



Reclaiming Home (Build-A-Pack #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Brodie McRae is content. As a lone wolf and a sometimes Dom, he's surrounded himself with good friends and made a life for himself on the opposite side of the country from where he spent his youth. But when he gets word that there are problems in his old pack, he flies back to Pennsylvania to confront his uncle, the current alpha. In one heated moment in defense of a young woman, Brodie's life is irrevocably changed. Now he's the alpha of a splintered pack, and it's his responsibility to make his former home safe and beautiful again.

For two years, Kynan Rossi has been searching for his lost sister. He's given up everything to find her and will not stop until he does. When Kye gets the call he's been desperately hoping for, he drops everything to go to a small town to be with her. The last thing he expects is to find a gorgeous Alpha starting anew.

The instant they meet, Brodie knows that Kye is his mate. Except the timing couldn't be worse. He's rebuilding a pack from scratch, his childhood home needs serious renovations, and his cousins need help getting sober before they can rejoin the pack. But Kye is everything Brodie didn't know he wanted and the attraction between them won't be denied. As Kye steps up, learning about wolf culture and helping to make the house a home, Brodie is determined to keep Kye forever.

Slowly and surely, everything comes together. Kye and Brodie's mating is the easy next step. As their love grows, so does their pack. But outside forces threaten the safety they've built. Brodie has reclaimed his home, and with Kye by his side, nothing will stop the McRae pack from flourishing.

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Brodie

I sat on a nice leather couch in one of the playrooms of my favorite kink club in Seattle, with my best friend on my lap. His violently red curls cascaded over my shoulder with the way he'd flipped them to one side.

"You feelin' good, sweetness?" I asked, petting his hip near the strap of his jock.

"Mhmm...", Rian managed to reply. He was still not quite back from his flight, as he called subspace.

We had a two hour slot booked and had half an hour left, so we were in no rush. For two completely platonic friends, we meshed well in the kink ways, and sometimes, like tonight, we would scene together.

It mostly happened when neither of us could find anyone else and/or when we wanted something safe and comfortable. Kink wasn't all about excitement for us, it was about comfort, too. A release without the sexual component was still a release. We'd stuck to non-sexual play after figuring out we didn't really feel like that about each other years ago.

I felt energized instead of sleepy, like I often did when I saw my submissive fly. It wasn't a given, of course, and most of the time it was hard work to get a sub there, but I tried my best and when it did happen, it was the best thing. On occasion, it got me to Domspace, too. That's why I didn't need to get off physically.

I wasn't what someone might call a lifestyle Dom. I went long periods without

finding a play partner, and had never had a live-in boyfriend who was also my submissive. I didn't see that in my future, either. I was good with people when I had to be, but I was a solitary being by choice outside Rian and some friends I ran with on full moons.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. Rian didn't react, so I just squeezed him harder.

"Come in," I called, knowing that nobody would interrupt if it wasn't important.

One of the club's submissives, Tino, peered in. "I'm so sorry, Sir, but you said to watch your phone?"

Instantly, I was on alert. "What happened?"

"Your sister has tried to call, twice."

Rian perked up at that. "Check what she wants," he murmured, gesturing for Tino vaguely.

Tino stepped inside and handed me my phone.

"Well done, boy," I told him, half-distracted already.

"Thank you, Sir." He quickly left the room.

I'd only asked Tino to keep an eye on my phone for any calls from my current boss or my sister while he'd been doing inventory in the back of the bar. With Rian right there with me, I didn't have anyone else I would've interrupted a scene for.

Rian made to move off my lap, but I didn't let him yet. I saw three missed calls from

“Sister” now. Bella was six years older, and our relationship was difficult, but we were the only blood family we had left that we cared about. Well, there were two cousins, but we weren’t close.

I swiped to call her back. The ring tone had barely time to play twice before she answered.

“Brodie,” she said, and immediately I knew something was wrong from her tone.

“What’s going on, Sis?”

“I hope I’m not interrupting—”

“I’m at the club with Rian, but we were done.”

“Hi, Bella,” Rian singsonged tiredly.

“Oh, sorry, hi Rian. I wouldn’t have called if it wasn’t kind of urgent. I guess?”

“You guess?” I kept from sighing, barely.

“Ben called. He thinks there’s something going on at Rusty’s.”

The way my stomach filled with lead was impressive. Rian heard everything Bella was saying and frowned, coming out of the remnants of his subspace a bit faster than I would’ve liked.

“Okay?” I asked, wondering where this was going. It could be anything, knowing Uncle Rusty and how he ran his excuse of a pack these days.

“Apparently, their mom finally left him like eight months ago. She’s gone, the boys

don't know where she is and good for her, but Ben says he and Max have been hearing rumors that there's a girl at the pack house."

Immediately, my skin crawled at her words, but even more her tone.

Barely managing to keep the growl out of my voice, I asked, "How old?"

I heard her swallow through the phone. "Young. Some rumors say she's underage."

"Why hasn't the Sheriff checked it out?" Rian asked suddenly.

"There's a new deputy sheriff who doesn't get along with Rusty. Old man Hayes retired last year and the new guy is a bitten wolf, apparently. Apparently the actual sheriff doesn't bother with Luxton if he can avoid it, so he's not help, either."

I hissed and Rian grimaced.

Uncle Rusty was the worst kind of speciest. He was a born wolf and lived with the belief that humans were a lower species, bitten wolves were only marginally better but kind of disgusting, and vampires were really not people at all.

"I also assume that if they have gone to check and she's eighteen, there's nothing they can do unless she tells them she's being held against her will or something," she concluded what I'd just thought.

I sighed. "What do you want me to do about it? It's not exactly a short trip to Bumfuck, Pennsylvania from Seattle."

She was silent for a moment, then said, "You know how much Mom loved that house."

I pulled my phone away from my ear and smacked it against my forehead. The fact that she pulled the mom-card was unfair, but I understood why she'd do it. Rian's long fingers closed around my wrist and stopped me.

"And what if she is being abused? Held against her will? Brodie, I don't...." It was her little sob that made me hate her a bit. She knew what she was asking and she knew I wouldn't be able to say no.

The worst part was that I couldn't even blame her for this reaction. Not after what had happened to her growing up in the pack house. Not after she had had to run away to save herself even if it drove a wedge between us for fifteen years.

"Okay. I'll go look," I finally murmured. "I need to clear it with my boss, but it should be fine."

Pack politics were tricky. Our mother had been a born wolf who met a human man, fell in love, and was booted from her pack for it. Our grandpa who passed away before our time had been the Alpha back then, and he'd been as shitty about other species as Rusty, his son, was later down the line.

Because of how the genes distributed, mom had two kids who turned out one wolf and one human, as if the universe had decided to demonstrate the 50/50 chance in play when a human and a werewolf had children.

I was a wolf, Bella was human.

Our dad passed away when I was seven and Bella was thirteen. Because Mom had been a stay at home mom, we really needed help. That's when we moved from Georgia to Pennsylvania. Mom said that the pack would help. That was what wolf packs were meant to be after all; big, protective families who took care of each other through thick and thin.

The reality was... not quite as nice. At least not in our pack.

I'd decided to fly to the nearest airport I could and then I rented a car to drive the rest of the way into the pack's property nestled inside Allegheny National Forest. There was a town about twenty miles from the house, and the closest neighbors, at least when I still lived there, were five miles away.

As I drove through Luxton, I realized how little had changed. There were many more closed storefronts, but there were also some new shops. It almost seemed... quaint.

I snorted at the thought. This town had never been kind to me. Even if I didn't share my uncle's last name, everyone knew everyone and I was forever tainted by the stench of Rusty Douglas.

Before I got all the way through town, I parked for a while by the street and texted my cousins and Bella.

"I'm in town. Going to the house. Anything else anyone's heard or that I should know?"

It took a minute for Bella to wish me luck, then Max piped up.

"Only that Dad has two betas left. They're all strung out as fuck."

"We should know."

I frowned at Ben's words. They were both addicts, they'd admitted as much. I couldn't blame them, really. Not with how they'd grown up and how normalized using whatever took you away for a while had been.

"Okay. If you guys don't hear from me within two hours, call the sheriff's office."

They all sent a version of “stay safe,” but I knew this was something I needed to do alone.

Ben and Max were still technically part of Rusty’s pack, and that brought some werewolfy fuckery with it. They couldn’t ignore his command completely. He wouldn’t be able to tell them to hurt me, but he could tell them to not do anything at all.

That meant they were useless for me as backup, and so alone I would go.

My phone rang as I was a few miles outside of town.

“Hey, sweetness,” I told Rian.

“You driving? Hands free on?”

I chuckled. “Of course.”

“Good.” He always wanted everyone safe. “What’s the ETA?”

“Depending on a few things, I should know what’s going on within half an hour at the most.”

“Ugh, I hate waiting. I wish you would’ve let me go with you.”

“I know, Ri. But you also know why I couldn’t.”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

We breathed together for a while. We did that sometimes, just to feel connected to each other when one of us needed someone right there but it wasn’t physically

possible.

“I hope this goes well,” I said finally after a couple of minutes. “But if it doesn’t, if something happens... well.”

“Bella will call me. I know.” Rian’s voice was sad and solemn at the same time. “But she won’t need to call me, because you will.”

I smiled slightly. I wished I could promise him that, but I wasn’t sure. You never could be with Rusty.

“I’ll call you. Love you, sweetness.”

“Love you too, Brodie.” He ended the call before I could say anything else.

We’d been friends for nearly a decade. On his scale, it wasn’t a long time, but he still said I was the best friend he’d ever had in his couple of hundred years. Rian was a vampire who had been turned right after the Great Famine in Ireland in the late 1850s. It felt nuts, that he was that old, but then again there were vampires that were much, much older.

Rian was unique. He had his sad, darker moments when life was a lot for him, but his personality was mostly kind of happy and upbeat in a way I couldn’t say I had ever been. We complemented each other, and I thanked whatever deity was listening every day that we had never been romantically attracted to each other, because we would’ve fucked this up already.

The closer I got to the pack house, the weirder it felt. I hadn’t been back in over ten years, so everything seemed the same while also incredibly different.

There were old fence posts on either side of the dirt road that led to the house miles

away from it to mark where the property line was located. A banged up, weathered sign warning about private property barely hung from a tree next to the right side post.

I snorted. Everyone in town knew that this was the Douglas pack's lands. Nobody would trespass. It was for potential strangers, and there weren't many that ended up this deep in the woods when the best hiking routes and such were on the opposite side of town.

The only one trespassing today was me.

It surprised me that I wasn't feeling nerves. As a wolf without a pack, I was weaker than wolves who were under an Alpha's protection. Which, in this case, seemed ridiculous because my uncle wasn't much of an Alpha. His betas would still be stronger than they would look, I was sure, just because they belonged to his pack.

Technically, Max and Ben were non-beta members of the pack. The old packs of yore had had more designations than the modern ones did. Every wolf would fall under the "Alpha, beta, or other" system, and their jobs within the pack were whatever the pack wanted them to be. Back in the day there had been omegas, but that was more of a rank than any actual task, and so omegas had become the non-betas eventually.

I wiped all of that out of my mind when I got to the spot of the winding driveway that rose up over a little hill before evening out again. Soon, there would be a bend, and then the big old house would rise from the woods like a movie prop that had been built there, because it seemed so unlikely for a house like it to be there, truly in the middle of nowhere.

As soon as I slowed down to see where I could park in the yard and lifted my gaze to the house, I gasped.

What the everloving fuck had happened here? The house looked like it hadn't been fixed in the last thirty years, when I knew for a fact that once upon a time it had been well-maintained. Now, it had holes in the roof and there were boarded-up windows, too. The once lovely dark green paint was faded and chipped, and the gutters were hanging all wrong.

The barn doors were open, with a scrawny, unwashed man stumbled out of it, hastily closing them.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I murmured under my breath.

They really had turned the barn into a meth lab, hadn't they?

I parked between two beat up pickups and got out of the car.

I was six foot four and 220 pounds of muscle. This guy was a strawman. He did a double-take when he took me in, then banged his fist against the door he'd closed and tried to puff up.

"What can I help you with?" he asked, strolling over.

Another guy looking like him came out of the barn. I could smell the chemicals on them, and I wondered how long it had taken for the two of them to stop smelling that. It couldn't be easy for wolf senses.

"I'm here to see Rusty." I gave them a bored expression. "He around?"

The front door of the house banged open and my uncle stepped out.

"What the hell? Is that little Brodie McRae?"

I pushed a small smile out and chuckled. “Uncle Rusty.”

He walked down the steps, and I could tell he had lost a lot of weight from his glory days. He had to be in his mid-fifties now but appeared like a seventy-year-old. I could see the gaps in his yellowed teeth and hid my disgust. He’d been a handsome, fit man in his youth.

We shook hands and I glanced around.

“Not much has changed here,” I stated as I let go of his hand.

“Nah, why change the good stuff,” he said as if any of our surroundings was good. A sudden gust of wind blew across the yard and he shivered in his T-shirt, even though wolves weren’t that susceptible to cold. “Come on in.” He looked at the betas, who were trying to do their job by being cautious of me. “You two can go back to work, it’s just my nephew. He grew up here.”

I wasn’t here for a fight, and his wolf could sense it. However, I would do whatever I needed to keep myself safe.

Following him up the creaky porch steps, I kept cataloging the signs of complete and utter disrepair the house had fallen into. It pissed me off more than the meth lab, because I had loved this house. It had been the best part of my teen years.

The inside wasn’t much better, but it was clear someone had tried to keep it clean.

“Come, let’s go sit in the kitchen,” Rusty said and led the way through the open doorway.

“Oh,” I said when I noticed the young woman by the stove.

She had long, dark hair and her scent didn't have the woodsy notes a wolf's would have. She was human.

As she turned her head to peer at me from underneath her hair, I could see she had a black eye that spread over her nose to her other eye as well. The thin dress she was wearing was stained, and her bare arms had bruises all over. My stomach turned.

"Hi," I said to her, which made Rusty snort.

"She don't talk. She ain't got the brain." He stood by the kitchen table and pulled a chair. "She's got a few decent holes though, so at least she's useful that way."

The way she flinched at his words and the pure hatred in her eyes told me more than a thousand words.

"Isn't she a bit young?" I asked conversationally, my gaze falling on my uncle again.

"She's nineteen. Old enough and, you know, not young enough at the same time, if you know what I mean, sonny."

Something inside me snapped. I had him slammed into the wall before I knew what I was doing. "You piece of fucking shit!"

His amusement turned into panic when he realized how much bigger I was, how much stronger. Alphas didn't need to be strong after all, they had betas for that.

"Is this about your whore of a sister?" he sputtered. Then his eyes rolled back, and I realized it was because I'd snapped his neck.

I let the body drop as my wolf puffed up inside. It absorbed the energy from the wolf within my uncle as life left him. The surge of the alpha power made me twitch, and I

knew my eyes were flashing red. Well, shit.

I turned to the girl who had backed into the gap between the fridge and the wall.

“I won’t hurt you. Nobody will hurt you ever again,” I vowed, my voice rumblier than I liked. I sighed. “Give me ten minutes to deal with the betas, and I’ll come back and we’ll sort this out, okay?”

She stared at me with obvious fear, but nodded rapidly. “Okay,” she whispered.

“What’s your name?” I asked, and she seemed shocked that I wanted to know.

“Carys.”

“Okay, Carys. I promise things will get better.” With that, I left the kitchen and walked out the door.

The betas burst out of the barn, their wolves finally having clued in that something was amiss.

I let my eyes light up and snarled at them. “You are not part of this pack anymore. Your Alpha is dead. You have twenty minutes to gather whatever you want out of the house and the barn, take those trucks and go.”

Neither of them seemed sad or upset about Rusty. Both of them glanced back at the barn and then to me.

“Yes. Take all the stuff from there you want. It’ll be destroyed otherwise. Same with whatever is yours in the house.”

They spoke quietly and quickly, then one darted into the barn and the other slinked

toward me.

“And don’t even look at Carys,” I ground out the words.

“Who?” the idiot asked, and I let out a sound that was more wolf than man.

He ducked past me and bolted inside.

As I followed more sedately, I dug out my phone and took a selfie with the red of my eyes showing. Then I texted it to my sister and cousins with the caption “oops?” Then I sent it to Rian with a “so I guess this happened.”

I’d never had the beta yellow eyes, let alone the Alpha red ones. Mine had always glowed the non-beta green, and while I felt when the color changed as it kind of narrowed my field of view a little, I’d never really thought about the color before. From now on, they’d be red, and I had trouble wrapping my head around the change, but I guessed I’d had the rest of my life to get used to it, not that it mattered much in the bigger picture. I had more things to worry about.

I put the phone back into my pocket and walked in. I could hear sounds of frantic packing from upstairs. I ignored it and glanced into the kitchen.

Rusty’s corpse was still on the floor, but Carys was gone. I went into the family room instead and grimaced at the nasty couches. Someone, likely Carys, had tried to cover them with blankets, but they couldn’t really be salvaged.

Everything smelled like cleaning products that were too strong to my nose, but they covered a lot of the disgusting smells underneath, so I’d take it. I was pretty sure the pack had lost part of their sense of smell to be able to deal with this, but I guessed drugs would do that to a wolf and Carys wouldn’t notice.

I slipped back into the hall and stood there, leaning to the kitchen doorway.

Carys came down the stairs first. She wore jeans and a T-shirt and clearly felt pissed off.

“They should be gone soon,” I told her, when she startled at a louder bang from behind her somewhere.

She nodded and went to stand in the family room doorway across from me. We stayed there awkwardly, while the former beta did his thing upstairs.

He ran down the stairs with two filled to the brim duffle bags, grabbed the keys to the trucks from the hook by the door. He took one last look back, sneering at Carys, then glared at me.

“Get the fuck off my property,” I told him and jerked my body toward him.

He burst through the door, and I walked out onto the porch to watch the proceedings.

He tossed the bags into one of the trucks and then he and the other idiot carried stuff out of the barn at full speed. They deemed themselves done within my time limit and tried to act tough as they climbed into the trucks and drove off.

I heard a long, relieved sigh from behind me and saw Carys standing by the window next to the door.

I went back inside and gave her my most compassionate expression. “Is there anyone I can call for you?”

She nodded seriously. “My brother.”

“Okay. Let me call the sheriff first. We need to deal with Rusty.”

Clearing her throat, she asked, “What do you need me to say?”

I smiled. “How about the truth?”

“No, I mean about you and him? Why you killed him?”

I hadn’t really thought about that. I shrugged. “Let’s say he was trying to lunge at you? It’s obvious that’s....” I gestured at her face.

She frowned. “Yeah. That’ll work.” She gestured at her body. “I’m pretty damn bruised all over.”

I glanced into the kitchen and wished I could kill the bastard again.

I took out my phone and handed it to her. “How about you call your brother? Rusty isn’t going anywhere.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

I rubbed my face, tired as fuck at... well, the world. I was exhausted. I was pretty sure I shouldn't be this sick of the whole universe at twenty-four.

I was browsing some missing people Facebook groups, scrolling through familiar names of other family members who had been searching for at least as long as I had.

"Hey, sorry I'm late!" my best friend, Henry said breezily, kissed my cheek, and sat down across from me.

"It's fine," I murmured.

And it was fine, really. I had nothing else to do today other than having coffee with him while he was on his lunch break—my back straightened as I saw a post about a young girl having gone missing from the same area my sister had two years ago.

"Kye? Kynan? Are you even listening to me?" Henry snapped, tugging my phone out of my hand before I had time to react.

"What? Sorry, I mean—"

"Isn't this enough already?" he asked, his tone exasperated as he looked at the screen before putting the phone on the table out of my reach. "All you do at home every night is scroll the internet for clues. When is it going to be enough?"

"I'm—"

“You’ve spent all your money, sold everything you own to find her, Kye. For two years. When is it going to be enough? When will you accept that she’s gone?” I could see the tears in his eyes, and it was the only reason I didn’t punch him.

He could see my jaw tick, though, could see how angry he’d made me and lifted his hands. Then he wiped his eyes.

“I never knew her, but....” He sighed.

“No, you never did.”

The grief I’d been dealing with on and off for two years tried to smother me, but I pushed it away. Until I knew for sure that she wasn’t alive anymore, I would keep my feelings in check. If there was proof of her being gone, then I’d grieve. But not. Yet.

“Look, all I’m saying—”

“Don’t.” I was hanging by a thread, and if he wanted to have this lunch hour with me, he needed to shut the hell up.

“Fine.” He took a deep breath, then smiled sunnily at the server who came to us with his drink and sandwich. I’d had mine already, waiting for him, but the server put another latte in front of me as well.

“Thanks,” I told her, and him.

I took a sip and sighed.

“How was the interview?” Henry asked after he’d eaten about half of his sandwich.

I shrugged. “Okay. I’m gonna say fifty/fifty chance they call me back.”

It was hard to get a job when you hadn't finished your degree and had a two-year gap in employment history.

"They ask why this time?" He all but read my thoughts.

"Nope." I rubbed a hand over my face and pushed some of my hair behind my ear. "They either don't care or they do, and make an issue out of it. The reason never matters."

"Hun, if you had a whole degree—"

"It wouldn't matter much. Not in this economy. And not in a city anyway. Agricultural science isn't exactly sexy when all you have around you are cafés and stores." I sighed again. "I wish I didn't have to drag you into this."

"No, what I told you last year still stands, Kye: my spare room is yours for as long as you need it. Besides, my apartment hasn't been this spotless ever before." He smiled at me warmly, and I almost let go of my bitterness.

After Henry went back to work—he was a junior architect at a prestigious firm and made a lot of money already—I went back to his apartment.

There was nothing to clean, so I grabbed my laptop and curled up on the couch.

Two years and some change ago, my sister Carys ran away. It was because of our stepmom, really. She was a wicked witch if I ever met one.

Our dad had divorced our mom when Carys was three and I was eight, because she was constantly cheating on him and basically ruined our reputation in our tiny Texas town. Because of her public intoxication and resisting arrest charges, Dad managed to get custody of us pretty easily. Not that she wanted us anyway.

Carys was too young to understand and the little I did, I felt glad she was gone. She hadn't been much of a mom anyway. Life without her after we moved to Tennessee to be closer to Dad's family was nice. We had grandparents, cousins, everything.

I guess Dad dated some, but he never brought anyone home to meet us until I was fifteen. Theresa was nice at first, but then she got pregnant the next year and it was as if Carys and I were the necessary evil after that. Our baby sister, Eira, was a nice enough baby. It was a shame her mom was such a bitch, though.

When it was time for college, I managed to get into Texas A&M, which almost meant I was going backwards, geographically. Dad had a good career, so he'd saved enough money for both Carys and me to go to college with very little debt. After I moved to Texas, Carys started to act out more. Do all stupid teenage stuff, rebelling against Theresa, mostly. Dad was disappointed, but he could tell how much she missed me.

I didn't really hear much from what she was up to, until she went missing.

The kicker was that she went missing while Dad, Theresa, and Eira were at Theresa's sister's place for some anniversary weekend thing. Carys didn't want to go, so they left her home, and when they got back, they realized she was gone.

None of us could get a hold of her. It was as if she vanished into thin air. Then, about two weeks later, she sent me a message from a random number, saying that she was fine and was with her new boyfriend.

It wasn't much, but it was something. I sent a message back saying to contact me once a week or else. She did send short messages for a few weeks, and then those stopped, too.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table, so I reached for it.

It was an unknown number, but I'd gone from rarely answering my phone even when it was people I knew—messages were so much better—to answering every call, just in case.

“Hello?”

“Kye. It's me, Carys.”

Afterwards, I couldn't remember the first few minutes of that call. My faculties returned around the time she told me to give her a second.

“No, don't go!” I yelled, tears still streaming down my face as my heart tried to do a jig in my chest.

“I won't, I'm right here, I need to talk to—hey dude? Alpha? What's your name?” I heard someone's voice, a low murmur in the background. “Okay, Brodie? Where are we, exactly?”

“What the fuck is going on, Carys?” I asked, my brain whirring at an unsettling speed, while also feeling like I was kind of dizzy.

“I'm in Pennsylvania, in a town called Luxton, it seems. I'll tell you everything as soon as you get here.” I was on my feet before she could say anything more. “You'll come, right?” she asked in a hesitant voice that broke my heart again.

“Of course I will.” I was already moving to the guest room to pack all my shit. “You'll be at this number?”

“Brodie? Will I be at this number?” she asked the guy at the other end. “Yeah, I will. And I'm not going anywhere, either. He promised.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s the nephew of the guy who was... anyway. I’ll text you the address? You can get here whenever. We won’t go anywhere. I need to give him his phone back, we need to call the Sheriff to come now. Brodie kind of killed his uncle for me.”

I stopped in my tracks, took a deep breath, and said, “Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I love you.”

Tears immediately rushed out of my eyes and I choked out, “I love you too, sis.”

I still had my POS sedan. It was likely the second most expensive thing I owned, right after my laptop. My phone was a cheap refurbished one and was definitely worth less than the car at this point, if only barely.

It would be fine for the six or so hours it would take me to get from Dayton to Luxton. I hoped.

I called Henry when I was done with packing.

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately, knowing I wouldn’t call him at work otherwise.

“Henry, it’s Carys. She just called me.”

“What?” His tone was so shocked and loud enough that I heard him apologize to someone and then a door closed. “What do you mean she called you?”

“She’s somewhere in Pennsylvania. In Allegheny National Forest, in some little

town. I'm gonna drive there right now—"

"Wait, wait, wait, Kye. Are you sure it was her?"

I frowned as I carried my bags to the door. "What do you mean? She's my sister, of course I'm sure."

"But it's been two years, right? What if it's a scam?"

"Honestly? At this point, I don't fucking care, Hen. I really don't. I'm gonna drive there and see what's what."

Something in my tone must've told him I wasn't going to be swayed, so he sighed. "Okay. Go to my bedroom."

"What?"

"Do as you're told, Kye."

"Okay..." I walked into his room that was pretty tidy and definitely luxurious.

"Now, open the middle drawer of my dresser and reach into the very back. There's a box there."

Frowning, I did as I was told and fished out a flat jewelry box, the kind someone might buy a bracelet in, except a bit wider.

"Now what?"

"Open it and take all the cash there is."

I popped the lid and gasped. There had to be at least fifteen hundred dollars in there.
“Hen, I can’t—”

“Stop it. Just stop, Kye. You need money and I know you don’t have any. If you have enough for gas to get to the middle of nowhere Pennsylvania, I’m shocked. Besides, whatever’s been keeping her from contacting you before now can’t be really that good, right? So, take the money. It’ll help you and her a little bit.”

I stared at the cash, torn and upset. “I... Fuck! ”

“Take it. And if I don’t see you again, Kye. I love you. You’re important to me. You’re the realest friend I’ve had, and I’ll miss you.”

I took a deep breath, gathered the money, let the air out noisily. “Okay. Okay. Thank you. And I love you too and I...” I couldn’t tell him I’d pay him back or that I would see him again without potentially making a liar out of myself, so I didn’t say those things. Instead, I said “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey Hen? You’re important to me, too.”

“Yeah.” He inhaled, the sound a bit stuttery as he gathered himself. “I got to go.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I ended the call, put the box back to where I’d found it, and left his room feeling like I could maybe manage this trip. First things first, I needed to get my car from the underground garage. I just hoped it would start okay.

I navigated through Ohio, stopping only to go use a bathroom and give myself and

the sedan a rest. There were a million questions in my brain, floating around, distracting me enough that I couldn't get overwhelmed with emotion again.

I didn't call Dad. Not yet. Not until I'd made sure with Carys it was fine to call him, and that wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to. There were things that had been said and done between me, Dad, and Theresa after Carys went missing that I didn't want to rehash in my mind or on the phone.

At my second stop, I found a small grocery store in a town along Highway 80. I was at least in Pennsylvania by then, and the car was still working. I got myself some drinks and a sandwich, then walked toward the register through the tiny cosmetics section.

It wasn't even that, really, more like random things on the shelves that were makeup or haircare related, I suppose. But what made me stop were the nail polishes. I glanced at my hands, wondering when was the last time I had polish on. Over two years, for sure. It had been our thing. Carys had loved nail polish since I first bought her a small kit for her birthday when she was ten.

I added black and purple bottles into my basket, then grabbed nail polish remover and some cotton pads. Whether she was into it anymore or not, at least I could use the black myself.

At the candy aisle, I picked up some of her favorites, too. I couldn't help myself. Reese's and Skittles had always been her go-to candy.

I felt somehow better, as if I'd done something for her, when I got to the car. Hell, I felt like I'd done more with those simple purchases than I had in the last two years of contacting people and scouring the internet every day.

The rest of the way to Luxton was easy enough. I drove through a lot of woods and

small towns scattered along the roads. By the time I landed in Luxton, I got my phone out and called Carys.

“Kye?” she asked in a tone that was so fucking glad I was calling it made me tear up again.

“Hey, so I’m in Luxton, and I need directions. The map app I have doesn’t seem to recognize the address.”

“Oh, okay, let me give this to Brodie.”

“Brodie McRae speaking,” that deep voice I’d heard in the background said.

“Hey, I’m Kynan Rossi, Carys’ brother. I’m in Luxton and I need to figure out how to get to the address she sent me?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, so it’s a bit tricky if you don’t know it.” He proceeded to explain to me how not to accidentally drive past the right crossroad and then what to look for. Including some battered Private Property sign. “There’s no streetlights, so you really need to keep an eye on that turn.”

“Okay. I’ll try my best. Thank you.”

“See you soon.”

I ended the call, wondering where the hell I was going that was so remote.

As I drove the last bit, I tried to remember anything at all I’d heard Carys say earlier. She’d called him Alpha, so it was safe to say he was a wolf, then. But if he was the Alpha, was this his land? And who was his uncle who had been the one holding Carys captive? At least that’s what I thought the situation had been.

Even driving carefully, I almost missed that turn. Driving deeper and deeper into the woods in the dark was kind of unnerving. The Private Property sign made it better and worse at the same time, which managed to almost amuse me. By the time the large house popped up in a clearing, I was sure I was lost somehow, even though Brodie had said it was a straight shot from the turn.

The house had to have anywhere from five to ten bedrooms. It was hard to tell with the darkness, but it loomed big and imposing opposite from a barn that had—crime scene tape across the doors? What the hell? Oh, right, manslaughter or murder. But the wolfy kind, so who even knew. There were very different laws for different species in different situations.

I parked next to a rental car, which was curious. As I got out, I tried to see more of my surroundings, but there really wasn't much light coming from anywhere other than a porch light and one bare bulb that hung from a hook by the barn doors.

I left all my stuff in the car, smoothed down my T-shirt and pulled my denim jacket on. Some stupid part of my brain contemplated whether these jeans and boots were good enough to meet my sister for the first time in two years.

As I walked up the porch steps, they creaked loudly. Then a tall, backlit figure opened the door and stared at me.

“Brodie?” I hazarded a guess.

“Kynan?”

“Yeah, uh, call me Kye.”

There was a weird impasse, as if he was measuring me somehow, but couldn't decide something. Then he stepped back.

“Come on in.”

“Thanks.” I took the few steps inside, and then suddenly my sister’s form pushed past Brodie and into my arms, and everything was right in my world again.

We collapsed to the floor right there, and Brodie closed the door behind us.

I don’t know how long it took for us to gather ourselves. We sobbed, clutching each other, for what felt like hours.

At one point, Brodie thrust some paper towels between us and then wandered off again. We kind of snickered at that, then wiped our faces and blew our noses. Then I really looked at Carys and tried not to react to her beaten up state.

“I know,” she whispered, giving me a weak smile. Then she took my appearance in more closely, and smiled. “You grew out your hair again.”

We both had black hair. Hers had always been to her shoulder blades and I’d worn mine longer as a kid. But then teen age hit and it wasn’t cool for boys to have long hair so I cut it short.

“Yeah,” I replied quietly. I couldn’t say I’d grown it out to feel closer to her, because it didn’t really make sense.

“I’ll be fine,” she said suddenly, wiping her cheeks again, this time with more determination. “We’ll be fine.”

“So, what exactly happened here? I mean today?” The rest could wait. I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear what she’d been through since she went missing quite yet.

“Let’s go sit somewhere,” she said and got to her feet, then held out a hand.

When I took it, I saw bruises on her arm and did my best not to let her take much of my weight. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know any of the potential injuries she had underneath her clothes.

"You guys want coffee?" Brodie asked when we stepped into what was a kind of disgusting family room.

"Yeah, actually. Let me go make some," Carys said quickly.

"You don't need to—"

"No, I do," she cut him off. "I'll be right back."

Meanwhile, I went to sit on one of the three couches. They had blankets over them, so I felt comfortable enough to sit down.

Brodie sat across from me and looked at me with his pale wolf eyes.

He was handsome as fuck. He was tall and tattooed up to his jawline. His hair was short on the sides and had that longer bit on top that I could see he ran his fingers through a lot, or at least had today.

"So, you're an Alpha?" I asked, just to fill the silence.

He grunted. "I am now. Wasn't this morning."

I could feel my eyebrows trying to crawl into my hairline. "How'd that come to be?"

"Let's wait for Carys. She can fill in whatever she wants." His tone wasn't unfriendly per se, more to a point. His phone rang before Carys could come back, and his lips curled into a quick smile before he answered it. "Hey, sweetness. No, I'm fine. She's

fine too. The sheriff was the new guy, he said it seemed pretty straightforward. Yeah. They're coming tomorrow to do something about the remnants of the meth lab. Yeah."

My eyebrows never really had a chance to lower.

Carys came in, carrying three mugs of coffee and a bottle of creamer under her arm. "This is all we had," she explained as she distributed the mugs. She held up the creamer, and I put some into mine, but Brodie declined.

"Okay so, where were we?" I prompted once we were all settled, Carys right next to me, and Brodie had ended his call.

"So, I grew up in this house from age seven onwards. Rusty was my mom's brother. My older sister Bella grew up here too. Our mom died of an overdose when I was ten and Bella sixteen. I don't know if it started before that, probably, but Rusty...." Brodie's jaw clenched as he tried to get the words out.

"I think we can use context clues here," Carys said dryly, gesturing at herself.

Brodie snorted softly. "My sister ran away before she even turned seventeen and I didn't hear from her in fifteen years." He blew into his mug, then sighed. "Our cousins are still part of the pack here. Rusty was the Alpha," he clarified for my sake.

Ah. Brodie hadn't been the Alpha this morning, but was one now. It all made sense suddenly.

"I've seen them, your cousins, through the window," Carys said quietly. "They haven't been in the house while I've been there, but...."

"They couldn't do much because of the whole Alpha command thing," Brodie

explained in a softer, apologetic tone. “But they did call Bella when they heard other people mention there was someone young here.”

I cleared my throat. “How long have you been here, exactly?” I asked, not sure if I wanted the answer.

“About seven months? That’s when....” She grimaced and looked down, then lifted her gaze to stare at me with an expression filled with defiance and fear, as if she was trying to keep up a front but wasn’t sure how I was doing to take it. “When my latest pimp sold me to Rusty for some meth.”

I felt nauseous and struggled to keep my mug from wobbling in my suddenly shaky hands.

“I’m glad I killed him,” Brodie rumbled, his eyes shining red for a brief moment.

“Me too.” I put the mug on the crappy, unsteady coffee table.

Carys snorted. “Me fucking three.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

As the siblings sat on the floor, crying their eyes out and clutching each other, I went upstairs to continue cataloging the damage the house had.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected when it came to Carys' big brother, but an angel with black hair wasn't it. He was easily the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

When I'd opened the door and he'd stood there, my wolf had gone crazy inside me. At first I thought it was because this was a stranger on a new Alpha's territory, a stranger coming into its den. Except, it wasn't that.

The way the wolf acted was like a playful puppy. It also wanted to get as close to Kye as possible. It took me a few minutes to realize what was happening: a mate bond.

It freaked me out. Of course it did. By the time I got to the other end of the long hallway upstairs, I felt like a caged wolf. Meanwhile, the wolf within wanted to go back to the humans, back to the mate.

I let out a choked up sound. One of frustration and disbelief. I couldn't understand what was going on. Why would the universe do this to me now?

In Seattle, I'd had an easy life. I had been content, even happy on occasion. I didn't need a pack for that, or a partner. I had a great job working for a contractor wherever he needed me—I was a mix of carpenter, plumber, and electrician by trade—and on the weekends I played hard at my favorite clubs or, if I didn't feel the craving, stayed at home and binged shows and movies.

I hadn't tried dating in years, because the men that wanted to date a working class Dom rarely felt right for me. I guess now I knew why. Some part of me must've known I had someone out there just for me.

Except, now I couldn't even begin to entertain the thought of beginning something new with Kye. Or anyone, really. I needed to figure out the pack. The house and the lands. I needed to move my life here for everyone's sake. Where the two humans currently sitting on the floor downstairs fit, I didn't know.

I concentrated on the house as much as I could. All the bedrooms were upstairs. The main one had an attached bathroom, and those two were in decent condition. The six other bedrooms and two baths though... not so much.

I opened the door to the room that had been mine and Bella's once and grimaced at the mess. Not only was there water damage all over, but there was a clear hole in the ceiling that hadn't really been patched. Who knew how long that must've been there.

The window was boarded up, too. The wallpaper was peeling, and the floor was... I didn't even want to think about it, really. There was so damn much to do here. By here, I meant the whole house.

Bella had been right. Mom would've hated to see the house like this.

I checked the other rooms again. I'd done that before, with Sheriff Holden Drumm who had wanted to check the whole place out. He was a deputy, really, but everyone called him the Sheriff because he was the senior deputy at the town's station. The actual Sheriff, Gerrell, ruled from his throne in the biggest city in the county, which, to be fair, wasn't that big, either.

Being a bitten wolf, Drumm had more understanding than most humans, at least. He'd been bitten about twenty years ago, and looked to be in his forties where he

was, in reality, in his sixties. Werewolves aged differently from humans. Born wolves like me often appeared younger than we were, but we still aged. Our life expectancy was around two hundred and fifty years.

Being bitten, like Sheriff Drumm, would make one age very slowly from the point where they received the bite.

Meanwhile, vampires like Rian were forever the same age they'd been when turned. In his case, he'd always look to be in his early twenties. There weren't any natural causes that would kill a vampire. They died due to violence, or, more often, by their own hand because being alive for centuries upon centuries got rough, mentally. The oldest vampire I'd ever met had been an owner of a bookstore in Portland. She told me she'd been alive for over nine hundred years.

Rian had explained that more often than not, the really old vampires became kind of numb to life. It was like depression, the older you got. He was still doing well, and I felt confident that my best friend would be around for at least until the end of my lifetime.

While Holden hadn't told me why he'd been bitten, he'd mentioned that it had been a life or death situation during a regular old workday somewhere in the south.

Being turned into a werewolf or a vampire were usually done for two reasons; either to save a life or for love. Turning people for other reasons was heavily frowned upon by most everyone.

Some people didn't even want to be turned in an emergency for various reasons. One of the big ones was speciesism. It worked every which way, too, and I was pretty sure that my uncle had gotten sadistic enjoyment over the fact that Carys was a human.

I'd asked her if she needed to see a doctor, and she'd told me no. Then she'd told me

my uncle had used condoms because she was a “filthy human.” If I could’ve killed him again, I would’ve. But at least that was better in obvious ways. She didn’t need any repercussions from him not using them after all.

I decided to go back downstairs and face the Rossi siblings.

Once we’d had our coffee, we realized it was late and we hadn’t really eaten anything all day.

“What do we have in the house?” I asked Carys.

“I’m sure we can scrounge something up. Let’s go check,” she replied with the brightness that had appeared after her brother arrived.

She got off the couch and pulled Kye with her. I followed behind them with our mugs and the creamer. As I put them in the sink, Carys realized she’d forgotten them and quickly hid behind Kye.

“Hey, whatever happened with Rusty, I’m nothing like my uncle,” I said calmly.

I could see her shoulders rise and fall as she took in a deep breath. “Okay.” She stepped around Kye and nudged her head toward the pantry. “Come look, Kye. Let’s figure out what we’re making.”

I rinsed the mugs while they were sorting through whatever we had left. I really needed to do a proper grocery run tomorrow after the company the Sheriff had called would come to clean the barn from whatever was left there.

They’d also go through the house, because there was paraphernalia in a few rooms and I hadn’t wanted to touch it.

Carys said she hadn't been made to use the meth that had been abundant around here. She was having headaches, though, which meant that it still lingered. I could smell it, of course, the chemical smoke that had seeped into everything where the pack had been smoking.

Luckily that was mostly the living room and one of the bedrooms. Uncle Rusty had liked to smoke on the porch where he'd surveyed his kingdom, so at least the main bedroom would be easier to clean.

There was so damn much to renovate. Especially with it already being September.

"Is there any place in town, like a motel?" Kye asked when they emerged from the pantry.

Carys filled a pot with water and put it on the stove for pasta, it seemed.

"I don't think so. Let me ask Ben and Max."

"The cousins," Carys explained to her brother.

"Ah."

"It's gonna be some pasta Bolognese, or at least something close to it," she said, gesturing at their findings.

My phone dinged, and I checked at what the guys were saying. "Nope, nothing but a B I'd catered to his need to feel useful.

He rolled his eyes, a small smile fleetingly playing on his lips.

"Let's go check upstairs, see if there's any bedding there."

“I’ll ask Carys,” Kye said quickly and walked to his sister. I could hear them talk quietly, but blocked the words out, just to be polite.

When he walked back out of the kitchen, the anguish in his eyes was unmistakable. Without saying a word, he followed me up the creaky stairs and into the main bedroom.

As soon as he was inside, he looked almost panicked for a moment, then slapped a hand over his mouth as his eyes filled with tears.

“Hug?” I asked quietly, and he nodded rapidly. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close, and let him sob against my chest. He wasn’t short, but I was tall. He fit perfectly in my arms, I could rest my chin on top of his head as I held him. The small sounds of pure suffering he was trying to hide into the fabric of my shirt were heartbreaking.

My wolf felt anxious, but also happy that we could be there for Mate. The wolf couldn’t understand a lot of things, but it understood grief, joy, even love to an extent. It didn’t get anything like the undercurrent of attraction I was feeling toward Kye, or the true meaning of his grief.

Wolves were simple beings, underneath the surface. Sometimes it was harder to remember we were supposed to act human in polite company. The closer to the full moon we got, the harder it was, sometimes. I knew I got shorter with words, more snappy, sometimes more hedonistic.

But now, I tried not to get swept up with the sensation of being whole, no matter how good he felt in my arms. I didn’t have time for any of this. I didn’t know what tomorrow would bring.

A few minutes later, Kye hiccupped one last time and pulled away. He grimaced at

the sight of my shirt that was now wet with his tears.

“It’s fine,” I assured him gently, squeezing his shoulder. “Now, what did she say? About the bedding?”

He grimaced again, glancing over at the bed. “She said she wants everything burned, but that there’s a cabinet in the corner where she stashed a few blankets and a couple of new pillows, b-because she hated when b-blood got on them....”

Seeing he was a few seconds from losing it again, I squeezed him tightly, as if I could hold him together like that, then let go.

“Okay, let me see.” I went to the cabinet between the windows and found exactly what I’d expected. The white dress she’d been wearing was in the corner where she’d likely tossed it. I could only recognize it because of the lace around a sleeve that was visible.

Kye had found some sheets from the dresser by the door, so we took everything downstairs and left it all on the couches.

“I’ll go get my stuff from the car,” he said, and ducked out of the house.

As I joined Carys in the kitchen, she seemed surprisingly content for the moment.

“We’ll make a nest in the living room,” I told her and the corner of her mouth lifted as she glanced at me.

“Good. I... Thank you.”

It was clearly the least I could do, but I didn’t say that.

We ate the surprisingly tasty if basic dinner, and talked about everything but the obvious elephants rampaging all over the house.

I volunteered to do the dishes after, and as I was gathering them, Kye reached for the plastic bag he'd put on the side table.

He handed it over to Carys. "Here."

She was curious, then giggled when she glanced inside. She carefully shook out everything that was in the bag, and then shook her head, appearing absolutely delighted.

"Kye...."

"I stopped at a store and...." He looked away, hiding behind his hair a little like she had done the moment I first saw her.

"It's awesome. Thank you."

From the corner of my eye, I saw her reach for his hands across the table, over the pile of candy and some nail polish.

I did the dishes while they ate candy and chatted about using the nail polish.

"Do you want some?" she asked, gesturing at the candy.

"Nah, but thanks," I replied, smiling. She seemed much younger suddenly, as if something about this was bringing out the carefree girl she'd been before whatever happened to her took place.

"Well I'm gonna do his nails and then he's gonna make a mess of mine," she

informed me pointedly, grinning as she started to open the nail polish.

“I need to unwind, so I’m going to go do a quick run around the immediate property.”

“Wolfy stuff,” she murmured, attention elsewhere.

Kye glanced at me, clearly amused. I was pretty sure he didn’t realize how exactly he was looking at me, though. I’d rolled up my sleeves to do the dishes and I felt his gaze sweep over my body.

“I’ll strip around the corner here and shift. I shouldn’t be gone for long.”

As I ducked into the entrance hall, I tried not to think how good that gaze had felt.

Shifting was always freeing to me. I normally only did it around the full moon, when a bunch of wolves from my friend group gathered in the Wallace Falls State Park for a proper run. Being back on this property, what I realized was now called the McRae Pack’s lands... this felt completely different, and the moon was nowhere near full yet.

As I let the wolf take over my human body and twist its own into the place where I’d just stood, I felt no pain. Something about the Alpha power was making me feel more at ease during the shift, which could be painful. It was especially bad for bitten wolves for a while, and the thought made me think about Sheriff Drumm. I really should invite him to run with me soon. He’d seemed like a good guy, and I could use solid people in my circle here. Hell, maybe, eventually, he’d agree to be pack. I could certainly use a smart, capable man who understood both humans and wolves after all.

I’d forgotten to open the door, so I let out a rumble sound and went to peer into the kitchen.

“Oh!” Carys blinked at me. When I flicked my gaze toward the hall behind me, she giggled. “Door?”

I rolled my eyes and padded to the door to wait for her. She followed me and opened it, then glanced at the clothes I’d folded and left on the floor.

“How about I put these outside so you can shift and change when you come back?” she asked smartly.

I huffed in agreement, bumped her thigh with my head, and loped down the stairs.

I did a circuit, like I’d said I would. All I could smell were some wild animals having been around, which told me exactly how little Rusty’s betas had cared about patrolling the property. I was pretty sure nobody had done that in ages, given that I could catch the scent of a couple of different predators so close to the house.

Knowing that while the wolf wanted to do a proper patrol run, I also had two vulnerable humans inside the house, I turned back after twenty minutes or so.

I got dressed to the sounds of them laughing at something in the kitchen.

It was late, so I went to use the tiny downstairs bathroom to clean my teeth and take a leak. Both Carys and I had showered during the day after the Sheriff’s people had left. We’d felt dirty for completely different reasons.

I sat on the third couch, scrolling on my phone, when they appeared.

“Hey, I’ll go take a shower upstairs, then we can sleep.” Kye gestured. He had a change of clothes in his arms, and I assumed Carys had told him where to find a towel if there were any clean ones.

“Okay.” I glanced at her. “Wanna make the bed for you guys?”

“Sure.”

As we did our best with the couches, going as far as to put the sheets on top of the blankets, and then spreading the clean blankets on top, she smiled slightly.

“What?” I asked.

“You could shift and sleep in your wolf skin. Would make it more comfortable, I’m sure.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. That way I wouldn’t need to wonder about kinks in my neck and back in the morning.

“You know what, that’s a great idea,” I told her, wanting to give her credit.

She beamed at me, then glanced away as if she caught herself. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“We need to talk tomorrow about where all of this is going,” I told her, gesturing at the house. “I’ll obviously need to move here and we need to talk about what you and Kye are doing and such. My cousins need stability and I think Sheriff Drumm would benefit from a pack.”

He’d briefly mentioned that he went to run with Ramirez pack, but that he didn’t feel at home with them and had told the Alpha he wouldn’t be taking her offer of joining them officially. There was nothing wrong with the pack, apparently, but sometimes your instinct told you where you did or didn’t belong.

She nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t know what Kye has planned. We also need to call

our Dad tomorrow.”

Right, they hadn’t done that yet. I wondered why. There had to be a story there.

“Well I’m in no rush with anything. Other than getting this house proofed for the winter, because holy shit is it in a bad condition.” My eyes caught some scorch marks on the carpet by the fireplace.

“It wasn’t the fireplace,” she said matter of factly when she noticed where I was looking. “It was a pipe.”

I grunted. I fucking hated my uncle.

“I bet this was a lovely house once,” Kye said, coming back into the room after the quickest shower known to mankind.

His whole being smelled so damn good that I wanted to devour him. The wolf inside me wanted closer, and I ignored it the best I could. Whatever shower gel he used was something woodsy in a way close to a werewolf’s natural scent. It seemed like wolfnip to me.

“It was,” I answered after a pause that went on a moment too long. “My mom loved it. She grew up here too. It’s been in her family for generations.”

“Huh.” Kye looked around again, taking in details. “I guess I can see it.” Carys’s yawn interrupted whatever he was going to say next. “Okay, bedtime.”

They decided they wanted to sleep with their heads toward the fireplace, and feet toward the door. I could understand the urge.

I stepped into the hallway and padded back in my wolf skin. I jumped on the third

couch and curled up. None of us wanted to turn the lights off, so we fell asleep in a fully lit house.

When I woke up in the early morning hours, it was only to realize that I'd migrated to the end of their couches, sleeping by their feet, as if my wolf had made a decision to protect them during the night.

Sighing, I put my head back down and went back to sleep. There was time for human nonsense later.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

I woke up before the others. I opened my eyes to a heavy weight pressing down my right foot and felt confused until I glanced down and saw a very large dark gray wolf asleep at the end of the couch. For some reason, that made me smile, then chuckle, which I tried to do quietly and without moving.

Carys was curled up next to me, her back to me as she faced the couch cushions. I had no idea what today would bring. I wasn't looking forward to the call we needed to make, especially because there were some hard discussions to be had before that.

Last night had been surprisingly calm, emotions-wise. The negative ones, at least. Those would surface, I had no doubt about it. The hug from Brodie had helped a lot, it had settled the roiling emotions that had tried to bubble into the surface as soon as she'd insinuated what Rusty had done to her. For months.

The large, furry head of the wolf lifted off my foot and he stared at me. It was interesting how I could tell the exact moment when Brodie took control. It was as if for a few seconds, I was looking into the eyes of a wild animal, and then something changed. It felt as if, as he woke up, Brodie's wolf came online first and the side that was man second.

"Morning," I whispered, and he let out a little huffy sound.

He got to his feet very carefully, then jumped off the couch before stretching on the floor. I barely managed to prevent myself from saying "good stretch" like I would've to a dog. He glanced at me, as if he knew where my mind had gone. Then he padded

out of view to shift, I assumed.

It turned out getting out of our little couch nest was pretty damn tricky. I maneuvered myself onto my knees and then knee-walked carefully to the end of the couch. By the time I managed to get my feet on the floor, Brodie peered in.

“Coffee?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, thanks.”

As he turned around, he murmured, “Go use the bathroom first.”

I grabbed my toiletry kit where I’d left it last night and went upstairs. Despite the disrepair, I could see the potential. I could see how it would’ve been a great place to grow up, although I guessed it hadn’t been that for Brodie and his sister. Or the cousins, likely. What were their names again?

By the time I came back downstairs, trying to avoid the creakiest steps, I could smell the coffee.

We didn’t talk. Instead, we got our coffees and went to sit at the table.

Brodie had a solid, calming aura. If you believed in auras, of course. I wasn’t sure if I did, but somehow, something about him made me calmer. Almost... happier?

“What’s on the agenda for the day?” I asked quietly after a while.

“The cleaning crew will come over in about an hour. I didn’t go to the barn myself, but when the sheriff’s guys checked it, they said a lot of the chemicals are gone. The betas likely took everything they could. It’s less of a hazard, but they’re still going to have to clear it out. I’m pretty sure we’ll be tearing the whole thing down before the

winter anyway.” Brodie spoke evenly, matter of factly, as he stared out of the window at the barn across the little yard. “I worry about the house more.” Then he looked at me and grimaced. “I mean, of course the barn is a hazard, but the house’s condition isn’t ideal for the coming winter.”

I glanced around the kitchen. It was outdated but clean. The thought that it was because my sister had been held captive against her will for more than half a year made the coffee taste like crap.

“She’s done a great job with what she’d had,” Brodie murmured, as if reading my thoughts.

“I don’t know how to have the discussions she and I need to have today.” The confession fell out of my mouth and I wanted to gather it somehow and stuff the words back where they belonged.

I needed to be strong for her, and I wasn’t sure I could be.

“If she lets me and you want me there, I can be there for you. I don’t know if it’d help, but....”

As we made eye contact, I could see something in his eyes that I couldn’t read. But I also felt the peace.

“Yeah. That’d... that’d be helpful. Something about you calms me.”

The flash of something akin to guilt was there and gone from his expression so fast I thought maybe I imagined it, but I didn’t imagine the way the corner of his mouth lifted minutely.

“Okay. We’ll ask her.”

His phone rang then, and he picked it off the coffee table and answered. He told whomever it was to give him a moment, and then went out of the house.

Carys woke up about an hour after me, and by then I was frying the eggs and bacon I'd found in the fridge.

She shuffled into the kitchen and gave me a little smile, then came to hug me from behind like she'd done so many times when we were kids and I stood while doing something.

"Morning," she mumbled.

"Morning. This is going to be done soon, so why don't you go brush your teeth?"

"Uh-huh." She didn't move, just clung to me for a few more moments.

The sound of a vehicle startled us, and we turned to the windows. We could see Brodie gesture at someone, and then a van backed to the barn doors that were now open.

"Is it really bad in there?" she asked, as if I'd know.

"Brodie said something about chemicals because of the meth. He thinks he'll need to tear down the barn."

"At least they didn't cook in the house." Her tone was more alert, firmer somehow. "Despite everything, I really like this house."

"Me too."

"Okay, I'll go do my thing and be right back." She left me to finish the breakfast.

Since the cleaning crew had arrived, I was pretty sure that Brodie wouldn't be able to come inside for breakfast. Thinking quick, I grabbed some toast and fried it in the bacon juices on the pan. Then I fried a couple of eggs, added bacon, and made him a sandwich.

His mug was still on the table, so I filled it with the fresh coffee I'd just made, and took it and the sandwich outside.

"Brodie!" I called out as I got to the porch.

He peered out of the barn. "Yeah?"

"Can I borrow you for five minutes?"

He peered back inside, then briskly strode across the yard. He was fucking gorgeous and I kind of hated that a little. I wasn't sure what my sister wanted to do, but leaving this place and Brodie behind made me feel itchy already.

"What is it?" His eyes widened a bit as he took in my offerings. "Oh. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Got to keep the Alpha strong," I quipped, then wanted to facepalm.

Another car, this time a cruiser from the Sheriff's Department, rolled into the yard.

"Should I move my car?" I asked as I realized how little space there was left.

"That's a good idea. Could you?" Brodie bit into the sandwich and made a happy sound.

"Of course. Give me a second."

I grabbed my keys from my jacket pocket and pulled on my shoes, then jogged to the sedan.

A handsome older guy who I thought was likely either the actual Sheriff or the deputy they called the Sheriff—not confusing at all—got out of the cruiser as I got into my car.

That didn't start.

I tried again. Still nothing. I opened the door and groaned.

“Doesn't start?” The Sheriff asked.

“Nope. I think it finally kicked the bucket or something.”

“Were you trying to move it?”

“Yeah, out of everyone's way. I thought I'd back it to the side of the house.”

He smiled at me, looking a bit like a movie star. “Put it on neutral and stay in the car to steer. Brodie and I will push it.”

“Okay, sure.”

Brodie walked down the steps, having heard us with his wolfy hearing. “Ready?” he asked me.

“Yup!” Even with the door closed, he could hear me and smiled slightly.

Each of them grabbed a front corner and pushed the sedan as if it didn't weigh a thing. “Holy shit!” I gaped at them, barely remembering to steer. Once the car was

where we wanted it and they straightened their backs, glancing at each other in wolfy solidarity or something, I grumbled, “Werewolf strength. Ugh.” I’d already felt inadequate enough while moving the couches with Brodie.

“What was that?” Brodie asked when I got out of the car.

“What?” I blinked at him innocently.

Sheriff Drumm chuckled. “I’m gonna head in to see where they’re at,” he told Brodie.

“Did you already wolf down your sandwich?”

Brodie squinted at me. “Yeah, why?”

“That was fast. We need to make sure you’re fed.” Then I realized my phrasing and snickered. “Wolfed down.”

Brodie rolled his eyes so hard I was surprised they didn’t get stuck backwards, but I could see a hint of a smile when he turned around to follow the sheriff.

“Yeah, yeah....” He took a few more steps, then called over his shoulder, “Thank you for the breakfast, Kye.”

I wasn’t sure I completely liked the way those simple words made me feel—warm and fuzzy in a way I wasn’t used to—but I still wanted to hear them again. So maybe I was a praise slut. Brodie didn’t need to know that.

An hour or so later, Brodie popped inside the house.

“Hey, could you two come up with a shopping list for food and whatever we need

right now and text it to me?”

“Of course,” Carys said easily. “I’ll check and Kye can take notes.”

“Thanks. Holden just left, so I’ll go now, but it’s a bit of a drive into town so you have some time.” Then his dark eyebrows scrunched. “The cleaning crew said they wouldn’t come into the house without me, but you never know, so tell them no if they come asking, okay?”

For a moment, we both squinted at him in confusion, then I got it. “Oh... Okay. We won’t let anyone inside while you’re gone. We can even lock the door if you want?”

The protective as fuck Alpha nodded, looking almost sheepish. “Yeah, that would be good.”

“Okay!” Carys jumped up and followed him to the door.

I heard her turn the ancient key and the click of the lock. Then she came back, eyes wide.

“I guess it’s wild to be a new Alpha?” Her tone suggested the question was rhetorical, so I shrugged.

We made the shopping list after a few minutes of rapid meal planning for a handful of days. Then we sent the list to Brodie, who sent back a message asking about treats.

“I feel weird using his money,” I murmured as my sister frowned.

“Same. But he asked. So let’s ask for ice cream. I’m sure he can get it here before it melts since he said he’d get frozen veggies, too.”

“Okay.”

We got an affirmative from Brodie, he said he'd be back in a couple of hours and to hold the fort.

He'd come in earlier to get coffee for himself and Holden, who'd seemed relaxed when they sat on the porch, chatting about wolfy things, I supposed. I knew wolves were more intuitive, they had keener senses and if Brodie said someone felt like a good fit for the pack, I would take his word for it if I didn't get a bad vibe from the person.

Holden seemed... lonely. Like he needed us as much as we needed a big, strong, capable beta. He felt right for us from the get go, but I knew not to take that for granted.

Carys took in a deep breath, gave me a sad look, and grabbed the kitchen roll. “Let's go talk. Then call Dad.”

I chuckled with little humor and followed her to our couch nest. I would've preferred having Brodie there, but maybe this was better? I wasn't sure she would be completely at ease around him, and I could deal. Probably.

For the next hour, she told me everything that had happened to her, but she started from a spot I wasn't expecting. She glossed over running away and concentrated on the boyfriend none of us had known about, who had dumped her pretty quickly because he got cold feet and didn't want to run away after all.

There'd been an older guy, and another one, and another one and... the details didn't matter. She snorted softly when she said “I'm the poster child for every runaway worst case scenario. I didn't even know what human trafficking really was until I heard Rusty use those words one time. It took me literally nearly two years to

understand I'd been trafficked."

"Why did you run away?" I asked the question that had burned on my mind ever since she vanished.

Carys blew her nose and mopped some tears off her face like I'd just done and gave me a tremulous smile.

"Theresa," she answered my question.

If I was honest, I had thought that might be the reason, but I still wanted details. I waited until Carys seemed ready to elaborate.

"We know how she treated us, right?" At my nod, she continued, "Well she started to get nasty when I rebelled. The more I came home smelling of cigarettes or booze or God forbid, weed, the worse she got." Clearing her throat, she shifted in her seat and straightened her legs after having hugged her knees to her chest for the better part of an hour. "A few days before I left, Dad was at work and she was yelling at me for something, I can't even remember what exactly. And she said she couldn't wait for me to get old enough that she could kick me out of the house, because I was clearly going down the path our whore of a mother had, and that I was no good and she didn't want me anywhere near Eira because I was already such a bad influence."

I gritted my teeth and held out my hand to her. She slipped her hand in mine and we sat there, silently fuming for a while.

Eira had been five years old at that point. She'd been a cheerful, clever little girl and still was for all I knew. I hadn't really been in touch with the family much in the last couple of years. Not after Theresa told our dad and I that we shouldn't be bothering the police after the first couple of weeks after Carys's disappearance, because there were more important things they should reserve their resources for.

“I tried,” I whispered. “Even when the cops stopped, I kept trying to find you.”

She smiled sadly and squeezed my fingers. “I believe you.”

“I did everything I could. Joined every group on social media, called the police departments, homeless shelters, I...” The tears were back, great. “I dropped out of school because my grades tanked, and I couldn’t be bothered to finish. Not when...” I shook my head, the tears rolling down every which way.

Carys moved closer, right against my side, and then pulled me into her arms. Again, we cried together, this time she was the one holding me. I had a feeling this wasn’t the first or last time this would happen, either. One of us would always be there for the other, for both of us, when needed.

“I know you,” she said after long minutes of us weeping. “You wouldn’t have given up. If it was the other way around, I wouldn’t have, either.”

“Yeah.” I did know that. She was my rock, as much as I was hers.

“I don’t know what I want to do next.” She picked on the frayed knee of my jeans. “I mean, eventually. Right now I just want to... be, you know? Be safe.”

“I get that. I don’t have any plans. Everything I own is in my piece of shit car. Wherever you want to go, I’ll go with you.”

Her breath hitched, as if she was about to say something but changed her mind. I waited her out again.

“What if it was here?” she asked finally.

I lifted my head and leaned back. “Here?”

“I don’t want to go anywhere near Dad and Theresa. I don’t have anywhere to go, Kye. If Brodie... if he’s building a pack here?” She looked at with such fierceness in her gaze, that it startled me a little. She wasn’t the girl she’d been two years ago. This was my sister, the adult woman who knew what she wanted, no matter that she was only nineteen. “If he’ll let me stay, I want to do that. I feel safe around him. I love this house. What if I could be good for his pack? I enjoyed some aspects of it all. I liked to cook and clean a lot.”

I hummed, my emotions rolling about inside me. “Let’s ask him. I don’t have anywhere to be, like I said. If he’ll let us stay, then I’m all for that. I’m not sure what I’d do for money, but I’m sure I can figure out something.”

I didn’t tell her about how I hadn’t been able to find a job in ages. How useless I felt in the face of the world as it was with my partial degree and very few real skills.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” I smiled.

She chuckled tiredly. “Can we nap until he comes back. Maybe call Dad once Brodie is here? I... I don’t know how I’ll feel talking to Dad especially if Theresa is there.”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. He offered to be here for our conversation, too. For emotional support.”

She frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me? I could’ve waited.”

“Nah, it was okay. Well, not okay, but you know what I mean.” I felt tired all of a sudden, too. “We’ll wait for our emotional support wolf.”

Carys laughed. “Maybe let’s not call him that to his face?”

“Deal.”

We curled up in our nest and fell asleep.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

T hat fucking sandwich. My wolf was ecstatic about one fucking sandwich.

Holden and the guy from the company who did the cleaning job had basically decided that the barn was toast. It needed to come down before any remnants of the chemicals met a random spark or hell, a lightning struck or something and exploded the whole building.

Holden gave me the number of a local company who would gladly come in to dismantle it in a way that wouldn't risk anyone. Apparently it wasn't the first meth lab that had been found around here.

I could imagine taking it down with heavy machinery was out of the question, especially with the chemicals still lingering. Like they'd said, one spark might be all it needed to cause damage we couldn't really foresee. I didn't want anyone at risk. Not the workers, not my pack, nor the house and the woods around it.

Having needed some time alone, I went to do a grocery run. Well, that, and a bunch of other stuff. There was a Walmart SuperCenter about half an hour outside of town, so I drove there to get what I needed.

The morning call from Rian still made me both smile and feel exasperated.

The thing about being friends with someone who had been around for over a century and a half was that they didn't view money the same way.

Rian came from absolute poverty, and by the time he'd realized he really did have as much time as he wanted, he'd begun to save and invest every penny he could. Not all of it had been successful, of course, but he had been smart about it all.

When he'd asked me if I still had the emergency credit card he'd given me, I knew what was coming.

“You use it, Brodie. For anything you need. For whatever the pack needs. There's a reason I keep giving you a renewed one every few years. It's not to sit pretty in your wallet.”

When I'd tried to interject, he'd told me he didn't need to do any more investing, he donated about two million dollars every year to good causes and still made more money than that yearly.

So, there I was, with Rian's credit card, about to go buy things that would make our lives more tolerable. I would also make Kye and Carys tell me what furniture they wanted because—shit.

I hadn't asked them to stay yet. I wouldn't ask, if I was honest. I doubted they wanted to. Who would? Staying in a shitty house in the middle of nowhere with a new Alpha who had pretty much no pack and could be contested by the old betas at any moment.

Not that I thought those two idiots would be in any shape to come back anytime soon, but they might. Weirder things had happened. Everyone knew addicts didn't necessarily act logically.

I got everything but the groceries first. Blankets, comforters, pillows, sheets. I didn't know anything about the Rossi siblings, so I couldn't buy them anything I'd know they'd like, but I got a new coffee maker and a selection of pods for it. I got a toaster—damn that sandwich—and a waffle maker.

I went into a nesting mode, and I tried my best not to think about that at all, because it was borderline embarrassing. I wasn't even sure why I felt embarrassed in the first place. Maybe because it was so new to me? Alphas were providers, after all. Nesting was supposed to feel natural to an Alpha. Except... I'd never been this kind of person toward anyone but my very nearest and dearest.

It was the mate bond combined with the Alpha power, probably.

I lugged all the stuff into my rental and then realized I might as well go and return the rental car and buy a new one while I was at it. Rian wouldn't mind. In fact, he would likely celebrate the purchase.

So, my couple of hours turned into five and a half, and by the time I was back in Luxton, my wolf was restless as fuck, a bit on the edge.

The thought of Holden catching me speeding made me snort. At least he'd understand. Hopefully.

When I got home, the cleaning crew was still working on the barn. They were really serious about it, which I could appreciate. I wanted my land, my pack, safe.

The new vehicle was a truck. Not a flashy one, because I didn't want or need one like that. It was meant for lugging building materials and groceries.

I snapped a photo of it, filled with bags, and sent it to Rian.

"You just bought me a car and all of this stuff."

I gathered as much of the groceries I could carry in one go and went up the porch steps. Except, the door was still locked and the key was inside.

I knocked on the window next to the door, but nothing happened. I couldn't hear anything, either.

Placing the bags by the door, I made an educated guess and walked to the family room windows. I could see a tuft of dark hair peeking out from the end of the couch and smiled.

I knocked on the window carefully, so I wouldn't startle them too badly.

Eventually, Kye sat up, blinking and pushing his hair out of his face. He frowned, trying to figure out what had woken him up. I knocked again, then waved at him.

He startled, then rolled his eyes and climbed out of the nest, then picked up his cell phone off the coffee table.

He unlocked the door and peered out. "Sorry, we've been asleep for a while." He glanced at his phone and grimaced. "Over two hours. You were gone for a while."

I frowned. "Yeah, sorry about that. I went and bought a car and half of Walmart."

"You did what?" He peered past me and blinked, sleep still clinging to his features. "Well okay, then."

"If you take those to the kitchen, I'll go grab some more stuff." I nodded at the bags by the wall.

"Yeah, of course."

When I went back to the truck, the head of the cleaning crew walked out of the barn and came to me.

“Hey, so I think we’re pretty much done for the day. We’re airing it out until tomorrow, hopefully getting rid of most of the residue that’s bound to be hanging around, but if you can get a demo crew in later this week, it should be as safe as it’s gonna get.” He had pulled his mask down and looked sweaty under his protective gear.

“You’re coming back tomorrow to start on the house?” They’d been around several hours today and while they could’ve gone to the house today, I understood that they didn’t want to start the job if they weren’t able to finish anything inside where we were living.

“Yeah, we’ll be here around nine in the morning and work full day. We’ll also bring a couple of Dumpsters for whatever we need to trash.”

“You rent those too, right?” When he nodded, I squinted at the house. “Can you bring two extra? I’m going to start doing reno as soon as you guys are done with your job and I feel like it’s gonna be a lot.”

“Sure. I’ll bill the two separately if you want?”

“Yeah, that works.” I wasn’t worried about the money, not with Rian in my corner, but it would still be nice to know how much of his money I had to spend for the cleanup versus renovations.

“It’s a great house,” he said, peering up at the hulking form. “Some sort of Victorian influences, definitely.”

“What gave that away? The round part?” I grinned, then got serious. “It was gorgeous once. When I was a kid. I’ll do whatever I can to renovate it.”

“If you need extra hands, I’d ask if the Kellers have anyone free. They’re—”

“I know. They were doing construction stuff when I was little. I didn’t even think they’d still be around.” Which was stupid. I hadn’t been gone that long, and families with that sort of presence in such a small town were likely to stay there.

His colleagues came out of the barn and made sure the doors were propped open. He glanced behind and nodded. “All right. That’s us. We’ll come back in the morning and I’ll have those Dumpsters delivered tomorrow as well.”

“Awesome, thank you.” We didn’t shake hands, because he still had his gear on, so I turned to grab some of the bags off the truck bed.

Carys met me at the door. “Let me take those.”

I handed them over and went to get yet another load. There were two more, and by the time we had everything on the hallway floor—well, except groceries of course—it looked as if I’d emptied a small shop.

“Uh....” Carys stared at all the bags. “So, you went shopping?”

I suddenly felt awkward and rubbed the back of my neck, not quite able to make eye contact with her or Kye who peered in from the kitchen.

“From where I’m standing, you’re acing this Alpha thing,” Kye said almost off-handedly, grabbed a pack of bottled water from the pile and went into the kitchen.

My wolf went a bit nuts at the statement. An excited whine tried to escape my lips but I bit it back, barely.

“Did you put the food away?” I called toward the kitchen.

“Yeah, that’s done. Why?”

I gestured for Carys to follow me and we went into the kitchen. Suddenly it felt mandatory to have the hard conversation I was fearing right then.

“Let’s have a chat,” I told them, then remembered the coffee machine. “Wait, I got us something.” I turned back and went to fetch the machine and the bag with the pods. “Here. Let’s figure this out, eh?”

The excitement was palpable. Figuring out how to use the machine and what pods we wanted to use and how it all came together was fun. Carys and Kye were clearly siblings, their bickering reminding me of myself and Bella once upon a time.

It took us a while to get our coffees, but eventually we sat at the table, with the Rossis looking at me expectantly from the other side of the table.

“So....” I took a sip of my espresso and tried to put my thoughts into words. Part of me was terrified that they were going to leave, and my wolf wasn’t happy about that possibility. “I’m just going to tell you what I’m about to do, okay?” At their nods, I took a deep breath. “The cleaning crew will come in tomorrow morning and we’ll figure out what needs to be done inside the house. Once they’ve done their thing, what I want to do is start fixing up the house. That’ll take all my time and I’m lucky to have the skills to do a bunch of the stuff myself.

“As for the pack... eventually I’d love for my cousins to be able to live here again if they choose to do so, but I need the rooms upstairs fixed first. I’m likely going to send them to rehab on my best friend’s money, too. They get to be in the pack if they’re sober, which they say, currently, they mostly are. But ‘mostly’ isn’t good enough for me.

“What I would like is to ask Sheriff Drumm to join the pack too, eventually, and any other suitable people we might encounter. Of course, it’s different for non-wolves, but my mom used to say that all the best packs always had humans in them, too.

Vampires are rarer, but it happens sometimes.”

Before I had time to say anything more, Carys blurted out, “Rusty hated humans. He thought we were like a... a lower species?”

I grunted with disgust. “I know. He was always like that. The wolves I tend to spend my full moons with these days have plenty of humans in their pack. I think humans make a pack safer.”

Kye frowned. “How do you figure that?”

“Well, for one, on the night of the full moon, wolves are unable to shift back to human, right? Well what happens if someone needs opposable thumbs? What if there are pups in the pack? Who takes care of them while the adults are in their wolf forms?”

Carys made a thoughtful noise. “I guess I’ve never thought of that. What did they do in Rusty’s pack when you were younger?”

“Well I was seven already when we moved here so I was self-sufficient and I had Bella. She’s human, but she was family so Rusty couldn’t do much about having her in the pack.” Until later, after Mom passed away. “But my cousins were little then. Toddler age. So we took care of them when the adults weren’t able to.”

Kye shook his head. “That sounds rough. It really feels like all packs should have humans or vampires in them, like you said. But aren’t werewolves and vampires kind of...” He made a vague gesture with his hand.

“It’s mostly the oldies. The younger generations of wolves get along fine with vampires. My best friend Rian is a vampire. Best guy I’ve ever met. He’s funding everything I need for the pack, just because he has more money than sense.” I smiled

fondly, hoping they knew I wasn't serious.

Carys took a deep breath, then looked me in the eye and asked, "So what if we wanted to stay?"

Kye nodded at his sister's words. "Neither of us has anywhere to be, no matter what our dad says when we call him in a bit. I don't have many real-life skills if I live in a city, but I think I could help with the renovations if you show me how, and come spring, or if we'd build a greenhouse, I can do a lot with plants."

"And I'll cook and clean. I actually enjoy doing it. We're capable of carrying our own weight. We're not going to be a burden to you or the pack if you let us stay," Carys said quickly, almost speaking over Kye.

I lifted my hand to still the frenetic energy gathering in the siblings. "Okay, first of all, of course you two can stay." In fact, I wanted nothing more and my wolf wanted to howl with happiness over Mate staying. "I'm not worried about anything. I know we don't know one another that well yet, but we have time."

I explained to them where I'd been working in Seattle and how I had plenty of savings, but that I hadn't joked about using Rian's money.

Kye told me about his studies that I immediately saw potential in. Having someone who knew about agriculture would eventually save the pack a lot of money in produce if we could figure out how to grow on the property. I was pretty sure Rian would also be interested in the endeavor. His background made him very serious about food—even though he didn't need to eat it himself—and sustainability was a cause he supported through various organizations.

Carys shrugged. "I don't have any skills, but if I have better ingredients, I will totally start to do meal planning and figuring out how to save money in the long run." Then

she smiled. “And I actually do enjoy cleaning. It calms my brain a lot.”

“Okay. I think that’s set, then.” I let my eyes glow red and held my hand over the table at Carys first. “Welcome to the McRae pack, Carys Rossi.”

Her smile widened as she took my hand. “Thank you for having me, Alpha McRae.”

I felt the pack bond forming between us, and my wolf felt overjoyed.

And then it was time to face the fact that my mate would be part of my pack, too.

I took Kye’s hand. “Welcome to the McRae pack, Kynan Rossi.”

His gaze locked with mine, and he smiled, looking breathtaking. “Thank you. I won’t let you down, Alpha McRae.”

The tingles up my arm from such simple contact felt wild and a bit scary. The bond between us was more obvious to me than the one between me and Carys. There was a reason for that, but at least humans couldn’t feel the bond the same way, so I didn’t have to explain it right then.

When I pulled my hand back, I took in a deep breath, trying my best to not beam like an idiot.

“I think we need to make that call now,” Kye said quietly, the happiness fading from his expression too quickly for my liking.

“Will you sit with us for it?” Carys asked in an almost timid tone that told me exactly how little she wanted to make the call. She had been through hell, but she wasn’t a timid young woman. She had strength, and while I would be getting her therapy as soon as she’d accept it, she was remarkably well, normal.

“Of course. Let’s go sit on the couch.”

As we passed all the bags in the hall, I pointed at a few of them. “I bought all new bedding. There’s a mattress pad in the truck still. I was thinking, maybe that’d be enough for us to be able to sleep in the bed upstairs?” I quickly added, “Only if you’re comfortable, Carys. I’ll order a completely new bed tomorrow but it’ll be a while before it gets here. I also assume we’re going to lose a lot of furniture tomorrow when the crew comes by.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “If we all can fit on that bed, I think I can sleep there.”

Kye echoed her thought, so I said, “We could fit on two couches last night. I can go wolfy if the bed is too crowded otherwise.”

“Aren’t werewolves all about pack cuddles?” she asked, then rolled her eyes. “I mean obviously Rusty never did anything like that, but you know, generally speaking. In good packs?”

“Yeah, physical touch is important to us.”

“I’m sure we can all fit. I’m a bit of an octopus when I sleep, though.” Kye blushed slightly.

Carys giggled. “I can vouch for that!”

We decided to put the bedding into the washing machine with the unscented liquid detergent I’d bought. That way nothing would smell like the store to me, or the old liquid Carys would’ve had to smell before. Kye got rid of the rest of the old bottle, while Carys tried not to show how much it meant to her.

At least I could thank my wolfy senses for that; scents were important to us, and I knew how visceral they could be in various ways.

The levity from earlier vanished as soon as we all sat on the couch. Carys was between Kye and me, the bookending feeling important for support.

Kye brought out his phone. “Okay. Here goes.” He made the call.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

I put the phone to my ear and held Carys's hand with the other. As I waited for Dad to answer, I looked at Brodie, wondering why we felt so safe with him. Safe enough to not only have this conversation with him present, but believing that he had to be there for it.

"Kynan?" Dad sounded confused.

"Hey, Dad," I started. "Do you have a few moments? I need to talk to you about something."

"Uh, well let me go in the spare room, just a second." I heard him call out to Theresa, but I couldn't tell what was being said. Then, I heard a rustling and heard a door close. "Okay, son. What's up?"

"I'm going to put you on speaker. There's someone here who wants to talk to you."

"Okay...?"

I held the phone between us and swiped the speaker on.

"Hi Dad," Carys said, her voice shaky but strong at the same time.

"What? Carys?" We could hear him choke on a sob, and then a sound of the springs of the old bed that had once been mine creak as he sat down. "W-what? How? I..."

She took in a deep breath, then calmly said, “Long story short, I ran away and I got trafficked. I got saved by Brodie—say hi, Brodie.”

He snorted softly and rolled his eyes. “Hello, Mr. Rossi.”

Dad sputtered a little but waited for Carys to continue.

“I called Kye and he came to us immediately. That’s about it. I’m safe.”

After some sniffing, Dad cleared his throat. “That’s... that’s good to hear. Uh....”

“It’s been rough. I’m gonna need a lot of therapy, I think,” she continued more quietly. The teenager who had gone for shock value with her cavalier attitude about delivering the news only moments ago was simmering down.

“Well if you come—”

“No. Absolutely not. I won’t step my foot into that house as long as Theresa is there.” The emotion in her voice was so firm I felt my eyes widen a bit.

“B-but—”

“I’m an adult now. I don’t want anything to do with Theresa.”

I nodded, even though Dad couldn’t see it. “Me neither. We’re good where we are. We feel safe here.”

“Where are you, exactly?”

“Pennsylvania,” I said, not willing to give him the town name.

Carys gave me an approving look. “I’ve been here for seven months. Before that I was all over the Southwest.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come home?” Dad asked.

“Kye told me you stopped searching for me because Theresa told you to,” Carys answered in a chilly tone. “Frankly, I’d rather stay in this house where I was raped repeatedly for over half a year than stay one night under the same roof with that woman.” Aaand there was the hurt and theatrical teenager again.

Dad didn’t know what to say to that. “Uh... well....”

“We’re going to stay here. We’re joining Brodie’s pack.”

“He’s a... a...”

“I’m an Alpha werewolf, yes,” Brodie said in his deep voice. “It was my uncle who was holding Carys against her will. I dealt with him and happened to... inherit the pack. I’m rebuilding it and I promise that your children are safe here with me.”

The fact that he still wanted to tell our dad that meant a lot. He didn’t need to say it on our account and he knew that, yet he still said it to Dad.

“Well, I suppose that’s....”

“Even if it wasn’t something you agreed on, there’s nothing you can do about it,” Carys pointed out. “We’re adults. This is what we’re choosing.”

Dad started to grasp at straws, then. “Your little sister—”

“I’m sure that by now, Theresa has told her all about how horrible of a girl I was and

how not to be anything like me.” She nearly crushed my hand as she squeezed it. “After all, she told me she didn’t want me in the house because I was such a bad influence for Eira.”

Before Dad could comment, I interjected. “We’ll call you at some point when we feel like it. Just know that we’re safe.”

He seemed to understand that saying anything to defend Theresa wasn’t going to fly, so he sighed. “Okay. If you guys need money—”

“I have that covered,” Brodie said immediately.

“I’m pretty sure Theresa wouldn’t want you giving us any money anyway,” I added.

We told him bye and ended the call. Carys and I looked at Brodie.

“I know it wasn’t my place to tell him that, but I take care of my pack. Well, Rian will help, but you know what I mean.”

“It’s fine,” Carys told him. “We don’t want Dad’s money anyway. Not after....” Then she glanced at me. “Right?”

“Right. I’ve been hanging by the skin of my teeth for over a year now, but I’ve still not asked him for a penny. I’d rather starve.” The fierceness of my tone managed to surprise Carys, but Brodie seemed... proud?

She burrowed under my arm and squeezed me hard. “Thank you for looking for me. For never stopping.”

I felt a bit choked up, so I kissed the top of her head and squeezed her.

She pulled from me and turned to hug Brodie. He seemed startled but hugged her back.

“And thank you for saving me and being a good guy,” she murmured against his chest.

He seemed to feel like I did and hugged her back without saying anything. He avoided my gaze but smiled slightly.

The more I spent time around him, the more of the snippets I’d ever learned about wolves came back to me. Like the mark of a good Alpha. I hadn’t just been guessing when I told him he was acing the Alpha thing already.

I needed to do more research, though. That was one thing I was good at, research. I hadn’t enjoyed studying as much as I would’ve wanted when I was still in college, but I’d managed. The idea of how to be the best human pack member Brodie could want? Now that made me want to study.

We sat in silence for a few minutes after the call, then Brodie sighed.

“I think we should sort all the shopping bags.”

Carys pointed toward the hall where we could see part of his haul, and giggled. “That’ll take a while. I still need to put the nonperishables into the pantry, too.”

I got off the couch. “You go do that, we’ll do the bags and the... upstairs stuff.” The bedding.

In short order, we got to work. Brodie took the frankly disgusting mattress pad from upstairs and hauled it outside. I gathered the old pillows and blankets, everything I could grab from the bedroom really, and took it out as well.

He was lifting the new pad from the truck bed and pointed where he'd put the old one. "Just pile them there. I'll toss it all to the dumpster tomorrow."

Back inside, I went to put the first load of bedding into the dryer and stuff more into the washing machine. We ended up sorting out the other stuff while we waited for everything to be done. Once everything was about where we wanted it, and we had all the bedding, we went upstairs. The room itself was clean and truth be told, the mattress wasn't that bad.

When I said so, Brodie hummed. "There is that, at least. I think I still want to get rid of it, though. Might as well."

"Up to you, Alpha," I teased, and to my surprise, he kind of flushed a little.

He opened the packaging of the new pad and I dodged out of the way when it sprung open, almost hitting me in the process.

"Oops?" He smirked in a way that told me it hadn't been completely by accident.

"I see what you did there, Mister," I grumbled playfully.

He laughed and we continued setting up the bed.

It was a king, so all three of us could definitely fit in there without hassle. By the time we were done, it even felt inviting. Everything was fluffy and clean, and it looked a little bit like a nest.

Brodie went to open a window to let fresh air in, then frowned when the window stuck.

"Need to replace the windows, too?" I asked, knowing it was one of those things to

add to the endless list he likely had in his head.

“Seems like it. Some are broken.” He nudged his head toward the door. “Here, come take a look with me.”

We went to the next room, which had clearly been the betas’. Everything was dirty and ransacked, as if they had packed in a hurry when Brodie kicked them out.

One of the window panes was cracked, the carpet was disgusting, the wallpaper was peeling, and well, it was a mess.

“This is the room that’s in the best condition,” Brodie murmured, sounding disgusted.

“It has potential,” I answered, because it did. We could start by making this Carys’ room, or her’s and mine.

Brodie glanced at me. “You’re optimistic.”

Chuckling, I walked out into the hall. “Rarely. But I choose to be about this. The pack needs a solid home.”

All the other bedrooms were in different kinds of ruin. There was water damage, some mold, broken and boarded windows, holes in the roof that had let water in. The floors were nasty, but we hoped that once we removed the carpets, there’d be wood underneath and maybe that could be saved.

“This was my mom’s room,” Brodie opened the last door we hadn’t checked yet.

It was in equal condition, but the window was intact here. I went to peer out. It overlooked the backyard, such as it was. We needed to figure out what to do with it as well.

“Are those rose bushes?” I asked, pointing to the back corner of what had once been a lawn but was now overgrown and sad looking.

Brodie came to the window, peering at the yard. “Yeah. I think grandma planted them when Mom was a girl. Mom took care of them when we came here.”

I realized Brodie was very close to me, then. I felt the warmth of his body and wondered if wolves ran hotter or if it was the bulk of this particular one that felt like a radiator next to me.

I gazed at him, getting stuck to the ink I could see on his neck, the sharp jawline and the plush lips. He was a stunning man, and something in me responded to him in a way I hadn’t experienced before.

It was as if I wanted to please him—which wasn’t new, I’d known I was submissive for years—but also, I wanted him to take care of me in ways outside of kink.

When I lifted my gaze to his, I realized he’d been looking at me, too. My breath hitched, I became hyper aware of him.

“Kye, I—”

“Guys! Do we want the steaks for dinner tonight?” Carys yelled up the stairs.

The moment broke, and my heart restarted. Brodie’s cell phone rang, and he fished it out of his pocket while staring at me in that weird way I couldn’t quite read.

“Yeah! Sounds good!” I called to Carys, my gaze still locked to Brodie.

He lifted the phone to his ear. “What’s up, sweetness?”

His fond tone and the pet name told me enough. There was already someone he loved. I could be pack and nothing more.

I gave him a little smile and gestured toward the door. "I'll go help her."

While we waited for the steaks to marinate, we went through the downstairs, taking inventory of... well, everything.

"The couches will have to go and we'll get one of those giant sectionals," Brodie murmured as he walked across the large family room.

"Do we want all the fireplaces in working order by winter?" Carys asked, frowning at the dust that clung to the innards of the fireplace. "There are what, two here and three upstairs?"

Brodie did quick math. "Sounds about right. The kitchen wood stove is ancient though. Do you think you want to keep it?"

Carys hummed. "I haven't been using it, obviously, but I think it could be a cool thing to have. But let's prioritize this one and the ones in the bedrooms we're going to use."

"Okay. Rian should be coming to visit sometime before snowfall so we'll need more usable rooms. He's a philanthropist and has a bunch of events lined up before that, so he's going to take care of those and then head on over."

"Ah, that makes sense," she said, chuckling. "What's he like?"

I glanced at Brodie who was beaming. "He's like this weird emo ray of sunshine. Tends to be moody, but has a super bubbly side. For how long he's been around, it's kind of odd he has all those emotions."

“Right, don’t vampires tend to get sort of... less emotional the older they are?”

Clearly my sister had been looking into the non-human species more than I ever had. Then again, she had always been a romantic, and the amount of romcoms where a dashing vampire came and swept a human off her feet or a werewolf saved a poor human when she gets stranded in her car when a freak snowstorm occurred was a bit ridiculous.

I remembered Carys and her friends giggling at some movies and romance novels in their early teens. Maybe that was where her knowledge came from? I made a mental note to check out some websites online asap, starting after dinner. I was hopeful for the future for the first time in two years.

The others were still chatting about vampires and how the old myths that said vampires couldn’t go into sunlight were bullshit, but my attention went to the rest of the room.

I walked to the side where the door to the old sunroom was. I opened it and peered in, frowning. All the glass panes were shattered, but at least someone had put some tarps over it.

I carefully walked into the room, grimacing at the lack of light. I used my phone’s flashlight to look around and took in the mess.

It was clear the elements had gotten in here, too. Luckily the sunroom was only one half of the backside of the house. The other half was the back porch and the utility room—if I was being gracious about the definition of the latter. The washer and dryer were older than me, but apparently still worked pretty well.

I peered at the table pushed against the outer wall where some tarp was flapping in the breeze, half in and half outside. It seemed like there were old gardening tools

there, and my plant-brain perked up. I started toward the table, and had just enough time to register a creak, a crash, and then the ground fell from beneath me.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

Carys was giggling her head off at something I'd said, when I realized Kye had gone through the door in the back. I turned to go make sure he was safe, when I heard the sound of something crashing and his yelp.

By the time I crossed the family room and burst through the door into the sunroom, I could smell his blood.

"Carys, bring the big flashlight!" I yelled.

She'd joked about it when she'd seen I bought one earlier, but right now I was glad I had done that and put it in the charger as well.

The floor beneath me groaned, and I backed away as I tried to peer into the room.

Carys got there seconds later, thrusting the flashlight at me. "Here!"

I turned it on and swept the sunroom, realizing there was a gaping hole in the floor.

Carys gasped. "Oh gods!"

"Stay back," I told her, then inched forward until I could see how deep the hole was. The edges were jagged, rotten wood and whatever else they'd used to build the floor back in the day.

I could hear Kye, then.

“Aw, fuck,” he grunted in a pained tone. “Don’t you two fall in, too.”

“You okay?” Carys asked, and I realized her human senses didn’t tell her that her brother was bleeding heavily.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Be careful.” I managed to get close enough to see him. The gash somewhere inside his long hair had turned it and any skin it touched blood red. “Ouch, that looks nasty. Did you hurt anything else?”

“What did he hurt?” Carys asked immediately.

“My head. It’s fine.”

It probably was, but he was bleeding too much to not make my wolf anxious at the scent. I’d always been good in a crisis, levelheaded and able to calm others down, and I tried to cling to that instead of letting the wolf control the situation.

Kye got to his feet, wincing as he glanced around. “I think I’m in a crawlspace. It’s a bit deeper than I’d expect, but there’s some old furniture here. Let me just....”

Please be careful. Please don’t get more hurt. “Okay.”

I needed to trust him to be able to take care of himself, especially in a situation where I was too fucking heavy to go close enough to pull him out.

Actually... “Carys? Can you come here and maybe we can human chain? I’m too heavy, but you’re not.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I held the flashlight with one hand and guided her into place with the other. She gasped when she saw all the blood but didn't say anything. I squeezed her hand.

Kye pulled what seemed like an old desk right to the edge of the hole and clambered on top of it. Then he looked at us, his head poking out of the hole.

"Oh hi," he said brightly, while blood ran down the side of his face. "Fancy meeting you here."

Jesus fucking Christ, my mate would be the death of me one day.

"Stay put," I ordered them, and backed away to grab one of the rugs from the family room. As I lifted one, I saw that Carys had used it to hide a weird stain in the thin, barely there carpet underneath.

I went back and maneuvered the long rug in front of her, then placed about half of it over the edge of the hole.

"Let's step on this end so it stays put," I told her, and we placed our feet carefully on top of the rug and hopefully not too close to the edge. "Okay, I'll hold onto your arm and you reach down to grab Kye."

She nodded and we did exactly that. Kye, appearing gruesome as hell, grabbed her wrist and she his.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now you guys hold on while Kye jumps and I yank you back." They nodded, and I counted down. "Three, two, one, jump!"

It was tricky to be gentle enough while using my strength to pull them both. I

couldn't hurt her, and they still needed to be able to hold onto each other.

My wolf wanted to go all in, and I knew I was leaving behind bruises over the healing ones on her arm—I hated that so much.

I pulled hard, stepping back to give them space, and watched as Carys and Kye were tugged out of the danger zone. We ended up in a haphazard heap on the floor that was still creaking.

They were laughing breathlessly, relieved, but I urged them to move.

“Come on, we need to get out of here.” I held out a hand for Kye and pulled him up. He reached for Carys, and we quickly backed into the family room.

“Holy shit, Kye!” Carys lifted her hands as if to touch her brother, but then didn't know where it was safe to do so.

“It's only a cut, it'll be fine,” he tried to reassure her, but with the blood still dripping—albeit sluggishly, thankfully—it wasn't working.

“Okay, how about you go fix dinner and I'll take your brother upstairs and get him cleaned up. I didn't buy that big first aid kit for nothing, after all.” I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring look, then widened my eyes theatrically. “Do you think I jinxed it?”

She smacked my arm and shook her head. “Oh fuck off. Your house broke him so you get to fix him.” Then she flounced off to the kitchen.

“She's more affected than she thinks she's letting on,” Kye murmured softly.

“I know.” I sighed and smiled at him. “Come on, let's go fix you up.”

He followed me into the main bathroom, where I grimaced at the state of his clothing. “How about you shower first? But obviously don’t get the cut wet.”

He mirrored my expression as he glanced at himself in the mirror. “Oh I’m such a horror show. My hair will be disgusting!”

It would be. In fact.... “Here’s hoping we don’t have to shave any of it.”

The horror in his eyes when he snapped his gaze to mine was kind of funny.

“That’s not funny!”

“It is. Kinda.” I grinned. “I’ll bring you some of your clothes. Get in the shower.” I stepped out of the bathroom and almost stumbled when he called out “Yes, Alpha,” after me.

He’d put his bags in the bedroom earlier that day, so they’d be out of the way. Then he’d piled some of his clothes on top of the dresser by the door. I grabbed clean underwear, pajama pants, and a T-shirt from his selection, and walked back into the bathroom.

It hadn’t occurred to me that he might feel awkward with nudity, because wolves didn’t really care about such things and frankly I saw submissives naked more than I saw them clothed at the clubs.

“Uh,” he managed to say, standing there in the nude, his hand on the shower faucet. The shower was adequate, but the water took time to heat up, and I supposed he was about to turn it on for that.

I quickly put his clothes on the edge of the sink next to the first aid kit I’d already brought out from under it. “Sorry. If this is too awkward for you—”

“No, no. It’s not that. I guess it’s less weird to you?”

I chuckled. “Well, for one, there’s very little modesty within a wolf pack. I’ve tried to be polite about it around you and Carys, but expect me to forget at some point when I need to shift.” I kept my gaze on his face the whole time. As much as part of me wanted to look my fill, this wasn’t the time.

He turned the water on and moved to examine the cut in the mirror again.

“I think the nudity is a similar thing to listening in to others’ conversations,” I continued. “It’s all about living together as harmoniously as possible. That brings some challenges, and you need to be courteous of others’ privacy.”

He hummed thoughtfully, then smiled slightly. “Explain that to me?”

As he stepped back to the shower, this time all the way under the stream while dodging it at the last moment so as not to get his hair wet, I let my eyes wander downward.

He had the cutest bubble butt I’d seen in a while. It was incredibly biteable, and I tore my gaze away at the last moment before he glanced at me questioningly.

“Well, people want some modesty, right? So we don’t stare at others while they’re naked, unless invited to look,” I explained, smirking a little. His blush had little to do with the hot water and that made my wolf preen even though it probably didn’t quite know why it was doing that. “And as for the listening in... well, our hearing is much better than humans’. So we get exposed to things early on. Hearing conversations we shouldn’t, hearing what people do behind closed doors, that sort of thing.”

“Oh... Oh! ”

I laughed at the horror in his voice. “Yeah. Let’s say you learn to close your ears for a lot of the noises you hear in the night.”

“I have so much to learn about werewolves,” he said as he started to scrub some of the blood off his neck. “It’s a whole other culture, for one.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “I guess it is. We were even more different centuries ago. More secretive and most packs lived in total seclusion.”

Kye snickered. “What do you call this house?”

“Okay, but most of the other modern packs I know don’t live quite this remotely. They do tend to live on large properties or adjacent to large nature reserves, though.”

“Well, personally I’m looking forward to learning more. That was what I was going to do tonight after dinner, but we’ll see if my brain has enough energy after all this.” He gestured at his head.

“Yeah, blood loss and injury take a lot out of you.”

He wet a washcloth and turned the shower off. “Can you get the rest from my hairline?”

“Sure, come sit.” I handed him a towel so he could cover himself a bit, and waited until he sat on the toilet lid.

He handed the washcloth to me and tilted his head so I would have a good view of the area where the cut hid inside his thick, dark hair. The issue was that the way he tilted his head made the wolf perk up.

I froze, torn between what the wolf wanted and what I needed to do, Kye’s hazel eyes

opened.

“What?” he asked.

Clearing my throat, I shook my head. “It’s uh....” I felt awkward suddenly. Vulnerable. It was a weird feeling to have.

He put his hand on my hip and tugged the hem of my T-shirt. “What is it, Brodie?”

I loved my name on his lips. Almost more than I loved it when he called me Alpha.

I took a deep breath and let it out, then smiled self-deprecatingly. “It’s the way you tilt your head.” Completely unable to stop myself, I ran my fingers along the graceful arc of his neck. “It’s....”

He licked his lips. “Ah.”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t take my hand away or tear my gaze from where I was touching his pale skin. “It’s... a wolf thing.”

I could see the corner of his mouth lift, and then he tilted his head even more.

I rasped out a chuckle. My body was responding to him like it hadn’t to anyone in a very long time. “You’re playing with fire, boy.”

He tongued his lower lip slowly, then whispered, “And what if, sometimes, I like to burn?”

I almost got a head rush from his tone alone. “I’ve put submissives on their knees for lesser reasons.”

His head jerked a little and my gaze locked with his. There was surprise in his eyes, but something else, too. An expression I had seen many times before.

I swayed toward him, but caught myself at the last moment. I cleared my throat and pointedly nodded at his head. “None of them have ever bled in the beginning, though.”

Kye let out a snicker. “So what you’re saying is that you’re one of those Doms who sometimes make subs bleed?”

Smirking, I cupped his jaw with one hand to hold his head still, and started to rub the blood off his face. “Absolutely. All you have to do is ask.”

“Noted.” He closed his eyes, but smiled as I continued to scrub the dried blood off his hairline.

Luckily the moment passed, but it left a seed of something hopeful under my breastbone. Like maybe this could work when I told him the truth about our connection.

The cut turned out to be small and there was no debris inside. I still made sure it was cleaned to my standards, even though Kye whined at me.

By the time I was done and I helped him get dressed—getting the T-shirt over his head without disturbing the cut was a challenge he hadn’t counted on—Carys was hollering at us from downstairs.

We went downstairs and had one of the best meals I had in a while. As we were eating, Kye’s phone dinged.

“An email,” he explained as he checked it. For a moment, he appeared surprised, then

he threw back his head and laughed.

“What?” Carys asked, amused.

“Well, they’ve just let me know that I didn’t get the job I interviewed for a few hours before I started my drive here.”

I snorted and continued eating.

“I, for one, am happy for that,” Carys said and beamed at her brother.

He put his phone away and picked up his fork and knife again. “Me, too.”

This time, when he looked at me, there was something more in his gaze. Something that my wolf couldn’t understand, but I certainly did.

Since Carys had cooked, we told her to go shower and relax while we did the dishes. We really needed a dishwasher, but that was put way down the list in my mind. We could deal, when it was just the three of us.

Kye put on some music from his phone and we cleaned the kitchen together. He hummed along to a raspy-voice singer, and I got stuck on the lyrics.

I could hear my future self in those words. About a man losing control when his person wasn’t close to him. Because whatever else Kye was, he was my mate, and that was everything to a wolf.

Later, when we all retreated upstairs to go to bed, Carys chose to sleep in a T-shirt and a pair of Kye’s drawstring sleep pants she had to roll up some. I had decided to wear a tank and boxer briefs because I ran hotter, and Kye wore the clothes he’d put on after the shower. At least that way there would be less skin contact during the

night.

“We need to get you clothes,” Kye told her as he pulled the new duvets back so we could climb in.

“That’d be great,” she admitted, blushing a little. “I didn’t have many things when I got here.”

“I’ll make sure there’s a clothing fund for the pack,” I said easily when I climbed into bed first, as they were clearly waiting for my cue. “Until then, you can use my card.” I knew Kye didn’t have money and that she would feel awkward using Rian’s money for something so personal, so I punched my brand new pillow a few times without looking at them and added, “That way you can go to Target or get something online. I’m sure once Rian gets here, he’ll try to buy you the moon, but you know, let’s start small.”

She giggled and climbed in, settling to the other side. “That sounds like a deal.”

Kye stood next to the bed and observed us thoughtfully. “So it would seem I’ll be spooned no matter what I do.”

Then he managed to crawl over his sister and get under the covers sort of halfway under both of our covers.

“What do we think about the light?” I asked, because there was a lamp on the bedside table on my side and the ceiling light had been turned off already.

“Can we leave it on?” Carys asked in a small voice.

“Absolutely.” I made myself comfortable and realized I was facing Kye. “Hi.”

He grinned, then gestured at his head. "I need to remember to sleep on this side."

Right. If he turned to face Carys, he'd sleep on the cut.

Carys' hand slid under his arm as she plastered herself against his back and yawned. "You're the little spoon until your head heals." She giggled tiredly. "Does that mean Brodie is your little spoon?"

Kye grinned. "I don't know. Does it?" He raised a brow at me.

I shrugged as much as I could lying down. "I don't know. Might as well?"

Then I rolled over and moved back until I could feel his body heat behind mine. I left a sliver of distance between our bodies.

"Good night," I said, and got a mostly-asleep hum from Carys.

Kye slid his arm around me and placed his hand over my heart. "Good night, Alpha," he murmured.

I fell asleep to his breath caressing the back of my neck every now and then, both the wolf and I the most content we'd felt in a long, long time.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

By the time I woke up, the bed was empty. My head was sore, and for a moment my brain tried to tell me it was a hangover. Then I remembered the events of the previous day and sighed.

I got out of bed and went into the bathroom to do my morning routine. I hated that part of my hair was clumped together with dried blood, but there was very little I could do to it when I couldn't really see the cut properly. I assumed with Carys's help, we could maybe get some of the blood combed out, but did I want to risk aggravating the area? Maybe not.

I got dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T, then padded downstairs in my socks, since I'd left my shoes by the stairs last night. They'd been kind of nasty after the fall, so I hadn't taken them upstairs.

My phone had been on silent all night, and I realized I had picked it up off the dresser and hadn't even looked at it.

I walked into the kitchen, frowning at the message I'd gotten from Henry.

"You still alive? Should I call in the cavalry? If so, where exactly?"

"What's wrong?" Carys asked.

She was plating breakfast, and Brodie was nowhere to be seen.

What time was it anyway?

“Uh, it’s my friend Henry. I should call him, I guess.” I’d completely forgotten.

I felt as if I’d been in Luxton for weeks now, but it had only been two nights? How was that possible?

I put the cell on the table, then walked to Carys and hugged her tightly.

She chuckled breathlessly. “Well okay? Good morning to you too?”

“I’m so fucking glad we’re together,” I murmured against her hair.

She used her free hand—the other one was holding a spatula—to squeeze me back.

“Me too. I love you, big brother.”

“Love you too, baby sister.”

The front door opened, and I stepped back, grabbing my phone to compose a message while picking a pod for the coffee maker.

“Good morning,” Brodie rumbled.

“Morning,” I said over my shoulder. “Coffee?”

“An espresso, please.” He took two of the plates from Carys, and went to the table.

“Caramel Macchiato for me,” Carys gave her order.

I fixed the coffees while I sent a message to Henry. “I’m good. Going to stay here. My sister is okay, and I feel like staying here is a good call for both of us.”

She came back to grab her and Brodie's coffees, and I put my phone away to carry mine to the table.

"So the guys should be here in about forty-five minutes or so," Brodie said, all business while I was barely awake. "I was thinking, maybe you two would like to go do some shopping for us?"

"More shopping?" I grinned.

"Well clothes for Carys, but I thought you might want to get more things for yourself. Plus groceries are a never-ending need. Oh, and I think we should get an iPad for the pack for communal use. I think having one in the kitchen for taking notes and making lists instead of everyone making them on their own gadgets might be for the best. The TV is good and Rian will send a bunch of my stuff from my apartment in Seattle so I don't have to go back, but we're still building this place from the ground up."

Why did he have to be so reasonable?

"I might want to go to a bookstore," I said thoughtfully. "Any thoughts on how far the closest one is?"

"I have no idea. Probably in Warren? That's where the Walmart Supercenter is where I went."

I handed my phone to Carys. "You check it out."

"We need to get you a phone, too," Brodie said. "Add it to the list."

Carys grumbled about it but started to make a list on my notes app anyway.

We all agreed that it would be easiest for us to be out of the house when the cleaning

crew came back to assess and work on the house.

“We need to fix his hair though,” Carys mumbled as she added something else to the list.

“Oh, yeah.” I chuckled. “I better not go into town looking like this.”

Brodie snorted. “Agreed. Do you have a beanie?”

I shook my head. “I had one but I’ve lost it since.”

“I have one you can borrow. I’ll get it for you.”

“Awesome, thanks.”

It didn’t cross my mind then that it would be a beanie he’d been using and thus smelled like him. The fact that I’d barely held to my wits last night and mostly managed because of a head injury told me a lot of my attraction to our Alpha.

We managed to get my hair sorted to a point where I could hide the rest with Brodie’s beanie.

Once we were ready to go, I realized Carys was uneasy about leaving the house.

“Wait, when’s the last time you went outside?” I asked her as she seemed to procrastinate by the door.

A strange little grimace-twitch expression flitted past her features. “Months?” She gnawed on her bottom lip for a few seconds, then said, “I tried to run.”

Brodie had gone onto the porch to wait for the crew to arrive, and he opened the door,

clearly having heard her.

“What do you need?” he asked immediately.

The feeling of fondness that burst into life in my chest at that moment took my breath away.

“I... I think it’ll be okay, I’ll get used to it in the truck.” Her words sounded like a hopeful question more than a statement.

“We can turn back at any moment,” I promised. “We don’t have to even go today if that’s easier.”

She seemed to steel herself. “None of the things I’ve experienced since I was brought here has been easy. This isn’t hard.” Then she walked out past Brodie and stopped as soon as she got to the middle of the yard.

“She’s so strong, but...,” Brodie murmured to me. “I think we need to find her a therapist.”

“Yeah, I don’t think this will last.” It had all gone too easily, as if she maybe had pushed the bad stuff to the back of her mind or something.

Brodie checked the time off his phone. “You two should get going so you can get off the driveway before they get there.”

Right, with the dumpster deliveries and the crew coming in, there wasn’t room to go past anyone on the narrow dirt road.

Brodie looked worried for a moment as he glanced at Carys, but then he turned back to me. “Call me if you need anything. Come back home as soon as you need to.”

Home.

I smiled. “I’ll keep an eye on how she’s doing. Don’t worry, Alpha.” I squeezed his arm and barely kept myself from swaying closer to kiss his cheek.

Carys was happy to get into the car, and I didn’t ask why she visibly tensed at a certain part of the driveway. She’d tell me if she wanted to.

Instead, I handed her my phone and told her to pick some driving music. It wasn’t that we were going that far, but it would give her something to do and think.

She picked a rock band that sang in... Italian?

“Don’t worry, most of their stuff is in English now,” she said preemptively, as if reading my mind a little.

“Hey, I can still understand a word here and there!” I protested.

Our dad’s side of the family was Italian American and his parents, our Nonna and Nonno, had taught us some Italian over the years. They passed away when we were younger, but some things stuck with you.

“I’m so glad they both passed away before I ran away,” she said after a while, her thoughts going to where mine had. “It would’ve broken them.”

I reached over to take her hand and squeezed it. “I don’t like that they’re gone, but I agree with you. Or hey, maybe you would’ve run to them instead.”

She shrugged and smiled a little. “Maybe I would’ve.”

As soon as we got back to civilization, so to speak, Carys tensed a little more. We

decided to go to the Walmart first, so we could get her the clothing and whatever else we needed more urgently.

I parked as close to the doors as I could, and then waited for her to be ready to get out of the car.

“I saw a lot of parking lots like this. I was moved from one car to another a few times at nighttime in similar places,” she said quietly, fiddling with the hem of her hoodie that was actually one of mine. It was too big on her, but not enough to not make it plausible as a fashion choice.

I turned off the music, opened our shopping list and kept waiting.

“We need to do our nails soon,” she said suddenly. “Maybe we should buy more polish while we’re here?”

“I’ll add it to the list. We can go crazy. Who’s gonna see?”

She giggled like she had as a kid. “Oh, I wonder if they have those nail art stickers?”

“Should we go check?” I asked, not at all smoothly.

She smiled, knowing well what I was doing, but nodded anyway. “Sure. Let’s try this.”

Armed with Brodie’s credit card—not Rian’s, because that was one step too far for us—we got everything we needed and then some.

We pointedly ignored the total and hauled our loot to the truck.

“Well, there’s the iPad and the phone and all,” Carys murmured as she picked up the

beanie she'd gotten for herself and took the tags off while we were at the truck. "That should make Brodie happy."

"Yeah. I think making sure we have everything is his way of taking care of us."

"I think that's a good guy thing, not just an Alpha thing." She put the tags back into the bag and pulled the beanie on. "How do I look?"

Her dark hair was thick like mine, only much longer. "Gorgeous as always. It's the genes."

She snorted and pointed across the vast parking lot. "Let's go to Lowe's. I think I saw a Dollar Tree on the way there."

That was a hint and a half. We'd loved Dollar Tree as kids. Our Dad might've had money, but we still lived frugally, and we learned early that we could stretch our allowances much further at a Dollar Tree.

It took us about four hours to get through Walmart, Dollar Tree, Lowe's, and Walmart again for the groceries. We hadn't wanted to leave the groceries in the truck for too long, but since we knew what we were getting, we got out of there pretty fast on the second run.

We were having so much fun, and we weren't even spending that much money.

After grabbing lunch at the nearby Taco Bell, we drove off to find the bookstore.

"So what do you want to find there?" Carys asked, sticking the last bit of her chocolate bar into her mouth.

"Some books on wolves, mostly. I want to learn more. I'm gonna check online too,

see what resources I can find, but....” I shrugged. “I want to be the best I can for the pack and for that I need to know what a pack needs, right?”

She grinned. “Could always just ask Brodie?”

“Well obviously, but he’s new to this. Besides, I don’t think Rusty’s pack was one where he would’ve learned healthy ways of doing everything, you know?” I listened to the GPS and turned left, slightly anxious about getting onto more crowded streets in a truck this big.

“I guess so.” She put the chocolate bar wrapper into the bag we were using for trash and pointed forward. “I think I can see the bookstore.”

Luckily, we found a parking spot down the block from the store. Again, before we left the truck, Carys looked around for a bit, taking in the amount of people around us.

“Okay, I’m good,” she finally stated, and on we went.

The shop wasn’t very big, but I found a few interesting books, while Carys wandered around to see if anything caught her eye. Once we were done with our search, we took everything to the front desk.

A middle-aged lady smiled at us. “Did you find everything okay?”

“Yeah, thank you. Unless you have any more nonfiction books about werewolves and pack dynamics...?” I asked, while Carys went to flip some LP records.

“Everything we have right now is shelved but let me see....” She took my pile and picked up one of the three books on wolves I had picked. “This one has a foreword by... yes, Professor Finlay. I think she’s written some papers that would probably be

interesting to you.”

“Oh, good to know. Thank you so much!”

“It’s always nice to meet a human who is interested in our culture,” she replied, flashing her eyes the green of a non-beta member of a wolfpack.

“We’ve recently joined a pack and I want to have all the knowledge possible,” I explained needlessly.

“That’s very good of you. I’m happy for your Alpha.”

She made more small talk while she rang us up, and soon enough we were on the road home again.

I chuckled.

“What?” Carys asked as she flipped through a comic book she’d gotten.

“I just thought we were going ‘home’, that’s all.”

She beamed at me. “Yeah, we are. I... that’s kind of awesome.”

“Yeah, it really is.”

When we got back to the house, the yard was filled with dumpsters, or so it seemed. There were three different ones and there was the cleaning crew’s van and a truck with different decals on the doors parked in the yard, too. I very carefully, wincing preemptively, maneuvered Brodie’s new truck into the space left closest to the house.

My sedan was parked behind one of the dumpsters now, which was oddly fitting, if I

was honest.

Two guys in protective gear walked out of the house with armfuls of stuff they tossed on top of whatever else they'd dumped before. They didn't pay attention to us, which seemingly helped Carys relax more.

Brodie emerged from the barn with a couple of other men. He smiled quickly when he noticed us, then shook hands with the men, who went into the truck and drove off.

We got out of our truck and Brodie came to us.

"Did you guys have fun?" he asked, looking at the number of bags we had.

"Oh yeah. We're well set now for the stuff we could get from around here." I smiled, again having the urge to touch him for some reason.

"We'll need to order the new couch today, because the old ones are in that dumpster," he said, pointing to one of the new ones. "We're not allowed in the family room at all."

I wasn't surprised, and we wouldn't miss the space for the time being. We still had the kitchen.

"The kitchen is fine, right?" Carys asked as she piled her arms with bags.

"Yeah, it's good. So is the porch, even though he smoked there. The biggest issue for these guys is the family room, the rest isn't hazardous." He grabbed enough stuff to make us appear very human. "Not that the family room is too bad, either. They want to be sure so they're pulling down what they can so I can resurface the room. The carpeting is going too, obviously."

Inside, the family room's side of the house was separated from the rest with plastic sheets that made me think of a serial killer movie. The guys came and went with things they needed to get rid of.

"Why didn't they open a window? Throw stuff out that way?" I asked, because it registered that the windows had been all closed.

"Mostly because they're hard to open. The wood is swollen and frankly it might break the panes if we forced them. I wouldn't mind, but they didn't want to take the risk since it's only one room."

"Oh, okay."

We put everything away, then handed the iPad to Brodie so he could set it up.

He made sure we'd gotten Carys everything she needed, and she showed her pile of goodies—clothes, haircare, the phone, and a few other things—to him.

Brodie was happy with her purchases, and she went to take them upstairs.

"And what did you get for yourself?" he asked, looking at me seriously.

I felt as if I was being tested, like it would disappoint him if I hadn't gotten anything good for myself.

"The rest of the books are mine." I nodded at the pile Carys had left behind.

He went to it and lifted the top one, then leafed it through. He didn't say anything. He checked the second and third ones, too, still too silent for me to know what he was feeling.

“Did I fuck up?” I asked, coming to stand by him.

Brodie stared at me, his expression almost stunned. “What?”

“Should I not have...?” I gestured at the books.

“No, no it’s not that,” he quickly answered, then smiled. “It’s just so... thoughtful , Kye. That you’d want to do this.”

“What? Want to know what I’ve gotten myself and my sister into?” I attempted a jokey tone, which he clearly understood.

“Yes. That.” He chuckled, then pulled me into a hug and squeezed the life out of me. “Thank you.”

“Hey, thank you, Alpha,” I murmured and hugged him back. “This is home now.”

He let go of me and looked at me like I was something special. “Yeah. Yeah it is.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

My head was filled with everything Kye.

It turned a bit problematic when I was supposed to be making plans for the renovations and I realized I'd been staring at the list I kept on my phone for several minutes without seeing it. Instead, my brain was giving me a replay of the books he'd bought the previous day, the way he'd acted as if it was completely normal, and anyone would do it. But most of all, my wolf was flashing me glimpses of the way it had felt to wake up another morning with Kye wrapped around me.

I heard the telltale sound of a beater driving up to the house, so I put my phone back in my pocket and pushed away from the side of the truck I'd been leaning on.

Ben and Max were finally coming to visit, and we needed to have some hard talks about everything.

It was mid-afternoon, and the cleaning crew had finished work an hour ago. The people I'd hired to tear down the barn would arrive on Monday—expedited because I wanted that fucking building gone.

The car was around the same amount of junk held together by duct tape and hope than Kye's, except this one was still running.

It stopped nearby, and I couldn't help but to smile at the sight of my cousins as they got out.

They gave me almost identical grins. Most people thought they were twins even though Ben was a year and some change older. With their blond hair that curled a little around their ears and hazel eyes, they looked so similar that the only difference at first glance was the fact that Ben was a few inches taller than Max's 5'8". They even had similar builds, with both being on the slimmer side but with the muscle tone that came from being born wolf.

"It's so damn good to see you guys," I said, grabbing them both into a hug.

We clutched each other for a while, the emotions running high in a good way for once on this property.

When I pulled back to look at them, there was no dry eye to be seen.

"Fuck we missed you," Max blurted out, then burrowed back against me.

Ben smiled and wiped his eyes, always the more stoic of the two of them. He put a hand on his brother's shoulder in support.

"I missed you guys, too." It was the truth, I realized now. "I'm sorry I was away for so long."

Ben shook his head. "We get it." Then he glanced at the house and frowned. "None of us could've known it would get this bad."

The door opened and Kye stepped out. He walked to the edge of the porch.

Max stepped back and moved closer to Ben.

"Kye, these are Max and Ben, my cousins," I introduced them.

I could tell Max, especially, was taken aback by Kye's looks. Ben went to shake his hand.

"Good to meet you," he murmured, clearly feeling a bit awkward for a reason that became evident in Kye's next words.

"Good to meet you too. Thank you for letting Brodie know my sister was held here," he said in an earnest tone.

Max's steps toward him faltered, but he caught himself at the last moment and went to shake his hand as well.

"We should've acted earlier, but we didn't believe the rumors," Ben, always the spokesperson of the two of them. "I'm sorry it took us that long to act."

"Better late than never," Kye replied easily, but I could tell he'd thought of that, too.

Max cleared his throat, his gaze anywhere but on Kye. "We didn't come by often. Not even monthly. Tried to stay away...."

"And nobody blames you." Kye walked down two steps so he could look the guys in the eye. "I don't. Neither does my sister."

As if on cue, the door opened again, this time with Carys peering out. She stepped out but stayed on the porch. Her gaze was conflicted, but then she smiled ever so slightly.

"I'm Carys." She gave her full attention to both of the cousins in turn. "I don't blame you for anything," she said firmly, in a tone that brooked no argument. "I learned to know your dad, and I know why you didn't come by more often and why it took you time to alert Brodie and his sister."

Ben frowned. "I wish—"

"If wishes were horses, right?" she said, smiling sadly. Then she nodded decisively. "I'll be okay. I promise. Just...." She glanced away and gnawed on her bottom lip.

The cousins stared at her, waiting for anything she might want to say.

After a few heartbeats, she turned her gaze to them, and I saw her steel herself. She straightened her posture and pulled back her shoulders. She appeared proud and capable in that moment, and both Ben and Max's expressions suggested they would follow her through fire.

"Take care of yourself," she told them. She smiled at me, then back at them. "If you're part of this pack, then you make sure you're the best you can be. I'm sure Brodie has some thoughts on how you can do that." She took in a deep breath and let it out, then added, "Let's not let Rusty's legacy define us." With that, she turned on her heel and slipped inside the house.

All three men turned to me, seeming a bit stunned.

"And that's my sister," Kye said, sounding proud but dumbfounded.

I chuckled. "She's a great asset to the pack, as are you," I told him. Then I concentrated on Ben and Max. "You two, let's take a stroll."

Kye took that as a dismissal, gave me a smile, and went after his sister.

I headed where the beginning of the perimeter path had once been. It wasn't there now, it had overgrown and seemed barely trodden by my attempts to keep the territory guarded in the last few days.

Ben made a disgusted noise when he realized the state of it. “Jesus fuck... I know we’re not angels, but did those bastards even care?”

“I think they were more concentrated on cooking.” I snorted. “I didn’t plan any of this, as you know, but now that I’m here....”

“For what it’s worth, we’re glad you took over,” Max murmured quietly.

I patted his shoulder. It couldn’t have been an easy thing to admit for either of them, given that to “take over” I’d killed their father.

“What Max said,” Ben agreed. “Look, we know our dad was a piece of shit. Always knew it, right? But it took Mom leaving him for us to truly realize how bad he’d gotten.”

“How is she?” I asked.

Mickey had tried in our childhood, but she was too submissive of a wolf to have been able to do anything against her husband and alpha’s will.

“We finally managed to get hold of her a few days ago. She’s clean. Found a pack that takes in strays. I think she’ll be happy.” Ben shrugged. “She feels like shit that her leaving made him do what he did to Carys, though.”

I shook my head vehemently. “It wasn’t her that made him do anything.” I turned away so they wouldn’t see my face as I grimaced. “He’s the reason Bella left the pack when we were kids.”

Ben had been walking next to me with Max at our back, but now they both stopped.

“No,” Max whispered.

Turning back to make eye contact with both of them, I nodded seriously. “I don’t know how long it went on, but it started at some point after our mom died. I don’t think Mickey knew, though. Or maybe she suspected when Bella ran away, but it’s all bygones now.”

Ben wrapped an arm around his brother, and they stood in silence for a while. Sometimes it felt like they communicated without words. They’d done it a lot when we were kids. I’d always assumed it boiled down to their wolves being intrinsically tied to their sibling while living in such an unsteady pack.

We continued to walk in silence for a while.

“Are Carys and Kye staying?” Ben asked when we jumped over the shallow creek that ran through the property.

“Yes.”

“Good.” After a moment, he added, “I always felt weird about not having humans in the pack.”

“We’ve met others who have mixed packs and they have seemed more... balanced,” Max piped up.

“They’re assets to the pack.” I cleared my throat, because this was the harder part of the conversation to me. “Are you guys willing to be my betas?”

Max tugged at my jacket sleeve and we halted on the barely there path.

They looked at me seriously, then exchanged a glance, and Ben nodded for Max to speak.

“We want to come back home, if you have us,” he started, then sought more encouragement from his brother again before continuing. “But we think we’re not ready. Not like this.”

He gestured at the slight gauntness of his face, the telltale unkempt appearance that, while nowhere near as bad as Rusty’s betas or the man himself, was still noticeable if you knew them.

I smiled. “I have a proposition for you guys. I have a friend, his name is Rian. He’s filthy rich and he’s basically bankrolling everything we need to get the pack running.” I lifted a hand before they could speak. “He insists. The guy has the energy of a Golden Retriever puppy even though he’s nearly two hundred years old and a vampire.”

Their eyes widened and they glanced at each other, then back at me.

“Okay?” Ben seemed dubious.

“He’s my best friend. I trust him with my life.” I’d trust him with my mate’s life. “He knows someone back in Seattle who runs a rehab clinic for non-humans. He wanted to offer you guys a chance to go there for a month or two. All expenses paid, including getting you there.”

Ben grimaced. “That’s....”

“A lot,” Max concluded.

“It is. All he wants in return is for you to get clean and come back to be my betas. Protect this property with all you got.” I knew that would make their wolves perk up.

“Is he going to come here?” Max asked.

“Yes. But he’ll stay in Seattle until you’re ready to head back, just so you guys have someone that I trust there if you need him. He’ll visit you when you’re allowed visitors and such.”

They did their silent conversation thing again, then Ben nodded for both of them. “Okay. When?”

“As soon as you can. He’s got spots for you in the program.”

“How quickly can you get us flights?” Ben asked, smiling, with a new kind of hope in his eyes.

I hugged them both, then asked, “How about I give you Rian’s number and you call him while I check on those flights, eh?”

I took Max’s phone and put Rian’s number in, then gave him a heads up that we were calling him. Max put him on speaker, and I chuckled quietly at Rian’s excitement.

“Oh my deity, am I glad to hear from you guys!” he started the call.

The guys gave me a wide-eyed expression and I smirked.

“It’s good to hear from you, too.” Ben remembered his manners. “I’m Ben.”

“And I’m Max. Nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Brodie, but I’m going to check on the first flights we can get them on while you talk and we walk,” I concluded.

The cousins didn’t stay for dinner but opted to go pack their bags instead. I’d told them I would take them to Pittsburgh to the closest airport that would give them a

shorter flight and they'd tried to insist on going on a bus. Rian had even told us he'd pay for a cab, for fuck's sake.

I put my foot down and told them that it was only a few hours drive each way. I could grab a few hours of sleep before I'd go get them around four in the morning, so they'd make the first possible flight out. I'd be back home for a late breakfast.

"But you're leaving the pack for us. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that." Ben frowned as they were getting into their car.

I shook my head. "You're missing the point. You two are pack." That shut them up. Max's eyes got a bit watery, so I added, "Besides, I'm the Alpha so what I say goes."

They chuckled and drove off. Mission accomplished.

Since the family room was still a mess, although in a different way now, Kye, Carys, and I sat in the kitchen most of the evening. She cooked dinner while Kye concentrated on his "wolfy research" and I made plans for the renovations.

At one point, Kye moved his feet and bumped into mine under the table. Without looking up from his book, he left his foot against mine. I could see the tiny curl of the corner of his mouth though, and snorted softly.

I liked submissives that were a bit bratty, and he was starting to relax enough to show that in small ways. I hoped we could explore that more at some point once things settled a little.

After dinner, Kye dug out a deck of Uno cards from somewhere and we went to a three-way war. The game interspersed with laughter and the siblings swatting at each other made my whole being hum with happiness.

We wrapped things up around nine, so I'd have enough time to sleep before the drive.

"Oh, I'll go grab something from my car," Kye said when Carys headed up to shower first.

I followed him out, glancing up at the sky to see the moon phase. I felt it instinctively, of course, and it worried me a little that Ben and Max would only have a few days at the rehab place before the full moon.

Kye closed the car door around the corner and the dumpster, then walked to me with a bundle in his hands.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding at it.

He unwrapped it and revealed a handgun.

Somehow that shocked me to the core. "I... uh..."

He grinned, his teeth glinting in the moonlight. "Don't worry. I know how to use it and I follow a strict safety protocol."

I hadn't been around weapons much. Werewolves and vampires didn't need them, after all. Nobody I knew had ever had shooting as a hobby, either.

"Well, I guess it's understandable you'd have one," I finally blurted out.

He wrapped it up in the cloth again and shrugged. "I was never into guns and I'm not now, really. But then Carys went missing and...." He gave me a searching look. "Is it okay that I have it? Just for protection."

It hit me that this was his way to keep his sister safe in my absence if it came to that.

Before I had time to speak, he gave me a self-deprecating little smile.

“I know it won’t do much unless I hit someone in the head and if they’re not human, even that won’t necessarily stop them for that long, but...” He searched for words for a while. “This isn’t to kill anyone. It’s to give her time to run.”

The heartbreak in his gaze told me everything I needed to know, right then. He would do anything for her. Anything at all to keep what happened to her from happening again.

I closed the distance between us and hugged him. “You’ll be safe. I won’t be gone for long. You lock the front door and block the bedroom door with the dresser, and you’ll have enough time to act if it comes to that.” I kissed his head. “It won’t, but just in case.”

“Just in case,” Kye agreed.

We went inside and he hid the gun in the bedside table drawer on my side of the bed. Carys wouldn’t look in there.

“We’ll need to have a better place for it,” I told him quietly as the shower turned off in the bathroom.

“A gun safe would be great to have.” His cheeky little grin made me roll my eyes fondly.

“I wonder where you’d get one of those.”

“I dunno,” he deadpanned, then snickered.

We took turns showering, and then went to bed. Carys was out like a light, her psyche

was still healing—she and Kye were going to look into therapists the next day—and I tried my best to settle as well.

I couldn't, though. I had a shower fresh Kye next to me, his natural scent mingling with some herby shower gel that was one of the milder ones that people who lived with wolves often used. I'd seen the bottle in the shower. It was a new one, which meant he would've bought it when they went shopping together.

I wondered how much of the fluttery, falling-for-him feeling was the mate bond and how much came from the fact that he was wonderful. He was physically appealing to me, of course, but he was also such a good, thoughtful person.

Sighing, I turned to lie down on my back.

“What's troubling you?” Kye whispered quietly.

He moved closer to me until I lifted my arm so he could cuddle against my side and put his head on my shoulder.

“Nothing,” I murmured back and squeezed him closer. “Not anymore.”

He thought about my response for a few seconds, then lifted his head to make eye contact.

The light that we always had on during the night illuminated his features. He seemed to be considering something, then his shoulder jerked up a little as if he was shrugging.

Before I knew it, he'd pressed his lips to mine in a chaste kiss.

I let out a quiet, wounded sound and had no way to prevent my whole being from

latching onto the connection. My fingers slid into his hair, my hand cupping the back of his head as I held him to my lips.

Neither of us tried to deepen the kiss, but we stayed like that for several seconds, just concentrating on the sensation.

Then I pulled my hand back and opened my eyes. He opened his at the same time, and we smiled at each other a bit stupidly.

He lowered his head back to my shoulder, then moved until it was on my chest before wrapping his arm around me.

“Good night,” he whispered.

“The best,” I whispered back.

I could feel his silent little chuckle in the vibration of his body against mine, and closed my eyes, smiling. The happiness in my chest, in my wolf, was indescribable.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

I woke up when Brodie slid out of bed and went into the bathroom to get his very early morning started.

Moving to his spot, I stretched carefully so I wouldn't wake Carys. She'd had some nightmares, and I wondered if they'd come from meeting the cousins. She'd only seen them through the window before, but they must've been a reminder of the time before Brodie arrived, which would easily mess up with her mind enough to give her bad dreams.

Deciding to be useful, I got out of bed and padded downstairs in bunny slippers Carys had insisted on getting me. I went to the coffee maker and patted myself on the back for having bought some travel mugs for when we'd need drinks at hand during the renovation.

I made a quadruple espresso in a mug, then poured in enough milk to balance it out and turn it into a very tall latte. Werewolves didn't get caffeine hits as easily as humans, just like their body and brain chemistry didn't react to alcohol and narcotics the same way. I was sure Brodie would appreciate the caffeine as soon as he got on the road.

Then I realized the cousins would be traveling with him, and started on two other mugs as well.

"There you are." He walked to me to see what I was doing. "Coffee?"

“Yeah, that one is yours, but I’m making Ben and Max some too. Try to remember to bring all three mugs back?”

The silence behind me made me turn to him. He had that same kind of awestruck expression on his face again. I blushed and turned away.

“Any thoughts on how they like their coffee?” I asked, then squeaked when strong tattooed arms wrapped around me from behind.

Brodie pressed his face against my neck and inhaled in a way that wasn’t regular human behavior. He soaked in my scent, then made a happy, rumble sound that vibrated from his chest to my back.

“I don’t know. Maybe strong lattes?” he said finally.

I explained what I’d made for him, and he chuckled, then dropped a kiss against my temple before stepping back.

There was a sleeve of chocolate cookies in the pantry, so I went to grab it and added it to the loot, then snatched a bag of Skittles from Carys’s stash.

“Okay, I think you’re set.” I showed the goods to Brodie.

For a moment it seemed as if he was going to kiss me again, but then his phone dinged. He dug it out and smiled, answering the call.

“Morning, sweetness,” he said, and my brain got the cold shower it needed.

I lined up everything on the counter for him, then waited for him to be done with the call.

By now I'd figured out that "sweetness" was his friend Rian who seemed to be his favorite person in the world. They were definitely closer than most guys were with their best friends, and I found myself unable to ask him if they had a romantic relationship as well.

It didn't matter to me if someone was polyamorous, but I didn't think I could handle my partner being with someone else, too. It worked for a lot of people, I was too possessive of my lovers—not that I'd had many—to be able to let them be with someone else too. Besides, if we were to have a kink relationship, too, that was a whole other thing as well.

I'd only ever played with Doms I wasn't in a relationship with, but I couldn't see myself sharing Brody with another sub when it came to sexual play.

Once he'd ensured Rian that he was about to go pick up the cousins and that he'd call when he got them to the airport, they said bye and he put the phone into his pocket.

"So, here's everything," I gestured at the coffees and treats. "I'll lock up and move the dresser just in case. Let me know when you get to the airport and when you start the drive back, okay?"

Brodie tilted his head minutely, as if he was trying to figure something out, then nodded. "Okay. I'll drive safely and be back when I can. I don't know how the traffic will be, but I'll be careful."

I was glad he was conscious that those were the words I needed to hear.

I followed him out to the porch and watched him get into the truck. Then I pulled the door closed and locked it so that he could see me do it.

I walked up the stairs and frowned. I still wasn't sure why I'd kissed him, but it had

felt right. Not only right, but right.

Since Brodie had moved the dresser right next to the door for me, all I had to do was close the door and push the dresser in front of it.

Carys sat up in bed. “W-huh?”

“It’s okay, go back to sleep. I just moved the dresser.”

“Oh ‘kay,” she mumbled and curled back up under the covers.

Smiling, I left my slippers next to the wall and then crawled into bed next to her. I checked to see that my phone wasn’t muted on the bedside table and tried to go back to sleep.

It didn’t feel unsafe without Brodie there, per se, but I preferred him at hearing distance.

I woke up a few hours later when Carys shook my shoulder.

“Can you help me with the dresser?” she asked apologetically. “I’m getting up and I can’t move it alone.”

I stretched and got out from under the covers, then shivered in the cool room. “Of course.”

I pushed the dresser back to its original spot and went to the bathroom. I might as well wake up, too and get some more studying done in the kitchen.

Brodie sent a message that he was at the airport with Ben and Max while I made Carys and myself coffees. Then he sent another one half an hour later like I’d asked.

We ended up zoning out around the table a little. Carys used the iPad to research therapists and I was on my laptop, finding out everything I could about Professor Finlay who had written the foreword in one of my wolfy books. I found her website, and realized that she might have all the answers I was looking for. She had written several papers about wolfpack dynamics and even lectured about it all around the world.

She had a couple of the smaller papers on her website for free, and I immediately downloaded them both. The thought of emailing her about my situation and what she would recommend flitted through my mind, but I decided not to bother her yet.

For some reason it surprised me to read in her bio that she wasn't a werewolf herself, or even a human. She was a vampire, and she'd been born in the early nineteenth century in France.

I began to read the paper titled Alphas, Betas, and the Rest – Designations Inside a Balanced Pack .

It was all very fascinating. At some point Carys pushed a plate of toast and bacon into my view and topped off my coffee. I continued reading while trying to remember to eat something on occasion.

“Kye? There's someone in the yard,” she said suddenly, her voice startled and nervous.

I got to my feet quickly, then went to peer outside. How had we not heard a vehicle?

A young person with a long blonde braid down their back walked by the barn.

“Stay here.” I went to the front door and cursed that I didn't have my gun. “Lock it behind me.”

I pulled on my shoes and jacket, then unlocked the door and stepped out quietly. The shitty porch betrayed me though, because the top step creaked loudly.

The person didn't turn around, which basically told me they were human. Either a werewolf or a vampire would've heard it for sure.

I glanced over toward the driveway and saw a truck with some decals parked in the first possible spot farthest away from the house, as if they didn't want it to be in the way.

"Can I help you?" I asked, and the person whirled around, a hand to their chest.

"Holy crap you scared me!"

"Well, to be fair you scared us, too," I deadpanned and tilted my head.

"I'm sorry, my Pop said I shouldn't have come without warning you beforehand, especially on a weekend like this, but I was driving and...."

At my quizzical expression, they walked closer and stuck out their hand. "I'm Lina Keller, my dad owns Keller Construction in town."

I shook her hand. "Right. You guys are coming to tear down the barn on Monday?"

"Yeah. I'm an apprentice still, but all hands on deck and all." She turned to look at the house, a frown marring her features.

Her hair was almost wheat blond, the braid thick and a bit messy in a way that told me she probably didn't care to keep up appearances. She wore some carpenter style overalls under an open denim jacket with a sherpa lining.

I took in the house, too. In the daylight it appeared as rundown as parts of it were.

“It needs a lot of work,” I said, then gestured toward the corner of the house. “Wanna see the other side?”

Her expression brightened. “Yeah, absolutely!”

As we started the trek around the dumpster and my sedan, she kept cataloging things with her gaze in the same way I’d seen Brodie do.

“It could be such a gorgeous home,” she murmured.

“That’s Brodie’s goal. Alpha McRae’s.”

“I heard about this house when I was little. My grandpa worked on some renovations back in the day. He said there was a rose garden?” She glanced around the backyard.

“There in that corner. I’m going to try and see if I can save it in the spring.”

She smiled. “Oh, roses are surprisingly hardy, I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“The sunroom is in a shitty condition.” I walked to the back porch steps but didn’t climb them. “I fell through the floor the other night. I also have no idea what the porch here is like, so I’m not gonna risk it.” I grinned a little.

She backed up a little from the house to get a better overall picture. “Yeah, you definitely need to do something to the sunroom before winter. Maybe even get new glass instead of just redoing those tarps.”

“The floor is already rotten, but I see your point. I think Brodie said that he’ll at least insulate the door between the sunroom and family room so the heat stays in during

the winter.”

We chatted about the house and she had some solid thoughts for a—“How old are you?” I asked. “I mean you said you were an apprentice.”

“Oh, I’m twenty. I was in an accident in high school, so studying was a pain for a couple of years. I graduated last year and started apprenticing with Pop.” She was clearly proud of herself as she should be.

“My sister is nineteen, she lives here as well.”

Lina’s expression betrayed her. She realized I knew where her thoughts had gone and winced. “Yeah, so there was this rumor in town....”

I shrugged. “There are always gonna be rumors. What I know is that she’s the strongest person I know, and that Rusty Douglas is no more. This is the McRae pack now and things are a whole lot different.”

“Well, it would be a dream come true to be able to renovate a house like this,” she said wistfully. Then a song I recognized as Guns N’ Roses sounded from her pocket, and she grimaced. “That’ll be Pop.”

“Good luck.” I grinned.

“Yeah, hi. No, no I didn’t go to the McRae house.” She widened her eyes at me. “No, I’m just driving around—” She stopped, horror filling her gaze. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll be right back home. Sure. Okay!” She ended the call, clearly pissed off. “So apparently Pop didn’t want my brothers and I to use the trucks for leisure drives without permission, so he put trackers in them.”

We looked at each other, then the absurdity kind of caught up with us and we started

to laugh.

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’m a legal adult. Have been for a couple of years. I’m definitely not the hellraiser of the family, that’s my brothers. Besides, they don’t even work for Pop!”

Privately, I thought that maybe her accident, whatever it had been like, had made her dad overprotective. Or maybe her brothers were prone to mischief and taking the company truck, who knew. Either way, I gestured forward, and we walked the rest of the way around the house and stopped by the barn again.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” she said brightly, then glanced at the kitchen window. “Your sister is very pretty.”

I chuckled, and she seemed to catch what she’d said and blushed.

“I mean—”

“No, you’re right. She is pretty. We have good genes.” I batted my lashes at her.

Giggling, she shook her head and started toward the truck. “See ya!”

“Bye!”

I watched her do a three point turn and drive off, then went inside.

“So, that was Lina Keller from Keller Construction. She’s the apprentice,” I clarified.

“I liked her hair,” Carys said from where she was standing by the stove, mixing something in a big pot, as if she hadn’t just been in the window. Curious.

I continued to read and got to a chapter titled “The Mate.”

Frowning, I tried to recall anything I might’ve known already. I vaguely remembered hearing about mates and how rare they were before, but that was about it.

“Mates, whether you believe them to be something brought on by absolute natural chemistry between two individuals or something fated, are a rare occurrence that only happens with born werewolves.

The mate can be another werewolf, a vampire, or a human, but the mate can’t feel the mate bond in the same way a werewolf is able to. There have been a handful of recorded cases of two werewolves being each other’s mates, but normally the bond is one-sided in the way that only one can truly sense it.

That is not to say that a mate bond isn’t real; it is a very real phenomenon that has been both thought of as something sacred and at times, vilified in the greater community. Some people see it as sacred for its rarity and the perfect compatibility of such a union, while others think it strips people from the ability to choose for themselves.

In some ways, that does happen to the werewolf. It is known, after all, that a werewolf who has found their mate will not be as compatible with another person, and often that knowledge is enough to make a wolf that has lost or been rejected by their mate give up on romantic relationships for the rest of their life. There are also many reported cases of such wolves having taken their own life rather than live without their mate.

In a werewolf pack, a mate, especially a mate to the Alpha, is always a welcome thing. It has been said that a wolfpack with a mate in it has been blessed. Some old beliefs state that a werewolf pack with an Alpha with a human mate is the most blessed one.”

I skimmed through a bunch of more text, then came to a section that explained about typical werewolf behavior when meeting their mate for the first time. There were paragraphs about courting and providing, and about being unable to keep from being physically affectionate even when meeting the person for the first time.

“While werewolves are known to be the most physically affectionate of the three species, the emotions of the inner wolf run high and protective once contact with the mate has been made.

In its purest form, the bond makes the wolf want to provide, and in the olden times, this often led to hunting for the mate and leaving the prey as offerings of sorts at the mate’s doorstep.

In current day, however, the—”

“Brodie’s back!” Carys startled me enough to make my heart race.

I left the laptop behind and followed her to the door.

Brodie got out of his truck appearing exhausted and gorgeous, because there was no way that man could look anything but.

When he saw us, he smiled widely. “Hey you two, how has your morning—” His head snapped to the side, and I could see his nostrils flare. “Who has been here?”

“Relax, it was just Lina Keller. I’ll tell you about it. We’ve been completely safe,” I assured him as I walked closer.

He was still on high alert, so I took a page from Dr. Finlay’s paper and went to wrap my arms around him.

“I promise, Alpha. It’s okay.”

The way he melted into my arms, giving me some of his weight too, told me he needed a nap. Then he buried his face against my neck and let out that rumble sound again.

“Come on, let’s get you inside. Carys has lunch and then we’re going to take a nap.”

Brodie’s tall form swayed, then he pulled back from the hug and yawned. “That sounds perfect.”

He kissed my forehead and for a moment it felt like he was about to say something else, but decided against it, and we walked inside together.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

The anxiety I felt driving back home was weird. It felt like a pressure in my chest, something that worsened ever so slightly the closer and closer I got. By the time I parked in the yard and got out of the truck, I was twitchy in a way I couldn't remember ever feeling before.

Then I saw Kye and Carys, and relaxed minutely, only to catch the scent of a person I didn't know. My wolf started to approach the edge then, and I was suddenly seconds away from imploding when Kye hugged me.

It was as if he pressed a button to release all that tension, and I swayed into him. My wolf instantly relaxed, flopping in my mind as if it had been doing something incredibly taxing for a long time.

Then Kye suggested lunch and nap, and the gratitude I felt toward him tried to bowl me over.

He was taking care of me in ways nobody really had before. I'd had a couple of on again, off again boyfriends but those were more transactional things than anything like this. I always felt like a service Dom with everyone but Rian.

The fact that Kye was tapping into our bond without knowing it was there told me exactly how real said bond had to be. Not that I questioned it anymore. It had only been days, but it could've been months with how my wolf settled around him.

While we had lunch, Kye told me all about Lina Keller. It was clear he'd immediately

liked her and thought she would be an asset to our renovations if we managed to get her father to loan her to us.

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” I agreed as I pushed away my empty plate.

Kye’s brows popped. “Just like that?”

“Unless my instincts tell me something negative about her, I don’t see why I wouldn’t trust your judgment.”

“Okay.” He seemed pleased as he stood and gathered our plates. “Let me put these in the sink and we’ll go nap.”

Carys grabbed the iPad. “I’m not that tired, so I’ll continue my hunt for a therapist and read, maybe.” She glanced at the window, then looked at me. “Do you think, once we’re ready to replace the windows, we could put in a window seat here?”

I followed her eyeline and tilted my head. “You know, I’ve seen those window seats where you use them as part of the kitchen table seating. Would that work? I could build a new table and maybe some benches. A proper bay window type of deal?”

“There’s certainly room for that.” Kye turned to us. “If we keep growing the pack, we’ll need a big table, too.”

I smiled at him, until he blushed and turned away again.

I went upstairs first and washed my face in the bathroom in the hopes of feeling a bit less icky from the drive. I took off my shirt and grabbed a washcloth, then wet it with hot water before running it along my neck.

I heard Kye coming into the bedroom and opened the door. “Hey, you need the

bathroom?”

He clearly thought about it for a second, then stilled as his gaze locked on my torso. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen me shirtless before, but somehow, right then, he seemed almost spellbound.

I waited until he snapped out of it and blushed.

“Uh, yeah, I could pee before I try to nap,” he murmured.

“Okay, let me just....” I put the washcloth on the edge of the hamper and walked out.

He slipped inside the bathroom, closing the door. I could hear him whisper “Jesus fucking Christ...” and snickered quietly.

To me, Kye was endlessly attractive. The lithe form with pale skin, long hair, and soulful yet mischievous eyes? Wolfnip, I tell you. And that was before I even considered who he was on the inside.

I took off my jeans, because who would want to sleep in those? Then I lay down on the bed but didn't get under the covers yet. Instead, I scoffed at myself, yet posed a bit anyway.

Half-reclined on the pillows, I put one hand behind my head, so my bicep popped, and spread my legs a bit, bending one knee slightly.

Okay, maybe I was posing more than a little.

The bathroom door opened and Kye stepped out. He did a comical double-take, then marched to the bedroom door. For a split second I thought I'd overdone it and he was walking out, but he closed the door instead and turned to me.

“Really, Brodie?” he asked, hands on his hips.

“You closed the door, though.” I smirked.

He rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth had been twitching even though he tried to scold me.

He left his sweats on the floor and climbed on the bed, then promptly knee-walked in between my legs and settled over me like a human blanket.

I smoothed his hair behind the ear that wasn’t pressed against my chest, then slid my hands over his shoulders and along his back, petting him.

Tugging at his T-shirt, I asked, “Can I take this off?”

He lifted minutely and let me pull the shirt off him. Then he settled back against me, and the skin contact was everything.

We stayed like that for a while, breathing together.

“How old are you?” he asked suddenly, not lifting his head but looking up as much as he could.

I squinted at him, confused. “Wait, we haven’t talked about that?”

He chuckled. “I mean, we haven’t even known each other a week at this point, Alpha mine.”

“Fair.” I snorted softly. “I’m thirty-three. Why?”

“I’ve been reading a lot and I was reminded of the fact that wolves don’t appear their

age. I would say you're twenty-five, based on looks alone."

I shrugged. "It is what it is. Max and Ben are twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively." Then I asked, "You're something like twenty-four? Five?"

"Yeah, twenty-four. I was five when Carys was born. Then sixteen when our sister Eira came along."

I hummed. "Were you close to her?"

Kye sighed. "Kind of, when she was little. But our stepmom never wanted us around after Eira was born so it was rough. I wish we were close, and maybe we'll be when she's old enough to make her own decisions, but we weren't even close enough for us to miss her now, really. Carys and I talked about it yesterday."

"I wish I hadn't lost so many years with Bella, but I get why she had to run."

"And then you avenged your sister and mine," he murmured.

He lifted his head and then continued the movement until he'd resettled to straddle me.

Kye tilted his head and watched me as he put his hand on my chest. I grinned slightly. I wasn't sure what he was trying to see, but I covered his thighs with my much bigger hands.

He rocked his hips minutely, rubbing us together in a way that made me sigh and get fully hard from the half mast I'd been in since he lay on top of me.

He raised a brow at me and ground his erection against mine through our underwear.

I smiled, then squeezed his thighs. “Stop.”

He stilled immediately, then cocked his head as if to ask why.

“There’s something I need you to know before we take this any further,” I said, my heart suddenly beating faster.

“Okay?” He frowned, and moved one hand in the middle of my chest as if he was feeling my sudden nerves affecting my body.

I fought hard against the instinct to break eye contact. For the first time since I’d ended Rusty, my wolf felt submissive inside me.

“I know you’ve been researching wolves. Did you read anything about mates yet?” I blurted out in an almost-nervous tone I disliked instantly.

Kye frowned again. “Yeah. Today, actually. I was getting to a point where the paper explained about how mates work in modern day packs—wait.” He sat straighter, lifting his hands off my chest. “Are you trying to tell me you have a mate?”

Yeah, that was exactly what I was trying to tell him, but I needed to choose my words carefully here. He was clearly thinking about bolting.

I moved my hands to take his and smiled slightly. “Yes,” I said firmly, then squeezed his hands so he couldn’t escape. “It’s you.” Or maybe going for the most direct answer would work too, thanks, brain.

“W-What?” The stunned expression on Kye’s face stayed there for a handful of seconds, then he chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, unable to keep a smile off my face when I felt him relax

on top of me.

“I guess if you’d come home half an hour later, I probably would’ve figured this out myself. Now that you’ve told me, I see the signs, so to speak.” He shook his head, then looked at me fondly. “I thought it was a regular wolfy touchy-feeliness and an insane chemistry brewing between us from the start.”

I grinned. “I mean, it is both of those things. There’s just something extra added into the equation.”

He pulled his hand from mine and rubbed it over his face. “Just so you know,” he said a moment later, his voice as serious as I’d ever heard it. “I’m all in. I won’t be leaving you hanging.”

The joy that burst out of me when the relief hit me and the wolf had my eyes glowing and my claws making an appearance. I let go of Kye so that I wouldn’t hurt him, but then the wolf took over and I grabbed him, flipping us over until I was on top of him.

He made a soft “oof” sound, then laughed brightly. “I gather that you agree with the idea.”

I buried my face in his neck, then rumbled out, “My wolf is extremely happy with this.” The words came out a bit slurred, the partial shift changing my teeth into something sharper and more animalistic.

Kye wrapped his arms and legs around me and squeezed tightly, hugging me with his whole body. “Good. I’m happy, too. Alpha.” Then he sighed, the sound pure happiness, and added, “Mate.”

The wolf inside me howled with happiness, a part of the sound coming out of my mouth in a low whine.

“It’s okay,” Kye whispered. “I’m here. I know you’re a wolf. I’m not going anywhere.”

I pressed my palms against the bed on either side of him, then watched as the claws finally receded. Pushing myself up, I looked at him.

“Do you know you’re a miracle?” I asked him seriously.

He smiled and chuckled, a blush climbing up his cheeks. “Well, even if I wasn’t, you’d be stuck with me, so there’s that....”

I understood the statement came from being self-conscious. Knowing that telling him he was wonderful wouldn’t help and that his view of himself would only strengthen over time, I only shrugged.

“I think you’ll be a fine mate for an Alpha,” I said casually, as if I wasn’t feeling his inner turmoil over being adequate. “And I’m incredibly fortunate that I get to be that Alpha.”

His lips curled up, but then the smile fell off. “There’s one thing I need to know, though.”

“What’s that? I’ll answer any question you might have. There are no secrets between us,” I vowed.

“Rian. I hear how you talk to him and....” He averted his gaze, clearly uncomfortable.

I wanted to chuckle but didn’t. It wasn’t a laughing matter when my mate, my unclaimed mate, already felt threatened.

Still in a pushup position over him, I lifted one hand and cupped his cheek. “Can you look at me, Kye?”

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then did as I asked.

Smiling ever so slightly, he said, “As hot as this show of strength is, my human brain thinks you’re going to collapse on top of me and you weigh a lot more so can we maybe talk while you’re not hovering over me?”

I let my chuckle out and moved to lie on my side next to him. I waited for him to settle so that we could make eye contact.

“I met Rian nine years ago at a kink club in Seattle. I’d already gotten a bit of a reputation for a new Dom, and there were submissives who wanted to play with me. I just... there was something about most of them that I didn’t like; this needy quality that expected more than I felt I could give.

“I guess now I know why fate didn’t put anyone in my way that I could have a long term relationship with, since without knowing, I was waiting for you.”

He blushed, but said nothing, so I continued.

“Rian and I did a scene at the club and then went home together. To his place, which was a ton nicer than the hole I was living in. He doesn’t really flaunt his money, but his place was nice. We had sex that night, even though our scene hadn’t been sexual. In the morning, when I woke up, he was reading some brick of a book next to me and said, and I quote, ‘you Dom me like a God, but I don’t think I need your dick in the future. Wanna be besties?’”

At Kye’s startled laugh, I grinned, too. “Yes, that’s the kind of language he uses.”

“Doesn’t sound very... two-hundred years old,” he commented.

“He really exceeds people’s expectations, that’s for sure. He’s funny and fierce and... there’s a lot of life he’s seen, and death. I think he tries to stay positive because there’s this darkness in him, too. But even I have rarely seen it.”

Kye’s expression changed into something so compassionate it made my heart clench. “Now I want to hug him.”

I smiled. “Good. He’s a hugger. Anyway, so we decided we were best as friends, because the sexual chemistry didn’t work. It was totally fine, but why would we do that when we can just cut it out of the equation.” I took Kye’s hand. “But here’s a thing. If he needs submission, if he needs a scene? I won’t say no to him.”

Kye thought for a while, his gaze sliding from mine in a way that told me he was figuring things out in his head.

“I don’t have that much experience with BDSM. I’ve been to a couple of play parties and munches, so I’ve met people and played in a more limited capacity. For me, D/s is sexual and much like with sex outside a scene, I... it’s not easy for me to trust to that degree.” He made eye contact again. “With you? Absolutely. Put me on my knees, Alpha.” He smirked at my groan, then got serious again. “I can accept you being Rian’s Dom when he’s here and he needs you. I’m sure I’ll learn to love him as much as you do, based on what you have told us about him.”

“But?” I asked, feeling trepidation.

He shook his head, then pushed some long black strands of hair behind his ear and smiled. “No buts. It will take me a bit to truly internalize that you’re as much mine as I’m yours, since we’re so new. But I respect the fact that Rian knew you first and that your relationship isn’t romantic or sexual. He’s not a threat to our mate bond.” He

then shrugged as much as he could lying down. “I have human sensibilities about stuff. Not only this, mind you. I was never really around werewolves and vampires growing up. The customs and differences between the cultures are kind of new to me, thus the studying. I’m learning, but it will take time for some preconceived notions to adjust.”

I found myself swallowing back sudden tears. Did he understand how amazing he was?

Overwhelmed, I blinked a couple of times and rolled onto my back. “Holy shit, Kye.”

He giggled, then moved closer to me and peered at my face. “So, wanna fool around?”

I chuckled a bit wetly. “We still need to talk about the bonding and all that, but yeah. Some fooling around would be welcome right about now.”

“Awesome!” He slithered down my body and settled between my legs. “I would like to taste you, Alpha.” He said the honorific in the way he probably would’ve called me “Sir.”

My throat clicked when I swallowed. “Are you going to be a good boy for me?” My tone was rough, my brain immediately going into Dom mode.

The smile that spread on Kye’s lips was breathtaking. “The best,” he said confidently, and I didn’t doubt him for a second.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

I pushed away the thoughts of being Brodie's mate—I could silently freak out about that later if need be, although I wasn't sure if I even would—and concentrated on the one thing I loved and was excellent at: worshiping a man who deserved it.

The subtle or not-so-subtle flirting had been exciting and fun when I wasn't sure if he was mine to touch. Now that I knew that he was, I could look and touch and taste to my fill.

I started with running my hands down his sides and over his thick thighs, pulling his boxer shorts off as I went. The man was a masterpiece, that was for sure.

"I love it that you're not bulky in the way some guys are," I murmured as I leaned to kiss the tattoo on his left thigh. I nipped at the skin as I pushed his thighs apart and settled between them. "I like that you're proportionate."

Brodie's chuckle made his body vibrate. "Proportionate, huh?"

I snickered. "I didn't mean your cock, although, I got to say it's also proportionate." I pushed my face into the space between his thigh and groin and inhaled. I was pretty sure he'd given himself a quick cleaning here, too, but his foresty scent and natural musk made my head spin in a good way.

"Holy shit, boy," he grunted when I turned my head and mouthed his balls.

"How are you with edging?" I peered up at him, knowing that he'd see the mischief

in my eyes.

He chuckled a bit darkly, then closed his eyes for a couple of seconds when I let my hair brush against his cock.

“Well, boy, that depends on who’s being edged,” he finally replied, challenging me with a gaze.

“What if it was you?” I leaned up and licked his frenulum teasingly. “I still want that nap, but before that?”

He seemed delighted at me or the situation or what I was about to do when he replied, “Do whatever you want, but remember there’ll be payback.”

I smirked. “I can live with that.”

The sound he made when I swallowed him down made my own cock dribble precum. I wasn’t sure how I’d survive being this gorgeous man’s lover from now on, but I’d die happy trying.

We woke up a few hours later to a knock on the bedroom door.

“Guys? I’m done with dinner prep so I’d really like a nap before I actually cook it.”

I pushed up from where I was sprawled face down next to Brodie. “You can come in,” I called out to Carys.

“If the sheets need changing, I’m not going to want to sleep in that bed before you change them,” she said in response, still through the door.

My mind briefly went to how I’d made Brodie dizzy with my cock-sucking skills

after edging him for a while, and how he had, as soon as he recovered, done the same to me sans the edging and grinned.

“It’s fine,” I assured her.

Brodie chuckled next to me. He was likely thinking about how and why+- exactly there was no cum on the sheets.

We’d pulled on underwear before we conked out, so when Carys opened the door and peered in, we were decent.

“Oh, dear lord.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, at least you both are happy.” She rounded the bed and gestured for me to move before getting into her spot. “You guys’ hair looks like you’ve been doing what I assume you did before you took a nap. Just so you know.”

Brodie grinned and sat up on the edge of the bed, then stretched his arms up high, making me tilt my head in admiration of his back tattoos and muscles and his... everything.

“By the way,” he said, turning back to grin at Carys. “I think you’re really stuck with me now. Your brother is my mate.”

Her eyes widened, and for a couple of seconds I didn’t know how she’d react, but then she let out a joyful sound and hugged me hard.

“This is awesome!”

I laughed and hugged her back, then winced when she scrambled over me to latch onto Brodie to hug him, too.

“Why is it so great?” I asked as I rolled out of bed on her side.

“Because now we’re never leaving! Not that I thought you’d want to leave without giving me a choice, but you know, I still like insurance.” She squeezed Brodie from behind once more, then flopped back on the bed, grinning like a little kid. Suddenly, she got more serious and looked at me. “I guess that might be remnants of some trauma, which I will discuss with the therapist I found online while you two were... napping .”

“You found one?” Brodie smiled. “Really?”

“Yeah, and she seems like a good one, too. I might’ve sent a message to Rian from your phone you left downstairs to ask him if it was okay to pick someone as expensive as her, but he said it was fine and he’d pay for it, so you know—” She stopped as she realized I was staring at her, feeling a bit stunned, and she deadpanned, “What? I thought this vampire fella was all our sugar daddy?”

Brodie guffawed and shook his head as he grabbed sweats and a T-shirt from the dresser. “I got to tell him that.”

“No need, I already did!” she said brightly, then burrowed under the covers.

Holding back tears, I grabbed my clothes and rolled my eyes for show, then got dressed and exited the bedroom with Brodie.

“You okay?” he murmured as soon as we were out of earshot.

I held up my hand and concentrated on getting downstairs in one piece, mentally and physically. Once in the kitchen, I leaned on the counter and pressed a hand over my mouth as my eyes filled with tears.

Brodie came to me and pulled me into his chest, then kept petting me until I was ready to make words happen.

“It’s just... she appeared so young and happy suddenly? Playful and like... like a weight had fallen off her?”

He nodded solemnly, then smiled. “I noticed. It was the first time she really felt like a teenager. I’m glad she found a therapist and I think it’s important we let her find and choose one for herself.”

“Oh absolutely.” I wiped my cheeks and reached for a paper towel. I mopped my eyes and blew my nose, then sighed as I let the tension out. “She lost the last couple of years. She was... lost, when she was supposed to be a kid, still.”

“Whatever she needs. Or you,” Brodie said firmly.

Smiling and feeling disbelief over this wonderful man, I asked, “Coffee and mate talk?”

He smiled back. “That sounds like a good idea. Let me go see if we have cookies.”

We sat at the table with our treats, and I quickly skimmed through the rest of the chapter on mates in Dr. Finlay’s paper.

“So what she’s saying is basically that you’re now my service Dom,” I teased, as I stuffed a snickerdoodle in my mouth.

Brodie grinned. “Pretty much.” He sipped his coffee, then hummed thoughtfully. “Being someone’s mate means that you do everything to make them safe and comfortable. Kind of like a good Dominant would.”

I brightened. “But with added perks because you’re an actual Dom!”

He burst out laughing and I might’ve started to fall in love with him at that moment.

“Yeah, I suppose. But seriously though, did the good doc mention about the negative side that can happen to the wolf?”

“Like going overboard to the detriment of themselves?”

“Exactly. It’s a fine line when all your instincts are telling you to do everything in your power to make sure your mate is cared for. That means part of your job is to make sure I don’t forget myself.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “So not an issue. If you haven’t noticed, I’m a caretaker type, too. So is Carys. I’m pretty sure we’ll be the most well taken care of pack ever.”

Brodie’s expression sort of melted into what I would call “wolfy heart eyes.”

That reminded me. “Hey, are Ben and Max there yet?”

“Oh shit, yeah, let me check my phone.” He went to get it from the counter where Carys had left it to charge. “Okay, there’s a layover note from both the guys and Rian who they kept up to date, and then another set of messages from when they arrived in Seattle. He’s taking them to dinner and then they’ll stay at Rian’s place overnight. They’re going to sign up for the rehab tomorrow morning.”

I nodded, more happiness filling my chest. “I’m glad. You got to them in time.”

Brodie came back to sit with me. “I wish I’d come here earlier, but then I don’t know there was anything I could’ve done to Rusty then. Not that I liked having to kill him

or even did it consciously, but....”

Life and taking one was different for werewolves and vampires. Their worlds could be violent in ways different from humans. Not that humans were non-violent, gods no.

“So, mating?” I got us back on track.

“Right. Okay, what do you know about the bites?” he asked, grabbing a cookie.

My back straightened automatically, as if I was sitting in a classroom and a professor asked me a question.

I internally snorted at myself. “Well, I know that the whole reason we have the Turning Clause in our medical records is that if someone is on death’s door, the doctors can check if they want to be turned, right? And only happens with either a vampire staff member if the patient has specified they want that, or by a fully shifted wolf member of the staff.” I crunched on a piece of amazing cinnamon goodness, then continued, “There’s different ramifications for both types of bites and the one doing the biting, because of how different werewolf and vampire cultures are, right?”

Brodie finished his coffee and got up to go make another one, because werewolf caffeine tolerance was stupid.

“Yes, exactly. So for wolves, when it’s a random staff member at a hospital or a random EMT, they don’t have any sort of responsibility for the person they’ve turned. It’s in their contracts as well. But if it’s an Alpha who turns someone, then that person is expected to have a place in the pack and the Alpha in question is to take care of them.”

“Right, okay, makes sense. Is that some sort of a remnant of old pack dynamics from

days of yore?”

“I actually think you might know more about some of this stuff based on your research than I do, but I assume so.” He came back with another double-espresso and I shuddered, making him grin. “Okay, so vampires. With them, turning someone is much more intimate. Vampires often turn people they want to have around, like lovers and extended family or friends, right? It’s more of a bond, doesn’t necessarily mean there’s the caretaking aspect, but it’s pretty normal for them to stick together.”

I frowned. “What does that mean to the vampire who has to turn someone at work, though?”

“You need to ask Rian about this, he’d know. I assume the people who want to be turned into vampires in case of emergency often have a vampire they know who is then contacted to see if they can make it to the hospital or wherever in time.” Brodie shrugged. “I haven’t really paid attention to the vamp side of things, I have Rian for that.”

“Understandable.” I grinned slightly, then finished my own coffee. “Okay, but then the mating bite. That’s different, right?”

The corner of his mouth curled up and the happiness I’d seen before entered his intense eyes again. “Yes. Because of a couple of things. For one, it’s always in human form and it won’t turn you. It will change you a bit, but it won’t make you a werewolf. For two, it needs to happen on the evening of the full moon, right before the wolf is forced into wolf form.”

I frowned. “But isn’t it a sex thing? Like how do you time it...?”

Brodie threw his head back and laughed, before looking at me fondly. “Yes, it can be, but it doesn’t need to be. The bond is already there, the bite is just sealing the deal.”

“Ah, getting wolf married?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, that. But it’s basically a formality, because like I said, the bond already exists. For the mate, it’s carrying the scar from that day on. I suppose it’s a bit like humans exchanging rings or some such.”

“Or a submissive getting a collar,” I mused. “I’ve never thought collaring would be for me, because I’m not that serious about kink, but if that’s something you—”

“Oh, not really, no. I don’t think I would want a 24/7 dynamic anyway, especially in addition to building the pack and everything. It’s never been something I’ve wanted. I’m content with occasional scenes, always have been.” He smiled at me in a way that transformed his almost severe features into something softer. “I think we will mold the D/s aspect of our relationship into whatever we might need at any given time.”

I reached over the table for his tattooed hand and began to play with his fingers. “I think so. I don’t see there being many issues between us. We seem pretty compatible and flexible where it matters the most.”

“I think so, too. I...” He hesitated, then gave me this almost awed smile that was tinged with something I could only read as sadness. “I wish I could’ve met you under different circumstances. Not through all this tragedy.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No. First of all, I’ve lived my life through ‘what ifs’ for over two years now, Brodie. I’m done with that shit. But the other thing is, who knows what kind of people we would be if we hadn’t gotten here in exactly this way.” I pulled one hand from his and ran my fingers through my hair. “I know for a fact that I will grow to love you. That this insane chemistry between us, new as it is, will carry us a long way.”

He squeezed my hand and grinned. “Who am I to question my mate, eh?”

“Exactly. Oh!” I realize I’d forgotten to ask for clarification. “What did you mean when you said the mating bite will change me?”

This time, his grin was teasing. “What? You didn’t get to that in your studies yet?”

I stuck out my tongue at him and kicked him in the shin under the table.

“Okay, okay!” He lifted his free hand, which made me more conscious—in a good way—of the fact that we were still holding hands. “So since you’re human, what will happen is that your senses will become somewhat more elevated. Nothing superhuman, but they’ll change a bit. The biggest thing is slowed aging though.”

My eyes widened. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Yeah. I guess whatever the werewolf magic or whatever you’d call it—” He gestured with his free hand, frowning at the lack of a proper terminology. “—wants to make sure the mates have more time together if they are different species, you know?”

“So what you’re saying is that my aging will slow to something closer to yours because something about the bite and/or the bond basically alters my what... DNA?”

“Yeah, or... magic .” His tone suggested he wasn’t big on the magic theory, which made me snort.

“When are you going to bite me?”

“That’s up to you. It’s either the day after tomorrow or next month.” He shrugged casually, but something in his expression told me he was still thinking I’d change my mind or push it back maybe not only now but for a while.

“I don’t have anything better to do on Sunday,” I said easily. “Might as well get married, you know.”

Again, he looked at me like I was something wonderful and a bit exasperating. “How do you want to do it? Any ceremonial things? The bite goes on your wrist.”

I gave it some thought, absently rubbing my thumb over his knuckles as I stared out the window.

Eventually, I smiled at him. “Would it be okay if we did the bite now, and then eventually, when we want to get married in the human way, we make that more memorable and meaningful. Have a party and everything?”

He smiled at me gently. “Absolutely. That sounds really good.”

“And I joked about the sex with the mating bite, but I don’t think we need that. I think I want to wait a bit until...” Until we had penetrative sex.

Again, my wonderful Alpha just nodded. “Of course. We’re in no rush. I don’t need to be inside you or have you inside me to feel connected to you.”

I raised my brows. “You’re not a strict top?”

“I’m pretty much a go with the flow kind of guy.”

“Oh...” I’d keep that in mind.

As if realizing where my mind had gone, he smirked, but said nothing.

Later, once Carys had woken up, we gorged on tacos with so many toppings because she’d been chopping “all the things” while we napped.

Then we played Uno again, chatting about everything and nothing at all. We brought her up to speed about what we were going to do with the mating bite, and she smiled so widely that I had to hide the way it made me choke up a little.

“Okay, so, there’s one thing I want to talk about, Alpha,” she said seriously after kicking our asses in yet another round of Uno.

Brodie gave her his full attention. “What’s that?”

“Well, I would like it if you would start the renovations from the family room and my room. We have time before Ben and Max come back, right? So their room isn’t a priority right now?”

“Right, they should be in rehab for two months. Depending on whether we hire more people to help us with the renovations, I don’t see there being a problem getting everyone in their rooms and the roof weatherproofed before we’ll have real snow,” he mused.

“Okay. See, I am not sure I can sleep alone yet every night, with the nightmares and all, but I also think you two need privacy.” She wagged her eyebrows at us.

I blushed and groaned. “Really?”

“Hey, think of it this way: you can be the dads with the kid who occasionally climbs into bed with them so you’ll have to close your bedroom door if you don’t want me there.” She was holding back giggles so bad that Brodie, who was sitting across from her, reached over and poked her side to make her crack.

The squealing that ensued reminded me of her when she was fifteen or sixteen. Before things went to shit. Before I almost lost her forever.

I got out of my seat at the end of the table and went to grab a soda from the fridge for something to do and give myself a moment to get it together.

Carys announced she needed to pee and skipped past me to the downstairs half-bath.

As soon as I closed the fridge door, Brodie wrapped his strong arms around me and squeezed me.

“I adore you both, you know that, right?” he whispered against my temple.

“It’s completely mutual, Alpha mine.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

O n Saturday evening, I got a call from Rian out of the blue. My brain immediately went to Ben and Max, except that wasn't why he was calling.

“What's wrong?” I asked, pacing into the hallway from the kitchen where we'd been sitting to play cards again.

I could hear how unstable his breathing was, which put me on high alert.

“It's not the boys,” he said quickly, the words stuttering out of him. “It's me. I....” He dropped something and cursed under his breath, then I heard the sound of him unlocking his car with a key fob.

Impatiently, I waited for him to get into his fancy Volvo. It was weird how a vehicle that wasn't super expensive could still portray how he was about money so well. Someone else might've picked a Lexus or a BMW, but not Rian.

He was breathing deeply, but choppily, clearly trying to center himself.

The fact that he didn't start the engine right away told me a lot, too. He wasn't in a condition to drive.

“I-I need you, Sir,” he managed to say in between gasping breaths.

I walked up the stairs and went to sit on the edge of the bed. “Rian, are you having a panic attack?” I asked in a deeper register.

“Uh-huh,” he wheezed.

“Listen to me. Close your eyes and concentrate on doing what I tell you. You can do that, right?”

He breathed out something that sounded vaguely like “yes, Sir.”

“That’s good, well done. Now slow down your breathing before you hyperventilate.”

I talked him through the worst of it like I’d done many times in the past, just not recently.

When I was certain he was going to be okay, I asked, “What brought this one on?”

“I don’t even know,” he said in an exhausted tone. “I was at an event and suddenly I couldn’t hear the people around me. I took that as a sign and got out of there.”

“I haven’t been away for long yet. Do you think this is because—”

“Oh, no.” The answer came too quickly, and we both knew it.

For him, BDSM was an outlet that centered him when life started to overwhelm him. Despite being sunshine with fangs personified, he had a darker side that came out in various ways, most often in periods of melancholy and numbness, or, like in this case, panic attacks.

“Try again, sweetness.”

He sighed. “Okay, fine. I could use a pain session right now, but I don’t have the energy and....”

And I was too far. He didn't like playing with most people we knew in the kink community.

"Do you need me to give Moses a call?" He was a mutual friend of ours, an Alpha of a flourishing small pack, who kind of acted as my backup if Rian needed someone to get him through a session. The only potential issue was Moses' submissive, Simone, who disliked him playing with other men even though she knew very well that Rian wasn't into sexual play. That was still what she was jealous of, not the play itself, which didn't make any sense to me, but to each their own.

Rian sighed. "Yeah."

"Okay. I'll do that right now and try to set it up as soon as we can. I love you, sweetness."

"I love you too, Sir."

I ended the call and found Moses' number. He answered quickly.

"Hey, I heard you're out of town?"

I chuckled tiredly. "That I am. Permanently, too."

"Oh shit, really?"

"Yeah, turns out I'm an Alpha now."

Moses whistled. "Oh wow. I bet you didn't see that one coming."

"Not at all. It was a split-second decision and yeah, the rest is history. Oh, and I found my mate." I grinned as I could practically hear his brain stalling.

After a few seconds, he said, “What?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Congrats, buddy! I’m happy for you!” I could tell that he really meant it, which made me smile. “Now, I know you wouldn’t just call me to tell me all this, sad as that is. So what’s up?”

“It really is sad. I’m not even going to try and lie about that. But it’s Rian. He had a panic attack and while he’s going to head here in a couple of months....”

Moses sighed. “I understand. I’ll help him as much as I can.”

“Is Simone going to—”

“Right now? Not my concern. She’s on my shit list with something she tried to pull last week, so it’s all okay. If she manages to unfuck the situation, then we’ll see, but I don’t see her having any say in who I help, especially in nonsexual play kind of way for the next couple of months.”

I had rarely heard him this angry, and I could imagine his eyes glowing Alpha red right then.

“You need to talk about it?” I asked gently.

He let out a messy, snarly breath. “No. Yes. But not right now. I’ll bend Rian’s ear. You take care of your own pack first.” He was quiet for a couple of seconds, then added, “I’m glad Rian is coming to you, though. I saw him the other day and he seems worn out. I wish I’d figured out what he needed right then, but better late than never.”

“Definitely. It’s not your job and I assume you were knee deep in whatever this thing with Simone is?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled tiredly, a feeling I could relate to after these calls. “Do you want to call Rian to let him know I’m available whenever he is or...?”

Since Moses worked from home, he’d go with Rian’s schedule.

“I’ll text him and tell him to call you immediately.”

“Okay, sounds good. Take care, buddy, and trust me to take care of Rian.”

I guess I’d needed to hear him say the words, but a weight fell off me. “Thank you.”

“What are friends for, eh?”

“Let me know if there’s anything I should know about with your sessions, and good luck with Simone.”

He snorted. “Thanks, I might need it.”

We said bye, and I messaged Rian. “Call Moses immediately. Then report back to me.”

There was a knock on the doorframe. Kye stood there, looking worried.

“Everything okay?”

I sighed. “Kind of. Come here.”

He walked to stand between my legs, and I hugged him close. He carded his fingers

through my short hair and stroked my back.

It still felt miraculous that just breathing in his scent and having his hands on me settled me so much. So easily. I'd always had a bit of a temper, but more than that I'd always been a caretaker. Being here instead of taking care of the person who had meant the most to me for years was rough.

Yet my mate petting me calmed me down. Made my skin lose the feeling of tightness, and I shuddered as I relaxed.

"Rian had a panic attack at an event," I whispered, unable to be louder in the moment. Kye's fingers stopped for a split second, then he continued the soothing touches, so I added, "Normally, I would keep him from getting to that point by the scenes we do. I called a friend, though, he's going to take care of Rian for me."

Kye nodded slowly, obviously thinking for a while. "Is he going to be okay until the guys get out of rehab?"

What he meant was whether we needed to get Rian here sooner.

"I think we need to play it by the ear, but—" My phone dinged with a message.

"Session with M. at noon tomorrow. Thank you, Sir. I love you."

I showed it to Kye and he exhaled. "That's good."

"I don't know if I need to reiterate this, but it's not romantic love he's talking about there," I said just in case.

Kye snorted softly. "No, I get that. He addressed you as Sir. You said your playtime is platonic only. I'm not worried."

“Good.” I squeezed him closer, and we stayed there like that for a while, him petting me while I sat and held onto him.

“Guys? Are we going to play more?” Carys yelled from downstairs.

Kye chuckled and squeezed me back. “Let’s go play one more round, eh?”

“Let’s.”

The next day was our “wedding day” as Carys had dubbed it. She knew we were both a bit nervous about everything and this was her way to diffuse that nervousness as best as she could.

“So this is what we’ll do,” she started that morning while we were having breakfast. “I’ll make a really meat-heavy lunch for you, and a bit less for us, and once we’re done with that, you two go do whatever it is you’re going to do with the bitey thing. I’ll prep more protein rich early dinner stuff, and then you tell me when you feel like you’ll turn soon, and we have dinner before that happens.”

“Oh, Holden will come run with me,” I said quickly, having gotten the message right before we sat down.

Kye smiled. “That’s awesome.”

Carys seemed happy, too. “Let him know he should come expecting dinner.”

I got out my phone and texted the good sheriff. “I’ll tell him to be here by six. The moon rises around seven-ish, if I’m right. That’ll give us time.”

Kye drank a bit of orange juice, then said, “So once you shift, you’re stuck until the morning?”

“Not quite. From the moment the moon starts to rise, it pulls the wolf out whether we’d want that or not. The moon reaches the highest point around one, so the most active our wolves will be is in the five hours around that time. We’ll hang with you guys for a while once he gets here, then go for a run or we’ll see what the wolves decide.”

“What do you mean?” Kye peered at me.

“Well, if they’re playful, a lot of it might be wrestling and tag in the backyard,” I said casually.

“Aww!” they said in unison.

Rolling my eyes, I picked up a piece of bacon. “There might be some posturing, too. The fact Holden has been around a couple of times doesn’t mean our wolves will agree completely at first. He’s not my beta.”

“Yet,” Kye said pointedly.

“Hopefully,” I agreed. “But we’ll go for a run later, and then likely be back to lounge around if we don’t feel like we can shift back. We’re both strong and healthy though, so shifting back should be easy. Sick, weaker wolves can be stuck until the morning. That’s where the belief that all wolves get stuck comes from. We’ll see what happens.”

Carys smirked. “So what you’re saying is that you’ll be frolicking around the backyard with your playdate while we—” Kye slapped his palm over her mouth.

“No. Absolutely not, brat,” he told her firmly. “We do not mock what we don’t have full understanding of.”

They were so fucking cute. “It’s okay. She’ll learn when I come in from a rainy run one day and shake all over her.”

The muffled, outraged objections from Carys made me laugh. I couldn’t remember when I’d laughed as much as I had since coming back here. Who would’ve thought?

I could feel the moon tugging at my wolf throughout the day. Kye and I did some of the renovation planning and even lugged out some trash to make room to work later on.

Then we sat in the kitchen, talking about what we were going to need for the house, starting from colors of paint and wallpapers, and of course, furniture. We’d also decided that since we wanted to pull the old carpet anyway, we’d see if we could salvage any of the wooden floors beneath. We wanted wooden floors and a lot of rugs instead of a carpet.

We made lists and had lunch, and I thought we were done with listing stuff for now, but Carys was eyeing the iPad as we came to the end of the lunch.

“Something on your mind?” I asked gently, when Kye got up to take the dishes to the sink.

“Uh,” she said, suddenly shy for some reason. “I just....”

I ducked my head to make eye contact with her. “Carys? This is your home, too. If there’s something specific you think we should have, then we put it for a vote, like everything else.”

She nodded and a quick, small smile flitted through her expression. “There’s this website that does all sorts of wallpapers. I was thinking we might want some of those?”

“Can you show me?”

She took the iPad and opened the browser. I made eye contact with Kye who was smiling at me from the sink. He made the heart sign with his fingers, then turned to rinse the dishes.

I never had a chance, did I? Even if he wasn't my mate, I would be falling for this man. Falling for the siblings in different ways.

After growing up in this house, in Rusty's pack, there hadn't been many good influences especially after Mom died and Bella ran away. Some of the women had tried to parent me, but it had been more for show than anything real.

There'd been drugs, then more drugs, and finally I'd ran away with the knot of guilt forming in my chest for leaving Ben and Max behind.

Carys's enthusiastic tone broke my musings. “Okay, here. I was thinking we could use this for the big wall in the family room.”

She turned the iPad my way, and I immediately smiled. The wallpaper had an illustration of woods that were darker and deeper in some parts, but here and there, there were animals. A deer, some rabbits, a wolf, a fox. The best thing was it didn't look like a kids' room wallpaper at all.

“That's gorgeous,” I said honestly. “Kye, come see this.”

He wiped his hands and came to stand next to me.

“Oh wow. That is really nice. That's a good pick, Carys!” He squeezed her shoulder. “Did you have others in mind?”

She blushed and with a speed that told us she'd definitely been browsing this store a lot found us another one. It was a sort of tropical plants and birds kind of thing.

"I was thinking, maybe for my room and the sunroom, whenever we fix that?"

"That's a neat idea," I murmured and raised a brow at Kye. "Didn't you say you wanted plant stuff in the sunroom?"

He nodded and smiled. "Yeah, and that as a backdrop would be great."

"Once we have the measurements of what we need, we can order those. Can you figure out anything else, like if you want something in the other rooms and even the main bedroom?"

"Oh, I think that should be decided by you two—"

"Nonsense," Kye's tone was easygoing. "You clearly have an eye on this stuff, so you figure it out. I can't decorate and I'm pretty sure that Alpha here can't either."

Carys looked so damn pleased, and contentment rushed through me. The wolf, concentrated on the moon as it was right then, felt content, too.

Kye grabbed some first aid supplies while I carried a blanket, and we went outside.

"Are you sure this is where you want to be for this?" I asked him, the rising moon calling to my wolf as we made our way on the path to the riverside.

"You said it was your favorite place on the property. Of course I want you to bite me there," he replied as if it was a given.

I wasn't sure what I'd done in a past life to deserve him, but I wasn't going to

complain.

It didn't take long to get there. His hand was in mine, which felt good for various reasons, including the fact that I could make sure he stayed upright on the uneven path.

The river ran through part of the property and there was a wide, shallow spot that we used to play in during the summers. The whole river itself wasn't impressive at all, but in this spot with the sand someone had dumped there, it made a nice place for cooling off and having fun.

When we got there, Kye glanced around curiously.

"I love that boulder," he said, nodding toward the large rock that sat on our side of the river.

"It was a great sunning spot." I tried to see the place through his eyes.

"Was?"

"Yeah. We need to do some maintenance here come springtime. I think the riverbeds need some pruning." I gestured at the veritable thicket that had grown here with disuse over the years.

"When was the last time you were here?" he asked and walked to the boulder.

He handed the first aid kit to me and climbed up to get to the smooth, almost tabletop-like surface.

I took a couple of steps and leapt to him.

“Show off.”

I grinned, spread the blanket, and we sat down on top. “The patrol goes a little ways that way. I jump across the river there and go around, then jump across in another spot upstream.”

“Like I said, show off.” He grinned, then looked a bit nervous. Before I had time to speak, he held up his hand. “I’m sure. I want this. I want you. Us. The pack.”

The determination and inner strength shining in his gaze floored me once again.

He shrugged off the jacket he was wearing and pushed the sleeve of his henley up to his elbow.

“Wait, does it matter which wrist?”

I shook my head. “You can pick whichever you want.”

“Then my left one. I’m left-handed. I want the scar somewhere I see it often.”

Floored.

I opened the first aid kit and began to prepare bandages to slap over the bite. “It will hurt. You’ll bleed. But it should heal pretty quickly, too, and leave a silvery scar.”

He smiled, breathtakingly beautiful in the moment. “Mother Moon’s Kiss.”

I chuckled. “Yes. That’s what the old tales call it.” I deemed the bandage ready and put it on my thigh.

“I want to kiss you first,” Kye said seriously.

Happy to oblige, I leaned in and met him in a sensual kiss that made me shudder.

He pulled away before I was ready, looking kiss drunk and smiling goofily. “Okay. I’m as ready as I’ll get.”

I didn’t insult him by asking him if he was certain he wanted to do this now. He would tell me if he wasn’t. He held his slender arm to me. He had long fingers that I could picture smudged with soil in the spring, as soon as he could start potting things again. He’d told me that was something he was excited about.

I kissed the inside of his wrist, feeling his pulse against my lips.

Holding his arm close to my face, I locked eyes with him. “I swear to you, by the Moon that guides all wolves, that I will do my best to be the mate you deserve until the end of our days.”

His eyes filled with tears, and he nodded rapidly, but stayed quiet.

I let my wolf through enough to give me sharper teeth, then turned his hand so I could bite the side of his wrist. I smiled at Kye, my mate, then kissed that spot and finally bit down.

His startled gasp and a whimper of pain hurt my soul. The last thing I wanted to give him was pain he didn’t ask for, but he’d accepted this so we could be joined together this way.

I felt his arm try to jerk back from my grasp, from the pain, and I tasted his blood as it filled my mouth. My wolf howled inside me, the connection between us becoming firmer, almost like a spiritual touch between us as it flared, held, and settled. Holding his arm, I let go with one hand and grabbed the bandage, then quickly replaced my mouth with it.

I panted for breath, putting pressure on the wound, and felt his gaze on me.

“What?”

He looked—turned on?

“My blood on your lips. I didn’t know it would be hot?”

I laughed, then leaned closer so he could kiss me. I could admit there was something erotic in kissing him with his blood mingling between us.

After I finished wrapping his wrist, he pulled his sleeves down and put the jacket back on, then shivered. The evening was going to be cold. I wished the fireplaces were in working order already, but at least the central heating worked most of the time, even if not in all the rooms.

I jumped down and held my arm for him so he could grab it as he clambered down to me with the first aid kit. I pulled the blanket and folded it under my arm.

“I can’t wait to come here in the summer,” he said thoughtfully as he gave my favorite spot one last glance before we started to walk home.

I took his right hand and kissed the back of it. He looked at me questioningly, but I suppose he read the gratitude and awe in my gaze, because he ducked his head and blushed.

“Come on, we have your next beta to woo,” he said, and so we went to wait for Holden to get there.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

The bite throbbed as I stood on the porch with Carys.

I didn't feel different, but I could tell something in Brodie had settled. Even with how his gaze kept flickering red every now and then, and his mannerisms became more and more wolfy when the moon climbed in the sky, he was still more relaxed now.

Carys and I watched as Holden got out of a sedan, then clasped forearms with Brodie.

"Thank you for letting me run with you, Alpha McRae," he said in a formal tone that told me it was about werewolf customs.

"You're welcome on my land, Holden."

They did a back pat thing that was kind of like a bro hug, but the subtle way they scented each other was kind of fascinating to me.

"Welcome," I told Holden as soon as he looked at us. "Carys has prepared a nice dinner before you guys do your thing."

He walked closer with Brodie, then came up the stairs and shook my hand. The expression he aimed at Carys was part guilt and part protective big brother.

"Don't do that," she said quietly, then hugged him to everyone's surprise. "It's all bygones now."

Holden stepped back and cleared his throat, then nodded, clearly moved. “Okay. I’ll try.”

He glanced at Brodie, who was watching their interaction with a gentle smile on his lips. “What she said. We know you’re a good man, Holden. You’re always welcome here.”

“Let’s go eat,” I said, clapping my hands once to break the subtle tension.

The wolves sat down at the table, and Carys and I served the steaks with “healthy green stuff” as she called it. The potatoes were garlicky and amazing, and I could see how proud Brodie was to be serving a meal like this to a potential beta.

We joined them at the table and Brodie smiled at Carys.

“This looks amazing, Carys.”

“Smells incredible as well,” Holden added.

“Thank you. Here’s hoping it all tastes good, too.” She was clearly pleased and flustered at the same time.

It was a great meal. We chatted about Holden’s job and our plans for the house as we ate.

“Is it insensitive to ask how you ended up being a wolf and when?” I asked, then immediately added, “Please feel free to not answer any of that if you don’t want to.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s fine to ask when we’re among friends here.” He smiled. “I was a few days shy of turning forty-one. Worked as a police officer in Atlantic City. I was about to finally do what my parents wanted and become a detective and

all.” He chuckled a bit tiredly. “They had high hopes for me, but I was never that competitive.”

“When was this?” Brodie asked, then told Carys, “No, you sit. I’ll clean this and bring the dessert.”

She blushed again and didn’t object.

“Twenty years ago. Ish.”

“Wait, so you’re in your sixties?” Carys blurted out.

Holden laughed. “Yes. I have to say that the slower aging has come in handy. There is no way I would be this fit if I was still human.”

Brodie came in carrying a tray of blueberry mousse. He served us all and then took his seat. I smiled at him. I knew enough about wolfpack dynamics now that I realized this was his way of showing Holden that he wasn’t one of those old school macho alphas who thought womenfolk or non-alphas or betas should be doing these things.

I didn’t doubt for a moment that Holden would ever see him as such, but I could tell our resident cop was taking note of everything and getting relaxed and comfortable around us.

“Then something happened?” Brodie prompted.

“It was a domestic call. Guy pulled a gun out of nowhere and tried to take out both his girlfriend and me. My partner was to the side and managed to shoot him before he could kill her. Me, on the other hand? We were close to the hospital and there was a wolf on call. They got me there just in time. I don’t remember anything but waking up in searing pain from the bite.”

“So how does that work?” I asked. “I know if an Alpha bites someone, then that person is the Alpha’s responsibility. But when it’s an emergency situation like that?”

Holden hummed around a spoonful of the mousse. “Well, there are these rehab centers around the country for newly bitten wolves. Basically, you go there to learn how to be a wolf and get stabilized like you would in a pack. The pack bonds don’t form in those places, because there’s no Alpha in them other than for some mandatory sessions.”

“That’s interesting....” I realized I’d already scarfed down the mousse. “This was way too good,” I told Carys. “Genuinely.”

“I was following some recipes I found online.”

“Hey, never downplay a good thing you did,” Brodie told her gently. “Be proud of what you’ve done here.”

“What he said.” Holden grinned.

When our chat turned to family—Holden asked about mine and Carys’ first—it was clear Holden had some issues with his.

“My parents are long gone. My twin and I were surprise babies they had while they were a bit older. They wanted kids but stopped trying when nothing happened for over fifteen years. Then surprise, twins! Then we lost my brother when we were about to turn twenty. I’ve been alone for a while now.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal.

Brodie hummed thoughtfully. “For what it’s worth, there’s always a place here for you.” He grinned in his surprisingly boyish way. “And I’m not just saying that because we could use an officer of the law on our side and I need more betas.”

Holden chuckled. “Good to know. I have been putting in a good word around town already. Telling people you’re nothing like your uncle and that things are very different here now.”

I cleared my throat. “Seriously, though. We think like you’d be an excellent addition to the pack and that we could be good for you as well.”

Brodie reached over to take my left hand, careful with the bandage over my wrist, then looked at Holden. “My mate and I would like to extend an official invitation to join the pack whenever you might feel like doing so. There’s no rush. Take your time.”

I nodded. “And if you never want that, that’s also okay. We want you to know that even if you don’t become Brodie’s beta, you’ll have a family here if you want one.”

Holden seemed touched, his voice a bit rough when he replied, “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay. If we’re done here, should we shift?” Brodie said brightly.

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Where do you...?”

“You can use the utility room over there.” I pointed.

Soon enough, both of the wolves had gotten undressed and shifted, one by one, and they were shaking their furs out in the kitchen.

“You’re gorgeous,” I told Brodie, running my hands over his massive form.

I’d known werewolves were large, but the fact that I didn’t need to lean that far down to be able to press my forehead to his was a bit insane.

Whereas Brodie was almost black gray, Holden's wolf form was light gray and he was a bit smaller. I didn't know the genetics that went into such things, but they both were amazing in their own right.

"Okay, go do your thing. We'll make some coffees and wander outside in a bit," I told them.

Carys went to open the door for them and giggled at something one of them did while exiting.

I smiled as I made us the drinks and put them into travel mugs.

Soon, we had our shoes and jackets on and wandered around the house to the backyard where two large wolves were running around like puppies.

Carys let out a giggle, which made Brodie's attention snap to us. Then he looped over and headbutted her gently. She scratched his forehead, then smoothed the hair down.

"Go play," she told him.

And play they did. They looked like actual wolves, playing tag, dodging each other, throwing themselves and each other around as they wrestled and, well, frolicked, like she'd said earlier.

Carys and I sat down on the creaky back porch steps and hung out. It was peaceful. Liberating, in some ways.

Brodie's phone in my pocket dinged, and I took it out to see a message from Rian.

"The boys are doing wolfy things at the rehab place. I went to see them earlier. How is our Alpha?"

I took some video of the wolves, then sent it to Rian. A couple of minutes later, he sent a bunch of thumbs up and laughing crying and heart emojis.

I showed it to Carys and she grinned. “He’s a lot of fun.”

It struck me that I hadn’t spoken with Rian yet. Carys had been texting him some when needed, so she had a familiarity with him I didn’t yet. We knew him through Brodie’s stories, of course, but it wasn’t the same. I hoped he and I would get along when we got to know each other.

By the time the moon was shining from between the trees and into the backyard, Brodie and Holden’s playing had reached a point of the growls being a bit less playful.

Then suddenly, Holden pounced and nipped at Brodie.

“Oops,” Carys whispered.

Even before she had the whole word out, Brodie had tossed Holden onto the ground where he immediately stilled and rolled over, submitting to the Alpha.

Brodie stood over him for a few seconds, a low growl rumbling out of him just loud enough for us to hear. Then he put his jaws around Holden’s throat and held him there in an oddly ceremonial manner for a few more seconds.

Then he pulled away and stepped back for Holden to stand up.

When the gray wolf got to his feet, there was a distinct sense of “I done fucked up” in his body language. Brodie wasn’t having it, though, and went to headbutt Holden’s shoulder.

Then he turned to us and loped over for pets.

“You’re such a ham when you’re like this,” I told him.

He huffed, then flopped down on the ground in front of the steps we were sitting on and put his head on top of my feet.

I scratched the top of his head and the thick ruff around his neck.

Holden walked closer and kind of snuck to sit next to Brodie. Carys giggled and gave him the same treatment I was giving Brodie.

They chilled with us for a few minutes, then Brodie glanced at the sky, then at the house, and then me.

“Yeah, I get it. You guys want to go run.” I grabbed his head and kissed his nose, to which he sneezed theatrically. “No kisses in wolf form, okay, good to know.”

Holden huffed as if amused, and Carys laughed.

“We’ll go inside while you do your thing. We’ll lock the door just in case. It’s going to be fine. Go and run. Howl or something when you get back.”

He got to his feet, then stuck his cold nose against my neck, making me squeak.

“I guess I deserved that. Now go.”

They waited to walk us to the front of the house, and I could tell they wouldn’t go before we were inside and Brodie heard the big key in the lock.

Carys peered out of the window by the door, then snorted when I turned the key.

“Aaand there they go!”

We went to the kitchen and camped out there with our entertainment and, later, snacks. Carys got tired at one point, so I told her to go to bed. Begrudgingly, she admitted that was a great idea, which told me how much all the cooking and general fussing about today had taken out of her.

I nursed my nighttime coffee and read more about wolves while I waited for mine to come back home. Eventually, sometime around two-thirty, I heard a quiet howl and grinned. I closed the laptop and went to open the door.

Because I knew Brodie would be mad if I didn't, I glanced out of the window to see if I recognized the wolves. Which, I did, because it was Brodie and Holden coming back, but it felt good to prove to him that I'd listened to him when he talked about how to stay safe.

I unlocked the door and opened it to two happy wolves. They were panting, tongues hanging from their mouths, and I picked off some twigs from Brodie's fur when he went past me. I tossed the twigs on the porch and closed the door behind them.

Brodie went to change first, and it took only a minute for him to both shift and put on his sweats and tank.

Holden went into the utility room, and Brodie closed the door behind him for privacy.

He walked to me and gathered me into his arms.

“Hi,” he said hoarsely, as if being a wolf for the evening had made his vocal chords forget how to human.

“Hi,” I whispered, then pressed against him and hugged him back.

His scent was intoxicating. Everything about his woodsy, musky scent was heightened by the shifting. He smelled clean, even though there was probably a mess of whatever had fallen off of his fur when he shifted back in the utility room. I was sure I'd missed detritus while I was picking parts of the woods off him, after all.

As if reading my thoughts, he murmured, "I'll clean the utility room tomorrow. I need a shower before bed. My feet are dirty."

I glanced down to his smudged toes and smiled, then grabbed his hand to check them, too. "Can you wash your hands?"

He smiled a bit tiredly, but went to the kitchen sink to get the worst of the dirt off.

We were standing by the counters, cuddling, when Holden finally re-emerged. It had taken him nearly ten minutes to shift back, but Brodie had told me that could happen to bitten wolves after a full moon run. Normally it wouldn't take that long, but sometimes it did.

"This was great," Holden said, his tone hoarse and tired like Brodie's. "I'm going to head out, but I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

Brodie let go of me to give Holden that same not-quite bro hug he'd given him when Holden arrived.

"Good night!" I told Holden when he passed me on his way out.

"Night!"

As soon as the door closed behind Holden, Brodie went to lock it. Then he came back into the kitchen and something flipped in his demeanor.

His wolf was still close, but this time the animalistic, almost predatory expression was aimed at me in a way that made me feel... coveted.

I felt like running so that he could chase me down, but I couldn't with Carys asleep upstairs.

Instead, I backed away until I was in the utility room doorway, then ducked inside with a wolf at my heels.

He grabbed me and lifted me on top of the ancient washer in a move fast enough to make me yelp and laugh.

Then he was kissing me and tugging at my clothes.

"I need...." His words came out muffled against my neck where he was making a feast out of me.

I was so hard it hurt already, and when he lifted his head, I could see his nostrils flare as he took in the pheromones swirling around us.

"Whatever you need, except....," I trailed off and looked away.

"No, not that. Not yet. We're not ready, but...." When his words kind of vanished mid-sentence, it was because his concentration on human language had taken a hike.

I glanced back at him, but his focus was on the bulge in my sweats now.

"Safewords," he grunted, then wrapped one arm around my waist to lift me enough to be able to pull my sweats and underwear off.

I laughed, a bit shocked and very turned on about the way he was suddenly out of his

mind with whatever this was. I felt safe. I knew he wouldn't do anything I didn't want him to—including fucking me because we weren't there yet—but hearing his distracted wolf voice talk about safewords was kind of funny.

I stopped laughing when he leaned down to swallow my cock whole.

My head banged against the wall and I let out a groan that didn't sound like me.

I reached down to tug the back of his tank up, so that I could see the tattoos covering his muscular back. When I tried to get it off completely, he rumbled a growl that vibrated my cock enough for me to thrust up, the tank forgotten.

“Holy shit, Brodie,” I gasped as he pleased me with a voraciousness I'd never experienced before.

It took me an embarrassingly short time to come, and I didn't bother warning him because I knew he wouldn't have cared.

I grabbed his head and held him still as I unloaded into his mouth and felt him swallow around me until I was noodly and pushing him away.

He stood up and pulled his dick out, then jerked it a few times before coming all over my cock and balls.

Then he rubbed the cum into my crotch with his big, calloused hand.

“Ow, ow...,” I protested feebly.

He chuckled, that sort of wild and dark Domly expression I'd seen a couple of times before momentarily flashing in his pale eyes.

“You didn’t think this was enough?” I asked, lifting my bandaged left arm.

“Nothing will ever be enough,” he rumbled, leaning in to kiss me deeply. “You’re mine now.”

I slid my fingers behind his neck and pulled him to me until our foreheads were touching. Then I stared at him from that close distance.

“You’re mine as well. Never forget that.” I cupped his sharp jaw and kissed him gently to show him I cherished him even without being able to feel the mate bond.

He kept his eyes closed as he nodded slowly. We didn’t need any more words.

Well, except.... “And now I need a shower. It’s a bit weird to go to bed next to my sister with how sticky I am.” I gestured at my crotch. Then, before he had time to say anything, I added, “No, you can’t clean it with your mouth.”

He complained playfully, grumbling something about his good ideas being shot down, but he helped me get my underwear back on and told me to go shower while he made sure the house was secured so we could go to sleep.

I padded up the stairs with my sweats bundled in my hand and couldn’t stop smiling.

Tonight had definitely been a success. I was pretty sure Holden would become one of us soon. He’d seen how we were, even as a fledgling pack.

Tomorrow would be Monday and the demolition crew would come by. We had a handful of hours to sleep because knowing where the full moon would land, Brodie was requested they start late.

Half an hour later, I played big spoon for Brodie that had already fallen asleep. Carys

snuggled up behind me, and I let sleep claim me.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

I woke up energized on Monday morning. Normally, I liked to get seven hours of sleep every night, but the barely five I got on this full moon seemed fine.

The mate bond anchored me to Kye, and the moon run to the pack lands. I felt... settled.

Carys woke up at the same time with me, and I let her use the bathroom first. While she was in there, I watched her brother sleep.

We needed to change the bandage on his wrist, and I wanted to take a look at the cut on his head. I knew it had healed well, I'd checked it every night, but he was still human and humans got infections much too easily for my liking.

"You watchin' me sleep?" he mumbled without opening his eyes.

I smiled. "I am."

"Weirdo."

"I am."

That made him crack open one eye. "What time is it?"

"Time for me to go make breakfast!" Carys said brightly as she walked past us.

“No need to be so chipper,” Kye grouched and burrowed back into the bedding.

“You can sleep. The breakfast won’t go anywhere and there’s really not much for us to do until I get the Keller crew started. I’ll start on the indoors stuff after.”

“M’kay,” he replied, and I could tell he was falling asleep again.

I kissed his forehead and went to the bathroom to start my day. I couldn’t stop smiling.

Mr. Keller was a no-nonsense kind of man. He was efficient, spoke with a slight German accent, and organized the job and his crew like a General.

His daughter Lina gave my house longing glances that told me exactly how much she wanted to work on it.

Once everyone but Mr. Keller himself had started on the demolition, I sidled up to him.

“So, would you happen to have anyone to spare for a few months? Paid job, of course.”

“Renovations?” He made an educated guess and took a pull from his eCig.

“Yeah. I’ve worked construction, electrics and plumbing for years, so I can do most of that myself. I have Kye helping me where he can, but he doesn’t have experience. I would love to have someone who has basic knowledge at least. I can teach them whatever they’d need if something new comes up.” I kept my tone neutral throughout. “It would speed things up if Kye had someone to work with when he starts to paint and do the wallpapers and such, but I need help with some things, too.”

He looked at the house and chuckled. “I can see that.”

“I grew up here, like I told you when we talked on the phone. I’d love to make this a home for a healthy pack once again.”

Being local, Mr. Keller knew about Rusty and what kind of man he’d been.

“If you don’t mind taking someone on an apprentice level, my daughter would love to work on a house like this. She’s been apprenticing for me, but I have almost pure construction lined up for the winter months and then starting in spring it’ll be decks and such again. I think she wants to do renovation. She sees more value in repairing the old than building new.”

I hummed. “I can understand that.”

“Lina!” he bellowed suddenly, making me jolt.

The girl with the thick blonde braid walked out of the barn, her whole being swallowed by different safety equipment from overalls to respirator, protective glasses, and a hard hat.

“Yeah?” she asked, holding onto a good-sized sledgehammer like it weighed nothing.

“Alpha McRae had a question for you,” Mr. Keller said evenly, taking a pull of his sweet aerosol.

She turned to me, still a bit intimidated like she’d been when they arrived, but relaxed enough that I knew she’d get over it soon.

“I need someone to help me with the house renovations. Everything that goes with it, really. I can teach you a lot, I’ve worked in the business for fifteen years. Your father

said you might be interested?”

Trying to hold back her excitement which I could see even with the gear covering her, she tilted her head a bit. “For how long?”

“A few months, at least. If your father won’t need you and we get along well, then I’m sure there’s enough work here for until the summer.”

“Paid or not?”

“Paid, absolutely. We can figure out what your hourly rate will be, but I will pay fairly and teach you everything I can.”

As if she wasn’t vibrating with sudden joy, she nodded. “Okay. I can work with that.” Then she looked at her father. “Dad, you sure you can spare me?”

I liked that she would check with him. It showed her character.

“I reckon you’ll be happier here than doing the hotel and everything else with us.” He glanced at me. “There’s this old hotel about forty-five minutes from here. Someone bought it and needs changes and renovations made during the winter months. Lots of tedious stuff with no personality at all, which is a shame.”

“Ah.” I understood his point.

“You’re really sure?” Lina asked him.

“When do I ever say things I don’t mean?” He raised a brow at her, then oomphed at the impact when she flung herself at him for a hug.

“When can I start?” She looked expectantly at me and her dad both.

I shrugged. "I'm going to work on the house today, so whenever you want is fine by me."

She turned her baby blue eyes at her father who was helpless and shooed her off toward the house.

"Yay!" She took off her coveralls there and then, tossing them into one of the trucks they'd arrived in.

Holding onto the rest of her gear, she walked up to me. "So hi, I'm Lina, and it seems like I'm gonna be working for you now." She held out her hand, beaming at me.

I chuckled as I shook with her. "I'm Brodie, the Alpha of this pack."

We'd said hi casually when they arrived, but this felt like a proper greeting. Her dad wandered to the barn to oversee his workers, and Lina followed me inside the house.

"I'll grab the iPad and I'll show you our plans while we tour the house first," I told her as we got inside.

She took off her thicker fleece jacket she had on and rubbed her hands together. "Can't wait!"

She came with me into the kitchen where Carys was doing something on Kye's computer while Kye had his breakfast.

"Oh hi," Kye said brightly. "I see you've been roped into the indoor work?"

"Hi! Yeah, apparently you guys need help for the winter and my dad said it was okay, so here I am!" Lina grinned widely.

Carys' whole body had tensed minutely, but she tore her gaze off the laptop and gave Lina a nervous little smile. "Hi, I'm Carys."

"I'm Lina, nice to meet you," she replied, then both of them blushed lightly.

Oh.

I grabbed the iPad and found the right file, then gestured for Lina to come with me. We had plans to talk over.

Having Lina on the team proved to speed our immediate renovations up by a half. She was so damn efficient and always great to be around. She had great ideas that impressed us all, and by the time her dad's team was done with the barn, she was fully integrated with our tiny pack, whether any of us realized that or not. She joked around with Kye, listened carefully to everything I said and asked questions if she had them, and always insisted on clearing the lunch table since Carys had cooked for us.

The two of them started to befriend each other, and after a few weeks, they were thick as thieves. None of us mentioned the clear attraction between them, because it was, well, between them and none of our business.

Rian started to do better with regular sessions with Moses, and was wrapping up his things in Seattle in preparation for the guys getting out of rehab. They had thrown themselves into recovery, and suddenly we got word that they'd be ready to leave the rehab place in two more weeks. That put a bit of a fire under the rest of us, because now we needed three rooms to be ready, in addition to the one bathroom and the family room.

It was fine, though. Everyone pitched in. Holden arrived one weekend with pizzas from town and asked to be put to work.

Kye had music on whichever floor he was working on. He didn't like to wear headphones, so all of us ended up curating a joined playlist that ended up being wildly hilarious.

We went from eighties rock ballads and emo bands to random pieces of classical music and heavy metal to modern pop songs and even some country with surprisingly queer and dirty lyrics.

The third time the shuffle function gave us Dixon Dallas right after Mozart, the laughter coming from all corners of the house felt like it wouldn't end.

Kye and the girls figured out individual pieces of needed furniture and all the colors and themes for each room. They asked my opinion on Rian's style and then messaged him when I said I didn't really know.

Now, had they asked what flogger Rian preferred or if he liked human or werewolf blood better, I would've had all the answers.

About a week before Rian and the guys were to arrive, we were sitting on the new U-shaped couch in the family room, having popcorn as Encanto played on the big TV.

"Oh by the way, we ordered the beds today. They should be here in a couple of days," Kye said as he reached for more popcorn.

"Did you get a new one for us?"

"Nah, I figured it was still good enough. Unless you want one?"

"It's fine by me. But if you want to do something more for the bedroom, be my guest."

He shrugged. “I think the new wallpaper is fine with the rugs and everything.” He snuggled closer to me. “I ordered a king-sized bed for the guys, by the way.”

I froze. “You did?”

He looked up to see my expression. “Yeah? I thought they were close enough to share one?” He frowned. “Shouldn’t I have?”

I stared at him for a few beats, then asked, “You’re okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I get that they’re Very Close”—I could hear the capitalization in his voice—“but I also know that wolves are different from humans. I don’t think anyone has any right to say how others live as long as nobody is hurting anyone.” He smirked. “Without consent, at least.”

Rolling my eyes, I kissed him, tasting the buttery popcorn and salt on his lips.

“Can you guys stop talking? We need to concentrate; Luisa’s song starts soon.”

Kye picked a couple of pieces of popcorn that weren’t drenched in butter and tossed them at his sister who had taken one corner while we were in the other.

“Very mature, baby,” I told him, so he chucked a few at me, too.

O ur relationship kept developing slowly, exactly like we both needed it to.

There’d been a few joint showers and a couple of nights when Carys had very pointedly told us that she was going upstairs to read and wouldn’t be down again that evening. I loved her for giving us the space to be a couple together.

On those nights, we made out on the couch, not-watching a movie or a show, and

soaking in the connection.

Slowly but surely, Kye's confidence grew in all aspects of our life. Not that he hadn't been self-assured to begin with, but there was just something more about him now that made me feel good.

One evening, after he'd supported Carys through the aftermath of a particularly brutal therapy session, he took a cup of tea for her upstairs where she'd holed up for the night. He came back to the living room where I'd been reading, and wordlessly knelt by my feet for the first time.

I pushed my fingers into his hair and began to pet him.

"How about you sit there until you need cuddles, and then you tell me what you need if there's something more?" I murmured.

He nodded and leaned to my calf, then put his head on my knee and relaxed gradually.

An hour later, he climbed onto my lap and stayed there until bedtime, never speaking a word, staying close as I kept reading and touching him to center him.

It humbled me, knowing that I could be this person for my mate.

The first two nights after we got Carys's room ready, she still ended up sleeping in our bed anyway. None of us mentioned it in the morning.

Then, on the third day, Rian, Ben, and Max were set to arrive.

The house was ready for them, but the renovations would continue for months. This was the first step in getting our pack under one roof and I couldn't wait for them to

get there.

Carys had been flitting around the house all day, trying to make sure everything was exactly like it was supposed to be, while Kye went to get more groceries. Lina and I had started on the temporary fixes of the sunroom.

“We could put some long boards down and then put some particle board on top of those,” she mused as she looked down from her ladder.

She was fixing the new, heavy duty tarps to the fortified framework we’d built for the outer wall. She could see through the gaps where the windowed ceiling had once been, and was staring at the hole Kye had made falling through the floor.

“That’s true,” I said and handed her another large screw she’d wanted to put in to be extra sure the tarp would hold.

“I was thinking that if something happens and someone needs to go into the room, it would be at least a bit safer.”

“We can do that next week? Once we have the tarps in place, we can start taking apart the ceiling of my mom’s old room. At this pace, with the guys helping, I’m sure we can fix the roof, too.”

I held onto the ladder while Lina came down after deciding we were done.

“Yeah. Oh, and I asked Dad who he uses for windows, and I gave the company a heads up that you’ll be calling soon.” She beamed at me.

I knew what she was doing. Her name-dropping her dad who was a regular customer would make the windows cheaper for us just because of the referral.

“Thanks. I’ll call them after the weekend.”

We attached the tarps on the bottom so they wouldn’t flap around in the wind, and then we deemed that task done.

“If it rips, it rips,” I told her when she assessed our handiwork. “This is to keep most of the snow and water out, but we’ll have to gut the whole sunroom in the spring anyway. I won’t trust that floor, and the walls have water damage. There’s probably mold.”

Frowning, she sighed. “Okay. It annoys me to leave anything unfinished, but it is what it is.”

The leaves were falling already, and we’d get snow soon, I was pretty sure. It wouldn’t stick yet, but there’d be a lot of cold icky stuff.

Which reminded me. “Oh hey, the fireplace guy will be coming over on Wednesday. We’ll have them all checked and swept, and fixed where needed.”

“That’s awesome!” She grabbed the ladder before I could, folding it and then began to lug it toward the front yard.

Rolling my eyes, I took our toolbox and the trash that was left behind, and followed her more sedately. She was strong for a human woman her size and liked to remind me of that regularly. It was kind of endearing, and watching her carry the ladder like it didn’t bother her at all while she wasn’t very tall was funny. Sure, it might not have felt heavy, but it was just long enough to make it a bit comical.

I’d learned to know her by now, so I didn’t comment on anything, instead followed her to the front porch where we set down our equipment for the next day.

“You sure you want me to come tomorrow?” she asked as she pushed the ladder with her foot, making it settle just so against the railing. Her organizational skills were out of this world even for me.

“You can, but you don’t need to.” I shrugged. “We could start later, maybe? I don’t think the guys have energy to stay up very late after traveling, but in case we do end up going to bed late....”

“That sounds good to me. How about I come by around midday? I’ll take my mom to lunch at the diner in town and then head over?”

“Midday is fine. Don’t rush on our account, have fun with your mom.” I smiled, briefly wondering how my life would’ve been if my mom hadn’t passed away so young.

“Okay! I’ll start driving home right now so I don’t meet the guys on the driveway.”

“Hey can you ask your dad about the equipment for widening the road in a few spots? I keep forgetting.”

“Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow!” She walked to her truck and waved at Carys who was peering out of the kitchen window.

A bout an hour later, I heard a vehicle rolling into the yard. My wolf was on the move before I made a conscious decision, and I shot out of the front door like a cannonball.

Rian got out of the driver’s seat, and braced for impact, laughing his fool head off.

Wrapping my arms around his slighter, shorter form felt like coming home. I’d missed him so fucking much.

He squeezed me back equally as hard, and his laughter turned into tears in my embrace.

“You’re here now, sweetness,” I whispered. “I missed you so goddamn much, but you’re here now.”

I turned us so that I could lean against the rental SUV and just held onto him. I don’t know how long we stayed like that. Time seemed to slow down and speed up at the same time as something inside me settled.

The wolf felt content in a whole new way. I understood that it had been settled by the mate bond, but that underneath, it had craved more pack.

I vaguely heard Ben and Max talking to Kye and Carys, but I tuned them out in favor of being there for my best friend.

Ben and Max joined us a while later, appearing around the vehicle almost tentatively.

I held out one arm and they walked into the hug, folding into it in a way that told me they were relieved to be back home as well.

“You guys look good,” I said when they stepped back. Rian was still burrowed against me, so I reached my hand to wrap around Ben’s neck first and squeezed. “Well done,” I told him, then repeated the touch with Max. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

Kye cleared his throat on the porch. “If you guys want to come check out your room?”

Wiping their eyes, they nodded and went with him.

I carded my fingers through Rian's curls as much as I could. He hadn't dyed them in a while, the red was paler now.

He liked to keep it shaved on the sides and the most vibrant red on top, and the state of it told me how he'd been feeling lately.

"I love you so much," I whispered to him. "I'm so thankful for you and especially for the fact that you're here now."

Finally, he pulled away enough to look at me. "I love you too, Brodie."

I squeezed him once more, then watched as he blew his nose and wiped his face, trying to make himself more presentable again.

"Now introduce me to your mate, Alpha," he said, a hint of amusement mixing with the pride in his eyes.

"Brat."

He grinned. "Always."

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

As I watched Rian collapse into Brodie's arms, I felt a stab of jealousy. I could imagine what Brodie was telling him, because it was obvious in their body language they'd been missing each other like hell.

I pushed the emotion away and smiled at Ben and Max.

"Welcome home," I told them as they approached the porch.

"Thank you," Ben replied, smiling.

Max nodded, appearing pleased as well.

By now, based on what I'd heard from Brodie, Ben was the one who did most of the talking for the duo. Max was more reserved, but I couldn't blame him for that. I'd heard enough of the way they'd grown up.

Carys came out of the house, grinning from ear to ear. "You guys look amazing!" she gushed and went to hug both of them.

Some of her therapy sessions had been rough, to say the least, but she was getting more comfortable around strangers when we went into town. Her hugging the brothers so easily made me feel even better about her progress. She'd never been afraid of them to begin with, but it said a lot of how our pack dynamics would be in the long run that she found them approachable from the get-go.

Ben and Max went to join Brodie and Rian's hug, and I saw Brodie reassure both of them in a way that clearly moved them all.

When Rian didn't seem ready to let go yet, I called the guys away from Brodie and him to give them more space. They grabbed a backpack and a duffle bag each and followed me into the house. Carys had already gone into the kitchen to start on the coffees—what else.

I realized Ben and Max had stopped moving when I reached the stairs and didn't hear them behind me. When I glanced back, they stood in the middle of the entrance hall where they could see into the kitchen and family room through the doorways.

"A bit different, eh?" I asked gently.

Max was the first one to tear his gaze off the family room. "Uh, yeah. I... this is incredible."

"It's not all done, of course, but the rooms we need the most should be good for now. Come on." I started up the stairs and this time they followed me.

"It's incredible what you guys have accomplished in such a short time." Ben's tone was awed. "I don't get it."

"With Rian's money and with some extra hands. And you might've noticed the barn was gone, too."

"Holy shit, I didn't even realize that," Max blurted out, then blushed at his uncharacteristic exclamation.

"We moved your room, by the way," I gestured at their room that had been facing the front of the house. "That side has so much more damage in the roof that we decided it

would be better to have you guys on this side with the rest of us.”

They glanced at each other, doing some sort of close-as-twins thing probably.

Then Ben cleared his throat. “You gave us one room?”

Instead of telling him, I decided to show it. “Brodie and I are in the main one, then Carys in the next, then there’s the bathroom, then Rian’s room, and you guys get the bigger one here at the end.”

I pushed the door open to the room that got the most light on this side, since it was in the corner and had two windows unlike the rest. Not even the main bedroom had two.

They stepped inside, then kind of stood there, a bit stunned again.

We’d picked the warm earth tones for them based on the few decorations their tiny apartment in town had had when we went to empty it a couple of weeks ago.

There were two stuffed toys that had been well-loved, so they sat on top of the big bed by some of the pillows that had been on their old, worn-out couch. We’d saved some things, but since they’d told us most stuff was hand-me-downs and curb finds, they hadn’t wanted to keep anything when their landlord had asked if we could empty the place faster than we were originally going to.

They dropped their bags by the door and looked around for several minutes, barely moving, just turning in place. Both had tears in their eyes.

Then suddenly Max took in a breath that was half a sob, came to me and hugged me tightly.

Chuckling, I hugged him back and waited until Ben joined us. There was going to be

a lot of hugging for a while, I was certain. Wolves were tactile creatures, and I had a feeling these two hadn't had much kindness in their life lately, or maybe ever.

"It's perfect," Max choked out. "A-And the b-bed...."

I heard the question in his tone. "That's your business. I thought you might want a cozy one though, so it's all kinds of upgraded."

The bed was not only large and had a memory foam mattress, but there were pillows and soft blankets for nesting purposes.

Max went to sit on the edge of the bed and then bounced a bit, before smiling like a little kid.

"You can't jump on memory foam," I told him in a teasingly scolding tone.

He let out an actual giggle, then slapped his hand over his mouth, his eyes widening.

"Thank you so much," Ben murmured into my ear almost too quietly for me to hear.

I could tell he was moved by his brother's demeanor.

"Hey, you guys are pack, and we love you. You deserve the best."

Max tilted his head and looked at me with mischief in his expression. "Are you our mommy now?"

I turned to Ben and deadpanned, "Control your other half please."

Ben snort-laughed and Max snickered.

“I’ll leave you to it. The bathroom across the hall is yours to use. Carys shares the one on this side with Rian, and Brodie and I have our own.”

“That’s great. Thank you,” Ben said again.

I slipped out of the room and went to the top of the stairs. I took in a deep breath, then walked down. It was time to officially meet Brodie’s best friend.

“The movers should get here tomorrow at some point,” Rian was saying when I made it to the living room where they’d relocated.

“Did you pack a lot of your own stuff?” Brodie asked him, then smiled sunnily when he spotted me. “Hey, baby. Come sit with us.”

I went to snuggle against his side in what I had begun to think as “our corner” of the couch. Rian was sprawled along the opposite side, doing a decent stretching cat impression.

“Not that much. I’m obviously keeping my apartment, so there was no need to empty it. Most of what I packed is yours. I basically took the handmade furniture you have and all your clothes and other things and packed those.”

“Except that end table,” Brodie said in a tone that was fond and teasing.

Rian laughed, the sound happy and relaxed, and nothing like I’d expect from the man that had stepped out of the SUV. It was as if all that negative energy that had been in him then had evaporated by finally being here and near Brodie.

“What table?” I asked, then cleared my throat. I felt awkward.

Rian grinned. “There’s this end table he made about five years ago. Driftwood he

carved. Glass top. It's gorgeous, but he's never wanted to sell it to me."

Brodie chuckled. "So he stole it."

"I relocated it. There's a difference," Rian said haughtily, his eyes still sparkling with amusement.

He was stunning. Kind of cute instead of handsome, and it was hard to think that he was about two hundred years old. His dimples were to die for, and the easy, wide smile that made him shine.

It was hard not to feel jealous, knowing he'd been close to Brodie for years.

Carys walked into the family room with a tray of coffee and cookies. She grinned at Rian.

"It's really weird to have someone living here who doesn't need coffee."

Smiling, he shrugged. "Hey, I still enjoy the taste very occasionally, but it's not nice to be sipping at something and then spitting it out in polite company."

"Eww...."

Vampires could technically ingest anything they wanted to, but they'd get horribly sick from anything but blood in any substantial amounts.

"That said," she continued after her expression of disgust, and sat to my other side. "Is there anything you'd prefer us not to cook in the house?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well I read that sometimes vampires can have triggers just like humans can. If there’s a food that has a scent that might trigger you....”

He blinked at her, clearly not having thought that anyone would ask or even considered any of this as an option.

“Uh....” He thought for a while, his eyes unfocusing. Then his expression changed to one I couldn’t read, and he focused on Carys again. “Root vegetables in large quantities can be a bit tricky if I smell them suddenly.”

She got out her phone and made a note. “Got it! Anything else?”

This time, I could easily read the grief he couldn’t hide. So could Brodie. He leaned forward to grasp Rian’s ankle, the closest part of him in reach.

Giving Brodie a wavery smile, Rian said, “And Jell-O. I... if I never have to see Jell-O in my lifetime, I would be grateful.”

“No Jell-O,” Carys said in that easy tone of hers and added it to the list. “I’ll make sure to add it to the list we have on the fridge door.”

Rian swallowed hard, then frowned. “A list?”

I smiled. “We have a list of things we don’t allow in the house. Like Vodka, any drugs, liver, what else is there?”

Brodie had leaned back again and settled in with his coffee. “That one brand of coffee creamer that smelled horrible to me.”

“And Jell-O,” Carys added, smiling at Rian.

Ben peered into the room. “We having coffee?”

“Yeah, do you need help with the machine?” Carys asked.

“No, I think I can handle this!” Max called out from the kitchen.

Soon, we were having an impromptu pack meeting about nothing in particular. We planned on what we were going to do in the next few days as we had our coffees.

“Kye, can you help me with my bags?” Rian asked when Brodie was deep in discussion with his cousins about something.

Brodie’s gaze snapped to me, but I ignored him.

“Of course.” I drank the rest of my second cup of coffee and put it on the tray, then got up and followed Rian to the hallway.

We both grabbed a couple of the suitcases and started to carry them up the stairs. He could’ve carried them all alone with his supernatural strength, but this wasn’t about the luggage.

“Third room?” he asked when he got to the top of the stairs.

“Yeah.” I followed him inside.

Much like the brothers, Rian stopped in the middle of the room and took everything in.

“If you’re bringing any of your own furniture or erm, relocating any of Brodie’s, we can take anything out from here and put it in storage until the last three bedrooms are done.”

We'd chosen rich reds and dark grays for his color scheme, but we hadn't used them in a stereotypical vampire movie fashion. The room wasn't gloomy, instead it looked high class without needing any gold or silver highlights. The metal details were all hand forged steel.

"This is... incredible," Rian said, doing the turning-in-a-circle thing. Then he noticed the large photo print on the wall by the door and slapped a hand over his mouth as his eyes filled with tears. "Who?"

I ducked my head. "Brodie mentioned you were from somewhere in County Mayo in Ireland so I did some googling and thought that rock formation was cool enough for a print." I quickly added, "If it brings bad memories—"

"Oh no, not at all. It's... gorgeous," he breathed out the words. "It's called Dún Briste Sea Stack," he continued quietly, eyes locked on the photograph of a massive rock formation and a stormy sea that appeared black and white until you took in the small amounts of green coastline in the foreground to one side. "I saw it once as a boy. My mother took me there before my sister was born."

To think that he was talking about something that had happened so long ago felt surreal to me.

"I'm glad you like it."

Without taking his eyes off the art still, he lowered his voice even more. "I've never been in love with Brodie or he with me. There's nothing to worry about. I know we seem closer than most best friends and that the BDSM muddles—"

"It doesn't, actually," I interjected quickly. "I'm kinky, I get that it's not sexual for everyone."

He turned his clever gaze to me. "It can be for me, but never with Brodie. Well, once. We tried but it's... weird with him." He grinned slightly.

"Not so weird for me," I replied, smirking.

Rian seemed genuinely delighted. "Good for you, seriously. That man is a great Dom."

"With what little we've done so far, I agree." I looked at him seriously and said, "If you need him like that while you're here, I'm not opposed. I know both of you would probably not scene because you'd be worrying about what I thought, but just know I don't mind."

He frowned. "'Not minding' is different from being okay with it."

"Well I couldn't say I don't care, because I do care, of course I do. But I don't see it negatively. Besides, let's face it, Brodie is also a service top so..."

Rian laughed. "That he is." Then he smiled at me. "He's the best guy I've ever known. I'm glad he found his mate and I'm even more glad it's someone like you."

He didn't specify what he meant by that and I wouldn't dare ask. "You set here?" I asked, gesturing around.

"Yes. This is amazing, Kye." He hesitated for a moment, then held out his arms.

I chuckled and went to hug him. "Hey, you're not only family, you're pack, right? Same as the rest of us."

"I guess. It's just..." He sighed a little and let me go. "I wasn't sure what you'd be like."

“What do you mean?”

“When a wolf finds their mate, that’s it for them. Whether you were a horrible person or not, that would be it for Brodie.” His expression changed into something tighter.

“And therefore for you, because he’s your best friend,” I murmured.

“Bingo.” He relaxed again. “But you’re a good person. Brodie called you fierce and protective.”

My insides warmed hearing that assessment. “I try my best.”

“I’m not sure if I believe in fate or anything like that, because sometimes things that happen are too fucked up to feel worth any sort of end result.”

“Oh I know. I can’t really accept that what my sister went through and what Brodie had to do to end up where we have was worth it. Taking a life...” I grimaced.

Rian shook his head. “I don’t think he’s truly processed it yet. You know how vampires and werewolves are different about this stuff, right?” At my nod, he said, “But Brodie is a good man. I know he saw it as something he had to do and he would do it again, too.”

“I would as well. To protect anyone in this house? Absolutely.”

Rian chuckled. “And that’s the fierceness he was talking about.” Then he got serious. “I’ve killed, but it’s not something I even remember details of, it was so long ago. Then when it mattered the most, I couldn’t do it and...” He winced, the same grief from earlier suddenly filling his eyes.

I put a hand on his forearm and squeezed. “There’s hopefully no need for any of that

anymore.”

He gave me a wavering smile. “Like you said, I would to protect the pack. To save someone.”

“Guys? We need to talk dinner!” Carys called out.

“Be right there!” I called back, then looked at Rian. “What about your dinner?”

“I’m fine for today, but I’ll check up my app for tomorrow.”

“Finding someone locally would be ideal, right?”

“Yeah. At my age, I need to feed about every two or three days. Normally the official donor apps have people spread all over the country. Don’t know about middle of nowhere Pennsylvania, though.”

“Well, we have people we know, the pack will help in a pinch, I’m sure,” I said, then added, “Probably not Carys, but....”

His nose wrinkled. “I would never even ask her. She’s been through enough and since it’s so intimate....”

“Right.” I knew he’d fed from Brodie before and wondered why exactly that made me mildly uncomfortable. “Here’s hoping the app works in your favor!” I quickly said as I turned to the door.

“I’ll start unpacking and join you guys downstairs later.”

“Okay!” I tried not to speedwalk to the stairs.

“Wait, you have apps for finding donors?” Carys asked that night when we were all gathered on the couch that was perfectly sized for all of us with some room to spare.

“Uh-huh, it’s called DonorMatch and it’s a government approved thing,” Rian said as he cuddled under a blanket.

The chimney sweeping service couldn’t get here fast enough, we all huddled under various blankets and/or against one another.

“Are there unofficial ones?” Ben asked, his brother half-asleep against his side.

“There are, but those can be risky. They’re mostly used by sketchy people, vampires and others alike and are like hookup apps really,” Rian explained, his nose scrunching with disgust.

“Oh, right, because it can enhance, erm, hookups.” Ben nodded thoughtfully.

“On the official app, the accounts have to be verified for everyone’s safety. I checked and there are donors around, so it should all be fine.” He grinned. “Of course, the fact that the government doesn’t want it to be used as a hookup app doesn’t mean people don’t try to get around it. There’s words and phrases people use in their bios to indicate what they’re looking for.”

Laughing, Brodie asked, “So what you mean is you can tell what the town is like based on what code people are using? Like if our neighbors are more liberal and kinky than we think?”

Carys made a disturbed face. “Oh gods, don’t tell me.”

“Let’s say it’s going to be tricky to find a regular donor who is just doing it out of the goodness of their heart,” Rian said in a deadpan tone.

“Noooo...,” Carys whined, while the rest of us laughed.

That night, she peeked into the bedroom. I was drying my hair after a shower and Brodie was reading a book in bed.

“Hey guys? If I need to sleep next to someone, I’ve asked Rian if I can invade his privacy—”

“And I said yes!” he called out from somewhere in the direction of his room.

She giggled. “So yeah, feel free to close the bedroom door.” She turned to go, then looked over her shoulder at us. “Besides, I bought earplugs.”

I groaned.

“You better go close the door, eh?” Brodie suggested.

Yeah, I closed the door. Of course I did.

Brodie

Kye came to the bed, his eyes glinting with mischief. The sexy kind.

“What?” I asked, putting my book on the bedside table.

Instead of going to his side of the bed, he climbed on top and settled against me with his body flush against mine. His hands were on my chest, and he rested his chin on top of them, then gazed at me.

“I think the only way to make you any sexier is if you had glasses. Like those heavy black frames.” He lifted his head and one hand enough to make the “chef’s kiss” gesture before settling back.

I laughed. Hard enough that he moved with it.

Kye looked delighted, then wiped my tears of laughter with his thumb.

I heard steps outside the bedroom door, but it was evident that Kye didn’t.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard this laugh from you, Alpha. Keep it up,” Rian’s pleased voice came through barely loud enough and for my ears only.

Chuckling still, I pecked Kye’s forehead. “How rough of a life it is, having a mate who can’t get bad eyesight.”

“I know. It’s tragic,” he deadpanned. Then the mischief intensified. “Oh, but for our

anniversary, you could buy fake glasses, you know.”

I squinted at him, attempting a more serious expression while still being amused as fuck. “Let me get this straight: your version of roleplaying is getting me a fake pair of glasses?”

He thought for a moment, then shrugged as much as he could. “It’s either that or one of those teeny tiny latex nurse’s uniforms.” His whole expression brightened. “Oh, but your ass would look spectacular in a miniskirt!”

I rolled us over and hovered over his madly giggling form. I could taste the three huge as fuck words on my tongue, but some part of me was holding back still. Instead of blurting them out, I glared at him playfully, then dove in for a kiss that seemed to take a life of its own.

It took us no time at all to slither out of our clothes and rut against each other mindlessly. I’d never felt this wanted by someone before, and I certainly hadn’t felt this kind of need for another, either.

“Wait,” Kye gasped when I took hold of our cocks between us.

I stilled and raised a brow. “Yes?”

“I want you inside me.” He came across determined enough that I knew he meant it, had thought it through, and I didn’t need to question it even if that was my first instinct anyway.

“Bare?”

He nodded. “We can shower afterward. Change the sheets if need be. I just....” He glanced away for the first time, then with determination in his gaze, he looked at me

again. “I don’t want anything in between us.”

I could tell there was more to his statement than the matter at hand, but it wasn’t the time to figure it out now.

“Okay.”

I reached over to get the lube from the bedside table, then pushed the drawer shut again. It made an annoying noise, and I winced.

“You need to fix that. Your poor ears,” Kye said, having seen the same thing happen before.

“Nah, I want to throw it out and replace it with mine. I’m sure Rian put it in the moving truck.” I smiled. “I made one I like a lot. The headboard is great as well. You’ll see.”

I worked my fingers inside him, unable to hurt him in a way that wasn’t consensual pain play. My wolf, as uninterested in sex as it was, would never let me be cruel or hurt my mate.

When I finally deemed Kye ready, he was clawing my back and tried his best to kick me in the shin.

“Come on already, I need you,” he whined, with steel in his gaze.

The fact that he knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid to ask for it was sexy as hell.

Slicking my cock, I nudged his thighs up and apart, then winked at him and pushed inside without any preamble.

The way his back arched and his eyes closed might've been the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced. His long hair fell around his head on the pillow, messy already, and I couldn't wait to see how disheveled he'd look by the time I was done with him.

It took him a moment to adjust to me and refocus his attention. When he did, he smiled almost dazedly, then nodded. "Go on. Show me what you got, Alpha."

The twinkle in his eyes belied his attempt at taunting me, not that I minded in the least.

"As you wish, mate." I pulled out almost completely, then snapped my hips forward, cognizant of the fact that he was human.

"That all you got?"

Yeah, okay, maybe he was a stubborn, tough as fuck human? I tilted my head as if thinking about it and shrugged, then gave in to the urge to fuck him into the mattress.

I knew he would tell me if I was being too rough, but seeing the way his skin turned white around where my fingers gripped him while he only moaned harder told me he didn't mind any of this. In fact, the rougher I got, the louder he became.

Being inside my mate was as magical as I thought it would be. I'd always thought the phrase "he felt like he was made for me" was just talk. How much difference could there be between one person and another anyway? But somehow, my whole body seemed to curl around him, mentally and physically. I felt protective and as if I was giving my mate exactly what he wanted and needed, and he was giving me those same things.

It was a feedback loop I couldn't get enough of; his punched out little moans spurred me on, made me feel like the provider and the Alpha I hadn't known I could be.

Elation coursed through me, the higher Kye climbed, dragging me right with him.

“So, so close,” he gasped out, then reached for his cock that was leaking between us.

“No, mine,” I growled, and grabbed his erection in a hand that was suddenly not completely human. “Shit.”

Kye looked at me, then grinned and squeezed my dick like a vise. “You’re a wolf, baby. Own it.”

Then he lifted his chin and tilted his head. Another little taunt. Another way to make me realize that he truly understood me. The growl that burst out of me wasn’t completely human, and again, his ass contracted around me as his cock jumped in my hand. I leaned in and nosed his neck, behind his ear, getting his scent, his sweat, his essence, then nipped at the skin with teeth carefully controlled so as not to hurt him.

“Are you going to come for me?” I asked, pumping his cock in rhythm with my thrusts.

His answer came in the form of him erupting in my fist, cum shooting out of his pretty dick that I immediately wanted to put my mouth on. Except then my own orgasm freight-trained over me and I was done.

His ass milked me for long enough that I knew he was doing it on purpose to prolong my ecstasy. When I collapsed on top of him, he let out a faint “oomph” and then chuckled, the sound happy and sated in a way that made me smile against his neck.

I pulled out carefully, but both of us winced anyway. Then I rolled us over again, this time leaving him on top so we could snuggle, sweaty and sticky as we were.

The scent of sex was overwhelming in the best of ways, and I must’ve let out a

contented sound, because Kye smiled at me.

“I like it when you sound happy,” he said, the smile gentling. “You’re a great Alpha and if I was to be someone’s mate, I’m glad I’m yours.”

I blinked a few times to keep tears at bay. Somehow I hadn’t thought it would mean so much to hear those words.

Three words bubbled up from somewhere deep within me. “You’re staying, right?”

Kye frowned. “What do you mean?” He pushed himself up to straddle my waist and kept frowning. “Why are you asking that?”

I squeezed my lips together, trying to come up with words to explain why I was asking something so stupid. So... necessary. I ended up shaking my head and looking at him, hoping my expression showed him something I couldn’t put into words.

Sighing, he leaned down to kiss my lips. “Baby, I’m not going anywhere. This is home now. You are home now. My sister loves it here, too. There’s nowhere either of us is going to go, no power on earth to make us leave.”

I tried to say something, to ask if he was sure, if things might change in the future, but he put his hand over my mouth.

“No, Brodie. You don’t get to question this. I’m your mate. That is not only sacred to you.”

Yeah okay. This time I squeezed my eyes shut, but the tears escaped anyway.

The next day, we all had breakfast together. Rian nursed a tablespoon of coffee for the taste, and tried to find a donor for his nutritional needs for later.

“Lina is joining us around midday,” I told everyone. “We’re continuing the work we’ve been doing on the house. Is there anything anyone wants done after the most pressing stuff?”

Since nobody had anything to add, I raised a brow at Ben and Max. “So, have you two decided what you want to do job-wise?”

Ben straightened in his seat and cleared his throat. “My boss wants me back at the garage as soon as you don’t need me here.” He’d had a semi-steady job and had managed to work through his addiction.

“Uh, I lost my job right before we went to rehab,” Max whispered, looking ashamed.

Kye squeezed my wrist to signal he’d take it from here. Gods I loved my mate. I really needed to tell him.

“So how about this? Ben, you can go to work whenever you want, because we have enough hands here. If we need you, we’ll ask, but right now I think one of you guys is enough, right, Brodie?”

“Absolutely. Lina and I are going to take the more technical stuff that needs to be done asap, but there’s plenty of indoor jobs for you, Kye, and Rian if working doesn’t ruin his manicure.”

Rian lifted a hand, gave me the finger, and let his fingernail turn into a vampire claw; something sharp and lethal like his fangs that showed when he smiled widely.

Carys snickered. “I’ll keep doing the cleaning and cooking, although if someone else wants to take over the laundry....” It was her least favorite thing.

“I can do that,” Max said quickly, eager to please. “And I’ll help with any cleaning

you need.”

“Okay, sounds good,” she replied in the easy manner I had started to recognize the Rossi siblings had in common.

“Can I start by fixing the porch steps on both sides of the house?” Rian raised a brow. “They creak.”

“Sure, you do you,” I replied and reached for more bacon before it was all gone.

“How much stuff is coming with the movers?” Kye asked then, and we started to make a list of what would go where while Ben called his boss.

“We can pile a lot of stuff in the back of the family room,” Rian said thoughtfully when we realized we didn’t have storage for everything yet.

“That’s true, and if you guys start on the first bedroom on the front side, we can use it as a storage room once it’s in good enough condition. The roof is solid there and the window can be taped where it’s cracked.” I finished my coffee right as Ben came back into the kitchen.

“He said I can go in today if I want to. Is that okay?” He seemed hopeful, but there was some wariness in his expression, too.

“Of course. It’s your job, Ben. That’s a priority.”

“Look, Ben,” Kye started. “I have a good idea about how your dad ran this pack, but we’re building a new one. We want to do right by everyone. If someone wants to work, that’s fine. If they don’t, we’ll find a way to support them even if they don’t have skills that are useful around the house. We’re on more equal grounds here.”

I smooched his temple. “What my smart AF mate said.” I grinned at Ben.

He chuckled. “Good.” Then he glanced at his brother, clearly worried behind Max’s back. Ben looked at me and I gave him an understanding smile.

Kye, intuitive and in tune as he was to us all now, swallowed his sip of coffee. “And as for Max, you’re free to find a job of course, but I’m sure there’s always something around the house for you to do for as long as you want it.”

“Or if you want to study something online like I’m gonna do, that’s fine too,” Carys quickly assured him.

Clearly sensing his brother being overwhelmed, Ben walked to Max and leaned to wrap his arms around him from behind. As if agreed on, the rest of us ignored them as we finished our breakfasts.

My phone rang before we were done, so I grabbed it from the fruit bowl at the end of the table where I tended to drop it whenever I needed to put it down.

The number was local. “Hello?”

“Good morning, Alpha McRae,” Holden said in a tone I’d never heard before.

“Morning, Sheriff,” I replied, making eye contact with Kye who seemed as surprised as I felt. “What can I do for you?”

“Something has come up that I wanted to talk to you about. Could you stop by the station this afternoon?” Ah, his cop voice, then.

“Sure. I have Lina Keller coming over in about an hour, and I assume it’ll take me another hour after that to get her set for today in a way that I can leave for a while,

but around... two?"

"That sounds good. I'll talk to you then."

"Great. See you then."

I ended the call and frowned.

"What was that about?" Kye asked.

"I have no idea, but it sounded like official business."

We had cleared the table, and I was putting the plates into the sink when my phone pinged with a message. Since the phone was in my pocket and my hands were wet, Kye grinned and fished it out for me.

"It's Holden," he said, lifting it so I could peer into the camera to unlock it.

"Nothing serious, but my boss wants a chat. Have your game face on, the guy is a bit of a jerk and there's some weird rumors going around."

"Well okay then," I murmured. "Read it for everyone?"

Kye repeated the message, which left the pack looking puzzled and frowny.

"What do we know about the Sheriff?" Rian asked from his perch on the island.

"Sheriff Gerrell? Just that he's an asshole who likes to take all the credit while doing none of the work," Max blurted out. "Says he wants to get rid of all the meth labs and was a pain in Rusty's ass for years, but luckily—for Rusty's sake—this place is far enough that he would never come here personally until a handful of years ago."

“Yeah.” Ben frowned. “It was very convenient how he also went away real quick, like maybe Rusty paid him off or something. Either way, the word around town is he doesn’t like Holden and the feeling is mutual.”

“And nobody local wants him around for another term, but he has a lot of friends in Warren where his office is and in other parts of the county.” Max grimaced. “I mean it’s not far, but it’s certainly far enough that Holden and the other deputies do all the work here and then Gerrell comes to take any credit he can. It’s unfair.”

“Sounds like a piece of work, especially if your hunch about him being corrupt is right,” Rian mused. “Should I come with you?” he asked me.

“No. Absolutely not. I know how you get. Besides, Holden has implied he’s not big on non-humans, so....”

Rian rolled his eyes hard enough that it felt like a miracle they didn’t pop out of his head. “Fine.”

Ben left for the garage and Carys snatched Max for something she wanted to do in the pantry. Lina came in early, and we went to work on the roof for a while.

“At least the weather has been nice,” she said, then lifted her hand and tapped her skull. At my confused look, she grinned. “Oh, my grandma loves to ‘knock on wood’ on her head.”

I chuckled, and continued to pull out the rotten pieces of wood that needed replacing.

I could hear Rian and Kye in the other end of the hallway, prepping the spare room for storage. They laughed every now and then, and the good old playlist of randomness they were listening to carried over as well.

“Okay,” I said around one. “I think you can continue this until I come back. No going up on the roof without a harness and a spotter.” I squinted at her.

She grinned and lifted her hands up. “I promise.”

“You better.” I tried to sound stern but didn’t succeed. She was a good kid and would never take any unnecessary risks like that. “I’ll be back later. I’m going to go clean up and if there’s time, I’ll get some groceries in town before the appointment since I’m going to be a bit early.”

“Sounds good, boss!” She practically shooed me out the door.

I started down the hall, but something about Rian’s tone made me stop by the half-open door to the room they were in.

“You need to understand that everyone has left him, Kye. It took me literally years of convincing before he got that I wasn’t going to vanish.”

“I didn’t think about it like that. Jesus. Now that I do... you’re right.” Kye took in a deep breath and let it huff out. “Now I feel bad for getting a bit annoyed at him.”

“Hey, you guys are still new and don’t know each other inside and out. You’ll get there,” Rian said, his voice full of conviction.

I snuck past the doorway, my heart beating in my chest like a drum. Yeah, that was it, wasn’t it? I was afraid everyone was going to leave me, because that was all I’d known until I met Rian.

Dad, Mom, Bella, then the few partners I’d had over the years, some friends, too. Part of it was natural, just life—or death—but it still felt like a lot.

I needed to talk to someone, maybe a professional. Hell, maybe even one of my friends. That could wait, though. First, I needed to go see what these rumors were, exactly.

After getting some necessities from the bigger grocery store in town, I parked my truck at the tiny sheriff's office. The parking lot for their vehicles was to the side of the building, and I spied the one Holden normally used. Next to it was a much fancier, newer one that must've been the Sheriff's.

Snorting softly, I got out of the car and walked to the front door.

The office, not really a station, was sandwiched between an old closed shopfront and a mom and pop style grocery store that seemed to be owned by the same family that had owned it when I was little and went in to get ice cream with my pocket money.

The middle-aged woman manning the front desk brightened when the bell dinged as I opened the door to the station, then seemed grumpy again when it was just me. Why, I had no idea.

"Hey, I'm Alpha McRae, here to see—"

"Alpha McRae, come on through," Holden called from the back.

He walked to the swinging gate and held it open for me.

I nodded to the woman and gave her a polite smile that thawed her a little.

I'd put on my best jeans and a henley under my leather jacket that was cleaner than the jacket I wore around the house.

"This way," Holden instructed, showing me through the back of the room, past some

desks, and then down a hall into an office.

The letters on the door spelled out Deputy Sheriff Holden Drumm, but the man sitting behind the desk immediately gave me the creeps.

“Ah, Alpha McRae,” he said, standing halfway up as he reached his hand for a shake.

“Sheriff Gerrell,” I replied, giving him the shake he tried to control by squeezing too hard. I didn’t react.

“Deputy Drumm here has brought me up to speed with the situation at the old Douglas pack house,” he started while gesturing for me to sit.

Holden remained standing by the door. I was in tune enough with him to sense his wolf’s agitation at the situation. On the surface he was calm, unflappable. He’d had practice with this man, that much was certain.

Since Gerrell hadn’t actually asked a question, I sat down and looked at him expectantly.

“Right, uh, there have been some rumors going around.” He barely hid his annoyance at my silence. “Rusty Douglas was supplying a lot of methamphetamine in these parts, and the rumors are running wild now.”

Again, no question was asked, but I threw him a line. “I have no knowledge of the ‘amounts’ he might’ve been supplying and to whom, but based on the fact that his idiot betas haven’t made another appearance, I’m done with Rusty’s legacy.”

Gerrell stared at me in a way that told me he was trying to read me.

“I see. Well, these rumors come from informants we have in the county. They’re

saying that Douglas' betas went to another uh, I wouldn't go as far as to call them a gang, but a group of criminals."

I shrugged. "Like I said, I haven't heard from them. We had the barn torn down and there's no trace of meth on my property, as your deputies know, since they have been dealing with everything with me. I don't know how this relates to me or my pack."

This time Holden cleared his throat. "The betas have been talking about wanting the house back. We're thinking they're trying to get these people to try something with them."

Snorting, I said, "Let them try."

Sheriff Gerrell hid his surprise a fraction of a second too late. "You're that confident you'll be able to defend your property?"

"My pack might be small, but if they want to underestimate us, they can come and try to see what happens. My pack and I have full rights to protect one another and our property, isn't that right?" At the Sheriff's nod, I continued, "I assume they're mostly humans, this group?"

Again, Holden piped up. "It would seem so, yes. So we're thinking likely armed. There's no record of there being vampires or werewolves, other than some hangers on, maybe."

"Well then I'm not worried." I leveled the Sheriff with a look. "Anything else?"

He appeared slightly constipated suddenly. "No, I suppose there's nothing else. Just keep an eye on things and let us know if you need help. Deputy Drumm says he has a good relationship with your pack, so I feel reassured that you and yours know to contact him with anything at all."

“Oh, absolutely. Deputy Drumm is a good man and an excellent wolf.” The tiniest of flinches on Gerrell’s face told me volumes about how he viewed our kind. “He’s always welcome to my house.”

I got to my feet and held out my hand, this time squeezing him a bit more firmly than needed. Not enough to be threatening, but enough for the good Sheriff to realize I had clocked his posturing and wasn’t impressed.

Holden came to see me out and walked to my truck with me.

“So, he’s an asshole and a half, isn’t he?” I murmured, making him chuckle.

“Not going to deny that assessment.”

“How corrupt is he, exactly?” I asked even more quietly.

Holden’s eyes widened a bit before he schooled his expression. “Not sure. Definitely some.”

“Is this whole thing some sort of warning I should know about?”

“I’ve tried to figure it out, but I’m a wolf so he’s not telling me shit. If I learn something, I’ll let you know.” Then he seemed to remember something else. “Hey, so you know the pack I used to run with on occasion before you came to town?” I nodded, so he continued, “The Alpha, Jessie Ramirez, wanted to meet up with you whenever you can to get to know the other Alpha in the area. She’d come over to yours, but she just had a baby couple of weeks ago and her pack is a bit overly protective—her words, not mine.”

“I’ll let you know. Full moon is soon, so before that?”

“That should work. Let me know and I’ll set it up.”

“Excellent. I’ll see you later.” I had the strongest urge to leave my scent on Holden, which he must’ve seen in my expression.

He smiled and held out his hand which I took, then cupped his elbow with my other one.

“See you later, Alpha,” he replied, and this time there was a different weight on the honorific.

I beamed as I drove home. It felt like I was gaining a beta, officially, very soon.

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Rian and I stood in the yard, examining the space we had to use.

“I think a two to three car garage with doors that way,” he said, gesturing, “with the other end of the building acting as a large storage shed and a chicken coop could be doable. What do you think?” He looked at me expectantly.

I walked the area where the barn had stood and nodded slowly. “I think it would be easier to have the coop attached to the garage like that. Keeping the chickens warm in the winter and all that. Of course if we were to build it in the back somewhere, that’d work too, but this way we wouldn’t need to figure out the electricity for a separate coop for heating.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

I glanced up toward the roof of the big, imposing house that no longer intimidated me in the least like it had when I first saw it. “Alpha? You there?”

Rian grinned.

“What’s up?” Brodie asked from somewhere out of view.

“Big garage with storage shed and chicken coop, yes or no?”

“Where the barn was?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds good to me.” Then, a couple of beats later, “Lina says her dad might be able to fit it in his schedule in the spring.”

“Awesome!” I called back and high-fived Rian.

Our first full moon as a whole pack was tomorrow night, and this evening, Brodie and Holden would be going to visit the Ramirez pack forty-five minutes away from our land.

They shouldn’t be gone for long and they wouldn’t stay there for dinner, so we were still going to eat together when they got back. Holden was invited to stay with us tonight, but Brodie wasn’t sure if he would.

Tomorrow, he would ask Holden, Ben, and Max to be his betas in a more official capacity. There wasn’t any ceremony or anything, just a question and an answer, normally during a full moon evening to give it all a bit more weight, Brodie had told me.

The happiness that had been swirling around Brodie ever since the guys came back was palpable still. His happiness made me elated, lighter somehow.

“You know how we went shopping this morning?” Rian asked.

He and Carys had gone on a spree and I wasn’t going to touch the whole thing with a thirty foot pole.

“Uh-huh,” I replied as we started toward the backyard.

“I bought us some more protection. Brodie okayed it.”

I stopped. “What did you buy exactly?”

“Rian!” Brodie called from the roof. “Get the first aid kit!”

We burst into movement, retracing our steps as quickly as we could. Rian practically vanished behind the corner while I ran after him on my human feet. Damn vampire speed.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, Brodie was sitting Lina down on the island where the best light was right above.

Her temple was bleeding, and she looked annoyed as fuck, but also a bit startled at the attention, maybe?

“What is it with this house and head bumps?” I asked casually.

Carys grinned, but she seemed shaken. Lina noticed and reached a hand behind herself, which Carys took.

“It’ll be fine,” Rian said, sounding a bit absent as he fiddled with the first aid kit. “We really need a suture kit here.”

Before I could ask, Brodie explained, “Rian is a doctor.”

“I was a doctor, about seventy years ago,” he corrected.

Lina’s eyes widened. “I keep forgetting you’re that old.”

“It’s my girlish figure, isn’t it?” Rian deadpanned, then straightened to start cleaning her up.

“Is it insensitive to ask if the blood is bothering you at all?” Carys peered over Lina’s shoulder at Rian.

He snorted. “Well I’m a doctor, for one, so I’m pretty used to it. It could be different if I was incredibly hungry, but even then it would be like....” He thought for a moment, then said, “You like chocolate, right? So even if you recognize someone drinking chocolate milk right next to you when you have a craving, it’s not like you’re going to tackle that guy to get his drink, right?” We all cracked up and he laughed. “Now imagine that the chocolate milk is on the inside.”

Lina guffawed hard enough that she moved her head, then winced when that caused Rian’s gentle prodding to become less so.

Brodie was hovering, clearly worried enough that I grabbed his wrist and tugged him away from the kitchen.

“You’re coming with me, Alpha,” I murmured.

The last thing I saw was the corner of Rian’s mouth curling up as he inspected Lina’s temple.

I walked across the downstairs, bringing Brodie with me into the family room. Then I pushed him to sit on the couch.

“But my clothes are dirty—”

“The couch will clean. Stay.” I climbed onto his lap to straddle him.

He looked at me, confused and on the edge.

“Hey, baby.” I cupped his face with my palms and pecked his lips.

Then again. And a third time. By the fourth, he let the tension bleed out of his body and opened his mouth to kiss me back. His arms wrapped around me, and his big

hands squeezed my butt and pulled me closer.

“Keep it PG!” Rian called from the kitchen.

Brodie chuckled and I reluctantly pulled my lips from his.

“Hi,” he said, eyes filled with that happiness I loved to see.

“She’ll be fine,” I told him firmly. “It’s only a cut. Headwounds bleed a lot. We already know this.” I grinned and pointed at my own noggin. “Besides, now we have a doctor in the house.”

Brodie sighed and rolled his neck. “Yeah, I know you’re right, but she was—”

“Doing her job? While being supervised by her boss and mentor?” At his frown, I continued, “Could it have happened to you?”

He sighed. “Yes.”

“Aww, my big, strong Alpha admitting he could’ve gotten hurt in the same way as the fragile human. I’m proud of you, baby,” I cooed, patting his cheek.

Rian cackled in the kitchen, and I could hear the girls asking him what was going on.

Brodie wrapped his fingers around my throat and squeezed gently. “Is someone feeling bratty? Do you want to ask me to beat it out of you?”

His lower register voice and the literal hold he had over my life in that moment might’ve turned me on a bit faster than I wanted to admit.

“Maybe?” I exhaled the word, embracing the beginnings of that swimmy sensation of

not getting enough oxygen.

“Well maybe we should—”

His phone rang, so he used his free hand to fish it out of his pocket.

“Alpha Ramirez, what can I do for you?” he asked, his fingers still holding onto me.

“Uh-huh. Let’s try again in a couple of days? Yeah. I hope your baby feels better soon. Let Holden or me know. Right. Mhmm. Have a safe full moon tomorrow. Bye.”

“No meeting tonight?” I wheezed.

He loosened his fingers, but didn’t move his hand. “No, the baby has a runny nose and she wants to keep an eye on him in case it gets worse. Did you know newborns can only breathe through their noses?”

“I didn’t know that, so that’s extra scary. Good for her for canceling.”

“I’ll take the kids out tonight. Get dinner somewhere farther away,” Rian called from the kitchen. “Give you two Alpha Daddy and Mate Daddy time.”

“Stop eavesdropping!” Brodie snapped at him, then added, “And thanks!”

He pulled me into a hard kiss, which I returned happily. Then he let go.

Glancing toward the kitchen, he asked, “Have you patched up my apprentice yet?”

“Yup, she’s good as new.”

Lina peered into the family room. “I’ll go wash up a bit and then I’m ready to go back to work.”

“Awesome. Meet you upstairs,” Brodie said, smiling.

“Cool.” She beamed a smile at us and vanished into the little bathroom.

I pecked Brodie’s lips and slid off his lap. “I’m gonna grab Rian and we’ll continue our planning outside.”

“After you make sure the couch is clean again,” he snarked, smacked me on the ass, and walked out of the room.

Damn Alpha Doms.

Max had been in town with Ben, hanging out at the garage, so when they came back and everyone got cleaned up after the day, Rian “packed the kids in the SUV” and they left the house. Holden, when informed of the decision, had told us he’d come by tomorrow instead.

I’d promised Carys that Brodie and I could fend for ourselves, and she’d pointed at the leftovers from the previous night and told us not to mess up her kitchen.

We decided to skip dinner for now, and went upstairs together. Since we’d already showered, we were ready for whatever Brodie decided.

Except when we got to the bedroom, he closed the door behind us and leaned to it, then tilted his head at me.

It was an expectant expression, and for a moment I wasn’t sure what he was after. Then it clicked.

“Hurt me.”

He moved fast, his hand curling around my neck before I had time to draw another breath.

“Traffic lights for safewords, otherwise you’re done talking until we’re done here.”

I nodded rapidly in the confines of his grip and went pliant.

Brodie smirked in a way that told me to forget about my gentle, kind, Alpha mate. This Brodie was all Dominant male in his prime, and I trembled in his hold. Not in fear, but in barely contained excitement and pure lust.

“Kneel.”

I dropped fast enough that his arm jerked down with the movement.

He let go of me for a second, then gathered my hair into a loose ponytail he wrapped around his fist.

“Undress me.”

I reached to pull his sweats down, the front already tenting a little. The musk of him was heady when I pressed my face against the bulge in his underwear.

Brodie tugged at my hair. “Did you deserve to do that yet, brat?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it with an audible snap and glared up at him. His eyes were filled with mirth. Damn cheat.

Holding eye contact, I pulled his underwear down and tossed it aside when he lifted each foot for me.

He tugged me back to my feet by my hair. I registered the fact that he had enough of my hair in his fist that it didn't hurt much but gave him all the control anyway.

I grabbed the hem of his top and tugged it up. He let go of me so I could get it over his head.

“Now undress yourself.”

That was easy. I whipped my T-shirt off and had my sweats down and off within a few seconds.

“Eager much, brat?” he purred, making me stick my tongue out at him. “Careful or the wolf might get your tongue.” He leaned closer, pulled me to him, and snapped his teeth that were now sharper than seconds before.

“I think someone needs a good spanking,” he mused, then turned us until he could sit on the edge of the bed.

Without letting go of my hair, he tugged me down again. “Come on, I'm sure a brat like you has been spanked before.”

Snorting softly, even knowing it would lead to consequences, I draped myself over his lap. He let me make myself comfortable, making sure that my leaking cock was between his legs and not trapped, and his own was pressed against my side in a line of heat that was somehow mind-blowingly erotic.

“Normally, I would hold onto your body, but I think you haven't deserved both of my hands on your skin yet.”

With that, he tightened his hold of my hair, this time enough for it to truly sting without pulling any out, and brought his big palm to one of my ass cheeks.

He squeezed, hard, making me moan at the dual sensation of sudden pain.

He alternated between cheeks, squeezing and rubbing until I felt sore. That was when he smacked me for the first time.

The choked sound I made had him chuckling. “Aww, this is where we start , brat. There’s no need to count, just sink into it. I’m not sure brats can count high enough anyway.”

And then he let his hand fly against my skin.

I didn’t count. I couldn’t. Not with how quickly his erratic, yet still oddly steady rhythm lulled my brain into that space I’d only heard of before.

The pain on the top of my thighs and up my butt and on my scalp started to feel like one big connected area. It was as if the rest of me didn’t exist.

The tears started at some point, and I breathed through my mouth, gasping and probably drooling, too.

My cock was rock hard, but I didn’t register it much. It wasn’t as important as the pain.

And the words.

“...you’re so good. You’re home now, Kye. You’re safe, and you’re loved, and you’ll never be alone or lose anyone again as long as I have breath in my lungs. You’re safe, I love you, you’re such a good boy for me....”

When I came to, I was cradled in his arms on the bed. He put a tissue on my nose and told me to blow. I obeyed, because what else was there to do?

Then he took another tissue and cleaned up my face.

I realized my hair was on a loose braid and hanging over my shoulder.

“How long was I out?”

“Ten, fifteen minutes, probably.” He smiled and kissed my forehead. “How are you feeling, baby?”

I took stock of the throbbing of my backside and the way my scalp was tender but not really hurting.

“I’m... perfect.”

Brodie grinned. “That you are.” He kissed me on the mouth.

“I love you, too,” I told him.

For a split second, his emotions were crystal clear to me. Some part of him was still surprised to hear the words and maybe to realize I’d heard them through my haze.

“Good.” He pecked my lips again. “What do you think about riding me?”

I let out a small laugh that was half a giggle. I felt high, still. “That’ll hurt.”

The wickedness in his eyes made my heart skip a beat. “Oh baby, I’m counting on it.”

The next night, we had a pack dinner. Rian was a bit annoyed, because his donor he’d seen twice already had a family emergency, and he needed a bite soon.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll be good until tomorrow, at least.”

“If you’re sure,” I told him, squeezing his wrist that was even bonier than mine.

“If all else fails, I’ll use the other app.” He gave me a grin.

The guys were in the family room, lounging on the couch while waiting for Holden to get there. He’d had an urgent work thing, having to go in as backup for something or other despite it being his day off because of the full moon.

We joined them, and Carys plopped on top of us, making herself comfortable with her head on Rian’s lap, her upper body on me, and her legs on Brodie.

“Do you think Lina would like to stay next month?” Brodie asked her casually.

By now, she knew full moon nights were for pack, for family, and on occasion, close friends or romantic partners.

“I... uh, I’ll ask?” she said in a squeaky voice she tried to hide by a little cough as she partially covered her face with her arm.

“She’s also always welcome to stay the night if she wants. Doesn’t have to be a full moon.” He squeezed her ankle.

Everyone but Carys and I turned their heads toward the window, which clearly signaled Holden’s arrival. I heard his truck before Carys did, but I wasn’t sure if that was more about her hiding a bit or for any sort of sharpened senses I might’ve gotten courtesy of the scar that now decorated my wrist.

I rubbed my fingertips over it and Brodie kissed the side of my head when he noticed.

The front door opened and Holden walked in. He looked exhausted.

“Hey guys.”

“Long day?” Brodie asked, knowing the answer already. “We’ll go easy on you once we shift, I promise.” He had his fingers crossed where we could all see it, and Holden snorted.

“Great, thanks.”

“Holden, this is my best friend Rian Flynn, Rian, this is Sheriff Holden Drumm.”

For a second, Rian tensed, hard, then seemed to recover as he reached a hand over my sister for a shake.

“Nice to meet you, Holden.”

“You as well. Brodie’s talked about you a lot.” Holden smiled in his usual way, but I could tell Rian was having a moment with how he couldn’t seem to relax.

So could Carys. She widened her eyes minutely at me while Rian wasn’t paying attention.

I shrugged a little and hid it by glancing at Holden. “Did you have dinner yet?”

“I didn’t really have much time—”

“I’ll go fix you a plate,” Carys interrupted and scrambled off us.

“Ow, thanks for the elbow, sis,” I grunted at her.

“You’re welcome!” She flounced into the kitchen. “Come on Holden, you get to pick what you want!”

Shaking his head, he smiled and followed her.

As soon as they were gone, I turned to look at Rian. He feigned innocence, but when I raised a brow at him, he shook his head.

Well all right then.

Just before the guys got ready to shift, Brodie called everyone into the family room. He stood by the fireplace—the fire was roaring behind him, which made it all kind of cinematic, not gonna lie—and turned to Ben, Max, and Holden.

“I think we’ve established what kind of a pack we want to be. There hasn’t been any trouble yet, most of us know how that can change in the blink of an eye with how things on the non-human side are, sometimes.

“With that in mind, I still want to say that my mate and I have welcomed the three of you into the pack in the same way we’d welcome anyone we think fits us and is a good person. That doesn’t mean I’m expecting everyone to officially be my beta.”

He raised a brow at me, so I cleared my throat.

“What Brodie said. In this pack, we don’t expect anyone to put their health on the line in the ways betas are expected to do in case of emergency. We don’t expect anything from you guys, other than to live your best lives.”

Brodie nodded. “You already know you can do whatever you want, work, study, whatever it is. I’m not going to limit your life choices, as long as they’re on the right side of the law and inside the rules we’ve established here as a pack.”

“That said, those rules? They’re real. We all know, and anyone who might be joining us later will learn, that we don’t mess with those things,” I said in a tone that

surprised even me with its sternness.

“Yeah, down with Jell-O!” Carys mock-cheered.

Brodie sighed and ignored her. “What I wanted to ask you three is this: do you want to be my betas? If you don’t, I understand. This is still your home or your safe place for full moons, whichever you’d prefer. And Holden, if you choose to be a beta, that doesn’t mean we’d expect you to live here unless you want to.”

Holden glanced at the guys and then back at Brodie. “First of all, I’m honored that you asked. I know not all packs want bitten wolves as betas or hell, at all. But for what it’s worth, I can see what you’re trying to do here, and because of that, I want to officially be your beta, Alpha McRae.”

“Yay,” Carys whispered, making us all grin.

“What comes to us,” Ben said and squeezed his brother’s hand. “We’re going to say yes, too. We know you’re nothing like our dad was and that this pack is worth fighting for now.”

Max nodded. “This is home, like a real one, with a real family. We feel safe here and that hasn’t happened in....” He looked away.

“Ever,” Ben said bluntly. “We love you guys.”

Carys pounced them then, and Rian and I moved closer too, to hug them as much as we could.

None of that mattered though, until Brodie came to us and leaned down to grasp each of the brothers’ neck in turn with a press of his forehead to theirs.

“We love you too,” he said firmly, his voice so unwavering that I could tell it affected the guys a lot.

Then he let go and stepped back, grinning a little. “So, full moon run, anyone?”

Ben dumped Carys onto the cushion next to him, then got off the couch and pulled Max with him while she was still making annoyed noises.

“You coming, too?” Brodie asked Rian.

He widened his eyes theatrically. “Have you seen the woods? It’s cold, dark, and wet over there. What do you think?”

Holden chuckled. “I can see your point.”

“You guys go play,” I told the wolves.

Holden and Brodie went to shift like they had last time. The brothers went upstairs, and soon loped down in their wolf forms.

Once everyone was ready, they stood next to each other in the hall, imposing as hell. So of course the rest of us went to pet them and give them hugs and, and in my and Brodie’s case, snout kisses.

Before it could all devolve into anyone rolling on the floor to get belly scratches, I opened the door and shooed them out.

“We’ll be right there, go frolic.”

Like last month, Carys and I made drinks and all three of us bundled up, then went out and around the house to sit on the back stairs that didn’t creak anymore since

Rian had fixed them.

Seeing four massive wolves play together was even more unbelievable than two had been. We chatted as we watched them, commenting and egging them on every now and then.

After half an hour, the wolf I thought was probably Max—and not Ben—came to us and settled by our feet while the others continued to run around the backyard.

“Enough for you, buddy?” I asked, leaning down to scratch the top of his head.

He huffed, then leaned into the touch.

The pack run went smoothly, other than the wet dog smell lingering a bit when they came back. Rian teased them mercilessly, until Brodie took him down and plopped his furry self on top of the poor guy, soaking his T-shirt and sweatpants.

I left them to it and went to make coffees for everyone while Carys, as usual, took care of nighttime snacks.

Holden stayed over and slept on the couch. He was still asleep when I tiptoed downstairs the next morning. The only one awake was Max, who sat at the kitchen table, scrolling something on a very old looking laptop.

“If you let Rian see that thing, he’ll come home with a brand new one the next time he goes shopping,” I said quietly.

The corner of his mouth curled up. “Morning.”

I went to him and wrapped my arms around him from behind. “Morning.” I squeezed him, having caught the way he seemed to be hungry for physical contact. “Coffee?”

“Yeah, thank you. I didn’t want to wake up Holden so I didn’t make any yet.”

“It’s late enough for everyone to start waking up, so I’ll make us some, then start on breakfast.”

“Tell me if you need help.”

I stepped away from him, then asked, “What are you looking at?”

“Oh, it’s some online college courses. I was thinking if I got my GED, I could start figuring out something to study.” He blushed lightly. “Rian said he’ll pay for everything, as long as I find something that interests me for real.”

“That sounds awesome. I really need to get back to school at some point, too, now that I have somewhere to put that sort of degree into use.”

We chatted quietly about my studies and soon, Holden waved at us from the doorway, then vanished into the downstairs bathroom.

Rian was the next to appear. He seemed grumpy as hell.

“What’s up?” I asked, squinting at him, because he really did look different.

“I’m getting hungrier than I thought I would be at this point. Must be all the physical activity in the last handful of days.”

Holden stepped into the room and frowned. “I’ve donated before. I can help you out?”

Something complex flashed through Rian’s features, and he shook his head. “Nah, I’d rather not start that with anyone in the pack. It can be a slippery slope with the

endorphins.”

Holden shrugged. “Okay. But if you change your mind, let me know.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

His mood continued to plummet throughout the morning, until around midday, Brodie gave him a patented Alpha expression.

We’d been watching a movie as a group, and Rian kept huffing and snapped at Ben when he adjusted the blanket that was partially on Rian, too.

“Rian? If there’s nobody available on your better app, then I’m going to have to pull an Alpha move here.”

The glare from his best friend was fierce. “What do you mean?”

“You’re getting a bit too snappy. I know how you get when you’re hungry. So either you check the app or you feed from me. We’ve done it before, and it’ll be fine.”

“I’m not one of your fucking betas!” Rian roared.

Two things happened simultaneously. Max dove under the blanket to hide against his brother. And Brodie got off the couch and pointed a finger toward the hall.

“Rian. Up to your room. Right the fuck now.”

It took me a few seconds to realize this was his Dom voice.

I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised that Rian folded immediately. He got up and walked out of the room, with Brodie following him.

“That was more than only being hungry,” Carys murmured.

I moved to Rian’s old spot and put my hand on Max on top of the blankets. “He’s being a brat,” I said gently. “He’s not actually dangerous or mean.”

Ben smiled at me sadly. “We know that. It’s just that yelling is a trigger sometimes, and....”

“He’ll be okay once he’s done with his tantrum,” I promised.

I would also make sure that he would fucking apologize to Max. He was the sweetest guy and scaring him like that was not allowed, whether you were a two hundred year old multi-millionaire or not.

We finished the movie, and I went to pick up our laundry from upstairs. It had been maybe forty-five minutes since Brodie and Rian went upstairs.

As I was going into our bedroom, Brodie stepped out of Rian’s room.

“Hey, is he doing better?”

Brodie nodded and came to me. “He’ll be fine. All he needed was a bit of pain, to be put into his place, and a bit of blood to tide him over.”

I opened my mouth to respond, then realized that I knew Brodie’s expression. He was turned on.

My brain stalled, and I blurted out, “I was going to get our laundry.” I ducked into our room.

I could feel my mind scrambling around, my heart beating too fast suddenly.

“What’s wrong?” Brodie asked, walking up behind me.

He put his hand on my shoulder, but without making a conscious decision, I twisted away from under his touch.

“Don’t touch me,” I said, my tone as weird as my roiling emotions.

“Baby?” The confusion in his voice told me exactly how off my own reaction was, right then, but I couldn’t help it at all.

I went into the bathroom to grab the laundry basket but ended up turning around and locking the door behind myself.

“Kye?”

I didn’t know how to explain any of what was going on with me, so I sat on the toilet lid and rubbed my hands over my face.

I guess I did have jealousy issues after all.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

I was so fucking worried about Rian. I knew my best friend inside and out, but this was something new to me. Sure, the pain and the blood had eased whatever was going on with him some, but the underlying current I felt from him was still there.

When I'd told him to tell me what was wrong, he'd looked at me, tears in his eyes and whispered, "Don't make it an order."

I'd left him resting in bed, coming down from the mini-scene alone because he'd told me he wanted that here. He felt safe here and besides, he hadn't flown this time. The respite from whatever was bothering him had helped, though, if less than I would've wanted.

After telling him to apologize to everyone, I let him be.

Staring at the closed bathroom door, knowing my mate was upset felt like almost too much to bear.

I could be worried about my best friend or my mate, but both? Seemed a bit excessive.

Unable to hear anything that would've told me how Kye was feeling, I sat next to the bathroom door and pulled my knees up. I let my head thunk against the wall and sighed.

"I don't know what has you upset. Give me a moment to figure it out, baby, okay?" I

said loudly enough that I hoped he'd hear me. "I'm fucking worried about Rian. He's not... something is going on with him. He's not telling me, and I can't force him."

Nothing. There was only silence behind the door.

Sighing, I crossed my arms over my knees and rested my forehead on top.

What had happened? I'd come out of Rian's room. I'd told Kye what we'd done, which he would've known already anyway. He knew my deeper tone that brooked no argument. I'd told him I'd given Rian some blood before if the situation called for it.

Kye knew there was nothing but deep friendship between us, so he couldn't be jealous. Except.... My mind raced back, trying to see the situation from his point of view.

I'd been flushed, probably. Letting a vampire feed from you did things to your body. It was an aphrodisiac if you let or wanted it to be. It turned people on even when you didn't want it, and... hell.

"Is this about letting Rian bite me?" I asked, hoping I was right, because there was absolutely nothing else that came to my mind. "Baby, you know I'm not interested in him like that. If my body reacts to the feeding, I can't help that. It doesn't mean I want to do anything about it, especially with him."

I heard the barely there sound of the toilet seat creaking, then Kye's steps as he approached the door. He sat down on the other side.

"You looked turned on," he murmured.

I wanted to fist pump because at least I was right about this, which meant I could solve this. Easily. Hopefully.

“You haven’t had a vampire feed from you, right?”

“No.”

“It’s a rush. It’s part fight or flight, but it turns into something sensual in an instant. That’s not something the vampire can control, it’s part of the biting process. I don’t know how it works, exactly, but there is a reason why those other apps exist, baby.”

His sigh was audible through the door. I smiled despite myself.

“I guess I don’t know how it feels so I shouldn’t judge it or... or get jealous.” After a beat, he added, “I just wasn’t prepared to see you look like you did, knowing someone else made you feel that way.”

I made a quick decision. “I won’t feed him again. Or any vampire. Unless it’s an emergency situation.”

Another short stretch of silence, then I heard the lock disengage, and the door opened.

Kye sat on the tiled floor and glanced at me, gnawing on his bottom lip.

I straightened my legs and pulled the door more open, then held out my arms. “Come here, baby.”

He hesitated for two heartbreaking seconds, then crawled over and settled on my lap. He hid his face against my neck, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Hey, no. Sometimes we don’t actually know what will happen until it does. It’s like some kink things. We might think we’ll like something or hate something before we

try it, and the opposite happens, right?”

He nodded, but said nothing.

“I love you and I never want to do anything that hurts you. So keep telling me if I do anything that makes you uncomfortable. I can be a big, oblivious idiot.”

He snorted softly against my neck. “But you’re my big, oblivious idiot.”

“That I am.” I smiled, knowing we’d be fine.

“I love you too, Brodie. Alpha.”

I squeezed him tighter and kissed his head.

Before I had time to say anything, he sighed.

“I think it’s something about Holden, maybe,” he murmured.

I frowned. “What is?”

“Whatever’s going on with Rian.”

That made no sense. “I don’t think they know each other.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so either. At least Holden doesn’t know Rian.”

“Huh.”

“We’ll keep an eye on it. Support Rian however he needs. He just can’t go being mean and loud, especially not to the boys and Carys.”

I smiled. He sounded like a parent. “He won’t. He got overwhelmed. He promised he’d apologize as soon as he feels good enough to talk to anyone.”

“He better.”

“I could’ve made him tell me what’s wrong, but he asked that I wouldn’t. I’ve made him talk before, years ago, when something was troubling him. It felt like abusing our D/s dynamic, though.”

“Yeah, that’s... I wouldn’t go that far unless it was something dangerous he’s hiding.”

“Yeah. This time he asked me not to make him tell, so I won’t. The trust between us is too important to me.”

“To me, too.” He sighed and kissed my neck. “I’m sorry.”

“Again, baby, no need to be. We’re still new. We’re still learning about each other and how we are as people in a very serious relationship.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said quietly, but I could hear the smile in his voice.

“What?”

“That we’re very serious. Because we are.” He lifted his head to look me in the eye. “I’m happy with you. I didn’t know it could be like this, that I could be this... fulfilled, I suppose, in a relationship, because every attempt at more than casual dating in my past never worked.”

I rumbled. “That’s because fate had called dibs on my behalf.”

He laughed, the sound light and happy. “I guess.”

We went downstairs and continued the afternoon movie marathon. There were snacks and drinks, and everyone tried their best to relax a little. I’d told Max to come cuddle to my side, and Ben and I sandwiched him between us. He relaxed very gradually, clearly on alert for any sounds from upstairs.

I loved my best friend, but hurting someone like Max was out of the question. Luckily he knew that and would apologize once he felt ready.

After the second movie, we moved the party into the kitchen. Carys started on dinner prep, shooed us to the table when we asked if we could help, and tossed the pack of UNO cards at us.

It all got surprisingly competitive, with Ben being extremely sneaky about his choices, Max pulling surprise moves, and Kye knowing exactly when to change direction or color for maximum damage.

No, I didn’t win even one game, damn it. I didn’t mind in the least, though, because they were having fun at my expense, as a pack, a family.

At one point, Carys wanted to join the game while she waited for something to cook, so I gave my spot to her and went to check up on Rian. I jogged up the stairs and knocked on his door. At his quiet acknowledgement, I opened the door and stepped inside. He was still curled up in bed, but his color was better due to my blood.

I sat on the edge and reached a hand to push his curls off his face. “How are you feeling, sweetness?”

He made a small “eh” sound and burrowed deeper into his blankets.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

He shook his head.

“Okay. Well, know we all love you and you’re very important to us. Whatever’s going on, you’ll find someone to talk with.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, still not making eye contact.

I leaned down and kissed his cheek. “I love you, sweetness. You’re my best friend. My platonic as fuck soulmate, right?” That made the corner of his mouth curl up a little. “I mean sure, there’s now a definitely not at all platonic actual mate, but you and I? We’ll never change, right?”

He nodded rapidly, then kissed the back of my hand and closed his eyes.

“See you tomorrow, okay?”

He nodded again, and I left him be.

After dinner, we all retreated to our own corners of the house. Carys went to her room to read, Ben and Max went to theirs, and since I felt too lazy to go upstairs yet, I settled on the couch with Kye soon joining me.

He crawled on top of me and then settled against my side, so he wasn’t pressing against my pleasantly full stomach.

“Do you want kids?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” I turned my head to see his face, but he wasn’t looking at me.

He fiddled with the front of my T-shirt. “It just came to me, that wolf packs are supposed to have kids. Like the Ramirez pack has several, right?”

I hummed. “They do, but that’s probably because they’re mostly a straight pack. They have couples that can produce those kids themselves.”

“Yeah, but there are options. Like adoption and surrogates and hell, aren’t there even like people who volunteer to join packs temporarily for that?”

“There are. A friend back in Seattle had a guy join their pack for a few months. He was a good match genetics-wise, but it was a sperm donor kind of thing, because the mother-to-be was asexual and aromantic.”

“So down the line, do you think you want kids? Maybe if we find a suitable woman from a service like that?” His fingers were picking at a hole in my shirt, making it slightly bigger.

I gave his question some thought. Not in a way of “does he have an agenda” or “what is he really asking” because Kye wasn’t like that.

Eventually, I replied, “I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it, because I never saw myself in a situation where I had a pack to lead. At best, I thought maybe I’d find a guy and we’d be happy together, but I wasn’t even expecting that, if I’m honest.” I took his hand off my shirt and threaded our fingers together. “What about you?”

“You know what kind of a family we come from. I don’t doubt my capacity to love at all, but I’m not sure I’m father material. If someone else in the pack had a kid or even more than one, I’d be all for that, but I don’t have any inherent need to be a parent.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I can understand that. Now that you said it, I’m pretty sure that’s how I think, too. Kids are cool, but I don’t think I necessarily need my own to be

fulfilled.”

“Good. We can talk about this more if we change our minds at some point. We have a lot of time left together and on this earth now that I also age more slowly, so who knows.” He lifted his head and smiled at me. “I also think that we’re already parenting a band of misfit kids as it is so...”

Chuckling, I kissed him. “You’re not wrong about that.”

“Wanna have a shower with me?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows goofily.

“Yes, definitely.”

Getting under the streaming water with my gorgeous mate was a luxury I had never dreamed of before I had it. It was so outside of my experiences, that I wondered how I’d gotten this far without it.

“What’s got your thinky face on?” he asked as he pushed me to sit down on the shower bench.

I smiled as he rubbed shampoo into my scalp with his fingertips and closed my eyes. “The fact that I’ve never done this before you.”

“What? Shower with a lover?”

“Yeah. I mean I’ve showered with Rian a few times, once because we forgot we were supposed to go to a thing and time was of the essence”—Kye chuckled at that—“and twice after a heavy pain session and blood play where we wanted to use the shower to clean up and come down from the scene.”

“But it’s not the same,” he murmured as he tilted my head just so to get the suds out

of my hair.

“No, it’s not.” I pulled him between my thighs and nipped at his flat stomach.

I might’ve been muscular and tattooed from neck to toes, but he was the opposite. Kye had miles of milky white skin, some muscle definition, but he was softer and in so many ways, more perfect than I could ever be.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

“I love you.”

He dipped his head to kiss me softly. “Love you too. Wanna wash my hair?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

We switched places, and I used the fancy shampoo and conditioner Rian had bought him. Apparently long hair needed different stuff and it was really good but also I was not to ask how much the bottles cost. So, I hadn’t.

The scent of something vaguely fruity and herbal clung to him just enough to be nice and not irritating to my senses.

“It’s funny how much more I smell fragrances now,” he said as I guided his head to rinse the conditioner out. “You definitely did something to my everything when you gave me this.”

He tilted his hand so that I could see the scar on his wrist.

I took his hand and pressed my mouth over the scar. It meant so much more now than it had that night. It had been a big moment, of course, but now the more human

emotions had caught up.

I mouthed his wrist and reached my other hand to wrap around his half hard cock. I jerked him off slowly, gently sucking on the scar.

His head fell back against the wall, and he let out a broken little whimper. “That has no right to feel so good.”

I hadn’t expected him to react like that, so I smirked around his skin. I sucked harder, gnawed with my blunt teeth like I was trying to leave a hickey, and suddenly, with a long, almost startled sounding moan, he erupted in my hand.

“What the fuck?” he whined, then let out a confused little laugh.

I let go of his wrist, but kept pumping his cock until he stilled my hand.

“Well, I guess we now know that’s a new erogenous zone?” I felt very pleased with myself.

“I’d say....” His lazy, satiated smile was everything.

I grabbed my shower gel and washed myself while he recuperated a little.

He got up and chuckled. “I’m surprised my knees aren’t wobbly.”

Yeah, I definitely felt smug. He noticed and smacked my hip with the back of his hand. Then he groaned.

“Holy shit, that’s gonna stay for a couple of days.” He turned his hand so I could see the dark bruising that now decorated the area of his scar.

He hugged me from behind, sliding his hands over my skin, following the path of the washcloth I was using as if chasing the suds.

“Want a hand?” he asked, running a finger along my shaft.

I wasn’t fully hard and felt no urgency, so I shook my head. “Nah. I’m good. This was more of a mental thing for me.”

“Okay. Let me know if you want some later.” He kissed my shoulder, then reached for his shower gel and stole my washcloth.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Kye

Rian apologized to all of us. The way he approached Max was what told me how sorry he was, exactly.

He slinked into the kitchen the next morning, when only Max and I were left. Brodie was outside, Ben had gone to work, and Carys was having her therapy session on the laptop in her room.

Rian stood by the doorway, looking at Max who had immediately tensed where he sat at the table.

I leaned my butt against the sink and watched.

“Max, can I talk to you?” he asked quietly.

Max’s eyes flicked to Rian, then to me. The conflict was clear on his face. It was also clear to see he would’ve wanted his brother there.

“Do you want me to stay?” I asked him, and he nodded, relieved.

“Yeah.”

I smiled. “Need me closer?”

At his timid, sheepish nod, I walked over to the table and pulled the chair next to him. I sat down close enough for our thighs to touch, then took his hand. “This good?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Anytime.” I squeezed his fingers.

I glanced at Rian, who seemed shaken by the proceedings. It was as if he hadn’t realized how much of an impact his yelling had really left.

He came closer hesitantly. The movement was so unlike him that I felt bad for him.

“To think I got to nearly two hundred years and don’t know how to control myself,” he said in an apologetic tone. “That’s not an excuse, though.”

I squeezed Max’s hand again.

He cleared his throat, then said, “No, it’s not.”

“I’m so, so sorry, Max.” He sat down across from us and lowered his gaze. I could see the battle in his body language. “There’s... There’s something going on that I can’t talk about yet. I need to process it first. It’s nothing bad, but it’s made me confront some things in my past and there’s more of that coming when I finally know how to express all that. Turns out the past never stays in the past.” He grimaced. “Again, not an excuse. But it’s been heavy on my mind, and then with the whole donor thing being up in the air at the same time....”

We were all quiet for a minute or so, then Max sighed. “Look, I have triggers. Yelling and sudden movements are some of them. Someone stepping close to me quickly is another one. You can probably imagine why, given that I grew up in this house.” Before Rian had time to reply, Max went on. “I understand being overwhelmed and snapping. Hell, I do it sometimes, too. But... you’re genuinely one of my favorite people in the world and my brain had put you in the safe category. Having you yell like that... it’s... it’s going to take a bit for me to get back to where we were.”

Rian seemed a bit sad, but understanding. “If there’s anything I can do to help you, let me know. I’ll try my best to be better. To do better.”

Max reached over the table and Rian gave him his hand. They squeezed fingers, then Max let go again.

“I’m not afraid of you,” he said firmly, looking directly at Rian.

Something in Rian relaxed, then. He let out a shuddering breath, as if that had been his greatest fear. He sucked his lower lip into his mouth, then nodded, his eyes brimming with tears.

“Good,” he managed to say. “That’s good.”

“Max?” Carys called from upstairs. “Can you come talk with my therapist about our school plans?”

“Sure!” He got up and almost touched Rian’s shoulder, but ended up giving him an apologetic smile and left the room.

“They’re going to get their GEDs together,” I explained, even though Rian likely knew already.

“It’s good. They’ll have peer support,” he said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “Like I’ve told them, I’ll cover whatever costs they have for their education.” Then he snorted at the ancient laptop Max had left behind. “I’m gonna have to fix that.”

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m shocked.”

He then turned to me. “Are we okay?”

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Last night went okay after Brodie returned to you?” he asked, expression shrewd as hell.

“No, it didn’t. It turns out I got jealous,” I admitted with a shrug. “We talked it out. It wasn’t rational.”

“Matters of the heart rarely are.” His tone and expression suggested he was talking from experience.

“I’m fine. We’re fine. All of us, I mean.” I smiled.

“If that changes, let me know. Maybe I shouldn’t feed from Brodie anymore.” He tilted his head, watching my expression. “It was the feeding, wasn’t it?”

I snorted, amused. “Yeah. I didn’t expect it to be an issue but apparently it really was.”

“I get that.” Then he seemed worried. “You do know there’s nothing like that between—”

I lifted my hand to stop him. “I know. It’s okay. If I feel bad at any point, I’ll let you know, I promise.”

A different kind of vulnerability entered his gaze. “And the D/s?”

I immediately shook my head. “No, no. That’s totally fine. That I can understand. I’ve had nonsexual scenes before. My logical brain can logic it.” I grinned. “It’s the stuff I couldn’t understand before I saw the after effect.”

He grinned. "I'm going to assume you've never donated blood, then."

"No. Well, except for the medical kind of donating for other humans."

"If you ever want to—"

"No. I think I'm fine. Let's just say that there's no inter-pack feeding unless someone volunteers. Holden maybe."

And there it was. His name made Rian blink rapidly a couple of times, as if that was the only reaction he couldn't hide fast enough.

"Yeah, I guess we'll see," he said dismissively.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked.

When he looked at me again, he shook his head minutely. "No. But thanks. If that changes...."

"Hey Kye? Can you come in, too?" Carys called out.

"Duty calls." I got to my feet, then went and gave Rian a sideways hug.

"I'm going to go shop for expensive electronics," he announced, making me laugh.

"Alrighty. See you later."

A couple of days later, Alpha Ramirez's baby was well enough that Holden took the afternoon off work to go with Brodie. Since Holden had run with their pack before, it was apparently polite to go make friends and allies with the Ramirez pack. I stayed home, wanting to host Alpha Ramirez and her immediate family and enforcer

beta—much like Holden was for Brodie—at a later date, given today went well.

Ben, too, was off work, and about an hour after Brodie left to meet Holden in town to continue to their visit, Ben and Max decided to do a perimeter check.

What made it extra fun was that they shifted to do it. I assumed there would be much frolicking in the woods during this “perimeter check,” but chose not to embarrass Max. Ben wouldn’t have minded the teasing, but his brother was more sensitive, and I didn’t want to hurt him.

They dashed out of the house and ran toward the path, nipping at each other like puppies.

Chuckling, I closed the door behind them and went to read on the couch.

All of our fireplaces were now in working order, and the warmth was welcome already, let alone later when actual winter arrived.

Rian was upstairs, but Carys joined me, halfway dozing off in the other corner of the couch with her feet on my lap. She was still tired from the therapy session, which had taken a lot out of her even though it had been mostly positive.

She and Max were going to study together, and her therapist was supportive and very happy with their support system in general. Max was even considering therapy after talking to her and seeing that therapists weren’t scary, especially if you found the right one.

Twenty minutes after when the guys left on their patrol, I heard a vehicle. Carys was almost asleep, and grumbled when I got off the couch to go check.

Something inside me was immediately twitchy.

“Rian?” I called out, and with unnatural speed, he made it down the stairs and stood next to me in the hall.

“This is not good,” he said quietly as he peered through the side window. “Two cars.”

“Nudge her awake, I’ll go out.” I reached for the drawer where we kept the handgun and tucked it under my shirt in the back. I knew it wasn’t exactly the safest, but it would be there if I needed it.

Rian nodded, deferring to me with ease I hadn’t quite expected.

I took a deep breath, opened the door, and stepped onto the porch.

There were five of them in total. They’d arrived in two beat-up trucks, which seemed like the norm around people who looked like them.

All were unkempt. The one the others deferred to was in a marginally better condition. His clothes were cleaner, his hair shorter.

“How can I help you, gents?” I asked as I stepped to lean my hands to the porch railing.

“You the human bitch that took over from your sister?” The lankiest of them all spat out, getting a glare from the leader of the group.

He cowed and stepped back, and I grinned. I knew who these people were, of course. In a way, after Holden and Brodie had told us about the weirdness with Sheriff Gerrell, we’d been waiting for something to happen.

“What kind of wolf do you call yourself, taking instructions from a human? Didn’t your former Alpha teach you better?” I snarked, smirking when another one, likely

the other beta, tensed and swayed toward the house.

“We came to make an inspection,” the leader said, taking a few steps forward and attempting casual with his hands in his pockets. “Where’s your guard dog?”

I tilted my head as if I was confused. “We don’t have any dogs, you must be mistaken?”

He snorted, and the two humans behind him with the betas chuckled.

“You know what I mean. Alpha McRae . Where’s he?”

Now this made me smile. “Oh, you aren’t that stupid. We both know very well where he is.”

“Maybe so. We also heard you have plenty of electronics and a girl here. Valuable stuff now that the meth is gone.”

The foursome behind him all smirked, clearly very impressed by their leader.

I didn’t take the bait, because I wasn’t afraid of them. “Really?”

He took a couple of more steps closer and tried an evil or threatening smirk, I wasn’t sure really. “Your guard dog ain’t here. What do you think you can do if we decide to come in.”

This time I laughed out loud. “I don’t need my Alpha, my mate here.”

“Dog fucker faggot bitch,” spat one of the humans behind him.

The fact that the betas were with these guys now spoke volumes of their self-worth,

really.

“And why is that?” the leader asked, sneering at me.

“Oh, I have them.” I nodded toward the two healthy wolves who had sneaked out of the woods behind them. “And them.” I pointed my thumb over my shoulder at the door.

Rian and Carys stepped out. Rian in his full vampire face was a fearsome fucking sight. He was grinning with his fangs fully showing, his long vampire claws flexing as he crouched ever so slightly, ready to pounce.

But the kicker was my sister—I needed to have a talk with Rian about what was suitable protection for her, really—who came to stand on my other side and racked a shotgun, then aimed it squarely at the asshole’s head.

I straightened myself from my casual lean and reached my hand to grab my gun. I took the safety off, but kept it aimed at the ground.

The growling from between their vehicles where the brothers had moved was low and menacing.

“Did you know that werewolves who do a lot of drugs can’t shift as easily as sober ones? I bet these guys couldn’t do it if you gave them ten minutes. There’s also the fact that while wolves are stronger, vampires are the fastest.” I beamed a smile at the asshole. “Do you wanna see how fast exactly?”

He was starting to realize they were outnumbered, if not in actual numbers, then in power balance.

“Was this really your plan?” I asked, cackling. “To come here to what, intimidate

us?”

He backed away slowly, as if we couldn't see him doing it. His men started to get into the trucks, dodging the brothers as best as they could.

Ben and Max were growling and snapping their jaws at them, which made the humans especially alarmed. When they squared off with the old betas, they swiftly herded them apart from the vehicles and started to push them toward the side wall of the house.

“Hey, hey, we're not here to cause any trouble,” one of them said. “B-Ben and Max, right?”

Ben snarled viciously in response.

“Y-you know your dad—”

Max cut him off by leaping at him, flattening him in the ground and snarling in his face.

“The sheriff said—”

“Shut the fuck up!” The leader bellowed, now at the driver's side door of his truck. “Get in or you're running!”

Max let the sorry excuse of a beta to get up and they rounded on the duo again, watching them scramble back to the trucks.

“In case anyone asks, you do not underestimate the McRae pack,” I called out to the leader. “But please, come try again. Could've been a fun evening, eh?”

Cussing up a storm, he practically leaped into the seat when Rian gracefully jumped from the top of the stairs to the hood of said truck, as if it was nothing at all.

Seeing him crouch there, tilting his head in a way a predator would while observing a prey made me grin. Carys giggled.

“Stop playing with your food!” I told Rian.

The men in the trucks couldn’t get away fast enough. Rian stepped down from the hood as soon as the truck rumbled into life, then cheerily waved at them with his still elongated claw-tipped fingers.

The brothers chased the trucks away, vanishing from view where the road dipped down into the curve.

Rian turned to us. “Girl, put that shotgun away, it’s not even loaded.”

Carys giggled and went to do as told while I put the safety back on the handgun.

“And you,” he continued, pointing at me with a regular index finger now. “I would never eat anything that revolting.”

“My apologies,” I said, bowing theatrically.

The guys trotted back into view with their tongues lolling out of their mouths.

“Did you call or message Brodie and Holden?” I asked Rian.

“I wouldn’t have, but I knew he’d get really upset if I didn’t. I’m pretty sure the only thing keeping him from getting ticketed for speeding right now is the deputy sitting next to him in the truck.”

“Fair enough.” I handed the gun to him and leaned down to pat the brothers on the head. “You did so good, guys. I’m proud of you. Your Alpha will be too. I don’t know why you came back early, but I’m glad you did.”

Ben lifted a front paw then, and I could see there was a smear of blood in the light gray fur.

“Oh, that’d do it. Go shift and I’ll meet you with the first aid kit.” It was obvious now that he was limping, but he hadn’t been moments before, which told me he’d been hiding it from our visitors. “And don’t start, you might heal fast, but I’ll still clean it anyway. Try and fight me, I dare.”

Max let out a little chuffing sound and they vanished inside. Whether the chuff was about amusement or to tell his brother to obey, I couldn’t tell. I wasn’t that fluent in wolf yet.

I followed them at a more sedate pace and went to get the first aid kit. I sat at the kitchen table and opened it, waiting for Ben to appear.

I was waiting for the adrenaline to hit me, to get shaky maybe, but that didn’t happen. I felt normal.

Half an hour later, I had Ben patched up and we were all sitting by the kitchen table, figuring out what to make for dinner, when we heard the familiar rumble of Brodie’s truck.

The Alpha who burst in through the front door had red eyes and was barely hanging on. Holden’s eyes were glowing beta yellow, but he was more analytical and seemed calmer.

Before I had time to do anything but stand up, Brodie had his hands on my shoulders

as he looked at me from head to toe.

“I’m fine. We’re all fine,” I assured him, the last word muffled by his chest I was suddenly squished against.

I heard Holden ask the others questions, but I was content hanging onto my mate, squeezing him back.

“We’re okay, I promise, Brodie. They won’t be coming back.”

“We were scary AF,” Carys piped up.

There were chuckles, but Brodie stayed silent. Then he pulled me away from the kitchen and through to the family room, then sat on the couch.

I straddled him and attached myself to him like a koala. We needed a moment, that much was clear.

“You’re not going to lose me,” I whispered into his ear. “I love you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

He buried a choked up sob against my neck, and I held him together while he gradually relaxed.

My sweet, sweet Alpha. I was so in fucking love with him.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:54 am

Brodie

The Ramirez pack was lovely. Jessie, the Alpha, was both glowing and tired as fuck—her words—because of the new addition. The baby was cute, too. Jessie's betas and the rest of the pack who were home and not at work or school seemed like good people.

We chatted a while about my pack and how I'd "snatched" Holden to join mine instead of hers, and it was all done in good humor.

We'd just been served coffee when my phone dinged in my pocket.

"Excuse me," I said, knowing that she'd understand. Alphas had a responsibility to be reachable almost all the time, after all.

Rian. "Visitors. NQ SOS."

My heart jumped into my throat and I showed the message to Holden. We'd had time to fill Jessie in with the weird vibe we'd gotten off the warning Holden's boss had given us, so when we told her we needed to go, she nodded.

"If there's anything we can do?"

"I'll let you know. Thank you. We'll try this again—"

"Go, go!" She smiled, but her eyes were filled with worry for us.

We were in my truck in no time, and I started toward home.

“Take the backroads when I tell you. It’s gonna be faster and less cops,” Holden said.

I nodded, my fingers white with how hard I was squeezing the steering wheel.

“What was the NQ in the message?” he asked after we made it through the long winding driveway, the pack’s property being in the middle of nowhere much like ours.

“Oh, it’s something Rian uses. Not Quite.” I took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to stay in control. “I wish I’d never seen it in this context, though.”

“Huh.” After a minute, Holden said, “I think not quite SOS is still better than SOS.”

“Yes, but we both know who those visitors are, and....”

Holden put his hand on my arm and squeezed. “Alpha, breathe. It’ll be fine. Our pack are all strong and capable people, and from what I know about these idiots, they well, aren’t. Not strong, and definitely not capable.” He chuckled a bit darkly. “And you have two betas and a vampire. What do they have? Those sorry excuses Rusty called betas and a couple of humans?”

I hoped he was right, and turned to a backroad where I could speed up enough to feel like I was actually moving instead of sitting behind a soccer mom or a fucking tractor.

It took me ten minutes less to get home than if I’d driven at normal speed. I decided that it was worth it and if Holden wasn’t scolding me, it was fine. Not that he would’ve. Not because I was his Alpha, though. He was a reasonable man and knew that even though he was an officer of the law, those laws really meant nothing in this

case.

I threw the truck in park and got out, barely registering the signs of vehicles having left the yard in a hurry. The stench of unwashed, drugged up bodies made my nose wrinkle, but I had no time to dwell on any of that.

The relief I felt when I could see my pack in one piece, looking happy and proud, was immense. Luckily my mate was intelligent and pulled me away from the kitchen.

I'd always been a strong man, physically and mentally. I'd had to be, with what life had thrown at me.

My life with Kye was just starting, and the fact that I was here, in this big old house, starting over and making better memories, happy even in my imminent little breakdown, seemed like a miracle.

I didn't have to be strong here, in his arms. I couldn't ask for anything more.

An hour later, we gathered on the couch for a pack meeting.

"We really need to figure this out," Kye said firmly, holding the iPad to Carys who was ready to take notes if needed.

"So, let's go with the assumption that my boss was trying to warn you guys off," Holden started and sipped his coffee at the end of the couch.

"Warn us off," Kye told him firmly. "You're part of this now." Then he stuck his tongue out at Holden who rolled his eyes fondly.

"Fine. Us. "

“Good boy,” Kye deadpanned.

“So what we think,” Rian interrupted them, “is that Gerrell had some sort of a deal with Rusty. We also heard one of the betas mention the sheriff, and the leader hushed him pretty harshly, right?”

“Yeah, it was very strict and a big fuckup to mention him,” Kye said thoughtfully. “I say he’s definitely in on this. But what could he be wanting? There’s nothing here for him.”

“He got money before, but sending some thugs to intimidate us doesn’t give him money,” Max pointed out quietly.

“Right,” Kye replied.

“What about the house itself?” Carys asked.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well you know how you automatically got the property when you became Alpha. That’s the law, isn’t it?” At my nod, she continued, “What if he thinks if he can take you out, he’ll get the house through the betas or something?”

“Let me do some research on the laws,” Holden said, holding up a finger as he started to scroll on his phone.

“I doubt he wants to be an Alpha himself,” I murmured. “I got the vibe that he thinks we’re shit on the bottom of his shoes.”

“The language the thugs used wasn’t very pro-wolf, either,” Kye said lightly. Too lightly.

I was immediately on alert. “What did they say?”

“It wasn’t for polite company,” he hedged.

“Fuck polite company, what did they say?” I rumbled, because nobody fucking insulted my mate.

Kye looked stubborn and stayed silent.

Carys cleared her throat and helpfully stated, “I believe the exact phrasing was ‘dog fucker faggot bitch.’”

Four growls rose from us wolves, and she seemed very happy with herself. Kye facepalmed, and Rian snickered.

“Okay, settle down, boys,” Kye said, glaring at his sister. Then he smirked at me. “I mean, it’s not like he was wrong?”

Ben guffawed, and this time it was me who wanted to facepalm.

“Right, so here’s something interesting,” Holden said in his no-nonsense tone, even though he still looked a bit amused. “If a property is either abandoned by a pack or the Alpha passes away without the Alpha power moving onto someone else and there’s an absence of a will and testament, the property automatically transfers to the local town. Within two weeks of such event, the town has to hold an auction where the highest bidder gets the property and whatever is on it.”

“Wait, wait,” Rian said, leaning forward as he frowned. “So let’s say someone like Gerrell wants the pack’s property and gets us to leave. He can make sure nobody else bids for it or someone bids like twenty thousand dollars and he bids twenty thousand and one dollars, he gets it?”

“Is there anything about fair value?” I asked before Holden could respond.

He scrolled a bit more, then snorted. “Rian, you’re correct. There’s a mention that the law has been valid for over a hundred years, and it hasn’t been updated, and back in the day people didn’t necessarily have good money, but could drive away packs to get their properties for like a dollar.”

“I think that’s a good starting point, even if it wasn’t what he’s up to,” Kye said thoughtfully. “I mean we can’t be sure, but we need to start thinking about this logically and take every precaution just in case.

“Yeah, exactly,” Max piped up. “I don’t know what he’d want with this place, other than the property value might be higher than we think, but we better be sure he can’t yoink it out from under us.” He looked determined, and his brother squeezed him briefly.

The fact that Max was comfortable enough around us to use his voice like this felt damn good to me. I was proud of him, of Ben, and I’d told them earlier. The self confidence they both had now was day and night from when I’d first arrived in town, but the change was even more obvious in Max.

I dug out my phone and made a call.

“Brodie? What’s wrong?”

“Hey, Ayesha. I’m in need of some urgent legal stuff, nothing is wrong but it’s a precaution.”

Rian grinned. “She’s awesome,” he whispered to the others.

“Oh, absolutely. Baby girl? Go watch your movie, Mommy is going to talk to Uncle

Brodie for a bit in the office.”

“Hi Uncle Brodie!” her Little, Kate, yelled.

“Tell Kate I said hi back,” I chuckled. Then I glanced at Rian. “And Uncle Rian says hi, too.”

I heard Ayesha forward the message for Kate, who squealed happily. Then I heard the door to Ayesha’s home office close.

“Okay, what can I do for you?”

I explained the situation to her . She’d known I was an Alpha now, because she’d met with Rian before he joined us in Pennsylvania, and she was on top of our case immediately.

“Okay, I’ll send you a template for a wolfy will. You can fill it in, get it notarized there, and send it back to me for safekeeping. Keep copies there in town as well with trusted people. Who do you want the property to go to in case of your demise?” Her tone was a bit snarky, but that was just who she was with me.

“In case of my death, my mate, Kye. Then after him it would be Rian, then Kye’s sister, Carys and my cousins Ben and Max jointly, after them, my beta Holden.”

Ayesha whistled. “That’s a decent lineup. Someone would have to get rid of a whole lot of people to get to the point where it can be auctioned off.”

“Oh, and add my sister Bella to the end of the list, too. Well, I’ll list them, but you know.”

“Absolutely.”

“I know she wouldn’t want it, but in case everyone else dies, she would keep it in the family. I know I don’t need to file it, and that it being somewhere people could produce it after my death would be enough, but I’d rather be able to say it’s all legal and set already.”

“Right, I understand. Okay, well if that’s all, I have a Little to entertain after I send you this template.”

I let my smile through into my voice. “That’s all. Thanks so much, hun. I know your time with your girl is precious.”

“That’s true, but friends are family, you know that.”

“I know. Thanks again.”

“Tell Rian and everyone else I said hi. Bye!”

“Bye!”

When I ended the call and gave the others my full attention, they all looked more or less stunned.

“What?” I asked, confused.

Without saying anything, they piled on top of me for hugs. Even Holden leaned closer to get his hand to my knee through the rest of the cuddlers and squeezed.

“You’re the best Alpha,” Kye stated.

I didn’t have time to object, when the others all agreed with him, loudly.

The happiness inside me felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

I grunted when someone kneed me in the gut and I got elbowed in the neck, but I wouldn't have changed the moment for anything.

"Now I'll just smoothly drop that information where the Sheriff can hear it and I think we're done," Holden mused. Then he frowned. "I got a feeling he doesn't like me, so I think there'll be more trouble in the future, but at least we can relax with the pack things."

"We're here for you, Holden," Kye promised solemnly, even though he was smiling a little. "Nobody gets left behind."

"Ohana!" Carys squealed too close to my ear, making me yelp.

The next day, Holden went to meet Sheriff Gerrell to inform him about how these criminals had been trying to intimidate the McRae pack, but hadn't quite succeeded. He said that the good sheriff had tried his best to appear surprised and upset on our behalf, but hadn't quite managed to hide how pissed off he was. It had only intensified when Holden had told him that there was a will being filed as they spoke, and that there was now no way anyone could take the property for themselves.

He'd left Gerrell in his office with a vein throbbing in his forehead while he grimaced, trying to smile politely.

Holden started the drive back to his own station and called me on the way.

"So that's handled," he said in a tone that was so self-satisfied I laughed.

"Holy shit. I almost wish I could've been there to see his expression." I grinned as I listened to him with Kye standing next to me.

We were outside, looking at the spot where the barn had been, and I had Holden on speaker.

“You’re the best, Holden,” Kye said cheerily.

I could tell Holden felt pleased by the praise. His tone was quieter and almost shy when he replied, “Thank you. I’ll talk to you later!”

“So, chickens?” I asked Kye when I’d put the phone away.

Carys joined us. “Can we have, like, ducks or geese?”

“Geese are evil,” Kye and I said at the same time.

“Okay, but ducks? They’re cute and not scary.”

“As long as it doesn’t evolve into bunnies and mini pigs and whatnot,” I grumbled, having heard too many stories of people giving into their spouses or kids.

“I can have a cat though, right?” Carys beamed at me with feigned innocence.

“Chickens and ducks in the spring. Cat for your birthday in December,” Kye said firmly.

She hugged us both, then ran back inside. “Lina, I’m getting a cat!”

We were almost done with the winter preparations. The storage room was filled to the brim with my stuff and a bunch of Rian’s.

Everything was falling into place, and I squeezed Kye to my side.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

I leaned in to kiss him, tasting him properly.

“Oh, that,” he exhaled the words when we separated.

The flush of his cheeks wasn’t only the cold, or the snow that started to fall around us.

Rian’s SUV rolled into the yard.

“I swear to god if you bought any more stuff, I’m gonna strangle you, Rian Flynn!” I called out to him as soon as he got out of the vehicle.

He cackled and grabbed a few shopping bags from the back seat, including a—

“Is that a litterbox?” Kye blinked at him.

“I knew you’d cave immediately and wanted her to be prepared.” He flounced inside, calling for Carys.

Kye groaned and pressed his forehead against my chin. “Is there a way to parent a two-hundred-year-old vampire?”

I chuckled. “If there was, I haven’t found it yet.”

“Great.”

When I curled up with him that night, and every night after, I felt contentment like I never had before.

The house I'd called home for years as a child and a teenager finally felt like home. Not a home, but my home. The one where I could live happily with my pack and my mate.

Rian had to go back to Seattle for one event or another every now and then, but he came back as soon as he could.

He found a solid donor in town and a couple of potential backups as well.

Kye started to make plans for a greenhouse and how to make the rose garden flourish. He hoped that growing veggies, fruits, and berries on the property and getting chickens would bring down our running costs.

Rian smartly chose not to mention how he could pay everything for everyone forever and not see a dip in his bank balance.

I couldn't wait to see what everyone I loved, my family, would choose to do with their lives.

Holden and Ben had jobs. Max and Carys wanted to study more. Rian did his philanthropic things from a laptop in the family room, and Kye wanted to better our property with the skills he'd learned at college and maybe even finish his degree one day.

Me? I kept building and renovating. Reclaiming every piece of my home, one at a time with my mate right beside me.

Kye

Thanksgiving was tomorrow. We might've already eaten two smaller turkeys—because who wanted a gigantic one anyway—and there were two more in the ovens.

The house was ready. It had a patched up roof that would handle the winter, new windows—including that nice bay window in the kitchen that was Carys' favorite studying spot. The backside of the home would get worked on in the spring, and we'd decided to leave the garage slash chicken coop build for springtime, also.

Lina had become a fixture. Mr. Keller had told us to keep her—in a playful way that told us how much he loved his daughter and didn't mind the budding romance between Lina and Carys whatsoever. He and his wife had even let her stay with us for Thanksgiving, because they and her brothers were going to visit some family that hadn't been kind to Lina while she was in recovery from her accident. It hadn't been a big deal, she'd told us, but enough that she didn't want to spend a whole evening there.

I was outside with the girls, Max, and Rian. We'd gone for a walk in the woods just for fun. Ben and Holden were doing another grocery run for tomorrow, and Brodie was playing lumberjack by the back corner of the house, close to where he'd used the back porch for a firewood storage for the winter.

As we stepped back into the yard, we all stopped.

Brodie's back was to us, he had taken off his jacket and was swinging his ax in only a

tank top. Wolves didn't get cold easily.

I tilted my head and watched his muscles play. The tight, worn-out jeans and combat boots didn't do much to make him less hot.

"That's got to be illegal," I murmured.

"Uh-huh," Rian and Carys said in unison.

Lina grinned. "I'm just gonna take your word for it." She shrugged and stepped around us to jog toward Brodie. "Hey boss, can I try?"

"Lesbians," Rian huffed with an amused expression.

"Okay aesthetically yes, but he's my cousin so," Max commented.

All of us turned to give him a look that made him blush. For reasons none of us would mention out loud.

We followed Lina and ended up taking turns with the ax under Brodie's strict guidance.

Holden had accepted that the couch would be his spot when he stayed overnight. He didn't want us to fix one of the empty rooms for him, so we didn't. We respected Holden's choice to not live with us. The reason was his alone, and we were giving him space. Instead, Brodie used his Alphaness to playfully tell him he wasn't allowed to go to his apartment in town tonight. It wasn't done seriously, he'd never order Holden to stay if he didn't want to.

That's what led into me walking downstairs on Thanksgiving morning and finding Rian staring at a sleeping Holden from the family room doorway.

He didn't startle, his senses likely having alerted it was me, nor did he appear sheepish. He just gave me a sad little smile that made me hug him tightly.

"You really need to sort this out," I said quietly. "I hate to see you this sad."

"Yeah," he replied with no commitment in his tone whatsoever.

I was sure Holden still had no idea about whatever it was Rian was going through. He was always polite and nice like he was with everyone, and I didn't see the recognition in his gaze when he looked at Rian. Not like the other way around, because Rian certainly knew Holden from somewhere.

I let him be and walked into the kitchen to get my caffeine fix. I went to sit on the window seat with my mug and looked out.

We had some snow now; it was sticking to the ground but would still melt away on the warmer days. It made everything appear pristine, though.

Lina slunk into the kitchen, clearly half-asleep and going directly to the coffee maker. She'd stayed in Carys's room overnight and would tonight as well. They were being adorable together. I was pretty sure they were still kind of dancing around the attraction, but I felt glad they knew to take things slowly.

"Morning," I told her as she finally got her coffee made.

She nodded and came to sit on the opposite end of the seat, then leaned her head to the windowpane and closed her eyes halfway.

"Your sister kicks in her sleep," she said drowsily.

I chuckled. "She does. Once, when she was little and had climbed into my bed, I woke up with her toes pressing against my nose."

Lina chuckled. "I think I would wake up to that sort of maneuvering."

"You're good for her."

She blushed lightly. "Thank you. I try."

I nudged her leg with my toes. "Well for what it's worth, I think you're doing everything right."

One by one, everyone else woke up, and we started breakfast. We'd agreed to eat lightly until dinner for obvious reasons, but mornings called for bacon and eggs.

"Can't wait to have our own chickens," Brodie said as he dipped some toast into runny yolk. "The eggs are always so good when they're from free range, happy chickens and close to home."

Ben's phone dinged, and he checked it out. "One of the guys at the garage. He's the one whose friend is the brother of that main asshole who showed up." He texted something back and lifted his head to look at us. "He went to those wannabe thugs' place with the friend. Apparently it's a shithole in the woods. Like rundown trailers and stuff."

"I've got to figure out a good reason to go check it out," Holden said, sounding weary.

"Could be that's why Gerrell wants this place. To move those guys here. Like if he had income from Rusty's businesses, maybe he figures this place was good for that stuff," Brodie mused, frowning.

"Either way, the real estate lady I went to see in town the other day, Gladys?" At our nod, Rian continued, "She says this place isn't valuable like that. There's no secret value in it. Sure, the value has gone up with the renovations and will continue to do

so, but....” He shrugged.

“We’ll either figure it out or won’t, but we’ll be fine,” I said firmly. We had a smart, capable group of people here, and an asshole like Sheriff Gerrell wasn’t going to be a match for us, no matter what he tried.

That evening, we had dinner and then lounged in the family room watching more movies because none of us cared for sportsball. Then we ate some more and watched another movie.

The lethargy was real. Then suddenly, Rian got to his feet and turned his attention to Holden. “Can I talk to you in private?”

Holden frowned. “Of course.” He got up and followed Rian out of the room and up the stairs.

“Here’s hoping that’ll fix whatever this has been,” Max murmured.

We all quietly agreed.

We were at the tail end of Hot Fuzz when a door slammed upstairs, and Holden ran down the stairs. He didn’t stop for more than to pull on his shoes and jacket, and he was gone before any of us could react.

Brodie rubbed his forehead. “I better go check up on Rian.” He gave me a kiss and left the room.

The rest of us finished the movie, and by that time it was late enough that some of us started to clean up and head to bed.

I went upstairs and took a shower, then curled up in bed. Brodie found me there a bit later. He looked sad.

“What’s going on?” I asked quietly.

“It’s a whole fucking mess. He asked to tell you himself. Just... there’s some history all right.” He sighed. “I’m going to text Holden and tell him there’s no pressure from the pack for him to come back before he wants to. It’s....” The way he exhaled and chuckled with no humor hurt my heart. “I’m sure they’ll figure it all out, given time, but Holden is a proud man and....”

“Yeah.”

I watched as he texted his enforcer, then put the phone down.

“I’m going to shower.”

“I already did, but I’ll come with you anyway.” He needed some TLC.

He smiled tiredly. “Thank you.”

“I’m your mate, of course I’m going to take care of you.” I followed him into the bathroom and took off the little clothes I’d put on for bed.

I helped him get undressed as the water warmed, then pushed him into the cubicle and went after him. He closed his eyes as I bathed him, helping him relax as much as he could under these circumstances.

Whatever this thing between Rian and Holden was, we’d figure it out. Same with the Sheriff and his agenda.

Things had been simple enough so far, but that wouldn’t always last. Not with so many people living under one roof and the world being as it was. But we would try and sometimes we would fail, too. We were all people. There was one thing that I knew would always save us one way or another: we were the McRae pack, and none

of us would ever stand alone.