



Mine to Claim (The Shifterverse #1)

Author: *JP Sina*

Category: Fantasy

Description: If a man hits you once, hell do it again.

Or so my best friend tells me. After getting my heart broken, I'm literally at my worst when she saves me from the side of the road, but going home with her meant more than I'd ever thought. She has secrets, and it's finally time for her to spill. My best friend is a werewolf. That's fine. Totally fine. But the real bombshell? Now I've got a secret of my own.

I'm her dad's mate.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Lila

My best friend yanked out her Louis Vuitton suitcase—worth more than my life—slamming it down with a bang that made the walls tremble. With her petite build, you never would have guessed she not only played volleyball, but dominated it. She could jump higher than a kangaroo and was known as the spike queen. One hit from her and she'd score. Not only was she the prettiest woman on campus with her short brown pixie cut and bubbly personality, but she was good enough to go pro. Not that she'd ever pursue it. Whenever I brought it up, she shrugged it off and claimed her life was “written in the stars”.

Whatever that meant.

“I have a date with Elijah tonight, Lila! I'll pack now and I'll be good to leave right after,” she half-said, half-murmured to herself. Elijah was her latest conquest. He was nothing more than a side piece, and from what I last recalled, supposed to be old news. Sleeping around was never something I could do. I'd been with my boyfriend for a year and still hadn't slept with him. Sometimes I wish I was more like Dani in that regard. While she had plans of fitting dick and packing in one day, all I really cared about was figuring out how morally grey the main character was in *Weeping for the Wendigo: A Dark Monster Romance* before my date with Parker.

“If there's one thing I know, it's that no one can beat common sense into you, but you. So I'm not even going to bother. I don't know why you're going to see him. Didn't you already drop him?” I asked, placing my bookmark gently between the pages to save my spot. She gasped, dropping the pile of clothes she'd gathered, and spun around to face me. She was already pretending to clutch her pearls.

“Hey, I’m here for a good time, not a long one.” She grinned. I threw my hands up in submission. “Besides... Elijah’s great. The sex is good too, but he’s missing a kn—something I desperately need. And who am I to deny him one last ride?” She shrugged as she sifted through the tower of clothes on her bed.

She’d been my assigned roommate freshman year. Not only is she the sweetest person I know, but she’s got a feisty temper to match. piss her off and you’ll see a side of her many didn’t get to. It would give anyone nightmares. What further cemented our friendship was the day we had to rush out for practice. If not for my full-ride scholarship to play volleyball, I never could have afforded to attend UW. Three years later, we were practically attached at the hip. She liked to call it fate, while I called it luck.

She flitted back and forth from her closet to her bed, throwing articles of clothing into her suitcase and some onto the never-ending pile. Even though she comes from money, she’s never made me feel like anything less because of what I lacked. Money, a family, literally everything I could possibly need. I could spend the rest of my life working without a single break, and I’d never be able to make the value of her wardrobe alone. It’s hard to find someone who can accept you for who you are and not base your value off what you can or can’t bring to the table. And Dani? She couldn’t give two shits that I only had a few bucks to my name. She’s my soulmate. In a platonic, best friend way. That or I’m just used to really shitty people.

“I really wish I could take you home with me,” she huffed as she shoved socks and intimates in wherever they fit.

We were done with classes and now had two weeks off for spring break. Most students left campus to go home, Dani included. I liked to stay because my scholarship covered my dorm and meals. It was hard passing up free food. On top of that, I didn’t have anywhere to go. No family that claimed me and no home to call my own. Okay, that was a lie. I still had my aunt, but I’d rather die than visit her and

whoever was slumming it at her place. I'd like to avoid whatever new creepy "uncle" she'd introduce me to.

The last time I talked about going with Dani to finally meet her family, my boyfriend, Parker, got really upset. He told me I couldn't go. I wanted to avoid a fight, so I gave in. He lived nearby and wanted me close. And it was no secret that Dani and Parker didn't get along. Thankfully, they only ran into each other when he came by. He'd been distant recently, and I'd decided to give him my full focus for the break. I was hoping a little bit of alone time would give us time to patch things up. I'd also been thinking I might be ready to have sex with him. I hadn't talked to Dani about this because she hates him. I was hoping we could work through our problems and grow closer before Dani came back. It's almost like a sixth sense, the way she's able to tell when something's wrong with me.

"I know, but I'm sure you already have plans when you get back. You won't even miss me," I teased in a way to comfort her. She sighed and gave me the "I know what you're up to look."

"Why yes, I do. There's someone I'm supposed to meet up with. We linked up over Christmas break after I swiped right on Myth— I mean Tinder. Nothing's happened between us. I try to avoid seeing anyone seriously back home, but he messaged me last night, and I'm going to explore that. He's giving big dick energy, if you know what I mean?"

"That's... wow. How about we be serious for a second? Is he hubby material?" If Dani was thinking of seeing someone, this was a big deal.

"I wouldn't say that, but he's someone I'd like to get to know."

"More stars talk?" I teased.

“Mm... yeah. That. I mean, can you blame him?” She waved at her body, and although she came off as cocky, I knew better. It was just one of many attempts to avoid talking about her family’s weird belief system. But I wouldn’t press. I’m not that friend. If she wanted to talk about it, she’d come to me.

“I seriously cannot with you,” I groaned and rolled my eyes. “I guess it’s good to be confident. And you? Everyone knows you’re hot.” Sighing, I slumped back against the chaise she had in front of our shared window.

“Look. All I’m saying is if he has what I’m looking for, I’ll give him a chance. Maybe I’ll have a spring break fling and fall madly in love. You never know. He could be my soul mate for two weeks and I’ll come back refreshed and ready to take on my last semester.” She lifted a strapless black dress that had chunks of material missing and held it against her body.

“That looks like a piece of floss, but I’m not going to let that distract me. What have I told you? There’s no such thing as soul mates. You find someone and you choose to make it work. This thing called fate is nothing more than a myth. There is no man out there that will love you no matter what. You need to be realistic and find someone who is willing to put in the work for you. And you have to be committed to doing the same.” It was one of the few topics we disagreed on and the words lodged in my chest like splinters. I didn’t know if it was due to a sense of protectiveness I felt for her or something deeper. It could be one of my many flaws.

“Let’s not get into that. Would you help me figure out what to wear?” she whined as she threw the floss aside. Hopping off the chaise, I walked to the massive wardrobe every student got for their clothes.

“Wait. Aren’t you seeing what’s-his-face today?” she threw over her shoulder as she dug so deep into her clothes, the only visible part of her was waist down. I cackled as I attempted to clear some off of her.

“You know his name, and yes, I am, but don’t worry.” I already knew where she was going with this.

“You don’t even need to ask. I got your back, babe. Try this one,” she offered a dress after yanking herself from the void of no return. I didn’t miss the part where she completely ignored the bit about Parker.

“Mm-hmm. Not to be ungrateful, but uh, that looks like a wolf went through it and tore it up with their teeth. Where’s the rest of it? Where would I even wear this?” She flicked her hair and threw it on top of the rest.

“You’re right. That sounds ungrateful.” Just when I thought she’d agree with me. I should have known better.

“I love you, but I need my body to be covered.”

“And I’ve told you multiple times. What’s mine is yours. And the wolf shredded clothing? This is Moonlight. She’s famous back home. It’ll cling to your body and your drool-worthy curves like a hug. See if there’s anything that catches your eye.”

Ugh. Why is being a woman so hard?

I wish I could just wake up already dressed every day.

Who am I kidding?

She had cute clothes, but I grew up eating my aunt’s leftovers—I was used to taking what I could get. Designer clothes? Just another luxury I couldn’t afford.

As I rummaged, I found more clothes I wouldn’t wear, but paused when I saw it. The baby blue material was soft with white floral print. Lifting it, I held it against my

body. It would fall halfway down my thighs. Hopefully, my fat ass wouldn't raise it too much, but I loved it. It was so pretty.

Do I deserve to even want this? To have it?

"Oh. My. Goddess. That looks so good on you!" Dani was the best hype woman and I hated how easily she could make me tear up. Making her own versions of saying was her thing. Goddess. Alpha-hole. Leaving it to the stars. The list went on.

"Stop it. You're making it weird." My attempt to deflect her praise didn't go unnoticed. She put her hand on her hip and leveled me with a look that tipped me off. She was about to go on another 'love yourself' tangent.

"Lils. I love you to death, but I will curb stomp you if you don't start being kind to yourself." The sheer look of wrath made me laugh out loud.

"My dad bought it for me, but I've never worn it. Obviously, you already know it isn't my style, but sis... it's as if it was custom made for you. It's yours." My phone dinged.

"You know I can't just take it. Besides, it would be weird to wear something your dad specifically bought for you. I'm fine with borrowing it, but it's coming right back to you." She'd already given me enough. Checking the notification, I saw Parker's name again.

"I'm not doing this with you. What's mine is yours. Including my dad, but ew. Not like that. And my Goddess, it's like shit-face can tell when someone's trying to make you feel good about yourself," Dani exclaimed, clearly irritated.

"Hey now," I said defensively.

She sighed.

“Look, babe. I love you. Thank you and thank you daddy Grayson for the dress.”

“Fuck you’re gross!” She cringed and turned back to her wardrobe.

Tapping the notification, I unlocked my phone and read his text. He was a few minutes away and wanted me outside. I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. I don’t know what happened, but in the last few months the distance has only grown between us. Running my fingers through my loose curls, I threw my phone down and undressed. With the dress on, I walked to the wall mirror and checked my ass. Thankfully, it didn’t ride up too much. Facing forward, I pulled at the hem as I eyed myself. I always felt prettier in new clothes. It sounded superficial, but it was true.

Walking over to Dani, I wrapped my arms around her waist and whatever she was holding.

“I appreciate you. Not only did you save me a trip to town and money, but you made me look pretty.” Releasing her, I stepped back.

“You always do, bish. Is he at least picking you up this time?” she sniffed. I knew she was just being protective and I loved her for it.

“Yes, Mom,” I teased.

“And flowers?” She was pulling out her checklist. Not all of us had a loving dad like she did, but I adored that he raised her to expect only the best. You had to be loved to demand it.

I didn’t have to answer. We both know he didn’t. She no longer pretended that she

didn't like him, but her expectations for any man who wanted to be with me didn't drop. Women were to be wined and dined. In her words, I "only deserved the best." And Parker? He didn't come close.

"Are you done packing yet?" Eyeballing her overflowing suitcases. I wasn't being inconspicuous with the subject change, but this wasn't new. Dropping to the floor on her stomach, she reached under the bed, and pulled out another brick of a suitcase. Shaking my head as she placed it flat on the bed before getting up, she flashed me her pearly whites.

"Nope, but if I pack wisely, I'll only have to take 3. All of this," she said as she ran her hands down her body, "takes time and lots of work. Sadly, it doesn't come natural."

"You're so full of shit, but you keep telling yourself that." Another ding from my phone alerted me to Parker being outside.

"He isn't even coming to the door?" Her lips curled in disgust.

"If you're gone by the time I get back, I love you and hope you enjoy your break. Try not to get kidnapped." I held my arms open, and she stomped into the hug.

"That was one time!" she whined. I choked up as we broke apart. I was so used to her being there all the time. She was the sister I never had and this place would feel empty without her.

"Mm... if it happens once?" I started the line she chanted like a mantra.

"It'll happen again," she grumbled. I hummed happily, and she rolled her eyes.

"Try to relax?" She snorted at my words.

“Please. Without practice or classes to fill my time, I plan on being bent in half while I’m free of responsibilities. The clock is ticking on my freedom. I’m going to paint the city. I just wish you didn’t have T-bag to hold you down,” she sighed, but couldn’t hide the emotion in her eyes.

“You’re so ugly when you cry.” I went in for another hug and patted her on the back.

“Going to miss you, bitch,” she whined. Pulling away, she dropped to the bed.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“I hope you guys have fun, or whatever,” she sniffled.

“You don’t mean it, but thanks,” I laughed.

She nodded and then shrugged.

“You’re right. I don’t. Not even a little bit, but I hope you have a good time. I hope he falls, hits his head on the sidewalk, and bleeds out.” My jaw dropped.

“Dani!” I gasped. She stuck out her tongue and jumped. Once again dodging my attempt at slapping her.

“You told me not to lie!” She threw over her shoulder before running out of our room.

“I said you don’t mean it. Not describe how you’d like him to die!” I yelled after her.

“Oh, trust me. That’s not how I want him to die. I can think of a few ways an alpha-hole like him can meet his end...” she mumbled from the other room.

“Weirdo,” I whispered under my breath.

“I heard that!” she yelled. I don’t know how she did; I literally whispered, but she’s always had insanely good hearing. My phone dinged as another notification popped up. Parker was impatient, and nerves swirled as I rushed out. Dani sat on the armrest of our sectional.

“Wear the wedges by the door. The black strapped ones.”

“Thanks, boo.” I blew her a kiss as I passed. Leaning against the wall, I maneuvered them on one by one. Then opened the door.

“Wrap it up! You don’t want the demon’s spawn in your life forever,” Dani called out before I could close it.

Shaking my head, I took the stairs two by two and miraculously made it with both ankles intact. Rushing the hallway before taking the side exit, I ran out to his Honda Civic. I heard Dani’s voice in my head telling me to wait so he could get out and open the door, but I brushed the thought away. Opening it, I hopped in and bit my lip shyly as I smoothed the material on my lap. When I peaked up at him, he wasn’t even looking at me. His eyes were glued to his screen.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

It's fine. My boyfriend doesn't need to give me his undivided attention as soon as I hop into the car. It's not like my scent drives him mad or he wants to mark me the minute he knows I'm in the vicinity.

Parker was busy tapping away on his screen. Balling my fist, I tried to be patient, but as the time on the dash went from 3:30 to 3:50 without so much as a word, I started to lose my mind. Sneaking a glance his way, I checked him out. Blonde hair fell over his eyes. He was wearing a white t-shirt and sweats. He wasn't dressed for going out and I wondered if he'd forgotten.

Chewing on my lip, I remind myself that he's a real life man and not a monster from my romance books. Men in the non-fictional world don't obsess over you like the morally gray fictional ones do. I have to stop holding Parker to that standard, every man really, or I'll always be disappointed. And I'm not the main character. Never could fit the bill. Dani on the other hand, she was made for the role.

Sighing, I slumped back against the seat. What I'm not going to do is compare myself to my best friend. It's not her fault she's perfect. And it's not like this is my first time actually thinking I look pretty or anything. I groaned internally. There I go being fucking self-centered again. Why do I always sound like a 'pick me' girl? Biting too deep, the metallic tang I was all too familiar with filled my mouth. A tear sprinted down my cheek as I faced the window and pretended I was looking outside. Everything was a blur and I hated that I'd thrown myself down depression lane.

Is it so wrong to want to be told that I look pretty?

I was so angry I shook with laughter, rubbing my forearm against my face as I leaned

into the glass, hoping to hide the fact that I was losing it. He threw his phone on the center console, the sharp noise making me jump. I can't look at him right now. He might notice my eyes are red. But of course, he didn't. The silence stretched as he pulled away from the curb and onto the main road. I didn't know if my worries were valid or if I just expected too much.

"Where are we even going?" His words cut through my self-deprecating thoughts and I scrambled to answer. Folding my hands over my lap, I fiddled.

"Smoke and Cedar. It's this place that's gone viral recently. I wanted to check it out."

He picked up his phone and texted while he drove. Strike one. Once again, I'm put on the back burner while he writes someone who is obviously more important than me. I wanted to address this, but at the same time, I really wanted to have a good night. And while I knew I should be able to voice my opinion, I also knew he wasn't really good at hearing me without taking it as a personal attack. So I swallowed it like every other time.

"I think you'll really like—"

"Can you not talk right now? I've really got to take this and I'm already multi-tasking. I can't drive, text, and figure out what you're on about. Just give me a minute." My jaw dropped at his sharp tone. Strike two. Someone's got him riled up and he's lashing out at me. Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly and faced the front. "A minute" turns into several and by the time he was done, we'd arrived.

He was still on his phone as the valet came to his car. I grabbed the ticket and thanked them before waiting for Parker to get out. Shaking my head, I walked to the entrance and the doors opened. I pulled out my ID and handed it to the security guard. We took the elevator in silence and when we stepped off, I gasped. The first thing I saw was the night sky and moonlight lighting Mount Rainier. We walked until we hit

the bar and on our right was a smiling waitress.

“Good evening! Can I get the name under the reservation?” She was a brunette with pale skin who was dressed professionally. And she was all smiles even though my date wasn’t dressed how he should be.

“Lila,” I said as I straightened. She checked her screen and nodded before looking up.

“Perfect. Please follow me.” As she led us into the main area, I couldn’t help but be flabbergasted. The oversized windows revealed a breathtaking view—city lights twinkling below, and in the distance, Mount Rainier towered over the landscape. The treetops made it feel like we were nestled in the woods rather than in the middle of a city. My boyfriend slumped in his seat, staring at his phone, so I pulled mine out too. Dani’s a bad influence. I’m having expectations I’ve never had before. The restaurant was everything I thought it would be and his inability to be present became harder to ignore. Cute little bronze lights that looked like mushrooms decorated the table. I didn’t bother picking up the menu—I knew what I wanted.

“Can I get you anything to drink while you decide on what you’d like to eat?” she asked.

“Yes, can I get a latte, please?” She nodded.

“It comes with cookies. Do you want that with the latte, or would you prefer I deliver it after your meal?” Her customer service is amazing.

“At the same time. Thank you. And water for him.”

“Sounds good! I’ll—”

“Did I say I wanted water? Give me a coke.” Parker demanded. The waitress looked

surprised for a second and then fixed her features.

“I’ll get this started for you and your waiter will be with you shortly.” She turned on her heel and disappeared.

“Do you have to be so rude?” I whispered.

“This was your idea. I didn’t want to be here.” His comments caught me off guard.

“Don’t direct your anger at me.” Before he could say a word, I turned away. Staring out the window, I sighed. The man was an ass, but if I told myself the pretty view and the smell of good food made it bearable enough times, I’d believe it.

A male waiter returned with our drinks and a platter of treats.

“Mm. Thanks so much! I’m ready to order.” I was so excited I felt like doing a little dance, but I knew Parker hated it when I did that.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

“I’d like to start with your french onion soup and for my entree, I’d like a potato wrapped Alaskan halibut. I know it comes with creamed leeks, but can you add baked asparagus? For dessert, I’d like the chocolate decadence, please!”

“Sounds good. And for you, sir?” The tanned skinned waiter with brown hair asked as he turned to Parker. But he was back on his phone.

“He’ll get the Filet Mignon. Thank you.”

Parker hates fish, and funnily enough, the Filet Mignon was the cheapest steak on the menu. I saved for this date and I’m going to enjoy my food. Before the waiter left, I

requested that he bring everything out together. As he walked away I realized that I'd talked to a stranger more than my boyfriend tonight. I sipped my latte and grabbed one of the cookies on the platter in front of me. When I bit into the chocolate goodness, I moaned. So. good. Finally, he set down his phone, and looked at me for what felt like the first time since he picked me up.

Blue eyes filled with irritation and boredom cut through me. Clenching my jaw to stop the tremble I feel setting in, I hardened my heart and waited for him to go in on me. His gaze lowered and his eyebrow arched as if I'd somehow caught him off guard. Pathetic hope bloomed and I was disgusted with myself for how desperate I'd become for any ounce of his attention. When his focus returned to my face, I knew he could see my nerves, but made no attempt to comfort me.

"You look good, doll. I'm managing a project and can't get the team to get along." Finally, he looked around before glancing at the time on his phone.

"Thanks," I mumbled. He sighed impatiently as I took another sip.

"What's taking them so long? We've been waiting." Lowering my cup, I held in the retort that's dying to get out. I'm the one who has been waiting. As if the waiter heard my inner turmoil, he appeared out of thin air with our food. There was so much that the waitress from earlier was assisting him. When everything was placed in front of us, my mouth was officially watering.

"Thanks so much," I groaned.

"I'd like—"

"Of course, Hun. Let me know if you need anything else," he said, cutting off Parker. You know it's bad when the waiter comes to your defense.

“What was that about?” my date scoffed. Flushed, I picked up my spoon and brought the cheesy goodness from the onion soup to my mouth. There’s a wooden mini-stand with a fluffy loaf that’s calling my name. Ripping off a piece, I swiped some of the whipped cream looking butter and spread it on before dipping it into the soup.

“Oh, my...” I murmured between chewing.

Halfway through the meal his phone vibrated against the table and once again, it was second to none. When the waiter came back and asked me how it was, I gushed about the food before asking for the check. He gave me an empathetic look and returned shortly to drop it in front of Parker. He completely ignored it, too enthralled with whoever was on the other side of the phone. Fed up, I picked up the little black book holding the bill and stuffed in a wad of ones and fives. Plus a 20% tip because customer service isn’t freaking easy . I barely have a few dollars left to my name, but it was worth it.

“Thank you. The food was amazing. No change.” I passed him the book and got up.

“Of course. I hope you have an amazing night.” He didn’t so much as look at Parker as he walked away.

“What was that about?” Parker grumbled, but I didn’t bother giving him an answer as I pushed my chair back. Standing, I headed out without another word. I took the elevator alone and gave the ticket to the valet. I stood out in the cold in front of his car with my arms crossed in front of my chest. When he made his way outside, I was already contemplating his death. The urge to slap him rattled through me, but I’ve never so much as killed a spider.

As soon as the attendant pulled up, I yanked the door open and slid in. The seat was cold and I stared at him as he slowly made his way around to the driver’s side. Parker was the cutest guy I’ve dated. With his blonde hair swept effortlessly to the side and

his blue eyes, he was the perfect cover model. He's easily the hottest guy at UW, but I've never wanted to be as violent with someone as I do right this moment. I tried and failed to take deep breaths to calm myself down. As soon as he was in and closed the door, he held his precious phone at an angle so I couldn't see his screen. I can't hold it in anymore.

"Is this so-called project more important than me?" I started as I faced him.

"First off, why are your panties in a twist? Holy shit," he said exasperated, as if this was coming out of nowhere.

"You've said maybe three sentences to me since you picked me up. Who're you writing and why aren't you being present right now?"

He shook his head and brushed me off like I was the one who wasn't making sense. Turning on the car he cranked up the heat and pulled away from the restaurant.

"I don't know what your deal is, but lay off. I need you to chill the fuck out." He brushed a stray strand out of his face as he quickly glanced at the screen.

"Are you actually fucking kidding me? I'm pissed and you can't give me more than a second of your time?" After how he'd acted this entire evening, I shouldn't have been, but I was in disbelief.

"Lila. Lay off," Parker warned through clenched teeth.

My jaw drops because for once I know he's the one in the wrong. I saw the silence filling the car for what it was—distance. If I was a priority he would be trying to hold my hand, trying to fix the misunderstanding, trying to make it up to me, but he wasn't doing any of those things. He saw my frustration as a reason for him to be upset with me and not a sign that he'd royally screwed up. I was stuck between wanting to fix it

and knowing I couldn't let it slide. His warning repeated in my head, but the storm was waging and there was no pulling it back. He's fine with me sitting here with my mouth shut as long as I let him do what he's doing. My needs take a backseat when his wants are involved. I hate it and I'm so done.

I snatched his phone mid-text, and he cursed. The car swerved and jerked to a stop on the shoulder. When he reached for it, I dodged, leaning toward my door. His nails clawed at my cheek, and I cried out. I blocked him as best I could while he fought to grab it back.

On the screen was a picture of a woman I recognized, posing in a mirror selfie. She wore lingerie and had a pencil-thin frame. Beneath it, one sentence burned into me:

Does she know you're coming to me after?

"Give me my phone, Lila!" he yelled as my stomach twisted. Sitting back, I let him yank it from my hands. He threw his phone against the dash and it ricocheted back, hitting me just below the eye. A sharp cry escaped me as he yanked my hair so hard my scalp tingled.

"I knew something was going on," I cried. He shoved me face down, bashing my nose against the dash. Releasing me, I held my face as blood dripped down my hands. When he looked at me, he had the audacity to look angry.

"Can you blame me? You never put out. I've got needs. You had to go and be a nosy ass bitch and now you've hurt your own feelings," he spat. My chest ached as I replayed the last few weeks, trying to figure out when it started.

"Are you seriously blaming me for the fact you were sneaking around like a rat?" I hissed. Before I knew what was happening, his hand snapped out and I hit the back of my head against the window. There was a flash of white as it banged and I swear I

heard something crack. Blinding pain shot through me and I screamed. Hunching forward, I grabbed my eye as warmth drenched my shirt.

“Look what you fucking made me do.” Parker’s voice was cold and collected. Nothing like the way he was acting.

“I... I...” my words died as my eyes watered. Parker had been rough with me before, but he’d never hit me. I was at a loss for words. My ears were ringing as my mind struggled to grasp what had happened.

Parker hit me. No, he punched me.

What. the. fuck.

“I told you I’ve been stressed. You made me wait for so long. So, yes, I needed to get my dick wet somewhere. Don’t start fucking crying like this is my fault,” Parker sneered. His eyes flashed and I swear they almost looked yellow. My tears had broken the dam and I was full on sobbing now. I might not be the prettiest or skinniest, but I know I don’t deserve this.

“Stop the car,” I hiccuped.

Parker kept driving like he hadn’t heard me. His gaze darted between the road and the floor. He was still focused on his phone, on her, and that just confirmed it all.

“Parker, stop the fucking car!” I screamed.

He hit the breaks and I pried the door open. I hopped out, and his roar chased me down the shoulder.

“You’re going to regret this, Lila. Get your ass back here!”

Don't do it.

Don't do it.

Don't fucking do it.

I managed to keep walking. Tears poured down my face as he stomped on the gas and the door closed. He left me on the side of the road, but it only cemented the fact I'd made the right choice. The cool air rushed against my face until it felt numb. I was hurt, bruised, and bleeding. I grabbed my phone with trembling fingers and called the only person who was ever on my side.

"Lils?" She sounded worried.

"Dani. Can you pick me up?" My voice cracked as cars zoomed past me.

"What's wrong?" She was already angry, her voice tight with rage, and I couldn't stop sobbing.

"Please. I-I need you to p-pick me up," I cried as headlights blurred. She didn't even hesitate. The sound of her tires screeching blared through the speaker.

"Okay. Share your location. I'll be right there."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

I didn't know how long or far I'd walked when a black Jeep Rubicon came to a screeching halt. A door slammed and I looked up to see my best friend, her car parked on the sidewalk. Her gray oversize hoodie had neon pink letters spelling 'FIGHT ME' on it. I almost laughed as she enveloped me in a bone-crushing hug. All the air whooshed out of me and I'd laugh if I wasn't so grateful to see her. When we pulled apart, her eyes were wide as she took in my face. She was five feet of fury.

"He's scum, Lils. A good for nothing piece of shit. We're getting out of here." Dani led me to the passenger's side. When I'd buckled in my seat belt she was already in the driver's seat.

"Thanks for getting me," I whispered.

"Always. Here. Wipe your face," she said as she handed me a pack of baby wipes.

"You just have baby wipes lying around?" I joked. She gave me a look before smiling.

"They come in hand when there's a mess." She made a jerking off gesture with her hand and I gasped.

"Why did I even ask?" I groaned as I pulled a couple out.

"Please tell me you two are done. If he's done it once, he'll fucking do it again," she hissed.

"Yes, I know. We're over." I could feel the weight of her gaze on the side of my face

like she was trying to see if I meant it. She made a turn to get on I5.

“I don’t want to go back to campus. Can I... come with you?” I asked quietly, staring out the window and holding my breath. I’d never gone home with her. After the first time I declined, it never came up again.

“Of course.” She turned left and headed north on the freeway.

“So... I know this probably isn’t the time or place, but I have to tell you something before we get home.” Her tone made me turn because she sounded guilty. She flashed me a smile before focusing on the road.

“Okay. Spill.” We don’t have secrets. I was not only intrigued, but desperate for a distraction. She took a deep breath to steel herself and suddenly I was a little nervous.

“Surprise! I’m a werewolf and I’m taking you home to my pack.” Silence followed her rushed confession.

“Excuse me?” I scoffed in disbelief because that made no sense. I think I’d know if my best friend turned into a wolf during the full moon. She remained quiet as she drove.

“Stop kidding around. What do you really need to tell me?” Gently, I touched the back of my head to feel where it smashed against Parker’s window.

“I’m not messing with you. I’m not human, and I need you to understand that before we arrive.”

“I’ll play along. Why would that matter?”

“Because my dad’s the alpha.”

“So?”

“That means I’m kind of like a princess.”

“Kind of?”

“Okay, in human terms, yes, I’m a princess. In shifter terms? I’m the alpha’s bloodline. It’s more about power and instinct than any princess gig.” I was still waiting for her to say this was all a joke, but the more we talked, the less likely that seemed.

Dani didn’t seem fazed by my shock and just kept talking. “Oh, that feels so much better. I hate keeping secrets from you, but we’re not supposed to expose ourselves to humans.” She let out a sigh of relief and then suddenly squealed and I grabbed onto whatever I could to brace myself if she ran us off the freaking highway.

“What is it?!” I yelled.

“I can talk to you about knots now! Fuck yes. I wouldn’t say it’s a secret, but I definitely couldn’t talk to you about that.”

“What’s a knot?” I asked, bewildered . My best friend has either cracked, or she’s really not human. I knew what a shifter was. I’ve read a few werewolf shifter romances, but have never come across knots.

“Giiirrlll. I’m about to rock your world. So you know how I’ve been saying that Elijah is missing something?” Her sudden burst of energy was overwhelming.

“Yes,” I answered hesitantly.

“Well, shifter men are built different. And Elijah? He’s human. So picture the male

anatomy, with an added velvety smooth bulge at the base. But wait! There's more. When they're getting close to, well you know, the bulge expands."

"Expands? What the fuck for?" I asked, flabbergasted and intrigued.

"To lock you in. To breed you," she giggled.

My jaw was on the floor and the shitty evening I'd had was long forgotten for the moment. Because, yes, I was imagining it.

"Does it... hurt?" I whispered.

"Yes, but in a good way."

"I don't even know what to say to that."

"Don't worry. I've made it my mission to find you a real man who can lay pipe. I know more than a few guys who would consider themselves lucky to have you."

"I cannot. Please stop. I am not sleeping with a stranger," I laughed.

"You will."

"I won't. Parker cheated on me because I wouldn't put out after a year. You think I would sleep with some rando? Nope. Not happening."

"If you're going to waste your break thinking about Parker, then we need to get you under a man. Give them what he couldn't have. I'm so petty. If I were you, I'd sleep with all of his friends just to spite him," she bit out. And I knew she meant it.

"I think we both know I'm not doing that."

“Don’t you dare go back to him, Lils. I swear I won’t talk to you ever again. Promise me. Right now!” She held her hand out to me and I already knew what she wanted. Her pinky was pointed at me like she was daring me not to.

“Okay, okay.” Extending my hand, I curled my pinky around hers.

Thankfully that seemed to signal Dani’s turn to relax. I noticed the way her shoulders slumped as she leaned back.

“I’m honestly excited to explore this ‘pack’ of yours and meet your dad. I feel like I already know him.”

“Right? The situation that came about me bringing you home was shitty, but I’m so happy you know everything now. Sucked having to keep it from you.”

“Fuck. Look at me. I don’t want to make a bad impression on your dad. What if he thinks I’m a bad influence?” I groaned. Dani laughed so hard that the car swerved as I cursed.

“You don’t have to worry about that. My dad is rarely at home. Even when he is, you’ll only see him during the day. If that. Because of the... anyway. He’s got a different woman every time I’m home, but don’t worry about him. He isn’t the judgmental type.”

“Mm...”

The open road stretched before us, paving the way for our last minute road trip to who knows where. The number of cars lessened the longer we drove, but before I knew it, hours had flown by. We took an exit for Olympia and sped down a road surrounded by trees.

“Open the glove box. You’ll find some crackers I had for lunch. Eat a few. The salt will help.”

“Help? With what?” I asked.

“These woods act as a veil. Soon, we’re going to pass through and you’re going to feel nauseated. You might throw up.” At her words, I opened it and grabbed the bag. Throwing a handful into my mouth, I chewed as she sped up. It’s like when you’re on a plane chewing gum to help with your ears popping. There was this pressure and then I collided with a barrier that quickly snapped—disappearing as we passed through the veil. And she was right. I was hit with a gross feeling that had me leaning on the glass. It was cool to the touch and helped.

With the woods behind us, we entered a clearing, and I was speechless. The moon was the largest I’d ever seen it. Moonlight touched every inch of land, lighting up the surroundings and the fields of flowers as we passed.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered, my breath fogging the glass.

“Thanks,” Dani smiled. City lights appeared off in the distance, but we took a right turn, veering off into a new direction. Twenty minutes later, we were met with pine trees decorating the mountain side. Nestled at the foot of it was a two story home. The dirt road hit concrete and as we drew near, I realized it wasn’t a home, but a mansion. Black stone, too many rooms to count, and smoke coming off the roof. A few luxury cars parked out front and armed men stood, watching us approach as if they were expecting us.

The car came to a stop and the men were now right in front of us. When she put it in park, a blond who looked like Thor opened her door and she jumped into his arms. Another man, one who looked like Aquaman, opened mine. I kept my head down as I stepped out.

“Jace, the greatest human alive. Lila, Jace. And the oaf next to you is Evander.” I nodded at the guy as he looped an arm around her and said hi to the man next to me. I’m going to assume everyone here is a shifter and now all I can think about is the fact they both have knots. My face heated, but seconds before I could spiral about how much of a perv I was, Evander lifted something around my shoulders. He wrapped it around me and was careful not to touch me.

How did I not know he was holding a blanket?

“Thank you,” I murmured, touched, but kept my eyes down. I know my face is a huge mess and my dress is coated in blood.

“You’re so thoughtful, Van,” Dani teased. I glared at her and she mouthed something like ‘what a man’. To which, I smiled a little because she was right. Parker would never. My throat clogged and she rushed over. Looping her hand with mine, she led me in. The men trailing behind us.

“Who are they?” I whispered. She arched a brow and smiled.

“Pack guards, but they’re also friends. Your room’s next to mine, but you can come in if you need me.”

When we walked in there was an open themed living room area that felt more like a hotel lobby. There was an oak tree in the middle, comfy chairs for people to sit, a huge fireplace against one wall, and large windows giving an almost 360 view of the beauty surrounding this place. Looking up, a wooden rail ran along the entirety of the second floor, and a grand chandelier hung from the pointed ceiling. Dani pulled me over a small bridge to the other side and I glimpsed a lake through the window before we began our ascent upstairs.

“I can’t believe you grew up here,” I murmured, more to myself than to her, as we

made our way down a hallway.

“Yeah, dad is actually pretty humble. Despite my tendency to tap the buy button, he doesn’t just throw money around. He wanted to ensure I had a safe space to grow up. That and our pack leaders would raise their family here as well.”

“Well, it’s beautiful. So you don’t just live here with your dad then?”

“No, I should have mentioned that earlier! My dad is alpha, and his second hand is called a beta, and then there’s the gamma—the one who holds them all together.”

“If your dad is the king, what’s the queen called?” I asked. Her mom passed awhile ago, but we didn’t talk much about her.

“Luna. She’s called a Luna,” she said as we came to a stop in front of a white door. “This is your room. Mine is there if you need me.” Pointing at the one across. “We can pick up anything else tomorrow, but everything you need should be inside. Do you need me or...?”

“Thanks, Dani. I want to be alone. Need to process some things,” I gave her a hug. Pulling away, I smiled at the guys before opening the door.

“Okay, that’s okay. I’m going to get caught up on pack news, but I’ll be in my room. Come over or text me if you need anything.”

“Sounds good. See you tomorrow,” I rasped.

Closing it, I was surrounded in darkness. A bed was illuminated at the other end of the room. I noted the bags of clothes and pajamas on the bed before crawling under the blanket. Taking a few steady breaths, I listened to the sounds of my breathing as they stuttered and turned to gulps, the tears flowing freely. I know Parker is a shit

human being, but that doesn't change the fact that he was my person. The events that led to me being here replayed. He didn't listen to me, didn't care about me, and hurt me. I haven't changed my mind and I won't, but now I have to figure out how to just not have him around anymore. Curling into a ball, I cried for the love I thought I had, and mourned the man he failed to be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

The pounding in my head threatened to splinter and crack my skull into a thousand little pieces. The sun hadn't come up yet, but there was no way I was going back to bed. My neck was stiff and my body tense as I rolled on my side. It was like I'd been hit by a truck. Sitting up, the world spun, and I closed my eyes as I waited for everything to right itself. When everything stopped, my eyes eventually adjusted to the darkness. I didn't bother fumbling around for a light that could be anywhere. Carefully, I stood and walked toward the outline of a door. Nudging it open, the lights flicked on.

Of course, its motion activated.

Blinded, I flinched against the brightness, squinting as if that would speed the process up. From the moment we passed through the veil and came out on the other side, everything I saw was beautiful. The bathroom was no exception. In front of me stretched a bathroom bigger than my aunt's apartment. To my right, a mirror stretched from one end to the other. Across from me, was a three-tier window overlooking the darkened mountainside. To my left was a wall of windows. Below it, a tub big enough to fit at least four people. The tiles beneath my feet were different shades of brown, matching the tile surrounding the tub.

Money may not make you happy, but it sure as hell will make you comfortable.

I groaned as a sharp pain sliced through my temple. Holding it, I swallowed the lump in my throat and braced myself to face the evidence of Parker's twitchy fist. My breath came out shaky as a shutter ran down my spine. One eye was black and blue and swollen, blood still stained Dani's ruined dress, blood matted the hair on the right side of my face, and the look in my eyes was hopeless. As if Parker hurting me was

the end of my life.

I gave him so much power over me.

A black bag caught my attention. Opening it, I found toiletries. Moving to the tub, I turned on the water before pulling my dress up. I cried out as the material rubbed against the back of my head. He hit me hard enough to cause damage and I'm stuck between wanting to cry and scream. I'm sad, but fuck, I'm so angry. Steam rose and the mirrors fogged, hiding the shame mirrored in my eyes. I grabbed the organic shampoo and scrub before stepping into the tub, sighing as the hot water rose to my ankle, then my knees, until finally it kissed my ribs. Leaning back against the cool stone, I played with the water as it flowed out of the faucet. Steam surrounded me and my eyes slid to the blackness outside. When heat warmed my chest, I shut off the faucet. Looking down, I watched as the water tinged a light red. Wiping the dried blood from my collar bone, tears spilled and droplets created small ripples. I should be sobbing, snot dripping, heart breaking, but I wasn't. Maybe I'm still in shock and it hasn't really set in.

Or maybe I never loved him.

Maybe deep down, I knew he didn't love me.

Grabbing the loofah, I lathered it and slowly scrubbed myself down. Lowering myself into the water until I was fully submerged, I closed my eyes as I gently washed my scalp. Breaking through the surface, I gulped lungfuls of air as I dropped back against the edge. I took my time enjoying a luxury I've never really had. A hot bath, a beautiful view of the stars, and a place where I didn't really have to worry about anything.

For now, I'll just relax and enjoy this break.

I made a promise to myself not to worry about him. I left him and I would eat good food, spend time with my bestie, and be a tourist in werewolf pack lands. When I was done, I towel dried my hair, and stepped into the room. Moonlight spilled in and I found clothes in the room—maroon silk shorts and a spaghetti strap top. My mouth watered as I thought about chocolate ice cream. There's just something about it that's comforting. But I don't know where the kitchen is, and there's something about being in a new/foreign place that makes you feel like you can't do anything.

I'm not a prisoner.

I can leave this room and look around.

Twisting the handle, I opened the door before I could change my mind. Dani's door was closed and I considered for a second if I should knock or just go on my own. I decided on the latter. Running my hand along the wall as I tiptoed down the hall. When I saw black bars on a rail, I peered over and noted that the living space was empty. I was trying to remember if I took a right or a left, when I spotted the stairs. When I got downstairs, I meandered through one hall after the other until I found a large oak door. Pushing it, it opened a crack and my eyes locked on movement. Something large is in this room. It was dark, but a low grunt stopped me from opening it further.

Leaning forward, I can't see much with only one good eye, but I realized someone was inside. My jaw dropped as the dark figure became a man. He's... hot. Brown hair fell over eyes so brown they looked red. A strong nose, thick lips, and a sharp jaw made him look beautiful in a brutal way. Veins stood out along his neck, feeding into the broadest shoulders I'd ever seen. A white long sleeve t-shirt hugged every muscle and—I covered my mouth to muffle the noise as his hips slammed against a petite woman. Blonde hair spilled over the counter, her fingers clawing—grasping at anything she could. My eyes jumped back to his as frustration marred his features. He bit his lip and my thighs clenched.

This is a private moment.

I shouldn't be here.

I came down for a snack.

I'm intruding, but still I look. She turned to look back at him, but he growled, and she whipped back around. Face down. He cussed. I know it isn't too late. I can turn around and march back the way I came. I'm obviously not going to get what I wanted, but I can't seem to move. I don't know what it is. My eyes were glued to the beautiful man bending a woman over in the kitchen.

He looked up and my heart stopped.

I was wrong.

His eyes aren't brown at all.

They're red.

The world and his hips froze as his gaze connected with mine. Brows furrowed, but then he did something I never would have expected. He dragged his tongue against his bottom lip and groaned. His hips withdrew and slammed against hers. With each movement, she banged against the counter.

My breathing came out faster, my chest rising and falling. When another growl fell from his lips, it reached across the room and caressed my body. I could almost feel him touching me. It's like I can read his mind. There's no way I'm doing this. My body was wet. Tightening at the thoughts that ran rampant. Everything tightened and I clenched my thighs.

I need the friction.

I've never been this turned on before.

Never coveted someone's man.

Never entertained the thought of touching myself while watching people fuck.

I need him to do to me what he's doing to her.

I want to take her place.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Despite my thoughts, my hand slithered down my stomach and beneath the band of my shorts. My fingers hovered for only a second before dipping into my heat. My hips jerked as I rubbed my clit. Lips parted as he continued to hold my gaze. Yellow eyes glowed like coal as he rutted into the woman beneath him, the irritation in his eyes disappearing, replaced by carnal need.

As if he was waiting for me.

It's as if this moment is heightened only because of me.

It's ludicrous.

It shouldn't make sense, but it does.

And it lit my body up like the fourth of July. I was greedily grinding against my fingers as I thrust them inside. My mind demanded I run, but my heart liked me right where I was.

His breathing filled the space as he slammed into her.

I matched his rhythm and felt myself tightening.

I'm already there.

I focused on him as he rutted harder into her. She moaned beneath him, but his gaze never left mine.

She's nothing.

I should look away, but I don't—can't—won't.

His movements changed and I moaned as I came. He growled as he came and I spasmed as my body twitched. His thrusts stopped and the spell was broken. My eyes widened before I turned on my heel and ran back. Down the halls, up the stairs, until I was throwing my door closed behind me. Dropping back against it, my heart thumped wildly in my chest. The ghost of his scent taunted me, and it was as if my body forgot I just came because I was wet again.

If I'm lucky, I'll never see him again.

I shouldn't have stayed. I shouldn't have watched. But I did—and now I can't forget the way he looked at me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Grayson

Last night shouldn't have happened. When I saw her peeking through the crack in the door, I should have been angry, but I wasn't. My wolf recognized her right away. She wasn't just some woman spying on me. She was my mate.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Lila

My door banged open, and I sat up so fast everything went black. When my vision cleared, Dani stood in my room with a bag in each hand, hair pulled up in two little horns, the rest spilling over her shoulders. Mischief sparkled in her eyes, and I instantly knew I wasn't going to like whatever she'd cooked up. I blinked—And she was barreling toward me in a skin-tight black dress.

“What the hell are you doing?” I screeched as she lunged, hoo-hah flashing me as she bounced onto the bed, laughing like a maniac.

“You’ve wasted enough time crying over that pathetic excuse of a man, and I bring offerings.” She dropped something warm on my legs, the smell of grease immediately filling the air. It was our ritual—when one of us was hurting, we showed up with cravings and crushed them together. One whiff, and I already knew what was in the bag. But even the best food wouldn't fix this.

“It has been one day,” I deadpanned. Dani was being Dani, and I'd just woken up.

“As I said, more than enough,” she huffed as she brought out the contents. Cheeseburgers were piled on next to a large fry each.

Laughing as tears pricked the corners of my eyes, I couldn't deny it because she was right.

“Why do you look like a Barbie fresh out of the box?” I needed the topic change, and if she noticed, she didn't let on.

“Eat. You slept the day away. We’re going out tonight. Luckily for you, I had them stock the closet for you,” she said between bites of her burger. My mouth watered, but I couldn’t focus on that right now. There was no way I was going anywhere looking like this.

“My face hasn’t healed yet. I don’t plan on leaving this room until I look normal. I don’t need everyone staring at me.” Her eyes flashed as she looked at me, but I dodged her gaze, grabbing a burger from the pile and unwrapping it.

“ You aren’t the one who should be ashamed, Lils. You’ve done nothing wrong,” she said firmly.

“I need time to process things. I’m not like you, Dee. My self-image is already low. Being damaged like this doesn’t help.” The whispered truth made me cringe. How I looked was the least of my problems, and yet it was up there on the list of things I was worried about.

“And I know you struggle with this, but babe, you’re a bombshell. You are the only one who can work on how you see yourself. I love you the way you are, but just this once, I wish you were like me. If there was a way for me to gift you my rapid healing ability, I would, but have no fear. We have the power of makeup on our side.” She reached out and squeezed my hand with cheese-covered fingers.

“I know you wield your brush like a samurai wields their sword, but there’s a limit to what you can work with. You can’t reduce swelling.” I took a bite of the cheeseburger I don’t need because it’s only going to add to the fat on my hips.

“Ah, ah, ah. Don’t doubt me. Hot towel press will bring it down a little. I can also make it look smaller and hide your bruises. The night is young, and we deserve this. All that staying up late studying, stressing, and finals. Come on. Tell me you don’t want to go out and forget everything.” My eyes watered. Of course I do. For half a

beat, I struggled to voice my thoughts.

“You sure you can make me look... normal?” I whispered.

“Babe. Trust me.”

“Okay,” I sighed, resigning myself to the fate that is Dani.

An hour later, she said she’d worked her magic. I’d had a chance to look around and the room was larger than any apartment I’d lived in. A combination of modern and luxury combined the warmth and rustic charm of the wood theme the pack house held. The walls were paneled in rich, dark wood, with the largest windows that framed breathtaking views of the surrounding forest. The sun was starting to set, and I was in awe of the colors that painted the sky. The floors were made of polished hardwood, and a plush rug ran from under the bed to the other end of the room.

My king-size bed frame was carved with intricate designs of wolves, moons, clouds, and mountain tops. The soft material I’d hidden under was a white duvet. There were more than enough plush pillows and the rest of the room was as beautiful as the bed. I was seated with my back to the vanity, which sat right next to the arched door that opened to the closet. When Dani flipped me around, I gasped because once again, Dani had transformed me. Not only did she manage to make me look normal—minus the slight swelling and cut lip, but she made me pretty.

“Stand up and let’s see the finished work,” she said as she placed her brush down. Standing, she asked me to twirl. I wore a matching mini black dress with black tights. The outfit was paired with all black platform pumps. My hair ran straight down my back.

“Women my height shouldn’t wear high heels. Oh, my gosh!” My eyes almost popped out of my head as I saw my ass in my reflection.

“What?”

“I won’t be able to bend over. My cheeks will pop out,” I groaned.

“I’m failing to see the problem here, babe.” Popping out her hip, she crossed her arms.

“I can’t with you. Why do I even bother?” I fake sighed. She was right. I needed this.

“Well? You like it right? Please tell me you like it.”

“Of course I do. You made me look like I didn’t get my face busted in last night.” She flinched at my words and I tried again. “It looks amazing. Thank you, but when were you able to get this all ready? Do you just have rooms stocked with clothes for when you have guests?”

“Oh, I told them on the drive home.”

“How? You never called them.” I racked my memory and nodded. There wasn’t a single time she used the phone. She was too focused on not turning the car around and making sure I wasn’t going to go back to him.

“It’s a wolf thing. We can link others in our pack. Meaning I can talk to them telepathically. As soon as we got into the forest, I was within reach. Anyway, let’s head out. The guys are waiting for us downstairs.” She started for the door and I followed.

“Wait, wait. So you just have an open... link to everyone in your pack? Doesn’t that get noisy?” I asked as we walked down the hall.

“It isn’t always open. It’s like calling someone with my mind,” she answered, sliding

her arm through mine.

“Still weird. And the guys?” My brows furrowed as I stumbled before catching myself.

“Yeah, Jace and Evander from last night. They’re my childhood friends turned bodyguards. I can’t go anywhere on pack territory without them. It’s irritating, but you get used to it.” She said it like having bodyguards was a normal thing.

“How come they didn’t come with you to school?” I asked.

“Uh, that’s where I put my foot down. University is the only time I’m going to be on my own. It wasn’t easy getting dad to agree, but I’m a werewolf among humans. I can protect myself.”

“And can we go back to the bit where you called Jace your childhood friend? He didn’t look like he was just a friend last night,” I teased.

“He’s always been there for me. I didn’t see him that way until my last break. I’m just... I don’t want to ruin things by making them serious, but let’s talk about that another time,” she whispered.

I paused in the hall, unease pricking my skin. Tonight felt different. It wasn’t the dress or the heels. There was a strange heaviness in the air, a pull I couldn’t shake. When we hit the stairs, we separated, and I was grateful for the rail. I needed to hold on. Just six steps down, and my heel caught. I lurched forward, eyes squinting shut as I fell.

Fuck.

Death by high heels.

I hit something hard, but it wasn't the ground. My face hit against something solid and warm as arms enveloped me. The smell of pine and camp fire hit me first. Peeking up through lashes, my jaw dropped as I clocked who was holding me—the man from last night. My heart was pounding and that feeling ignited low in my belly. He carried me effortlessly, like I didn't weigh anything. My gaze was drawn to his intense eyes. Red isn't a natural color, but I like them. He was staring so intensely, as if he was trying to figure something out.

“Thanks for catching me,” I rasped.

“Thanks, daddy! Lils is fragile.” I peeked over his shoulder at Dani's words and my eyes went round.

Oh. my. gosh.

He placed me on the ground slowly, and I fell against him. My cheeks heated as my body pressed against his firm one. He's hard where I'm soft. My breathing sped up as the pieces fell into place. Mystery man is Dani's dad. I spied on her dad. Groaning internally, I closed my eyes. I touched myself in front of her freaking dad .

Kill. me. now.

I hadn't mentioned what happened to Dani and a tinge of guilt pricked at my chest. But what was I supposed to say? “I snuck down for a snack and ended up rubbing one out as I watched the hottest man I've ever seen in my life bang a blonde in the kitchen?” Yeah, no. My skin heated at the memory. Now that I knew their relationship, I didn't know how I would broach that. “Hey, Dani. Your dad is hot, and I came while watching him like a pervert.” Ugh.

Pulling away took every ounce of strength I had because all I could think of was climbing him like a tree. I took a step back as Dani walked around him.

“Daddy, Lila. Lila, Alpha Grayson.”

“H-hi. Am I supposed to bow?” I whispered the latter to her. She burst into laughter and when I glanced at him, I swear I saw the hint of a smile.

“No, you don’t bow,” she giggled. His eyes lightened at the sound and she stepped forward, hugging him. His attention was on her now and I missed the weight of his gaze.

The fuck?

Let’s not do that.

I cannot like my best friend’s dad.

No matter how hot he is.

As if he could sense the direction of my thoughts, those red eyes locked on mine again. I wanted to shrink back, but I wanted to make a good impression. Holding my chin up, I held his gaze, and his brow lifted.

“Where are you guys headed?” he asked.

“Wolfsbane, and before you lose it, the guys are coming with.” He looked around at her words and I realized he was searching for them. “They’re outside.”

“Hm,” he hummed.

“We talked about this,” she sighed.

“Blood moon is coming. You shouldn’t be messing around.”

“Are you going to take your own advice?” she huffed. That silenced him, but his eyes darted to me for a second before returning to her. And it was my best friend’s turn to soften. Her shoulders slumped and she grabbed his hand. Pressing up on the tips of her shoes, he met her partway bowing his head so she could kiss his cheek.

“I’ll be safe,” she promised before grabbing my hand and pulling me outside.

I’m not going to.

I’m not.

I won’t.

I do.

Looking back over my shoulder, our eyes connected, and I forgot how to breathe. Flipping back around, I nibbled on my lip. It wasn’t until we’re outside that she spoke again.

“I wish he’d take a mate. He’s mourned long enough. I want to see him happy, you know?” Her voice cracked. I squeezed her hand.

“I do,” I murmured before the guys appeared.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Grayson

Complete. That's how I felt the first time I held her in my arms. It killed me to put her down, to pretend every instinct didn't demand I claim her. Every fiber of my being screamed for me to pull her closer, to mark her, to make her mine in ways she wouldn't understand. But I couldn't—she was human. My eyes fluttered closed as I inhaled as she passed.

Fuck.

I couldn't have her, but I couldn't help but look. I watched as she walked that pretty ass out of my pack house. Only when she was gone could I think clearly. It was best if she stayed as far away from me as possible.

I can't have her.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Lila

Wolfsbane was packed. It was shoulder to shoulder as Jace led the way to the VIP section. We'd just sat down in an almost full circle booth when Dani crooked her finger at Jace. He shook his head, but smirked as he slid out and followed her onto the dance floor. She pointed at me from where they stood—Jace glared at everyone within arm's reach and they moved back. But there was no way I was going to go out there without a few drinks first.

There were three different platforms and each had people gyrating and swaying to the music. Lights flashed, music pulsed, and stars of different sizes and shapes hung from the ceiling. Covered in mirrors like crystal balls, they reflected the lasers, which stretched and shifted across the club as they moved up and down.

A waiter automatically came to our booth and placed a platter full of drinks in front of us. I didn't hesitate. There was no doubt Dani would be back soon to drag me out of my seat. Downing the liquid courage I needed, it shot through me causing a shiver to run down my spine. Slamming the glass on the table, I flushed when I found Evander smiling at me.

"I know she's going to come for me. Holy shit that's strong," I choked through the burn.

"You might need to slow down. Our drinks are stronger than what you'd find in the human realm," Evander warned as he eyed the second glass I was already reaching for. He wore a white tank and an unbuttoned, gray short-sleeve button up. The color contrasted against his beautiful tanned skin. Long curly hair fell down his back and

framed his face. Were all men here beautiful?

He laughed and I wondered if he could hear my thoughts. The alcohol was warm in my belly as he leaned forward. I gulped as he put his elbows on the table.

“Most shifters are good looking, yes,” he answered and I realized I’d said it out loud. I groaned.

“How would you know? Do you pass through the veil often?” I asked, ignoring my blunder and his response. He put his hand on top of my glass and held it down.

“A few times.” Evander tilted his head as if I was a puzzle he couldn’t figure out.

“You’re not going to have any?” I asked.

“No. We can’t drink when we’re shadowing her.”

“That kind of sucks.” I scrunched my nose before glancing over to Dani. I laughed as she twerked against Jace. He looks tormented. Like he wants to enjoy all that she is, but can’t help glaring at the men around them. As if daring them to look at her.

“She’s always been the life of the party.” Looking at him, his gaze darts from them dancing to me.

“On campus too. People can’t help it. She’s just... Dani. It’s hard not to love her.”

“Oh, I know. We grew up together,” he laughed.

“Did you just admit to loving my best friend?” I teased.

“Yes, I used to,” he admitted. I blinked. Caught off guard by the honesty.

“Hm. Well, this isn’t my scene. I usually go along to keep an eye on her, but now that I know the truth.” I shook my head. Dani never needed my protection.

“What is?”

I pulled the glass out from under his hand and downed another. He was staring at me intensely and I didn’t know how to handle it. Do I like it? Yes. Do I want to sleep with Evander? Maybe. Dani’s dad, Grayson, flashed to the forefront of my mind. Quickly, I banished the thoughts that threatened to bubble up. That can’t happen. Looking into Evander’s brown eyes, I knew the alcohol was having an effect because I was wondering if he could distract me from my best friend’s dad. It’s a shitty thought.

“What is what?” I asked.

“Your scene.”

“Nothing like this. Nothing remotely including this many people, if any. I prefer a cup of hot tea and a book over this,” I said loudly as the song got louder, jerking my head at the crowd.

“I know what you mean,” he yelled back.

“Oh? Do you?”

“Yeah, but I like using my hands—sculpting,” he said, lifting them as if to demonstrate.

“That’s... really cool,” I admitted, leaning in so he could hear me better. He flashed me a genuine smile and I stared at him openly. Evander wasn’t just handsome—he was hot. Glowing eyes flashed and I compared them without meaning to. Where

Evander is sweet, quiet, and caring, Grayson can turn me into a puddle just by looking at me. Grayson's gaze was intense and dominant. I'd talked to this man more than Grayson and yet he'd had more of an effect on me.

"Does it hurt?" His eyes flashed as he gestured at my still swollen face and I gulped.

"Not anymore. You were right. Your drinks are stronger." I nod at the glasses in front of us.

"Did you end it with him?" I nodded as Jace appeared and leaned on the booth.

"Bitch! You need to get your ass out there," Dani squealed as she squeezed in next to me. She isn't even sweating. How cruel can the gods be? Snatching a glass up, she drank the gin and tonic like water.

I could never.

"I've had a couple drinks and I think I'm ready!" I yelled. The rest of my body was hot and I was feeling good. She looked at me and a slow smile spread across her face. Nodding, she got up.

"Let's show them how it's done!"

Nodding, I got up and grabbed her hand. We started dancing and then the guys were around us—Jace at her back and Evander's hand on my waist as he moved behind me. I swallowed the lump in my throat because he reminded me of Parker before he was an asshole. I won't let him ruin this night.

Fuck. him.

Evander was solid behind me, his body swaying against mine as the song changed to

a faster beat. Dani grabbed my hands and lifted them up in the air. We jumped and laughed, shaking our heads left and right. Evander groaned behind me and as fingers slid down my thighs I understood why—my dress had ridden half up my ass. I didn't question it, I didn't think too much into it, I didn't wonder what Parker would think if he saw me. I just danced with my best friend. For once in a really long time, I didn't worry about anything. We danced until we couldn't dance anymore.

We stumbled into the pack house a little after 2 am. Jace cradled Dani in his arms like she was the most important person in the world. He doesn't say much, but I can tell he's so far gone for her. I was holding onto Evander's arm to keep me from falling. Looking around, I was disappointed when Grayson was nowhere to be seen. And I wondered if he was somewhere with that blonde again.

"I'm going to put her to bed," Jace murmured, Dani nuzzled up against his chest, her arms around his neck. He turned from us and headed up the stairs quickly, yet careful not to wake her. And then I was left standing in the lobby with Evander.

"He's not going to let her anywhere out of his sight," he chuckled.

"Why not?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"The Blood Moon. It's almost here. It only comes every 18 months."

"Why would that make him so protective?"

"We can find our mates during the Blood Moon. This is also the only time pairs can take a chosen mate." Confusion pulled my brows together.

"Mate?"

“We worship the Moon Goddess. When we’re born, she picks someone for us. The couple, or throuple, is made just for the other in the pairing. A chosen mate is not your Goddess given mate, but one you choose to bond with and spend the rest of your lives together with.” There was a longing in his voice that matched the look in his eyes. And I remembered all those times Dani spoke of a soulmate—someone made just for you. I laughed bitterly.

It all makes sense now.

“What happens if you don’t find your mate during the Blood Moon?”

“You have to wait until the next one and Dani’s of age now. It’s up to her if she’ll have him. He’s always loved her. She just realized it recently.”

“There’s so much I didn’t know about her. The situation that brought me here is shitty, but I’m happy it turned out this way.” He tensed at the reminder before releasing me.

“I don’t want to go to bed just yet,” I whispered. He froze. His eyes widened and his mouth parted. Then I realized how that came across. Waving my hands in front of me, I shook my head.

“Wait, that’s not it. I meant like... do you want to grab a snack with me?”

“That sounds good.”

We walked to the kitchen in silence and I felt like an idiot for making it awkward. When we walked in, the lights flickered on. I didn’t get a good look yesterday, but it was as beautiful as the rest of the house. High vaulted ceilings, a large island I’d seen unsanitary things happen on, large windows that I knew would give an amazing view during the day. A dinner table that had to be as long as the ones in Harry Potter.

There was a fireplace at the far end and I sighed.

“Dani was lucky to grow up in such a beautiful place,” I murmured as I made my way over to the fridge.

“What sounds good?” Evander asked.

“Cereal,” I groaned. Pulling it open, I grab the milk. When I looked at my partner in crime, he was grabbing bowls from the floating cabinets. I know I shouldn’t eat after how much I drank, hell, I should just go to bed, but I’m not doing that. And I need to sober up. He grabbed a few boxes from the massive double-glass door marked ‘pantry’. He dropped them on the island and I squealed when I saw Honey Bunches of Oats in the mix. I jumped onto the island and laughed when I didn’t make it. I was pressed against the cold counter, as Evander walked over and I froze when his hand circled my waist and lifted me up. He flipped me over effortlessly, and I tensed at the show of strength. Parker did a number on me, but Evander was bigger than him. I hated that fear that curled my stomach as he placed me on the counter.

“You okay there?” Evander laughed.

“Yes, I just underestimated it,” I said, determination lacing my tone. He smirked as he handed me my bowl and grabbed the Coco Puffs, while I grabbed the better cereal pouring it into mine. He did the same, and I filled them both with milk. I picked my bowl up and held it to him.

“You gonna lift me up like Simba next?”

He snorted. “You want the theme song with that?”

“Only if you sing it dramatically,” I said, grinning wide. I clanked our bowls together.

“Cheers!” I said happily before grabbing a spoon and digging in.

“Cheers,” he chuckled, spooning cereal into his mouth.

The door opened, our heads turned, and I almost dropped my bowl. Because in walked a man I had no business being that excited to see. I don’t know how it’s possible, but he’s even more tense than when I saw him earlier. Power rolled off him and I avoided his gaze as he neared. Ignoring the way I want to run my fingers along his forearms.

Fuck.

I’m not sober enough for this.

Thankfully, I’m not alone with him.

Evander cleared his throat and I turned in time to see his eyes go from a silvery white to brown. He bowed his head before glancing at me. I was about to ask him to help me down when he headed out the way Grayson came. My jaw dropped as I watched him disappear, leaving me alone with Dani’s dad.

What the fuck just happened?

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

My head was spinning. Why would Evander just leave without a word? Grayson dismissed him. That's the only thing that makes sense, but why? Does he want to talk about last night? Is this about me partying with his daughter? That was just hopeful thinking. A part of me couldn't deny it—he was jealous. This had to be about what I saw. Slowly, he strode closer like a predator stalking prey. He moves elegantly for a man that looks like the room should shake with each step he takes. My heartbeat quickened the closer he got until it was pounding so loud it roared in my ears. Then he was in front of me and I craned my neck to hold his gaze. He was so close, I could feel his body heat. The scent of cedar wood burning hit me first, and I inhaled deeply.

Oh.

That's good.

I wanted to reach out and touch him, to trace the scars marring his exposed arms. Even with the heels, my feet dangled mid-air. Those red eyes held me captive and I swallowed the lump in my throat as I rubbed my thighs together. This was the third time my body had had a reaction just by him looking at me. It reminded me of the night before and I wondered what it would feel like to have his hands on me, his chest to my back, his powerful thighs behind me. His gaze narrowed, and his breathing deepened, his fists clenched. I wonder if he feels it too. This attraction. I can't take the silence a second longer.

“Dani's upstairs. I didn't leave her at the club,” I blurted the first thing that came to mind. Because what else would he want? Leaning down, he placed his hands on the counter on each side of me. And my breathing was erratic because he'd caged me in and all I could think about was the veins popping out of his thick forearms.

“What were you doing with him?” he asked, completely ignoring my words. The first words out of his mouth were gravelly, deep, and set goosebumps down my arms. Can a woman cum from just a voice? I blinked and backtracked. Wait.

“Excuse me?” I’m confused because this can’t be.

“What were you doing with Van?”

My thighs spread as he eliminated the space between us. My throat ran dry as inch after decadent inch was pressed against my body. It was even better than when he caught me. My eyes widened as something hard dug into my ribs.

“What did it look like?” Clearly I have no control of the words coming out of my mouth. And I had no idea where the courage came from, but sassing the werewolf alpha was not what I had on my bingo card for this trip, but there I was. I should be worried about the important things like Dani, knowing he isn’t human, or that he’s my best friend’s dad, but right now, I can’t bring myself to care. No, I’m more focused on the fact that I want to know what his knot feels like.

“Don’t play with me, child. Were you going to give yourself to him?” he growled, like it angered him. The sound sent a jolt of electricity straight to my clit.

“Weren’t you fucking someone here just last night? I don’t see how that’s any of your business, alpha,” I taunted. My heart thrummed against his. Without even questioning it, I slid my hands up his muscled forearms. Something hot and intense buzzed between us.

“This is my pack. Everything that happens here is my business.” His pupils dilated the further my hands traveled. Leaning in so my breasts squished against his chest, I lifted my mouth, so my lips hovered an inch from his. His gaze dipped, and I ran my tongue along the bottom.

“I’m not part of your pack. Who I fuck doesn’t concern you.” His eyes flashed. I shouldn’t feel so giddy provoking him, but I do.

“I didn’t know humans were so easy. You’ll spread your legs for anyone?” His breath was warm against my lips and the urge to close the distance was strong. The way he looked at me made me feel beautiful, desirable, like I could have anyone. It’s new. It’s different. It’s empowering.

“I know the man who fucked someone yesterday and now has another woman on the same surface isn’t talking.” I laughed, but his expression didn’t change—still one of unadulterated lust. He inched back, and I was about to protest when his massive hand slid up my leg. My eyes zeroed in on the movement until it came to a halt on my thigh. It was so large. He could practically encircle my thigh with one hand, and that was impressive.

“How many have had you? Give me their names.”

“I didn’t know we were exclusive, alpha,” I teased. His eyes closed as he took a deep breath. When they opened, his fingers climbed higher, pausing at the apex of my thighs.

“Goddess. I’ve never wanted to throw a woman over my lap and spank her until her flesh turned pink as much as I do right now,” he groaned.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” I panted. Goddess, who am I right now?

“We shouldn’t do this. Tell me to stop.” He was pleading. It only turned me on more knowing I was the one tormenting him. Peering up through my lashes, I poked the inside of my cheek with my tongue.

“I shall not tell a lie,” I whispered and widened my legs. He grabbed my tights and

tore them, the sound echoing in the large room. My lips parted as I stared, breathless, eyes locked on him. My flesh was exposed, and he froze. I wore nothing underneath and now we both knew. Without hesitation, he swiped a thick digit through my wet, aching heat, and I bucked as he flicked my clit. I made a noise, and he looked me in the eyes as he brought it up to his mouth. His lips sucked the wetness, and I was ready to come undone. I was speechless.

“So fucking good,” he groaned. My toes curled. This man was nothing like anyone I’d ever been with. “Should I bring Evander back in here? Make him watch?” he threatened.

“I’m not sleeping with you without protection,” I rasped. It was alarming how ready I was to give myself to him.

“I don’t plan on taking you. Not here, not ever.” His words didn’t make sense. Is he in the same room that I’m in? Because he’d just torn my stockings and sucked my pussy juice from his fingers.

“Then what are you doing?” I smirked and crossed my arms in front of my chest.

He dropped to his knees, and the sass quite literally left my body.

“Nothing can happen between us. I’m just... having a taste.”

His eyes dropped to my exposed pussy and then his mouth was on me.

I moaned as he kissed it like he did this every day. His tongue speared me then ravaged my clit, flicking repeatedly as his thumb pushed into me.

Oh.

I dropped my hands to the counter behind me to steady myself as he did something no other man had ever done. He ate me like I was the sweetest fruit and he couldn't get enough. My hips jerked with each flick of that devilish tongue as he expertly claimed my pussy.

"I can't," I whimpered. He hummed and everything clenched. He rubbed his face against me, dragging my wetness all over his skin, his lips, and I threw my head back as I came.

"Fuck, ah," I moaned. He didn't come up for air, licking, sucking it all up like he couldn't get enough. When he pulled back, he pushed two fingers in and I twitched.

"Wait, no," I gasped. Squeezing my legs in an attempt to get him to stop, but he didn't budge.

"I'm not done with you yet," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my belly. He pushed my legs open effortlessly, and I ran my fingers through his brown hair. I meant to push him away, but as his eyes glowed and his tongue thrust in and out of me, I pulled him closer. When he curled his fingers, he hit a spot I didn't know existed. Twisting on the counter, I tried to get away, but his hand gripped my hips, and his thumb pressed against my belly button.

"Wait, Grayson—oh, shit," I moaned as he stimulated what I think is my g-spot. I've barely come down from my last orgasm and already I feel another one building.

"I need to see you." It was an order. Pulling the top of my dress down, my breasts poured out, and he bit his bottom lip.

"You're. so. hot," I rasped between his fingers thrusting into me. My muscles contracted as spots danced across my vision. His rhythm picked up and I ground my hips against him for more. He put pressure on my g-spot, and the dam released. My

vision blacked out as I screamed. Something gushed from me and when I blinked, liquid splashed his face, but that didn't deter him. If anything, it only encouraged him. His eyes darkened as he kept going, desperate for more.

"I don't know if I have anymore to give," I whimpered. Removing his fingers, he dropped his head and ran his tongue up my center. Slowly. Once. Twice. Three times. I twitched with each and sighed when he moved back. It was too early to celebrate. He pushed two fingers into me, his thumb rubbed my clit, and another pressed against my back entrance.

"Oh, no. That's not—oh!" I groaned.

"One more. You're going to give me another," he cooed. As if I hadn't given him enough. I was delirious with pleasure. Spent.

"I really don't think I can," I whimpered even as I lifted my right leg and threw it over his shoulder. He grabbed the other and did the same with it. Rubbing my own juices over my back entrance before he eased his fingers back into my pussy. His pinky pushed into my ass. With each thrust they went deeper, his pinky driving past a layer of muscle I had never explored before.

"Be my good girl and cum on my fingers one more time," he purred.

My body had a mind of its own, moving on its own accord, trying to obey as my thighs gripped the sides of his head tightly. His fingers went knuckle deep and I was there again—at the edge. He dropped his head to my clit, removing his thumb, and sucked it. I watched as the man below me moved his head left and right as he stimulated everything. Fireworks went off, and I came for him again. Just like the last two times, he licked up every last drop even as my body convulsed. Before the orgasm had even fully passed he was on his feet. His eyes trailed down to my heels and back up before he turned and walked out.

Did Dani's dad just eat me out?

Yes, three times over.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Grayson

I thought of nothing, but how she tasted.

Sweet. Wild. Mine.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Lila

After last night, I slept like a baby. Waking around noon, I got dressed in cute ripped jeans and a dark green, square-neck long sleeve. Dani texted me to meet her downstairs for brunch. Walking through the kitchen the madness I found could only be described like walking into the cafeteria. There were people sitting around the table that was long enough for apparently everyone who lived here. Jace was placing a bowl in front of Dani when I dropped into the chair next to her, but Evander was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Evander?” I asked looking down the table to see if he was sitting somewhere else.

“Reassigned,” Jace grunted before sitting next to her.

“Makes no sense really. The two of them have been by my side for years. When my first body guard retired they took his place . I can’t think of a reason why my dad would just up and move him. Especially since I’m only here on breaks, you know? I’m going to bring this up to him if he decides to come down,” Dani huffed as Jace stuffed his plate with food.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, the words catching on a lump of guilt.

“What? Don’t be. It has nothing to do with you. It’s my over-controlling father stepping in for no reason. Whatever.” She scooped up a spoon of strawberries, blueberries, and coconut from her acai bowl. I scooped some eggs, bacon, and hash browns onto my plate.

“Eat up. You’re going to need energy for our shopping trip!” she giggled, the irritation replaced with excitement. After the meal with Parker, I’d spent everything I had. There wasn’t a dollar to my name. It made my skin itch to accept so much when I couldn’t afford to buy socks, but I knew there was no getting out of this.

“Mm, are we now? You don’t want to bed rot and read all day?” I shouldn’t have been hopeful.

“Uh, no. It’s sunny and we’re going to make the most of it. There’s a bookstore in town if you want to pop in and check it out?” she offered.

“I would actually. So make sure you pencil that in. I know how you are when it comes to shopping. You always have a list of where we’re going to go first and then an order that needs to be followed,” I groaned.

“You know her well,” Jace chuckled.

“Are you coming too?” I asked. His shoulders slumped.

“He doesn’t have a choice, and not because he’s my bodyguard,” she mocked. Facing him, she booped his nose and I stifled a laugh because that was so freaking cute.

I love this for her.

She caught my eye and blushed before rolling her eyes.

“I wouldn’t let you go anywhere without me anyway. Can’t have you meeting someone else before the Blood Moon,” he growled. Something miraculous happened—Dani was speechless. Her eyes were wide and she blushed a violent shade of red and shoved his chest.

“Gag.” I grabbed my throat and pretended to choke.

“Shush, you,” she laughed.

Twenty minutes later, we were driving into town. The Rivian Dani picked for today’s trip drove smoothly. And it was probably the roomiest SUV I’d been in. There was more than enough space for all the shopping she’d got planned. Jace pulled to a stop and my best friend practically flew out.

“There’s nothing like a retail therapy session,” she sighed, a hand on her hip as she impatiently waited for me.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” When I stepped on the sidewalk, I looked up to find that we’re outside a store I’d never heard of.

“The Goddess. I told you it’s the #1 place for trending styles. She’s got a shop in a few other realms.” She was bouncing on the heels of her feet. Walking in, the doors opened automatically, and a team of retail associates rushed forward. Three of them wore white skirts and tucked in silk blouses, but one was dressed in a black skirt and matching blouse.

“Danielle. How may we be of assistance today?” the latter asked.

“Hi, Emerson. Thanks, can I get the latest collections out?”

“Yes, of course,” she answered. One of the women in white locked the door after Jace walked in before disappearing in the back with the rest. Walking further into the store, I found Dani was already sitting in a lounge chair, a glass of champagne in hand, and I shook my head. She had a look of determination and I wanted to laugh, but couldn’t stop thinking about what happened last night and wondering how I could broach that subject, or if I should. I did not want to. It was hard talking about it before

I even knew who he was. Now that I do it feels almost impossible.

“See anything you like on the floor? I promise the best is coming out if you wait a few minutes. She just dropped her Spring collection and I needed it like yesterday,” she gushed, ripping me from my spiraling thoughts.

“Look, I don’t—”

“Nope. None of that.” She glanced around and I followed her gaze. There was no one here. Jace was still in the front and the women were in the back. “We aren’t worrying today. Not about men, school, or money. Especially you. We’re on break, and this little shopping spree is on my dad. So don’t worry about the money. He’s got more than enough, but we can try to find the limit.” My heart plunged into my stomach and mingled with the butterflies at the mention of Grayson.

I’m such a shitty friend.

“Dani, I can’t—”

“You can. And you will.” She gave me that look. The one that screamed ‘end of conversation.’ The guilt was eating me up, but if I pushed on this, she would one hundred percent fight me. So I didn’t.

“Okay, but I’m going to protest it the entire time,” I teased half-heartedly.

“Oh, no. My best friend forced me to shop til I dropped,” she said in a little whiny voice, lifting her hand and holding it against her forehead.

“Ha, ha,” I deadpanned. The women appeared one at a time, pushing a rolling rack. I couldn’t see the clothes, but already knew from the material that the price tags were through the roof. The one in white came out with finger food. Dani jumped to her feet

and was in front of the first rack in the blink of an eye. Facing the next rack I fought against the burning curiosity that told me to check the price tag first.

“Oh, you need to try this one.” I turned to see a dress I might actually need .

An off shoulder mini dress the color of... a starry night sky. I grabbed the material and inhaled sharply. It slipped through my fingers like silk.

“Bitch. This is the softest thing I ever felt. And I’ve felt the pack house beds. This is... so soft,” I murmured as she dropped it in my hands and looked at the next piece, a corset styled blouse.

“See? What did I tell you? She’s your new favorite designer,” she squealed.

“Fine, you were right, but she’s my once in a lifetime favorite designer,” I laughed.

“You’re such a downer. What’s mine is yours. We should take everything, but still try it on.” My jaw dropped.

“No, no way are you buying the whole collection. Do you see all of these?” I waved at the racks.

“No. I’m not buying the whole collection,” she said, dragging out the word with a grin. “But I’ve had to fight you just to get a pair of jeans, so yes, I’m going all out today.” She pulled a skirt and held it in front of her before tossing it on the chair.

“At least give me a logical reason to trick my brain into going along with this,” I whined. Grabbing another dress from the rack, she held it up in front of her.

“The Blood Moon is tomorrow. There ya go,” she teased.

“From the little I’ve been told, I know this event isn’t for humans,” I groaned.

“Psh. Shifter human pairing is rare, but not unheard of. We’re doing things differently this year. The neighboring pack has permission to join us for this one. They’ll get 24 hour access to the veil. And I’m praying to the Goddess she has someone in mind for my dad.” Her words made my heart skip a beat.

Traitor.

“I am not looking for a mate, Dani.” But my mind was stuck on Grayson finding someone at this gathering. My stomach twisted into knots.

“I know that, but you can go and mingle with those who don’t find their mate.” She wriggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“I don’t know why I even try to have a conversation with you,” I grumbled.

“Um, because I’m the bestest, maybe? No, definitely.” She blew me a kiss and we spent the next six hours trying on every outfit. Then she ordered two of each because ‘while everything that is hers is mine, she doesn’t share.’ Which is a total lie, but I love her for this. After that we hit up an upscale place overlooking the water and ate the best food I’ve ever had. Then we went to two more boutiques before grabbing snacks for later. That night we had a sleepover, watched movies in her room, and stuffed our faces until ungodly hours.

Life is better with great friends.

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Grayson

If the upcoming Blood Moon hadn't had my urges running high and my wolf almost feral, I would have followed her. I would have been at her door, consequences be damned. But I knew I couldn't be trusted. So I was dependent on the live reports I received via link and the emails that updated me of her whereabouts. Without them, I would have been driven to madness.

Lila

The pack house underwent a transformation overnight. Soft blush roses and baby's breath were now placed on every surface and fairy lights woven into the greenery that hung from the ceiling. People piled in and butterflies flew through the living area and flowed into the backyard I hadn't had the chance to explore. The ceremony would soon be taking place out there, but I stared at the rest of the room as I waited for Dani. Singles eyed each other as I smoothed out the imaginary wrinkles in the night sky dress we got from our shopping spree. I marveled at the dark blue with stars that sparkled. The soft material hugged my curves and it was so light I felt naked.

"Boo!" Someone shoved my shoulder and I almost jumped out of my skin.

"You're evil," I hissed and grabbed my chest as Dani cackled.

"I couldn't help it! Everyone else can hear me coming, and you looked so serious. Tonight is supposed to be fun." She stepped off the stairs and grabbed my arm. Jace shadowed her, nodding at me before staring at her with so much adoration it made my heart melt.

May that love find me one day.

"You ready to find a mate?" she teased.

"Ha. Ha," I deadpanned. She shrugged.

"You never know. Who are we to question the Goddess? You're here, aren't you?"

“I’m the only thing you’ll be finding tonight,” Jace’s growl made her blush.

“On a serious note, um, there’s something I should tell you about tonight,” she started.

“Oh, no. Why do I have a feeling it’s going to be bad?” I groaned as she patted my hand.

“It isn’t. It’s just.... different. During the Blood Moon, we’re driven by our instincts.” Jace hid his laugh behind a cough.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked cautiously.

“Well... we’re a pack and... oh, fuck it. Tonight, every shifter will be driven by instincts,” she answered.

“Still not getting it.”

“Logical thinking will take a back seat as our wolves come forward. Every man and woman here will be stripped down to their base instincts—their desires. We’ll be ruled by them. Since this is a mating ceremony, there will be lots of fucking.”

“So I’m going to be witnessing an orgy?” I joked.

“Pretty much. It isn’t often, but people sometimes die because someone will try to claim a woman that isn’t their mate. Just stay away from the couples, okay?” her tone was serious.

“Okay. And those who don’t find their mate?” I wasn’t really looking forward to watching everyone get into it, but mostly, I didn’t want to watch Grayson with her again. I didn’t like the thought of that. Not one bit. Dani started leading me toward

the doors that led outside and I grimaced, preparing myself for what awaited us out of those double doors.

“They either leave or find someone to enjoy the evening with. I know you’d prefer to call it a night, and I want you to be comfortable, but please at least give it a chance.” She looked at me pleadingly as if she was begging me to change my dinner plans, not sit with people while they started having sex. There was no way I was sleeping with a stranger, but I nodded.

“Wow,” I breathed as we stepped outside. The moon was the first thing I noticed. The last time I remembered seeing it was when we arrived at the packhouse the first time and it was a bright white. Now, it was almost completely red. My gaze dropped to a trail of blush rose petals at my feet that lined a path past rows of white, oversize lounge chairs fit for the activities planned tonight. Two trees, one on the left and right of the pack house, reached high into the sky and arched together. Tables for drinks and food were set up, but no one was eating yet. Friends and couples claimed seats and it was quickly filling up.

Grayson stood at the front with arms at his sides and his head held high. The muscle in his jaw twitched as his gaze locked on mine. Nerves screamed that my presence wasn’t expected and I took a shaky breath. Blatantly, I checked him out. He was shirtless, his body almost completely covered in scars. I wanted to kiss each one, trace every muscle, and lick every ridge. My mouth dried at the happy trail that disappeared beneath black cargo slacks.

Behind him sat a chair that had to be custom made because it was twice the size as the ones meant for the guests. With my best friend at my side, the guilt was overwhelming, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I didn’t want his attention on anyone but me.

Movement dragged my eyes to the man I hadn’t even seen at his side. He had black

hair and silver glowing eyes. Almost close in size, he wore tanned cargo shorts and I wondered who he was. There was a chair behind him, and when I looked at him again, our eyes met for a second when Dani turned to me.

“We’re going to get a spot. Have fun,” she squealed. Then she was heading down the aisle, Jace’s hand on her waist possessively. She dropped onto a chair and Jace bowed to Grayson before taking a seat. This whole situation was odd, but when in Rome... I could feel the weight of his gaze on me as I made my way down the flora path, claiming a seat a row behind Dani.

I loved her, but didn’t want to be next to her when she got down to it. The seats filled and I spotted Evander with someone on the far right. I hadn’t seen him since Grayson dismissed him, but I was glad he wasn’t alone on this night, though I was disappointed because I would be spending this night without a friend. My phone vibrated and my face scrunched—Parker was calling me. I shook my head, powering it off.

“Brothers. Sisters—welcome. Tonight, the Blood Moon rises, and we’re joined by the Midnight pack. Since the dawn of time, our kind has celebrated a night where bonds were forged and blessed under the Goddess’ will. Look upon the red moon and give yourself to your desires. I pray she has mercy. May your heart follow the path written in the stars. Tonight, the moon watches. Let the Blood Moon Ceremony begin.” His voice boomed over the crowd. All heads dipped back as the moon was completely shadowed by a brilliant shade of red.

Then it happened.

Chaos.

Scanning those around me, I watched as men and women jumped from their seats. Their nose in the air, scenting before opening their eyes. Glowing yellow, a man ran

to a woman who sat in the front row. Others pounded. One woman ran, a wicked smile on her face as she threw one last glance over her shoulder at a man standing in the middle of the aisle. His skin melted away, only to be replaced by fur as bones cracked until a brown wolf stood in his place.

Holy shit.

Reading about shifters and seeing them in real life was a completely different experience. A blur passed in front of me and I pulled my knees to my chest as a man grabbed the woman seated beside me by the throat. She wore a red dress that stopped mid-thigh and he tore it down the middle. I'd laugh if I wasn't utterly shocked. He ran his nose up the side of her neck and inhaled. The act was a reminder of when Grayson had done that to me. As if summoned, my gaze rolled to where he still remained standing. His head hung and his hair covered his eyes as his shoulders rose and fell with each slow breath.

My heart celebrated that he was still alone. As if hearing my thoughts, a woman in a red lace outfit that covered nothing approached him. One look and I recognized her as the woman he'd been with when I first saw him. I curled my hands into fists as my heart had the audacity to start breaking. Yesterday, I'd been so focused on the guilt I felt for keeping what happened between me and Dani's dad from her that I hadn't prepared for this. The realization that I didn't want him to claim her hit me like a slap to the face.

I didn't know when it happened, but I was on my feet. There was no way I'd make it to them in time. It shouldn't be possible, but I felt something stretching from me and reaching for him. I'd just been in a committed relationship a few days ago, and now I wanted this man to claim me.

It was at this moment I knew I fucked up. I'd chosen wrong and wished I could do three things differently. I'd tell Dani the night I saw the handsome stranger in the

kitchen, I wouldn't have attended this ceremony because I would have told him a taste wasn't enough, and finally, I would have gone to him first. She dropped to her knees in front of him, her head bowed, and my breathing became erratic.

No, no, no.

He's mine.

Lewd noises reached my ears as the male beside me claimed his mate. The smell of sex permeated the air as bonds were made, but I kept my eyes on Grayson. He stood over her for what felt like an eternity. I waited for him to scent the air like the others had, but he didn't. Completely ignoring her presence, he lifted his head for the first time since red completely wrapped the moon, and a shudder ran through me as glowing red eyes locked on mine. She stood, head bowed, and slowly backed away. I took my first step forward and it was as if his eyes flared with approval. And then it hit me: he was waiting for me to go to him.

My throat was dry and my hands clammy as they trembled. I took another step and his chest rose as he inhaled sharply. I should have been worried about Dani, but I wasn't. He had my full attention. One foot after the other until I was only feet away. What he did next was my undoing. He lifted his nose, his hair falling back, eyes closed as he scented the air. I clenched my thighs together because he wanted to smell me. That shouldn't be as hot as it is, but here I am—crying down my thighs. Lust burned through me and a low, warning growl only made me gush more. And then he was in front of me.

Barely contained need pulsed between us. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I want to cling to him, drop to my knees, and run at the same time. Memories of his head buried between my thighs kept me right where I was. Then a ghost of a caress danced up my arm and had every hair standing. A clawed hand wrapped around my arm and in the next breath I was being lifted, tossed over his shoulder as he did a 180.

Oh.

As he carried me away , I glimpsed the crowd, most of them were fucking. Women riding men, men rutting men, and a woman being taken on the ground. This was insane, but there was no time for me to adjust. Flying through the air, something soft cushioned my back, and I bounced as he remained standing.

“What—” My eyes widened as a low growl rumbled before he hooked a finger beneath his shorts and yanked them down. My mouth watered as every delicious inch of him was exposed. From the sheer girth, I knew I couldn’t wrap my hand around him.

There’s no way that’s fitting.

My gaze trailed lower because there was more. Smooth, velvety skin met a bulge. It looked harmless, but that was supposed to go inside me. I wanted to reach out and touch him. Looking up at him, his eyes never strayed from mine. He hadn’t budged. His hands clenched into fists as he fought against his very essence—his instincts. He stood there, waiting... for me. Dani’s words came to mind. “Every man and woman here will be stripped down to their base instincts—their desires. We’ll be ruled by them.”

Knowing that he was holding himself back, even now, did something to me. My heart squeezed. Sitting up, I scooted to the edge of the chair. Standing up, I stood before a man I had a connection to that I couldn’t quite explain. A love that was written in the stars. Could this be mine? With the moon at my back and him to my front, no one could see me, and I made up my mind. Bunching the material of my dress in my palms, I slowly lifted it. His breathing hollowed out as I dropped it to the floor. And finally, his eyes left mine, dipping as he took in my neck, my breasts, the loose skin of my stomach to where my thighs rubbed.

“Grayson,” I whispered. Then he was on me. He caged me in, his hands cradled my head as we landed. His body pressed against every soft curve of mine. Smoky cedar comforted me, but didn’t wipe my memory of the soda-can thick third limb that now poked my breast. Now on my back, I stared into the eyes of both the wolf and the man.

“I crave you,” he gritted, voice low and strained. I wrapped my arms around his neck. The hunger in his eyes mirrored my own and barely contained lust surged through me as muscles rippled beneath my fingers.

“You have me.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 3, 2025, 12:56 am

Grayson

Those three little words were my undoing.

Lila

A powerful growl reverberated against my chest. There was no more talking as he lowered his body to mine. It tingled; the feeling spread as his lips slid along my shoulder. My fingers dug into the hair at the base of his neck as he nipped at my neck before lowering to my chest, leaving a trail of heat behind. I arched as his tongue flicked a sensitive nub. My breathing picked up as he teased it and then kissed the curve of my breast before doing the same with the other. I didn't think, didn't freak out, didn't wonder if this was the right thing. It was effortless with him.

I watched as he nipped at the sensitive bud. Lifting, I pushed against him. Need ran rampant and he was the only one who could quench this thirst, but he was in no rush. Opening his mouth, he sucked my breast in, and sucked. Hard. Eliciting a moan as he rubbed the other nipple between his index and thumb. With each suck, the pressure grew, and he switched and repeated with the other. I whined, needing more, needing his focus lower. One second he was making his way lower and the next I was upright straddling his head. He squeezed my hips.

"What're you doing?" I rasped, looking over my shoulder to see if anyone was looking, but they're too busy. Turning around, I looked down at him. This position was lewd, but I knew what that tongue felt like.

"Sit on my face. Ride it til you cum," he ordered. His words went straight to my clit. When I took too long, his hands dragged me down by the hips. He kissed my pussy as I lowered, and my hips jerked.

"Grayson," I moaned as his wet, hot tongue slid between my lips. Pulling me down as

he drove deeper. Out. In. Dragging along my walls. Twitching with each movement, I needed more. I wanted to cum. Leaning down, I ground against his face, chasing what I needed. Taking what I craved as his tongue matched my drive. His hands gripped my ass cheeks as he helped move me faster, hitting the same spot repeatedly.

“Yes, yes, yes. Just like that. Oh,” I whimpered as he did exactly as I asked. Shaking his head, spreading my wetness all over his face, I clenched, his nose flicking against my clit as I came. He groaned and continued spearing into me with his tongue, lifting and dropping me so he was tongue fucking me through my orgasm. I slumped as he cleaned me. Then he slipped out from beneath me and somehow I was on my back. Breasts out, thighs spread, Grayson on his knees, gripping the base of his cock—I was speechless.

“I’ve thought of nothing but your pussy since I had you last. If you smothered me to death, I’d go happily. You taste so fucking good, Lila. So. fucking. good. I didn’t think it could get any better, but seeing you like this? Naked on my mating bed? Ready for my cock? Fuck. I was wrong. You’re fucking beautiful,” he groaned. I was already warm, but my face heated as his words touched me. The simple admission of wanting me made me feel happier than I had in a long time. He thinks I’m pretty, and I might just be a vain woman, but I’ve only ever wanted to be seen.

How is it possible for a man I barely know to make me feel this way?

“Fuck me, Grayson. I know you’re holding back. Let go and fuck me,” I whispered. I jolted when his cock slapped against my pussy. His mouth hung open as he eased the tip in. My lashes fluttered as I watched more of him disappear. My muscles tightened at the pinch. I wasn’t a virgin, but I had taken my time with Parker. It just never felt right, but it only added to the time from when I’d last slept with someone. No amount of preparing would be enough for him. He had the type of dick you couldn’t get enough foreplay with. This was going to hurt, but it would hurt so good. His eyes were on me, but mine watched as he stretched me past my limits. My vision blurred

and a tear escaped. He cupped it and I looked up at him as he swiped it away. Slowly, he slid deeper and I shook my head in disbelief. Reaching for him, I dug my nails into his forearm.

“Such a good girl. You’re taking me so well.” Warmth spread in my chest at his praise.

“It hurts,” I cried. Peering down, there was still more of his cock though I felt overly full. How is there still more?

“You can take it, Lila,” he said, his voice tight with restraint.

My guts disagreed. It felt like he was pushing against the inside of my stomach, piercing areas he had no business being in. And then he was in and the bulge at the base of his cock pressed against my pussy. I was so unbelievably full, my lips stretched wide, my stomach hurting from the pressure.

“Too much. Way too much,” I whimpered as I moved up the oversized chair so that some of him pulled out.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he groaned as he grabbed my hip, pulling me back, filling me again.

“Fuck,” I moaned as I looked up at him. Sweat rolled down his temple. Not from exhaustion, but from restraining himself.

“Look at how perfectly we fit.” His tone was filled with lust as he withdrew. Looking down, I watched as inch after wet inch slid out of me. Before he was completely out, he was filling me again, and I swore I could feel him beneath my ribs. It’s too much. The pleasure and pain mingled and I didn’t know which one I was feeling. He didn’t give me time to fucking breathe before he was doing it again.

And again.

And again.

He was pounding into me, holding me still so I didn't scoot up the chair. I've nowhere to go. No choice but to take it. There's nothing but him. My breasts bounced with every slap of his hips. The sound of flesh against flesh only pushed me closer to the edge. I clawed and scratched at him and bit into my lower lip as I took him.

"Open for me. Breathe, baby," he grunted. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as he drove into me.

"Ah, ah." I couldn't string sentences together. The only thing I could do was take it. His thumb pinched my clit and I saw stars. I was squeezing him, but he wasn't done. He violently rubbed my sensitive nub as he picked up speed.

"You're so tight," he hissed. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he drove into me.

"Oh, fuck! Grayson." His name was a prayer on my lips.

"One more. I need you coming around my cock," he growled. I wriggled as he used two fingers this time on my clit. Reversing, he switched the rhythm and I was there.

"Don't stop," I rasped.

"Never," he groaned.

I fell apart.

"I'm coming. Oh, I'm coming," I cried, tears streaming as I watched his thick cock stab into me. Then—he glitched. Blinking, heart stuttering, I couldn't be seeing this

right. But it happened again. I wasn't mistaken. The man who'd been fucking me—who'd worshipped me—morphed. His spine arched, claws ripping through skin, and I froze. My breath caught somewhere between a gasp and a moan, terror and wonder collided.

As his form twisted and expanded, my body heated, the fear only making me want him more. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I knew he wasn't human, but it wasn't just this moment that I realized he wasn't just a man. He was far more dangerous. Intoxicating. And still, I wanted him. All of him.

The furry two-legged creature above me now had a snout, furry ears, and a black coat that covered every inch of skin. And somehow, he grew inside of me. Pushing the limits, squishing my insides, and then he withdrew. Leaving me stretched, hollow, and arching.

Clawed hands flipped me so I was on all fours. My hands gave out and my face hit the chair as his massive cock slapped loudly against my ass. Looking over my shoulder, it wasn't a wolf, but a mix of the two behind me. When the red moon first appeared, I'd seen a man shift, but he'd become a large wolf. This wasn't that, but a wolfish beast. And it was now that I realized he hadn't cum. I couldn't remember what Dani said about the knot, but I saw a massive wolf earlier—not a two legged creature. She didn't say anything about another form.

I couldn't form another thought because he breached me. He was larger than anyone I had been with. Filling me, pushing deeper, until he was fully seated. His knot pressed at my entrance, my belly full, as saliva dripped down my cheek and pooled. I clawed at fabric as he pulled out of me, my body squeezed around air, but he didn't leave me for long. In the next motion, he thrust his full length into me.

“Good little mate,” he growled. My eyes crossed as he pounded my thoroughly used pussy. I grabbed blindly at whatever I could. My body jerked forward as a hand

wrapped around my throat, lifting so I had to arch back to look up at him. Even in this form he was beautiful. Glowing red eyes stared down at me. He dipped, and then his long red tongue lapped at my cheek. The chair moved with each thrust and then something happened—the bulge pushed against my pussy, but instead of just hitting it, it slid partially in. I shook my head.

“Yes. You’ll take my knot.” There was no arguing with him, but I couldn’t.

“I can’t!” I whined. His knot hit against my aching sex over and over again. Each time easing in a little more than the last.

“You can, and you will.” His grip on my neck was firm. He wasn’t letting me go. His gaze was locked on my face. And then there was nothing but pain.

“Hurts,” I sobbed.

Shlop.

My mouth fell open as my vision blurred as I screamed. It was inside me. It was impossible, but I’d taken it—his knot. But he didn’t give me time to adjust. There was no adjusting to this.

“Perfect. So perfect. You’ve done it, Lila.” Grayson kissed my tears as he slowly fucked me. I was filled to the brink of breaking. His knot moved within me and his thrusts picked up. I didn’t know how I hadn’t passed out. I was so full. The pain ebbed. It was still there, but as he picked up speed, pleasure built low in my belly. He released my neck and I dropped. My face flush against the material as he lowered his chest to my back. His hips rocked and then I felt his knot expanding. Pain erupted along my neck as canines tore through flesh.

Unbelievably full, he fucked me harder and I clawed, cried, begged as my orgasm

tore through me. My legs shook, my back arched, and stars danced across my vision as Grayson locked me in, his knot so large he could no longer move inside me. His cock buried deep within me as he came. Heat warmed my belly as splash after splash of his seed filled any remaining space. Canines slid out of my neck and his wet tongue lapped at where he'd bitten.

Something hit my chest and grew as he lifted me. Moving back so that I was cradled in his arms. He grabbed a blanket and covered me. I don't know where it came from, but I was too far gone to care. My eyes were drifting as my head lolled against his soft, furry chest.

"You took me so well, Lila," he praised. My body twitched as he continued pumping into me. My lashes fluttered closed, but not before the gentlest of touches ran through my hair.

Lila

An overwhelming heat encompassed me, pulling me from sleep. Sometime after I'd blacked out, we'd moved from the backyard to his room. Sunlight slanted through floor-to-ceiling windows, streaks of gold dashed across the sheets tangled around my legs. The room, no, the world was filled with a silence that either came after or before something big—like a life changing event. My gaze locked on the massive arm hanging over my waist. Trailing up his chiseled torso to the wide shoulders, I tilted my head back and looked into the sleeping face of my... mate.

I flinched. My body was deliciously sore. The events of last night replayed and my face heated. Grayson's scent lingered in the air and mixed with something darker, more primal. I pulled the sheet tighter around me before realizing I wore one of his shirts—the soft material hanging off my shoulder, unbuttoned, leaving me exposed. Was that all a dream? Am I still dreaming? The mark on my neck throbbed, heat curling under my skin like a burning reminder. My fingers brushed it.

It was real.

That really happened.

Grayson claimed me as his mate.

Dani came to mind and I sat up. Gasping from the pain, a hand wrapped around my arm and pulled me back. Almost as if refusing to let me escape to reality. I was powerless as I fell back into his embrace, meeting red eyes that were no longer glowing, and he stared down at me with amusement.

“I thought you were asleep,” I whispered.

“No, I figured you needed a moment to yourself. Were you going to make a break for it?” he murmured, his voice thick with sleep. The rays highlighted his frame—mussed sex hair, a hint of a dimple in his smirk, and a sharp jaw. He had a look in his eyes, like he was preparing for something.

“I wasn’t running away. As surprising as the events of last night are, I regret nothing,” I said honestly. His finger found my hair, brushing it back before trailing down the curve of my throat. His gaze darkened as it paused on the mark he’d left.

“Good. I have no plans on letting you go.” My heart thudded at his words. I was desperate for this man. Goddess, I wanted to believe him. Sliding my hand up his chest, I took a deep breath.

“We have to tell Dani,” I whispered. His eyes danced as he cupped my cheek, thumb grazing my jaw.

“She knows. The whole pack does.” I sucked in a sharp breath and shuddered.

“Does she hate me?” I whispered.

“Never. It’s me she’s angry with.” My lips parted, my brows jumped. Looking out the window, I saw the forest swaying in the breeze as the lake beyond glinted like glass.

“When Dani picked me up on the side of the road and brought me through the veil, I thought my world had been flipped on its axis. Little did I know that was just the beginning. One moment, I’m watching you being intimate with someone else, and in the blink of an eye, I’m running down the aisle to you. Everything moved so quickly, but I have no qualms about it. You’re my love written in the stars. Waking up, wrapped in your arms, marked is not where I expected to find myself, but I welcome it. It feels so right and I want it.”

“I swear on the Goddess, I’ll never hurt you, never stray. I’m sorry it was shitty before, but you’re here now, and you’re safe. This is new for me too, but I’m not taking it lightly. You were made for me.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead and my heart swooned.

“It’s going to take me time to figure out what my life is going to look like now. Where do I stand in this world? How do I fit? Will your people accept me?” I stumbled over my worries as he caressed my cheek.

“You stand at my side. You fit perfectly. They will accept you because I’ve claimed you. Being Luna is something you will learn. There’s time.” A comfortable silence filled the room. Being this close to him, his heartbeat thumped against me, the heat of his skin—everything about this moment felt safe. His fingers traced slow circles along my spine, sending shivers through me.

“There’s no rush and no standard. I’m happy to have you here with me. The rest will fall into place.” His shared truth was a relief. My throat tightened, and I blinked fast to stop the tears from falling. It hadn’t been long since I was staying with Dani because I had no place to go, my heart breaking because the man who was supposed to love me harmed me, and I felt so ugly. In the short amount of time I’d been with Grayson he’d shown me that he was patient and comforted me in a way my boyfriend of a year never had. My stomach rumbled loudly, and I died of embarrassment. Covering my face in shame, I was lifted in his arms and placed on the edge of the bed.

“What’re you doing?” I groaned.

“We both heard your demand. Or would you prefer to go downstairs like this?” His gaze darkened as it trailed down my exposed flesh as his shirt hit my knees. “I love it, but I don’t want anyone else seeing what’s mine.”

“I am not going downstairs like this. I think everyone saw enough last night,” I

squeaked. He smirked.

“I had a few things brought from your room,” he said. And then he did the sweetest thing. He lay a few outfits on the bed. Once I’d chosen a black skirt and an oversized pullover, I removed his shirt and dressed. There were stolen touches from where the skirt stopped on my thigh to pulling my hair out from under the material. I felt his need to be near me in the silence as he patiently helped me, in the light kiss on my hair, and in the way his hand rested possessively on my hip.

“We need to go right now, or we’re not leaving this room,” he promised. My lips parted and I blushed as he led me to the door. As soon as he opened it, I froze because on the other side stood Dani. Dressed in a velvet romper, her hair was clipped back, her neck on display as she sported a fresh mark. Two twinkling stars where Jace claimed her. Speaking of, he stood behind her. His head dipped as he greeted... me. And then Grayson. She reached out, and hugged me.

“This is all so weird, but honestly? I’m glad it’s you.” Her voice was genuine and made me tear up. I hugged her back tightly.

“I was worried. I didn’t know what you were going to say,” I sobbed.

“Don’t be. Are you okay?” she whispered against my hair.

“Yes... it’s overwhelming, but right.” She nodded at my words.

“We’ll catch up... I love you, but keep the dad details to a minimum. You can fill me in on the rest,” she whispered as we broke apart. I giggled as she cringed. Dani’s presence—warm and unapologetically her—was the final piece of reassurance I needed.

“So you and Jace?” I asked. She nodded, holding back tears of her own.

“Finally. I’ve known him for years. I think deep down I knew, but wasn’t ready. Going into last night, I was ready. He was going to take me as his mate no matter what. The Goddess doesn’t make mistakes, but I’m so happy it turned out he was my other half,” she said firmly. Grayson groaned behind me and Jace coughed. She looked at her dad and I moved so she could hug him.

“I’m happy for you,” she whispered.

“Me too. Congratulations on finding your mate, baby,” he murmured. Then she pulled away and looped her arm with mine. We turned and made our way down the hallway as the guys followed.

“You may be mates, but don’t think this gets you out of girls’ night. We are not letting these marks hold us back from living our best life,” she boasted, daring the guys to say anything.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I swore. We ignored the grumbling at our backs as we stopped at the stairs. Jace stepped forward and walked down with Dani. I turned to Grayson, his arm extended, and I stepped into his embrace.

We stood there, staring over the buzzing packhouse below, the sun lighting the massive building naturally as the surrounding forest swayed gently in the breeze. I breathed him in, letting go of the last whispers of doubt telling me I didn’t deserve to be here. There was a lot to discuss and figure out, but I didn’t need all the answers right now. I had this man, my mate, this new beginning, and my best friend in this new realm. He squeezed me tight as if hearing my thoughts.

“We’ll take this one day at a time, Lila. Together.”

We descended the staircase, hand-in-hand. My heart pounded as a few heads turned, but relief washed over me when smiles and nods greeted us.

“Alpha. Luna,” someone murmured. The other alpha, stepped forward, nodded at Grayson, then to me.

“Congrats on your pairing,” he rumbled.

“Thank you,” we said in unison, then turned to each other. His eyes danced as he smiled for me.

More stepped up and did the same. Their soft acceptance wrapped around me like a blanket. I wasn’t rejected. I was seen. I had a new family... a new home. And I was his. Maybe I didn’t know what came next, but whatever it was, we’d face it together.