. An invitation impossible to resist.

I crawled toward her, my hands tracing the contours of her body as I closed the distance between us. And as our lips met, a tantalizing press that sent shockwaves of sensation through me, I knew Lily had the upper hand. I would do anything for her. Kill for her. Her soft touch ran along my biceps to my shoulders, a gentle exploration that sent me into overdrive.

I cursed, then parted her lips with my eager tongue, tasting her delicate flavor until I was starved for her.

Lily's fingers found their way into my hair, her breath hitching as I explored the sweet recesses of her mouth. My senses were overwhelmed by the intoxicating blend of sensations—the taste of her lips, the warmth of her body pressed against mine, and the knowledge that this moment was a culmination of our desires.

My hand traversed her body, a careful journey that avoided the tender remnants of her injuries. She shivered and moaned my name. My fingers skated over her skin, eager for the sounds of her pleasure.

The teasing glint in her eyes, gave me permission to skate my fingertips to circle her breasts, which made her arch into my touch with a gasp of pleasure. I watched her, the dark hunger in me increasing.

Lily's desperate cries of pleasure spurred me on. Every sound, every quiver of her body, had my cock dripping.

My touches grew bolder, more insistent, fingers traced a path of pleasure that had her gasping for breath. Her responsiveness, the way she embraced the intoxicating rush of

pleasure we shared did it for me. That it was Lily, my mate, sent me over the edge. My Yucilon predator roared for release, driven by an instinctual craving, and Lily was my willing prey.

As my fingers teased and played, an electrifying current skated along my spine, a feral energy that pulsed with restless anticipation.

Senses sharpened as my gaze locked onto Lily's. One finger brushed against her neck, my touch teasing her pulse. It quickened and my teeth elongated, the glint of moonlight slipping through the opening of the curtains. "Lily," I growled, entranced by Lily's irresistible allure. I lowered my head toward her neck. My voice, a deep rumble charged with a brutal edge, reverberated in the intimate space. "Surrender to me."

Lily's breath hitched. Her pretty eyes darkened until all I wanted to do was drown in their green depths. I let my fingers graze her satiny skin, teasing her with what was still to come. In a heartbeat, I claimed her with my lips, tasting the delicate length of her neck. Without hesitation, my teeth sank into her flesh with a fierce hunger that sent shockwaves of sensation through me. Lily gasped, a reflexive reaction to the sharpness of my bite? I attempted to pull back, but her moans of pleasure gave testament to the intoxicating pleasure blazing through her veins.

A primal growl echoed deep within my chest. I let down my guard and indulged in the connection. The taste of her intoxicating blood sent a savage hunger ripping through me. My grip on her tightened, possessive in its intensity, as my mouth mapped a trail of feathery kisses over the newly created mark.

Lily's fingers curled into my hair, her lower body pressing upward, as if seeking release. I eagerly wanted to give it to her. A thousand times over. The sweet warmth of her blood, and the raw edge of my unrestrained desire threatened to send me way the hell over the edge. Lily had no idea just how dangerous I could be. The need I had

for her. Only her.

As I lifted my head, I watched Lily, the unquenchable fire filling her green eyes. My lips parted to reveal my canines, still stained with the remnants of her essence. Would she hate me now? The idea pulled a growl of rage from within. I swept my hair aside, then used one long razor-sharp claw to make an inch-long cut along my neck, blood dripping down. “Take from me, love. Do this for us.”

Lily didn’t hesitate. She lifted her head and kissed my neck, then teased the tip of her tongue over the cut. “It’s ... sweet,” she murmured.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Do it, sweetness.”

And with a sigh, Lily wrapped her lips around the slice and drank. A moan escaped as she drank from me. My temperature rose, dick hardening and thickening. I groaned her name, eager to drive my cock deep. Aching for her.

“My body is yours and yours is mine,” I instinctively whispered, my hand pressed to the back of her head. “Our souls entwined. Your happiness, health, and comfort will forever be my priority. I exist for you.”

The words sent us both into a tailspin of desire. Lily pulled back and stared at the mark on my neck. I could feel the cut sealing closed. As if it’d never been. She swiped her tongue over her lips, tasting me there still. “What just happened?”

“We’re bound now,” I growled. “By the time the night is over there will be no separating us.”

I could hear the rhythm of her heart. Faster and faster. Her breath coming in ragged pants. “Forever,” she mumbled. “We’re together forever.”

“Yes,” I confirmed, my gaze locking onto hers. “Forever.”

There was no going back now. I was glad. But would she regret it? That question weighed heavy on my mind.

Lily

“My Lily,” Kai whispered as he moved down my body. Once he was at eye level with my breasts, he opened his mouth and latched onto one. I jolted as pleasure consumed me. His tongue darted out and brushed the tip back and forth before sucking long and hard. His teeth grazed just enough to cause me to moan his name and squirm beneath him. Kai was relentless as he moved to my other breast, licking and nibbling. The delicious torment sent electric currents zipping directly to my center. Moisture trickled down my thigh and my clit throbbed.

“Oh, yes, Kai.” I arched my back, hoping for more. Needing so much more. His mouth, his touch. I skimmed my fingernails down his back. I was rewarded with a curse from Kai. His head lifted. Our gazes collided. God, the man was gorgeous. Scratch that. Gorgeous Yucilon . A shapeshifter. My shapeshifter. And every part of my body was attuned to him. As if he’d reached deep inside me and found something that no other man had ever touched. I caressed the length of his back. It was Kai’s turn to moan and heat spiraled through every inch of my body. By slow degrees he was turning me inside out.

His skillful mouth went on a journey over my torso even as his hands moved slowly over my curves. His fingers delved into the neatly trimmed curls between my thighs. I moved my legs wider apart, trusting Kai to take me to the heavens and beyond. As his fingers danced over my clit, stroking and squeezing the small bud, I threw my head back and shut my eyes tight, riding along the wild sea of pleasure. He teased my slit with a finger, eliciting a series of moans and whimpers from me. That single finger slid deep, then retreated, only to do it all over again. When another joined the first, I lost all reason. Kai’s mouth closed over my clitoris, suckling and licking. I felt a

tickling sensation at my entrance. I opened my eyes just in time to catch the tip of Kai's index finger teasing me there. The little strokes sent me into orbit. The orgasm crashed over me in a violent wave, overcoming me. My thighs quivered and my hips bucked as it blasted through me. Several earth-shattering seconds later, my muscles went limp, and I collapsed against the bed. Kai's big, strong hands caressed my thighs, hips, then he lifted his head from between my thighs and pressed a light kiss on my mound. I stared down at him. His heated gaze captured me.

"My beautiful mate," he growled.

I couldn't think straight. For now, I only wanted him to take me back up that jagged, rocky cliff. This time we would jump off together.

I held out my arms and smiled. "Make love to me, Kai."

"I ache to make this last, but the tether on my control snapped a long time ago."

I touched his forearm, smoothing my hand up and down. Kai sucked in a breath and gritted his teeth.

"I don't want you controlled," I murmured. "Screw that."

He lifted and sat on his haunches between my thighs, his gaze roaming over my bare body. I got to my knees, then leaned forward. The movement put my mouth in direct line with his jutting cock. I reached a finger out and touched the tip of him there, enthralled when a pearl of moisture emerged.

"I want this," I confessed boldly. Bracing myself with one hand on Kai's thigh, I used my other to wrap around his massive length. I pumped him once, luxuriating in his curse, then angled my head and took him into my mouth. I sucked him deep, unwilling to give the big bad wolf a chance to think beyond the feel of my lips

wrapped around him, my eager tongue stroking him.

“Lily,” he groaned as a fist dug into my hair and held me firmly against his groin. His body wrapped around mine, caging me in an intimate embrace.

I closed my eyes and licked his bulbous tip, then sucked him deeper. His heavy length nudged the back of my throat and I had to open wider to accommodate his girth. I tasted the salty flavor of his pre-cum and moaned in pleasure at the delicious flavor so unique to Kai. My hand came up and cupped his sac, squeezing gently. Kai’s eyes shut and he threw his head back on a groan. I allowed my hands and mouth to play for another minute, but I was too excited for him to be inside of me and I didn’t let the pleasurable torture go on for long. I slid my mouth backward, leaving a loving kiss on his tip before breaking free completely.

“Lily,” Kai groaned, his strong hands clasping me around the middle. He lifted me in the air, then placed me on my back before moving on top, his cock poised at my entrance. His gaze sought mine. “Now,” he growled, as he pushed his cock into me a bare inch.

My brain disintegrated the instant Kai entered me. He was thick and so big, and I had to widen my legs to take him. I watched Kai strain to remain in control, slowly moving in and out of me until my body adjusted to his intimate invasion. When he reached between our bodies and played with my clitoris, I closed my eyes once more, luxuriating in Kai’s masterful touch.

K ai

My mate was a luscious mix of sweet innocent and wild lioness. Her tight body surrounded my cock, milking it and sending me into oblivion. Her long flame-red

hair fanned out around her body. She was a woman of natural beauty. I sniffed the air, taking in Lily's erotic scent, allowing the alluring spice to fill me. I was the only one with the privilege to tease that addicting smell from her. My animalistic nature practically salivated with predatory delight.

I braced myself on my elbows on either side of her delicate body, and pushed into her faster, harder. My Yucilon fought for dominance inside me. I dipped my head and kissed her lips. So soft and pliable. Her mouth had taken me to the very edge when she'd sucked my cock.

Her legs moved to wrap around my waist, anchoring me to her. My fingers played with her clit while my dick thrust in and out of her tight heat. Lily's soft curves fit me the way no other woman's had. She was made for me to love. Mine. No other would ever have her this way. A growl escaped my throat as I imagined her leaving me. My teeth scraped over her sensitized nipples and I sucked one turgid peak into my mouth, longing to bite into her again, to somehow strengthen our bond. Lily was not Yucilon. Could she walk away? For me it would be torture. The separation would drive me mad. The not knowing pushed me to take her deeper. My hips thrusting against her. Lily shouted my name as another orgasm overtook her. I let my claws extend, then slammed them into the mattress on either side of her body, pinning her in place. Her name escaped with a ragged groan.

My arms became steel bands beside her. A haze of lust threatened to envelop me. I fought my way through it, slowly bringing my mind back from that black place.

Lily.

My mate.

I covered one round breast with my mouth, sucking on her nipple, filling my mind with her smile, her expressive green eyes. My breathing calmed and my claws

retracted. I lifted my head and stared down at her. “My love,” I whispered. Just as Lily’s hands caressed their way down my shoulders and over to my chest, her soft palm resting directly over my heart, I lost it. I was thrown headfirst into the most intense orgasm of my life. Nothing could compare to making love to my Lily. I emptied my seed deep inside the clutch of her body, then teased her clit and watched in fascination as she found another climax.

I waited precious moments until she came back down to earth before I kissed her, lingering at her mouth, tasting her heavy breaths and licking at her plump lower lip. I littered her cheeks and chin with kisses, then journeyed south to her neck where I found the wild beat of her pulse. I suckled her there, and knew a sense of possessive satisfaction when Lily moaned and arched against me.

I gently drew my mouth off her, then stared down at her closed eyes and the delicate smile on her face. The feeling that we weren’t merely satisfying a physical need but also quenching the insatiable thirst of two souls destined for each other overcame me. This was what I’d been missing.

“That was ... intense,” she breathed out, an upward tilt to her lips.

“Forgive me,” I gritted out. “I got a little out of hand.”

She lifted her hand and caressed my cheek. “It’s the Yucilon , right?”

I nodded. “I expected it to be powerful, but the force of our bonding took me off guard.”

“I love you, Kai,” she murmured. “And I loved our bonding. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

My heart filled with the sincerity of her words. When I would’ve offered the words

back to her, something caught my eye. “Look at your body.”

She glanced down and her gaze widened. “They’re nearly gone! Oh, my God, Kai,” she rushed out. “How?”

I grinned. Pleased that I could take her pain away. Happy that I could erase the physical evidence of her abuse. “It’s my Yucilon blood. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” She sighed. “Wow, I didn’t realize.” She tilted her head, then lifted her hand, staring at it. “I think I’d enjoy being able to shift. To run through the forest with you.”

The thought sent my heart racing. “I’d enjoy that too.”

“Wait.” She pushed me off, then lifted herself to a seated position and crossed her legs in front of her. “Will you resent me if I can’t shift? If I can be ... everything you want me to be?”

“Never,” I cupped her chin in a firm hold. “You already are everything to me.”

Lily’s fear simmered just below the surface, her brows furrowed as she regarded me with uncertainty. “You’re sure?” she asked, a note of hope slipping through.

I curled my fingers around hers. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life,” I vowed, meaning the words.

Lily’s gaze softened as she met my eyes, a note of vulnerability reflected in her expression. “I just wish I knew what might happen next. If I’ll be able to shift or not. It’s scary not having answers.”

My thumb brushed over the back of her hand in a gentle caress. She exhaled,

shoulders loosening as the tightness in her posture unraveled. The worry in her eyes softened, giving way to something warmer—something that held me captive. “We’ll handle it. Together.”

She sighed, “Together.”

“Yes. You are my mate, Lily. I know this deep down. In my soul. You’re a part of me. The mating is safe. I’m just not certain if you’ll have the ability to shift. Everything else is clear to me.”

“It’s just ... I want to be a part of your world, fully . To experience everything, even if it’s challenging.”

“I want that too.” My grip on her hand tightened, my eyes locking onto hers, as an unshakable determination took hold of me. “But you already are a part of my world, Lily. Even if you can’t shift. It doesn’t matter to me. Does it to you?”

“It matters because I want to be your equal. I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“You could never, my love.”

Lily tilted her head and leaned in, her forehead resting against mine, our link strong and unbroken. “I love you, Kai,” she whispered. “Either way this comes out, we’re in this together.”

I cupped the back of her head, as I hoped to convey a promise that spoke of my unwavering commitment. “Yes, we are.”

“Will it hurt? Shifting, I mean.”

“I won’t lie, at first there will be some pain, until your body gets used to it. Then it’ll

come naturally.”

Her lips kicked up sideways. “We’re in some seriously uncharted territory, huh?”

“We are, but our mating is true,” I vowed. “This is known in my heart.”

Her gaze shot toward the door. “Kai, I hear something outside,” she whispered. “Could Patterson have—”

“Hush, my love, it’s only a raccoon. It’s about four hundred yards away,” I replied. “You can hear that?”

She nodded, then glanced down at my chest. “Your heart, it’s so strong, so fast.”

“Lily,” I said, “get dressed. I want to show you something.”

Curiosity ignited in her green eyes and she nodded, slipping off the bedding. I had to keep my hands fisted at my sides in order to keep them off her. She was a temptation. I watched as she quickly pulled on my t-shirt—it hung to mid-thigh. “This good enough?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes,” I groaned, before taking her by the hand and bringing her outside. The last rays of sunlight kissed the horizon, painting the sky in a vibrant tapestry of oranges and purples. A cool breeze rustled through the leaves, carrying the promise of the night to come.

“Kai, what are we doing out here?” Lily asked, her voice a blend of excitement and wonder.

I stood beside Lily, attempting to be a source of comfort amidst the whirlwind of changes she was experiencing. We were in a secluded grove deep within the forest, a

place my family often retreated to for privacy. Tonight, however, it held a different significance, as it marked the beginning of Lily's transformation after our mating.

Lily

My heart raced, senses heightened to a level I'd never imagined. I could hear the rustle of leaves in the distance, the call of a night owl, and even the subtle whispers of the wind as it brushed against my skin. My breath came in shallow gasps as I struggled to adjust to the overwhelming flood of sensations.

Kai turned his piercing golden eyes toward me. "Lily," he said, his voice a soothing melody, "I know it's a lot to take in right now. But you're not alone in this. I'm here with you every step of the way."

I nodded, my eyes widened in awe. "This is ... it's all so unreal," I admitted, my voice a hushed whisper.

Kai stepped closer, his hand reaching out to gently touch my cheek. "Your abilities are a reflection of our bond," he explained. "As we become more connected, your senses will merge with mine, allowing you to experience the world in ways you've never known before."

He guided me to sit on a fallen log, then stood over me magnificently nude. "Let's start with your hearing," he instructed, his voice soothing. "Close your eyes and focus on the sounds around you. Let them come to you, but don't let them overwhelm you."

I followed his instructions, taking a deep breath and closing my eyes. Gradually, I began to filter through the symphony of sounds, homing in on each one individually. The distant chirping of crickets, the swift gurgle of a nearby stream, and even the

faint hum of my own heartbeat.

Kai's hand settled on my shoulder. "Now, let's work on your sense of smell," he said. "Take in a deep breath through your nose and let the scents come to you. Focus on one scent at a time, like picking out individual notes from a melody."

I inhaled deeply, my senses flooding with a plethora of smells I hadn't noticed before. The earthy aroma of the forest floor, the sweet fragrance of blooming wildflowers, and the faint hint of pine carried by the breeze. It was exhilarating.

Kai's voice was a steady presence in the sea of sensations. "Remember, control is key," he advised. "When it gets too much, take a moment to close your eyes, and use the calming techniques I showed you."

I nodded, a sense of gratitude washing over me. With Kai's guidance, I felt a growing sense of confidence at the power I now possessed.

Kai smiled at me, his gaze steady. "I want to share something with you, something that's a part of who I am," he replied. "But before I do, I want you to know that no matter what you see, I'm still the same Kai you've come to care for."

I nodded, my trust in him unwavering. "I believe you, Kai."

He took a step back, his eyes locking onto me. The air shifted around him, charged with otherworldly energy. And then, before my eyes, his body changed. Bones shifted and muscles rippled beneath his skin as he transformed.

A low growl filled the air, and my breath caught in my throat as I watched Kai's form morph into a massive black wolflike creature. His fur glistened in the fading light, his golden eyes piercing the dusk with such intensity. He was a magnificent presence, a being that seemed to belong to the realm of dreams and nightmares.

My heart raced as I stared at the incredible creature before me. Fear and awe mingled within me, an array of emotions I struggled to comprehend. And yet, amidst the overwhelming sensations, there was an undeniable sense of connection. A bond with this creature, with Kai, that went beyond the physical.

Kai's eyes never left mine, and I could feel his reassuring presence even in his transformed state. Slowly, he approached me, his movements controlled. His large head lowered, and he nuzzled me gently, his touch both tender and fierce.

Lily. Kai's voice was a deep rumble in my mind.

How are we able to do this? I thought the words rather than speaking them.

Mate, was his only reply as he nudged my thigh with his snout. You are the first human to ever mate with one of our kind. And I want you to know every facet of my existence.

I smoothed my hand against the coarse fur of his neck, my heart swelling with emotion. I met his golden gaze, my eyes filled with unshed tears. "You're magnificent, Kai," I said aloud. "Terrifying and beautiful all at once."

Kai's wolfish form softened, vulnerability in his gaze. And you, Lily, have entranced me like no other. You've accepted me, and embraced every aspect of who I am.

As the last traces of daylight gave way to the embrace of night, Kai's form shifted back to that of a man. He stood before me once again with tenderness in his eyes.

I stepped closer, my fingers tracing the contours of his face. "I am yours, Kai, in every way," I whispered.

He pulled me into a warm embrace, our hearts beating in unison. "And I'm yours," he

murmured against my lips with a kiss that held the promise of a world uncharted and a love everlasting.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 3:55 pm

K ai

My heart raced as I looked into Lily's eyes, the threads binding us together stronger than ever after she had witnessed my true form. I could feel her presence in my mind, her thoughts like a gentle caress against my consciousness. The barriers that had once separated us were now nothing more than fragments.

I could sense the changes within her, the subtle shifts in her body as my DNA coursed through her veins, bringing with it the healing she so badly needed. The bond we shared was unlike anything I had ever experienced, a merging of souls.

I stared at her, desire coursing through me as I took Lily's hand in mine. "Lily," I said, my voice barely a whisper, "My world is yours now. The good and the bad."

A wealth of anticipation gleamed in her eyes. "When I left Walnut Ridge I wanted to start fresh somewhere. Be my own person for the first time in my life." Her smile lit me on fire. "Then I met you and everything changed. I don't regret a second of it."

I traced the curve of her jaw with my fingertip. "Let's go back inside," I urged, my cock hardening at the prospect of getting her beneath me. "I want to make love to you again."

Lily's cheeks flushed and I found her utterly intoxicating. "Kai," she whispered my name, her voice filled with a raw emotion I could feel echoing within me.

I leaned in, my lips grazing her forehead in a gentle touch. "You're fully healed now. I need you under me, my love," I said, unable to contain the passion riding me. "I

want to claim you properly.”

Lily’s fingers intertwined with mine, her touch a silent affirmation of her feelings. “But you did that, right?” she asked.

“In the way of my kind, I mean,” I explained, a surge of emotion swelling within me, my heart overflowing with a love I hadn’t expected to feel. I guided her back toward the cabin, our steps slow. The air around us thickened with anticipation, the world narrowing to the shared space between us.

As they entered the cabin, the warm glow of the fire was dimming, but I didn’t care. All that mattered was Lily. I closed the door behind me, then turned to her.

“Lily,” I whispered, my voice a low, sensual murmur. Hunger crashed through me as I closed the distance, capturing her lips in a kiss. I craved her. Ached for her. As our bodies pressed together, our breaths and heartbeats merged into a symphony of shared desire.

At her delicate moans, a low growl emanated from deep in my chest. I put one hand on her waist and walked us toward the bed. When the backs of my knees hit the side of the mattress, I allowed myself to fall backward, dragging Lily on top of me. I adjusted her until I had her right where I wanted her, pressed up close, my cock nudging that tempting V between her legs. My hand went to her hair, wrapping a fistful of the dark red tresses, and tugged. The instant our mouths touched, I knew I’d do anything to keep Lily. No one would ever separate us.

Lily...

Her name echoed in my mind just before my mouth crushed against hers, forcing her lips apart. I took possession of the sweet interior. Lily moaned and moved her hips in little circles, teasing and pushing me to the edge of control. I sucked at her lower lip

and probed her mouth, tasting the sweet flavor of her arousal. I inhaled and knew Lily was close. Her scent had changed to a warm, spicy aroma that I would no doubt thirst for the rest of my life.

I pulled my mouth off her and growled, “Any pain?”

“None,” she groaned, then she drifted her lips over my jawline. “Please, Kai,” she begged.

“I’m here,” I assured her, then I caressed my way down her neck, nipping at the vein I found there. She breathed my name and it spurred me on. I let my tongue tease the delicate skin behind her ear. But another part of her body called to me.

I pulled my mouth free, then took hold of the hem of the shirt she’d thrown on. “Off with it,” I ordered. When she sat up, her soft wet pussy pressed against my cock, I was enthralled. Couldn’t move, could barely breathe as I watched her slowly lift the fabric, revealing her belly and ribcage. Bruises and cuts gone. All that remained was Lily’s silky ivory flesh. “My beautiful Lily,” I praised.

She never spoke, merely tossed the shirt over her head and let it fall to the floor. I knew I’d been given the greatest of gifts. I would never let her go. Never let her regret choosing me. Choosing our bond. I cupped both precious swells, then lifted my head and nibbled at her, my need for her uncontrollable. I moved my arms around her, mashing my face against the round orbs. My legs spread wide and I pushed my aching erection against the plush cushion of her ass, letting her feel what she did to me. Lily writhed shamelessly atop me, her moans turning to cries of need.

I hummed my approval, then released her nipple and let my hands skate down her body until I reached her mound. I cupped her there, enjoying the feel of her juices against my palm. Fuck, I was done being gentle. The predator in me was ready to take her. Mark her. I needed my scent covering her. Inside of her.

When her pussy slid over my cock, I bit back a curse. She was already so hot and wet. It wasn't enough. I wanted her begging. My Yucilon needed it. Craved it.

The fingers of her right hand reached out and stroked slowly over my pectorals, back and forth, her green eyes drawn by some imaginary force to the path her hand made over my body. As her fingers drifted lower over my abdomen, I flung my head back with a groan. Desire and pain mingled, pushing me precariously close to the edge. I was strung too tight. I forced myself to concentrate. I couldn't afford to lose control. Lily was too new to my world. She wouldn't understand if I became too aggressive. When Lily dipped her head and placed a gentle kiss on my left nipple, then nipped it with her teeth, a dark haze of lust engulfed me.

I took hold of a lock of hair and tugged until she was staring down at me. Her surprise reminded me that she was human. Had no idea how close I was. "Hands and knees, Lily," I murmured.

Shock registered in her pretty gaze. "Is this the claiming you talked about?"

"Yes," was all I could manage. My animal was in control now. I patted the bed beside me. "I won't hurt you," I vowed, hoping it was true.

"I trust you, Kai." She licked her lips, then moved off me, going to her hands and knees beside me. "Like this?"

I couldn't breathe, let alone speak. I sat up, then moved behind her. Her sex glistened from her arousal. I inhaled, enjoying the sweet scent. I nudged her legs wider, then dipped my finger inside her. "Are you sore?"

"No, oh, God," Lily moaned as she flung her head back and gripped the blanket with both fists.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I bit out. My mouth watered for a taste of her, right between her supple thighs. Using my thumbs, I spread her open, exposing her clitoris. I leaned forward and sucked it into my greedy mouth. Fuck, I was starving for her. My tongue dipped inside, tasting her tight channel. Lily cried out and pushed her hips against my face. I gave her what she needed, teasing her and flicking my tongue over and around her clit. Again and again, I played with her. When her thighs began to quiver and her body bowed, I suckled her clit once more, then watched in awe as she screamed my name and came for me.

I lifted my head from between her thighs, then positioned my cock at her entrance. “Now, Lily.”

She flung her head back. “Yes, please, Kai!”

I slid my dick in a few inches, careful not to hurt her, but Lily surprised me when she slammed her ass against my hips, seating my cock deep inside her tight sheath. “Fuck,” I growled.

“I need it,” she whimpered.

I lowered my body over hers, caging her in, then began a slow, easy rhythm, allowing her to get used to the feel of me deep inside her body. We fit perfectly. “Mate,” I whispered against her neck.

“Yes,” Lily agreed, her voice husky from her cries of pleasure. She turned her head and stared at me. Her eyes full of heat. Her hair soaked in sweat.

“So, damn pretty,” I praised, moving one hand to her hip and holding her still while I made love to her. I ached to draw out our pleasure, measure by measure. Make her aware of each stroke of skin, each time her body clutched around me. As if we’d done it a thousand times.

My hands found their way over her silken body, like a blind man committing each piece of her to memory. When I found the tiny nub of her desire, Lily breathed out my name. It was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. As I pushed her closer to the edge, her movements became more and more frantic, driving my cock farther into her dripping pussy. Soon there was no separating us. Without warning, Lily flew apart. Her pussy clutched me in a tight fist as her fingers dug into the bedding. When her thighs clenched tight, I lost what little control I had left.

I thrust hard, pumping faster, deeper. Wrapping my arm around her lower belly to keep her still, I pulled all the way out, then slammed deep again. Over and over, my hips nearly shoving hers to the mattress until my balls drew up tight, and I stiffened.

I lowered my head to Lily's shoulder, my teeth elongating, and I bit down hard. Blood flowed over my teeth and tongue. Lily moaned and slammed her ass backward, then screamed as yet another climax sent her careening over that imaginary cliff. The slick walls of her pussy gripped me. I sealed the wound with a swipe of my tongue, then the familiar sensation of my cock swelling began, locking us together, and it caused Lily to cry out my name. I allowed my teeth to retract. Damn, she tasted sweet. As I placed little kisses along her spine, intent on soothing her, I swelled further, until a knot formed at the base of my cock. I wrapped my body around hers and joined her, Lily's tight, slick passage milking me dry.

I kept her beneath me another moment, allowing the swelling to ease. When it was safe, I pulled my cock free and sat back on my haunches. Lily whimpered and collapsed against the mattress.

"What was that?" she asked in a breathless whimper. "I've never ... wow."

"It's the mating," I explained, laying down beside her and stroking the sweat-soaked hair from her face. With her pretty green eyes on mine, I continued. "A knot forms at the base, locking us together."

“Why didn’t that happen the first time?”

“I held back,” I replied. “You were injured, Lily. I didn’t want to chance hurting you until you were fully healed.”

“Oh.” She smiled at me, sending my heart racing with her beauty. “So, now it’s official official.”

I chuckled. “It was official official before. But now it’s possible for you to...” Shit, I hadn’t even realized what I’d done.

Her head is tilted to one side. “To what?”

“Uh, I wasn’t fully aware.” Or was I? “Damn it, maybe I was, it’s just—”

“Kai,” she warned, “you’re starting to scare me.”

“The knot is different for a Yucilon . I can make love to you without the knot, but I can’t get you pregnant. With the knot...”

She stiffened beside me, her gaze widening. “You tried to get me pregnant?” she asked, leaving the bed and slipping into my shirt, covering herself from my view. “We just mated and you want to get me pregnant already?”

“Not intentionally,” I groused, sitting up. “It’s ... it’s instinctive, Lily.”

She bit her lip, her arms wrapping around her body. “But you came the first time. I know you did.”

“Yes.” I got off the bed and moved toward her, grateful when she didn’t back away from me. “The thing is, without the knot forming, there’s no chance of you ending up

with child.”

“Okay, okay,” she said, pacing the room. “I’m an adult so it’s as much on me as you. It isn’t like I insisted on protection. And I’m not on the pill because, well, it always made me feel horrible, so—”

“Lily, breathe, my love,” I urged her. I could see her spiraling and it was the last thing I wanted.

“Right,” she mumbled, taking a deep breath. “So, how does this knot thing work?”

Never in all my years did I think I’d be having a birds-and-bees conversation with my very-human mate. “Many animals are similar to us. A knot forms to seal the male inside the female. But with a Yucilon , the knot is a thousand times more—”

“Potent,” she helpfully supplied, crossing her arms in front of her. “You kicked it up a notch.”

“I did, but I didn’t do it on purpose. I wasn’t trying to trap you or deceive you.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I think the animal in me chose for us both.”

“To ensure the continuation of your race,” Lily said, her voice steady. She stared down at herself, a hand pressing to her belly. “A baby,” she whispered, as if in awe of the idea.

I went to her, taking her into my arms and holding her close. “I wouldn’t be upset by that. Would you?”

Her arms wound around my middle, and she nuzzled her nose to my chest. “No. I don’t think I would.”

I pulled back a few inches. “Are you angry?”

“No,” she grudgingly admitted, “just trying to take it all in, I guess.”

Something else struck me. “I should probably warn you about going into heat.”

Lily’s face reddened. “Heat?”

“Yeah.” I licked my lips, my dick hardening all over again. “It might not happen for you, but for one of my kind it lasts about two weeks,” I explained. “Your sex drive kicks into overdrive. You won’t be able to get enough. Until it’s over, of course.” Damn, I wanted to experience that with her. Just the thought had me ready to jump her.

She quickly glanced away, as if finding the subject embarrassing. “That’s very ... I don’t know what to say to that.”

My phone rang and I cursed the damn thing. “I need to get that. It could be about Trakker.”

“Of course.” She stepped out of my arms, then sat on the end of the bed. I picked up my cell and checked the screen. “Wyatt,” I muttered as I answered. “What’s going on?”

Lily

I was freaking out a little as I watched Kai. The warmth of our shared passion still lingered in the air, but my thoughts were consumed by the revelation Kai had dropped like an unexpected bombshell. I looked at him, my eyes narrowing in anger.

And love.

Kai's gaze shifted from the phone in his hand to my face. Oh, he was feeling all sorts of self-reproach. It was clear in his expression. "We'll leave now," he said into the phone.

My fingers clenched into fists as I tried to process what had just happened. He'd kept something from me. Intentional or not, I still felt betrayed.

Kai sat down beside me, his hand reaching out to gently cup my cheek. "I understand your anger, Lily. And I take full responsibility for not telling you," he said, his eyes locked onto mine. My anger was tempered by the raw vulnerability in his gaze. I sighed, as anger gave way to a sense of unease. "I don't truly think you were trying to trick me," I admitted. "I just never imagined being a mother before."

Kai nodded, then began playing with a lock of my hair. "Honestly, I never imagined being a father," he admitted. "But pregnant or not, we'll handle it together."

Just as the tension between us began to ease, Kai's gaze landed on his phone, his expression shifting from concern to urgency. "We're needed at the house," he said, his voice tense. "Wyatt has news about Trakker."

My eyes softened as I realized the gravity of the situation. "Of course. Family comes first."

"You are my family." He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead, then got up and put his clothes on.

I took a deep breath. My mind was still reeling from the news of the potential pregnancy, but I knew that we had other pressing matters to attend to.

I got to my feet and followed suit. Soon we were out the door and on our way back to the house. As I glanced over at Kai, seeing the worry on his face, I knew that the path ahead wouldn't be easy, that our life would be fraught with trials, the likes of which I couldn't even fathom. But despite the challenges I would be there for Kai. As his mate. His equal. Through the good and the bad.

Lily

The atmosphere inside the house was somber as we walked in, hand in hand, our bond no doubt evident in our demeanor. We entered the kitchen to find the rest of Kai's brothers gathered around the table, their expressions tense. All eyes turned toward us, the room falling into an expectant hush.

Kai's gaze locked onto Wyatt's. "What's the news about Trakker?" Kai's voice was a low, controlled rumble, revealing his tightly wound frustration.

Wyatt's gaze was heavy as he looked at his brother, his expression carrying the weight of the news he was about to deliver. "Trakker is being held in a facility that is as secure as a fucking prison," he said, his words heavy with a sense of defeat. "Patterson has taken every precaution to ensure that breaking in is nearly impossible. It would take an army to even attempt it."

My heart sank at the news. I knew the torment Trakker must be enduring at the hands of Patterson. My mind filled with images of metal instruments meant to cause pain and induce fear.

As the brothers began to discuss possible strategies, I listened intently. Suddenly all their attention turned toward me. A sudden self-consciousness swept over me, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "What?" Oh, God, could they somehow sense the completed mating between me and Kai? Was our bond so obvious that it was evident to those with preternatural abilities?

Easy, my love. They are happy for us. That's all.

I quirked a brow at Kai. We shared a mind link, but could he read my every thought so easily?

Your unease pushed me to slip inside your mind. Don't worry, I'm not reading your every thought. He winked at me, his hand tightening around mine, his stance protective as he stepped forward. "Stop staring," he commanded, his voice carrying the weight of authority. The warning in his golden eyes sent tendrils of heat through me as he addressed his brothers. "You're making her uncomfortable."

Creeg was the first to smile. "Congratulations," he offered, his voice filled with warmth.

"Thank you," I replied, as some of the embarrassment ebbed.

"Finally, another female around here," Fostine chimed in. "You can help me keep these idiots in line."

I laughed. "I'm happy to try."

The others expressed their sentiments as well. Wyatt was the only one who didn't speak up, and I wondered about it. I decided to ask Kai about it later.

"You okay?" Kai asked aloud, his protective stance surrounding me like a shield. I nodded in agreement, grateful for his support and the clear boundary he was establishing between his brothers and us.

"Back to the problem here. We need a blueprint of the place. And we'll need to find out how many people he has guarding it."

"There are cameras everywhere, Wyatt." Miggs groaned. "The only way we're getting in is to cut the power, and a place this big definitely has a backup generator."

Fostine cleared her throat. “We need a list of people working for Patterson. We need someone on the inside.”

Lucian nodded. “Like Ricky,” he replied. “Good idea.”

“Miggs, think you can work some magic?” Wyatt asked, watching his brother with a gleam of hope.

“I’ll do some digging,” Miggs answered, his expression grim as he left the kitchen.

Kai tilted his head as he watched Wyatt. “We know for sure Trakker is there?”

“Put it this way,” he muttered, “if I was a crazy scientist and wanted to make sure my latest guinea pig didn’t escape, this is the place I’d pick.”

As the family meeting ended, everyone left. There wasn’t anything anyone could do until Miggs was finished with his search. I worried that the wait would drive us all mad. Creeg offered to make dinner, while Fostine headed for the workout room. Cage chose to go for a run, while Lucian shuffled off to his room. Still attempting to recover his strength after two years as Patterson’s captive, I assumed. It would be a long road for him. Yucilon or not.

When we were alone again, Kai turned to me, his eyes filled with a healthy dose of regret. “I’m sorry about all this,” he murmured, his fists clenched at his sides. “I wanted our first day as mates to go a bit differently.”

My lips curved into a small smile as I looked into his eyes, finding solace in his presence. “If I’m to be your mate then I’m all in, Kai. No half measures. Your problems are mine. Mine are yours. That’s how it’s meant to be.”

“Mine are a tad bigger than yours,” he admitted with a grin, pulling me into his arms and nuzzling the top of my head with his chin.

I settled against him. “Ha, you’re forgetting what you said about me going into heat. I’m bound to drive you mad.”

Kai winced and glanced down at me. “Yeah, see, that’s not exactly a turn-off for a Yucilon , my love.”

I decided to tease him a bit. “No?”

“No,” he swiftly replied. “Think big bad wolf, and you’re the little redhead he’s about to devour.”

My face heated to about a hundred degrees. “Oh.”

He laughed. “Damn, I can’t wait.”

In a swift and mesmerizing shift, the air around us seemed charged with an electrifying energy. Kai’s arms flexed and rippled. I was reminded of the moment outside the cabin when he’d shown me his true form and transformed into a magnificent black wolf-like creature, his size and power awe-inspiring. His fur gleamed in the moonlight, each strand shimmering with an otherworldly intensity. His eyes a brilliant golden shade, piercing and locked onto me with a passion that had shot through my very soul. The transformation had been both beautiful and primal, a display of his true nature that had left me breathless. And I wanted to witness it again. Ached to transform with him. Run alongside him through the forest, as mates were meant to do.

But what struck me the most was the hunger that radiated from him now. The bond between us was only intensified by our mating—a fierce need that was now reflected in his wild eyes. My senses were heightened, my awareness focused solely on my mate.

Every movement Kai made was deliberate, his powerful muscles flexing beneath his

shirt. He exuded an aura of masculinity, as if his animal instincts were driving him even now.

Kai dripped with a raw magnetism that drew me in, my heart racing in response to his unbridled hunger. I could feel the intensity of his longing reverberating through the bond we shared. It was as if the barriers between us had dissolved, leaving only a raw and unfiltered connection.

My breath caught in my throat as his warm breath skated against my skin, his body radiating a heat that enveloped me. The sensations were overwhelming. I met his gaze, my own eyes no doubt reflecting a deep yearning that matched his. "I love you," I breathed out, needing to say the words, needing him to hear them.

He quirked one regal brow. "Even though my animal tricked you with the claiming?"

As I looked into Kai's golden eyes, I saw a flicker of uncertainty there, a vulnerability that tugged at my heartstrings. I could sense the weight of his doubts, the haunting shadows that lingered in the corners of his mind. Affection and understanding swelled within me, too powerful to contain any longer.

Without hesitation, I reached up and gently cupped his cheek. "Kai," I urged, "I need you to know something. No matter what's happened, no matter the mistakes or the misunderstandings, my feelings for you have never wavered."

Kai searched my gaze. A feathery brush against my mind told me he was there, the thread between us as strong as ever. "If I could change it I would," he murmured, his voice tinged with regret. "I'd explain better, help you to understand our ways."

My thumb brushed against his cheek. "I know," I admitted, my voice steady.

His arms tightened around me. "I'm not sure I deserve you."

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to shift. I don’t know if I’ll get pregnant. All that’s certain is that we belong together.” Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I held him close, the weight of our shared emotions filling the space between us. In that moment, all doubts, all fears were swept away by the intensity of our love.

Kai’s fingers tightened around my waist, his touch sending shivers through my body. He held my gaze with an intensity that set my heart racing, a fire burning in his golden eyes that consumed everything else around us. “Lily,” he said, his husky voice filled with raw hunger, “From this world to the next, there’s no place, no existence, where my love for you won’t burn as fiercely as it does now.”

“Kai...” His promise seared clear through me, igniting a fire within that matched his. I could feel his desire, his need for me, radiating from every inch of his being. It left me breathless.

His hands traced the curves of my body, his touch left a trail of sensations that sent my senses reeling. “You’re mine,” he whispered, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear, his breath hot and tingling against my skin. “Every part of you, body and soul, belongs to me. And I’ll protect you, cherish you, and love you with a ferocity that knows no bounds.”

My heart pounded in my chest, the heat of his words seeping into my very core. I met the desire in his gaze with my own. My fingers trailed over the contours of his chest, feeling the power that lay beneath his skin.

“I’m yours. In every way,” I breathed.

With a fierce growl, Kai claimed my lips in a kiss that was a symphony of raw animalistic need. His mouth was hot against mine, his kiss possessing a fervor that sent my senses spiraling. Our bodies pressed together, his strength enveloping me, our connection a blaze of electricity.

The world fell away and nothing else existed. Tomorrow wasn't promised to anyone, but I would take what I could from the present, and relish every moment spent in Kai's arms.

The End