







# Rejected By the Alpha (Sparkle Hollow Wolves #6)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I'm offered as a forced bride...to the Alpha who rejected me.

I'm used to psychological abuse. I'm the lowest of the pack, the outcast.

What I didn't expect is that my family would sell me off to an Alpha.

What I didn't expect either is that my new husband is the one who once broke my heart...

I once loved him and thought he was my fated mate.

But then he told me he didn't want me and left me callously.

I endured my miserable life, conditioned to serve other people's needs.

And now he's back, forcing me to marry him, taking me from one prison to another.

I'm supposed to live with his violent pack and his dark past.

His house has only one bed, and I try not to feel his body warmth.

But I can't protect my vulnerable body from his cruel, cold touch.

I can't guard my unwilling heart from his crushing, icy tongue.

Will the Alpha break me once and for all this time?

Sparkle Hollow is a small paranormal town where wolves howl to the moon, mates chase each other through the woods, and alpha males claim their women until their bellies grow with the proof of their love...

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I was in the middle of getting ready for the day when my phone rang. A little early for phone calls, isn't it? I thought.

I grabbed my phone and saw that it was Lex. The Sparkle Hollow alpha had always been an early riser, and I knew from experience he liked to get as many tasks out of the way as possible as soon as his day began.

That didn't make me any happier about seeing that the clock read 7 a.m.

"This is Killian," I said, holding my cell up to my ear.

It wasn't unusual for the alphas of other packs to call me instead of Alpha Jasper when they needed something. He wasn't exactly known for his charming demeanor and kindness, after all. As his second-in-command, it was my responsibility to help Jasper with less desirable tasks. Taking phone calls about minor pack business fell strictly within those guidelines.

"Morning, Killian," Lex said. "I hope it's not too early. I just had a quick message to pass along."

"Not at all," I lied graciously.

"One of the she-wolves from Sparkle Hollow is in the market for a mate," Lex began.

"There's no one suitable in your pack for her?" I asked.

"Not according to her family," Lex said with a sigh. "She's a nice girl. Good-looking

and kind, although maybe a little on the reserved side. She just turned twenty-five, and her parents are demanding that she marry.”

“Who did they have in mind?” I asked.

“That’s the thing. They said she can only marry an alpha. Would you be able to have the other alphas spread the word? Maybe one of them knows an alpha that’s on the market?”

“Seems a bit presumptuous,” I said with a scoff. “I think every parent would love for their daughter to become luna someday, but that rank is hard to attain. There are only so many wolf packs.”

“I tried to dissuade them from the idea,” Lex admitted. “But they’ve been loyal to me, and they haven’t asked for much. She is their only child, and they don’t seem upset by the idea that to marry someone of that standing might mean she needs to move far away. To be honest, I think she might prefer it that way.”

“She and her parents don’t get along?” I asked.

“Not from what I can tell,” Lex said.

“Well, let me know her name and any other details. I’ll see if the alphas know of any packs looking for a bride.” I pulled out a pen and paper to jot down the details.

“Leah Smith,” Lex said.

I heard Lex continue speaking, but his words turned to background noise as memories of my first—and only—love filled my brain.

Leah had been a newly shifted wolf when I had met her almost a decade ago. Of

course, I knew she was a member of Sparkle Hollow, but I had always assumed she had met someone who was capable of making her happy after I had left town.

We had been too young for anything serious, and circumstances of my own making had forced me to leave her behind. But I had never forgotten the way she made my heart sing or the way her curves had captivated me.

Her brown hair and eyes hid a fiery personality that had drawn me to her instantly, and awakened feelings that I had never believed I would feel. My upbringing did not include things like love or affection, and I had been blindsided by how easy it was to be in her presence.

“Killian,” Lex’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “You still there?”

“Yes, I’m here,” I replied, composing myself.

“Just let me know if you find any leads,” Lex said.

“I will. And you’re positive they said that they only want an alpha?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “They’re good pack members, but they’ve always been rather blinded by power and status. That’s all that’s important to them with this marriage.”

After assuring Lex that I would pass along the message, I ended the call.

This is our chance, my wolf said excitedly.

Rocky, we lost our chance a long time ago, I said sadly.

Jasper and I had been members of the Moonstone Pack for a few years already when I met Leah by chance. The pack we found ourselves members of was vicious and cruel,

similar to my upbringing in the brothel alongside Jasper. It felt comfortable and familiar to us—a far cry from the peace I found with Leah.

During one of my runs on a break from guard duties, I had stumbled across the town of Sparkle Hollow and been fascinated by how quaint it was. Its quietness resonated with me, and I had spent time exploring the area. Once I caught sight of Leah, it was as if my world shifted. We were happy together, and I had believed she was the one.

I had dreamed of a time when I would be able to bring her back to the Moonstone Pack with me, my own personal peace amidst the chaos of the pack.

And that was when my half-brother, Franco, had reappeared and upended everything.

He had arrived out of nowhere, seeking me out to ask for my help in his most recent twisted plot for power. I had agreed to help him out of family loyalty and broke things off with Leah, choosing to follow Franco instead of my heart. It turned out to be the one and only time I regretted keeping a vow to someone.

By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late. I had already rejected Leah as my mate and allowed her to slip through my fingers. I had returned to the Moonstone Pack, a more broken version of myself, determined to stick by Jasper's side no matter what happened next.

Through thick and thin, Jasper had been my true brother. I had been by his side when he broke free from the Moonstone Pack and became alpha, and stood by him when he married his mate, April. Together, he and April had created a new, kind world that I was still finding my place in. The impact of living through so much trauma and violence had taken a toll on me.

But Jasper had managed to beat his inner demons and settle down with his mate. Perhaps I could as well.

There was only one way to find out.

I set out from my small house and walked next door to where Alpha Jasper and his wife lived at the top of the hill. Their home was one of the largest in the neighborhood that housed our pack, as they often had guests staying with them. It was also where all our pack business was conducted.

“Good morning, Killian,” April greeted me when I came in through the side door.

She offered me a fresh cup of coffee. The steam billowed over the rim of the green mug, the robust and bitter aroma wafting toward me.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the cup. “Is Jasper up yet?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said as she took a sip from her own mug. “He’ll be down in a minute.”

I sat at the kitchen table and sipped my drink as I thought about the best way to broach the topic with Jasper. In hindsight, I wondered if I should have told him about Leah. He had asked a few times why I hadn’t gone out in search of a mate of my own. I had avoided his questions, giving vague answers about not being able to find “the one.” After so many years of keeping my feelings for Leah hidden, I didn’t feel like bringing her up now.

“Ki, what are you doing here so early?” Jasper asked as he came into the room.

“Alpha Lex called with a request this morning. I wanted to come and talk to you about it,” I replied.

Jasper pulled up a chair as his mate brought him some coffee. She placed a hand on his shoulder, and I saw her give it a gentle squeeze before she left the room to give us



space.

“What was his request?” Jasper asked.

“There’s a she-wolf in Sparkle Hollow who is looking for a mate—an alpha,” I said. “Lex asked me to talk to you and Nile to see if you know of any packs looking for a luna.”

Jasper frowned slightly as he thought about it, but I already knew his answer. “No, none that come to mind,” he said.

“What if there was a pack—a small one—that had an alpha willing to take on a mate from Sparkle Hollow? An alpha who could help tie our packs together even closer and maintain the peace?” I prompted.

My heart pounded as I spoke, so I took a deep breath to steady myself. My palms were sweating, so I wiped them on my pants before continuing. There was no way around it. I had to ask him openly if I was going to make my plan work and get Leah back.

“What do you mean, Killian?” Jasper asked with a look of confusion on his face.

“I have served you faithfully for many years. Even before you became the alpha, I acted as your second-in-command and did anything you asked of me. I would never do anything that would cause disruption to your life, which is why I want to ask whether you would consider supporting me in the creation of a new werewolf pack within Pinedale.”

My voice was measured, and I spoke clearly, watching Jasper’s face for disapproval or anger with each word that passed through my lips.

“You want to become an alpha and marry the she-wolf from Sparkle Hollow?” Jasper clarified.

“With your blessing,” I replied. “We have already proven that multiple packs can live peacefully together. My pack could be small, but the alpha title would allow me to choose a good mate who would benefit the entire community.”

Jasper looked at me thoughtfully, his eyebrows creased as he stared into my eyes. For a moment, I thought I had made a mistake. Of course, an alpha would not be willing to give up any of his territory to another male, regardless of how close they were.

“It’s an unusual situation, but you make a compelling argument,” he said, to my surprise. “You have been my best friend for a very long time. I see no reason why this couldn’t be beneficial to all of the packs. You have my support, Alpha Killian.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I realized what he was saying. I was going to be alpha. And I was going to win my true mate back.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

“You didn’t think you should ask my permission before offering me up in marriage to the highest bidder?” I asked as my parents began packing up my room.

“Don’t be such a drama queen,” my mom snapped, tossing my clothes into a suitcase unceremoniously. “It’s hardly a sacrifice to become luna.”

“Besides, we aren’t selling you. We aren’t getting anything in return except a connection to an alpha,” my father added.

“We wouldn’t have gotten much for you if it were an auction, anyway,” my mother said.

It was always the same. One moment, they spoke as if they were giving me a gift. The next, they were insulting me.

“Most parents just let their children get married when they want to,” I pointed out.

“You ungrateful little girl,” my mother snarled, throwing the book she was holding against the wall. Her outburst made me feel like a small child again, and I felt myself shrinking away from her. “Do you have any idea what your father and I have given up to raise you? Any idea how much work it is to have a daughter?”

“Especially one as spoiled and rude as you,” my father said. “You owe your mother an apology.”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” I said quietly.

Years of experience had taught me that my punishment would be slightly less arduous if I apologized contritely before things got out of hand.

“When we are done packing up your things, you are going to clean every inch of this room. Do you understand me?” my father spat.

I nodded in assent as my mother stepped toward me. She placed her hand on my cheek delicately, and I looked up at her from my seat on the twin bed I had slept in since I was a small child and wondered about the expression behind her eyes. Was it possible she felt sad about the prospect of her only child leaving home? She had never shown me much affection before, but a part of me had always hoped that it would be possible for her to love me someday.

Her hand moved away from my face, only to return quickly with a sharp smack as she slapped me across the cheek. I turned my face in shock and hurt at the abrupt contact as tears welled in my eyes.

“I expect that to be the last time you speak back to me, Leah,” she said coldly.

“Yes, Mother,” I replied.

“I hope you don’t speak to your future mate in that tone, either,” she added. “I hear that his pack is a very vicious one. Who knows what your punishment might be for disobeying him?”

They returned to packing up my things as I sat quietly, trying not to cry. My emotions were not welcome in this house, and I knew that if I allowed my tears to fall, my punishment would only get worse.

For my entire life, my parents had ruled me with an iron fist. I had always been regarded as the least important member of the family, even as a young child. I was

useful to them but not loved. Some of my very first memories were of being forced to serve them and look after their needs, usually at the expense of my own. For twenty-five years, I had endured my miserable life of sacrifice.

It wasn't like I was constantly mistreated, though. I had always had a roof over my head and usually had food to eat. They even occasionally showed me affection.

I glanced at the photograph near my bed—the three of us smiling on my fifteenth birthday. It was the day I had shifted for the first time, and I remembered how proud they were of me and my brown wolf, Destiny.

I smiled at the memory and did my best to recall other good times I had with my parents. The dollhouse my father had built me one Christmas stood in the corner of the room. It had been taller than me at age six and was one of my prized possessions.

But because it had meaning to me, my parents had often used the threat of its destruction to get me to comply with their demands.

That was the thing about my family. All affection felt forced, as if they were pretending for appearances or to get some kind of control over me in the future. And it never lasted for long. Any moment of happiness was usually followed by a punishment soon after, no matter how hard I tried to please them.

Now, they wanted one final form of payment from me: to give them the title they could never attain themselves. Luna, the wife to the alpha, the most powerful role in the werewolf community. I was being forced to marry a stranger because of their own sense of self-importance. But at least I might finally be free of them after today.

I had thought I could escape my parents one other time in my life. It was a year or two after I had my first shift. With each passing year, my parents' treatment of me had gotten worse and worse.

But when I reached young adulthood, I met a man who had given me hope. I fell in love with a young rogue shifter, and we had been happy together for a time. It was only when Killian and I were together that I got a reprieve from the misery of my day-to-day life.

He'd talked about marrying me and getting me away from my abusive life, but ultimately, it wasn't meant to be. He rejected me out of the blue one day, abandoning me to continued torment at the hands of my family and pack. That moment solidified the feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem that my parents had instilled in me.

Unfortunately, it also meant that I was doomed to a life of solitude within the pack. My parents had always prevented me from socializing with others so they could have control over me. While other children played outside and participated in pack life, I was relegated to staying by my parents' side whenever I was out of the house. After years of this, I became known as the strange little wolf girl.

My parents always made a point of dressing me in designer clothes when we left the house so their status in the pack would increase. They wanted to be known as rich and powerful people. Despite my fashionable belongings, I'd always found it difficult to make friends. No one wanted their children to play with the pack outcast, and the other children seemed to fear my parents.

The only exception to this was my best friend, Sienna. I watched as my father grabbed the photograph of her from my nightstand and tossed it into a box of my belongings. My friendship with her had been the one constant in my life.

I was in the third grade, and after years of being treated like an unwelcome addition to all my classrooms, I had gotten used to being alone. But one day, on the playground, a group of boys took my harassment a step further.

As I sat on a bench on the edge of the playground, they began pelting me with

pebbles while the teachers' backs were turned. As a small, unathletic, quiet child, I didn't know how to respond. I crawled underneath the bench, covering my head with my book, praying that they would lose interest in their sick game.

A pair of girl's shoes suddenly appeared at eye level, and I wondered if more children were about to escalate my abuse. But instead, a confident voice shouted at the boys.

"Leave her alone!" the voice said.

"I wouldn't stick up for the freak if I were you," one of the boys replied. "Unless you want to get hit, too."

"See what happens if you do," the girl replied cockily.

I peeked out from behind my book just in time to see the boy pull his arm back, ready to throw a rock into her face. Without hesitation, the girl took one step forward and swung her other foot up, connecting between the boy's legs. He collapsed on the ground as the rest of the group scattered.

"You kicked me!" he wailed.

"I'll do it again if I see you bother her again," she said nonchalantly.

I crawled out from under the bench as a teacher rushed toward us. The boy was in tears as the girl smiled down at him.

"What happened here?" the teacher asked.

After a rush of explanations, Sienna was carted off to the principal's office, still smiling, while the boy was escorted to the nurse. I was worried she would get in trouble at home for defending me, but after school, I found her waiting outside the

building.

“Don’t worry about it,” she assured me. “My parents don’t care if I stand up to bullies. Want to be my friend?”

That was it. We had been friends ever since. Of course, that friendship was even further complicated by the fact that Sienna wasn’t a member of the pack. Instead, she belonged to a local witch coven.

Many of the older wolves in the pack warned my parents about allowing their daughter to cavort with a witch, but there wasn’t much they could do—not when Sienna had convinced them that she could curse them whenever she felt like it.

As time passed, Sienna had become one of the most beautiful girls in town. Her vibrant green eyes and bright red hair added to her mystique, and she became the focus of romantic affections among the boys in our classes. Despite her growing popularity, she remained a true friend to me, ignoring the invitations to class parties in favor of spending time watching movies at my house.

My parents had always tried to dissuade her from being around me, but Sienna had never been afraid of them. Her family, unlike mine, treated her with kindness and respect. She had been taught to give respect when it was given, which meant that she met my parents’ passive-aggressive comments with sarcasm and indifference. No matter how many times they tried to make her leave, she always returned.

As her photograph disappeared in the cardboard, something inside me snapped. How would I survive without the only friend I’d ever known? I would be fine without my parents, but I couldn’t imagine leaving Sienna.

“What if I refuse?” I countered.



They stopped packing as they both turned around to face me, anger written as plain as day across their faces. It was a look I had seen often over the course of my life but not one I had ever truly gotten used to. Most parents seemed to love their children. But not mine.

“If you embarrass us today by refusing to say your mating vows, I promise that you will regret it,” my father threatened.

“You are leaving this house and this pack today, whether you leave with a mate or by yourself,” my mother continued. “If you don’t marry the alpha, we will disown you and make sure that you are no longer welcome in Sparkle Hollow.”

“Then I’ll go somewhere else,” I countered, still in disbelief that they were making me marry a stranger.

“Where?” my mother sneered. “We’ll make sure all our allies will turn you away as well. There will be nowhere left for you to go. Unless you want to become a rogue and risk what kind of treatment you’d receive among the other werewolves whose families have sent them away, then I suggest you cooperate.”

Dread crept over me as I realized that I was trapped in my parents’ scheme. There was nowhere for me to run, and no one to turn to who could help me. I had been cut off from the kind of support it would take to go against them. My best chance at some semblance of freedom was to marry the alpha, who had agreed to take me and pray to the wolf god that he was a kind man.

I didn’t have high hopes that he was compassionate or intelligent, but anything was better than continuing to live with the monsters who had raised me.

“That’s it,” my father said, zipping the duffel that contained the last of my clothes. “Leah, grab your stuff and meet us at the car.”

My parents had packed my belongings but clearly weren't interested in helping me any further. If I wanted to take my stuff to my new home, it would be up to me to get it downstairs. It only took two trips up and down the stairs to grab the boxes and bags containing my life and load them into my dad's shiny gray Lexus. It was both a blessing and a curse that I didn't have much to my name. I walked back up to my old room and looked around at how empty it was. The only trace left of me was my dollhouse.

"What are you waiting for? Get in the car," my mother snapped as she passed my bedroom doorway.

"I was just..." my voice trailed off as I waved my hand at the near-empty room.

But my mother didn't hear me. She had already gone down the stairs and out the front door.

As I shut my bedroom door and followed her, I felt a burning in my eyes as hot tears gathered. I did my best not to let them spill out, but by the time we made it to the end of the block, they flowed freely. I looked out of the window at my neighborhood through blurred eyes. There was no use in trying to compose myself. I knew I wasn't losing a happy home, but it was the only home I had ever known. In front of me was uncertainty. For all my parents' faults, I had at least been able to count on their consistency.

We pulled into the pack house and were greeted by Alpha Lex. "Are you okay?" he asked me as I stepped from the vehicle. He sounded more surprised than concerned to see my stricken demeanor, but at least he cared enough to ask.

"She's fine," my mother replied for me. "It's just an emotional day. Isn't it sweetheart?"

I cringed internally but nodded in agreement. She only ever used terms of endearment when we were in public.

“Very well. Come inside, Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” the alpha said to my parents. “I just have a few things I wanted to discuss with you before your daughter’s future mate arrives.”

I trailed behind them and sat awkwardly on a chair in the alpha’s office while he discussed pack matters with my parents. I hardly heard a word they said as I focused on controlling my breathing. My mate would be here soon, and I was regretting my crying spell in the car. I wasn’t sure an alpha would want to marry someone who cried at the thought of being luna.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp knock on the door. I turned my head at the sound and saw the door open to admit a lean and muscular man with wavy blond hair that threatened to fall into his eyes.

His all-too-familiar hazel-green eyes.

I hadn’t seen him in years, but I would recognize him anywhere.

“Killian?” I blurted.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I hadn't seen the she-wolf sitting in the corner when I had first entered the room, but I turned to her immediately when she spoke my name.

"Leah," I said.

My heart skipped as I took in her presence. Her round face bore a look of surprise as her eyes widened and her lips parted slightly. She clearly hadn't been expecting to see me, and part of me felt bad for surprising her. Although I knew I would see today, I was stunned by how much her presence affected me.

Time had intensified her allure, and she had grown even more beautiful than I remembered. Her petite figure had become more curvaceous in the passing years, and I had to remind myself that there were others in the room to stop myself from taking her into my arms. Quelling my passionate urges, I turned my focus to Alpha Lex and the two people sitting across from him at his desk.

"You must be Mr. and Mrs. Smith," I said, striding toward them.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Alpha," the woman said as she stood to greet me.

She had Leah's petite stature and curvy frame, but that was where the similarities ended. Where Leah's features were soft and kind, her mother's were harsh. She couldn't be more than fifty years old, but her hair was nearly fully gray. The folds of her neck sagged like the skin of a withered apple, lined with wrinkles.

"And you," I replied, fixing a smile on my face.

“Alpha Lex was just going over the particulars of this arrangement with us,” Leah’s father said. “We can’t tell you how pleased we are that our beloved daughter will be so well looked after by you.”

“Ha,” Leah scoffed from the corner. “As if I would marry him .”

I turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow inquisitively. I had expected that she would be less than pleased to see me here, but I was shocked by her outright hostility.

“I’m afraid that isn’t up to you, dear,” her mother said. I noticed that while her words sounded firm but kind, there was a threatening undertone to them.

“Leah, your parents have already arranged the ceremony,” Alpha Lex reminded her. “The guests are arriving downstairs as we speak.”

I saw the color drain from Leah’s face and wondered if she had even been told that the mating ceremony would be taking place today. If my mouth would allow me to put my thoughts into words, I could ask her, but it seemed that speech was lost to me every time I looked into her chocolate-brown eyes.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably and turned back to Lex.

“Alphas Jasper and Nile send their best regards,” I began. “They offered to accompany me today, but I thought it would be best to keep the focus on Leah. It is her big day, after all.”

“It’s no matter. The guest list was limited, and the ceremony shouldn’t take long,” Lex replied.

“Of course,” I replied, unsure what to say.

There was something odd about how they were discussing the event, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Most women looked forward to their mating ceremony and wanted to have as many pack members as possible in attendance. Aside from a werewolf's first change, finding a mate was the most important day of our lives.

"Once you and our daughter are settled, my mate and I can't wait to meet your pack," Leah's mother said to me.

"Um, yes, of course," I replied, faltering uncomfortably as she laced her arm through mine. "It may take us some time to be ready for visitors, but I'm sure Leah will be looking forward to it. And myself, of course."

"You're so right, Alpha. There's so much work to be done in the first few months of marriage. Especially during an arranged marriage like this one," Leah's father said.

"But we know you will be very pleased with our Leah," her mother added. "She's such a hard worker."

I delicately untangled myself from her and moved closer to Lex's desk. As much as I realized the importance of getting to know Leah's family, there were more important things at the moment.

"Before the ceremony, I want to make sure that nothing has changed in regards to your alliances within Pinedale," I said to Lex. "Although I am no longer a member of the Dark Moon Pack, I retain an alliance with Alpha Jasper, which I am honor-bound to maintain."

"They remain unchanged," Lex assured me. "And as long as you marry Leah today, then you will have an alliance with us as well, Alpha Killian."

I heard Lex's slight stress on my new title. When we had spoken about my intention

to marry Leah, he'd seemed surprised that I would leave Jasper's pack behind. Only promises that I was intent on marrying the Sparkle Hollow female to bolster the peace between the packs had been enough to convince him I wasn't hellbent on a regional power grab. Based on his tone, it seemed that he still had some reservations on that score.

"It's not often that a new alpha comes out of an established pack without a political rift or bloodshed," Lex pointed out. "Our allies and I will be making sure it remains that way."

I bowed my head to indicate my awareness of his veiled threat. It wasn't necessary, as my main goal in becoming alpha was to win Leah as my mate, but the power of being an alpha meant I would have to be political now as well.

"I think it's time we got this contract completed," Leah's father said.

I glanced at Leah and noticed she was still fuming at the idea of binding herself to me. But there was nothing I could do to back out of it now. I was an alpha now, and the peace between Sparkle Hollow and the three packs of Pinedale now hinged on me going through with the marriage ceremony—no matter how much my future mate detested me.

As I followed Leah's parents and Alpha Lex out of the office and toward the courtyard with Leah on my arm, I knew that I wouldn't back out even if there was nothing on the line. Leah was everything I had ever dreamed of. Somehow, I would find a way to break through her rough exterior and make her remember her love for me.

"You realize they haven't even used your name once, right?" Leah asked quietly as we left the pack house, the sunlight shining down on us.

I hadn't realized it. I had been too busy focusing on not making a fool of myself in front of her and heard only half of what her parents were saying.

"What have they been calling me?" I asked.

"Alpha," she replied. "That's the only reason we're here, you know. They didn't want a mate for me. They wanted power for themselves."

"Too bad for them that they won't be getting any," I muttered.

I didn't know the whole story of what had transpired between Leah and her parents, but I could tell that they didn't care for her the way she deserved. After seeing how they ignored her wishes and bargained her off to any alpha they could find, I was even more determined to do the right thing. She deserved love, and I would make sure she got it.

In the courtyard were a handful of Sparkle Hollow wolves. When we entered, Leah's parents were greeted with warm smiles and kind conversations as they joined the crowd while Lex walked to the arbor at the end of the garden. The wooden trellis was overgrown with blue morning glories that let off a faint fragrance.

Leah continued to ignore my glances as we joined Lex there and prepared to say our vows to each other. I wished she would look at me the way she had before, but I knew I had a lot of work to do before she would open her heart to me again.

"Thank you for gathering here today for the mating ceremony of Alpha Killian, formerly of the Dark Moon Pack, and Leah Smith," Lex began.

The crowd halted their conversations as he started the ceremony, but they continued shifting on their feet. It was clear that none of them were excited about Leah's marriage. I wondered why they were here instead of her close friends. Now that I



thought of it, I couldn't remember if she had ever mentioned any friends. Perhaps there had been one, but I couldn't remember her name.

"Killian, you may say your vow," Lex said.

"I, Alpha Killian Stone, take you, Leah Smith, to be my mate," I said.

I felt a faint thread of energy leave my body as I said the words. It wasn't overpowering, but noticeable. I wondered if the mate bond would strengthen over time or if this feeling was what everyone spoke of when they told me about it.

Lex nodded at Leah to indicate she should follow with her own vow. She didn't speak immediately but cast a glance at her parents in the crowd. I saw her mother give her a hard look. I wondered what Leah had been told about her responsibility to go through with becoming my mate.

"I, Leah Smith, take you, Alpha Killian Stone, to be my mate," she said quietly.

"You may kiss," Lex said to me.

When Leah's dark brown eyes widened in fear as she looked up at me, I realized I couldn't kiss her now. I had seen women who had been forced into physical affection before, and I never wanted to make my mate feel afraid of me.

Instead, I bent down and kissed her gently on her dimpled cheek. I heard her sharp intake of breath as my lips contacted her smooth skin. I pulled back and saw that her eyebrows had furrowed slightly in confusion.

"I won't force you," I mumbled so that only she could hear.

"Thank you all for being present," Alpha Lex said, addressing the assembled wolves.

“You are all invited to stay for a reception in the dining room.”

Leah and I turned forward to greet the guests, but none of them were looking at us. Unlike other ceremonies I had attended, there was no celebration of the fact that we had just pledged our lives to one another. I looked at Leah to assess her opinion of the guests’ reaction, but she was gazing into the distance listlessly. It seemed she hadn’t been expecting a loving reaction from any of them.

The guests, including Leah’s parents, meandered into the pack house with us following behind them. When we got inside, her mother accosted me.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “Come this way, I want you to meet my friends.”

Without another word, she pulled me by the arm toward a group of women holding champagne glasses. I grabbed Leah’s hand as I was dragged away and felt a slight resistance as we approached the group. Her small hand felt limp in mine, and I could tell she wanted to be anywhere other than in this room with me.

“Dears, this is my new son-in-law, Alpha Killian,” Mrs. Smith said to her friends, batting her eyelashes at me as she spoke my name. “Alpha, these are my closest friends.” She proceeded to introduce them by name.

“Pleasure to meet you, ladies,” I said politely.

I answered their queries as briefly and succinctly as possible before excusing myself and Leah to greet the other guests. At each group we came to, all attention was on me. Most of them didn’t acknowledge my mate at all, and the few who did looked her up and down judgmentally without speaking to her.

“Don’t you have any friends here that you want to talk to?” I asked Leah quietly.

“I only have one friend,” she replied. “And it looks like my parents didn’t invite her.”

I sighed as she confirmed my suspicions about her treatment in the pack. “Then we need to go,” I said.

“Why?” she asked, surprised by my abrupt declaration.

“Because if one more person looks at you disrespectfully, I might just take their head off,” I said simply. “Where are your things?”

“Um, I think they were going to put everything in your car,” she said uncertainly.

“Great,” I replied.

I grabbed her hand and strode from the room. Leah walked quickly to keep up with my long strides as we headed for my car.

“Shouldn’t we say goodbye?” she asked hesitantly.

“Do you want to?” I asked, stopping short just in case I had misread the situation. “I didn’t get the impression you were overly fond of anyone there.”

She shook her head, confirming my suspicions.

“Then no,” I said. “I think everyone got what they needed from today. No need to prolong their false affections, don’t you agree?”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I knew I would be leaving with Killian eventually, but I hadn't been prepared for such an abrupt departure. Still, the relief at finally escaping from my parents was palpable. I felt my body relaxing as we left the courtyard, but when my new mate opened the door to his car, I hesitated.

"Something wrong?" he asked, waiting for me to climb inside.

I eyed him suspiciously, unsure of how to proceed. My eyes darted down the street, and I wondered if I could make a run for it. But my parents' threats echoed in my head: if I left, I would be without a home forever. Just the thought of excommunication from the packs made my chest tighten in fear.

"Everything about this is wrong," I said.

Killian sighed in exasperation. "Leah, I understand why you weren't pleased to see me today. But what's done is done. You need to get into this car," he said. "There is plenty of time for us to hash everything out, but I don't think standing in the middle of the street is the best place for us to have a conversation."

He had a point. Reluctantly, I got into the passenger seat and allowed him to shut the door behind me. I took a deep breath, trying to dissuade myself of the feeling that I had just exchanged one prison for another.

When I first met Killian, he'd belonged to the ruthless Moonstone Pack. It had been a point of contention between us that our packs were essentially at war with one another, to say nothing of the acts of violence that his alpha committed against wolves throughout the region. I didn't know what became of Killian after Alpha

Aiden Moonstone changed his ways with the help of Luna Madi, but it wouldn't have surprised me if he'd followed his best friend, Jasper, in the creation of an even more ruthless pack. I felt sure that I was walking into a home that was just as vicious as the one I had just been freed from.

Killian was silent on the drive away from Sparkle Hollow as he took me toward my new home, and I decided to allow the quiet to continue. I had plenty to be upset with him about, but I also knew he was right. What was done could not be undone. We were mates, for better or worse, and starting an argument in the car wouldn't change anything. It felt better to suffer in silence than to listen to his justifications and explanations for the past.

Eventually, I felt myself dozing off, my forehead pressing against the car window while Killian drove. After a few hours, I felt the car slow down and opened my eyes to see we were entering a small, quaint town.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Pinedale," Killian said.

He didn't elaborate, but I watched as he confidently turned onto a side street without the use of a GPS. This must be where his pack resided.

The car wound its way through the streets, eventually stopping outside a large building that read "Community Center" on the outside. Killian killed the engine and hopped out of the car, walking around to open my door for me.

"Before we go inside, I want to let you know who you're about to meet," he said.

My heart dropped in my chest as I pictured the horrible monsters that were surely waiting inside for me.

“Pinedale isn’t like Sparkle Hollow,” he explained. “Besides the humans that live here, it also is the home to three separate wolf packs.”

“Three?” I asked, my voice rising in pitch despite my attempts to hide my unease.

“The original pack belonged to Alpha Nile Pinedale,” he explained. “They opened their town up to Alpha Jasper and the Dark Moon wolves. That’s a pretty long story, though.”

“And your pack?”

“My pack is a small offshoot of the Dark Moon wolves.”

“Wait,” I said. “Are you saying that all three packs are here? To meet me?”

“Not everyone... most likely,” he answered hesitantly.

He nodded toward the entrance, and I followed as he led me toward the large front door. My feet moved robotically as I did my best to control my breathing. The last thing I needed was to break down in front of my new pack—all the packs—and show them that I was a weak luna. My success here was dependent on how well I could act unfazed.

Killian opened the door, and I walked inside with my head held high. I expected to see a grungy atmosphere with smoke-filled air as tough wolves in dark leather milled about the room. What I saw instead was quite the reverse.

The room was immaculately clean and smelled like fresh flowers and clean linen. Long party tables filled half of the open space closest to the door, and just beyond were informal seating arrangements near a slightly raised dais. The tables were covered in green linen tablecloths and had centerpieces of white pillar candles and

vases of fresh flowers. Milling around the room were a few dozen men, women, and children.

“Killian!” a voice shouted happily from our left.

A man in black jeans and a t-shirt walked confidently toward us, grasped Killian’s hand, and brought him in for a hug.

“Hey, Jasper,” Killian said. “I want to introduce you to my bride. Leah, this is Alpha Jasper.”

I wiped my hand surreptitiously on my thigh to remove any trace of sweat before reaching out to shake his hand. “Nice to meet you,” I said as confidently as I could muster.

“Welcome to Pinedale,” Jasper said. “We’re all glad you’re here. I hope my brother hasn’t given you any trouble.” He clasped Killian on the shoulder. “If he does, you just let me know, and I’ll sort it out for you.”

“No, not at all,” I said quietly.

Brother? I thought. I didn’t realize he and Jasper were so close.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur as I met more people in one day than I had spoken to in the past year. Everyone seemed kind and warm, especially the other lunas of the town. April and Violet hugged me tightly when we were introduced, and I felt my heart breaking as I realized I had spent my entire life missing out on this kind of camaraderie.

Killian couldn’t seem to stay in one place the entire time we were at the community center. He was pulled back and forth, talking to everyone and looking perfectly at

ease with his pack. The bond he shared with them was clearly strong.

But the longer I witnessed it, the more my heart ached with hurt and jealousy. It had been so easy for him to leave me so callously, and here he was, doing it again. He had abandoned me to a sea of strangers while he enjoyed the relationships he had built in my absence. Kind strangers, yes, but strangers nonetheless.

When I felt my smile faltering and exhaustion from the day beginning to set in, I made my way to where Killian sat talking with a group of wolves.

“Hey,” I began tentatively.

“Hi,” he said. “You doing OK?”

“Just getting a little tired,” I hinted.

“Killian, you should get her home so she can settle in,” Jasper said. “It’s been a long day for both of you.”

Killian bid his friends goodbye and showed me to the car before driving a short distance to a small house a few blocks away. He opened the door for me once again and walked me up the short pathway to the front door. The unlocked door swung open easily, and he flipped the light switch to give me a brief tour of my new home.

“Living room, kitchen, bathroom,” he said, pointing toward various doors in the hallway. “And the bedroom is down the hall. You can go check it out while I grab your stuff from the car.”

“Aren’t you worried I’m going to run away?” I asked.

Killian shrugged. “I’m not your jailer. I think you’re smart enough to know that your



life will be harder if you leave than if you stay.”

My anger made me want to argue with him, but I was too tired right now. He left to grab my things from the car, and I walked down the hallway toward the bedroom. I turned on the light and saw a modest room with a queen bed, two nightstands, and a dresser. Moments later, Killian returned.

“Where’s your room?” I asked as he placed my suitcases on the floor near the dresser.

“You’re standing in it,” he answered.

My mouth dropped open as I realized what he was implying.

“No way,” I stated. “I will not be sharing a room with you, let alone a bed.”

“You don’t have much choice,” Killian said. “As you can see, there’s only one bed.”

“Then sleep on the couch.”

“I’m an alpha. I’m not sleeping on a couch.”

“You want me to sleep on the couch?” I asked, offended at the thought that my new mate—even one like Killian—would force his luna to sleep somewhere uncomfortable.

Killian seemed equally affronted by the suggestion. “Absolutely not,” he argued. “It’s a big bed. There’s plenty of room for the two of us.”

I looked at him suspiciously, wondering if he was counting on our close proximity to force me into marital relations. Killian seemed to guess at my train of thought, because he sighed deeply.

“I already told you, I won’t force anything from you,” he reminded me. “How about this? I’ll put pillows between us so there’s no chance of me touching you by accident. Will that be good enough for you?”

I eyed the bed again, realizing there wasn’t a better solution. “Fine,” I agreed. “But if you touch me, I’ll make you regret it.”

Killian gave me space to get ready for bed, only coming in once I had given him the green light. He shut the light off, and I felt the mattress shift as his weight pressed down on his side. The pillows between us made our own individual spaces much smaller, but luckily, I didn’t take up much room, anyway. I smirked, thinking of how much more uncomfortable he must be on his half of the bed.

In no time at all, I heard his breathing slow as he fell asleep. Despite my tiredness, sleep didn’t come as easily to me. The pillows dampened the feeling of closeness somewhat, but I was still heavily aware of Killian lying an arm’s reach away from me. His body heat filled the room, and in spite of my earlier protests, I felt myself wishing I could reach out and touch him. There was no way I could deny, even to myself, that I still felt physical attraction for the man I had once loved.

But love was something I could not allow myself to feel for him again. He had already broken my heart once; I didn’t think I could bear it a second time. I would need to guard my heart much more carefully now that we were mates. This marriage didn’t need to be anything other than a convenience for either one of us. We had already gotten what we wanted: a luna for him, and an escape from Sparkle Hollow for me.

As I thought of the freedom I could enjoy as luna of Killian’s pack, I smiled. I was going to make the rules for myself now. And my first rule was to never allow myself to get hurt again.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

With my eyes still closed, I woke up to the smell of Leah's scent enveloping me. My eyes fluttered open, and I saw her brown hair spill across the pillow that separated us. The sunlight was peeking through the curtains of my bedroom—our bedroom—making it easy to see her sleeping form lying just out of reach.

Her breathing was calm, and I knew she hadn't yet awakened. Her chest rose and fell in an even tempo. My attention was drawn to her breasts, and I noticed the outline of her nipples through the sheer fabric of her pajama top.

Immediately, I felt myself become aroused. I raised myself up on my elbow slightly and shifted my torso away from the pillows that separated us. I struggled against the overwhelming urge to reach out and touch her.

Don't do it, I commanded myself. My left hand was hovering over the pillow as I battled my desire to toss it off the bed and pull her into me.

I had never taken an unwilling partner. Today would not be the day I ended that promise to myself. My hand jerked back, and I tucked it under my own pillow firmly.

The movement startled her awake. Leah's brown eyes fluttered open and stared straight into mine.

"Good morning," I said huskily.

She cast her eyes around the room, taking in her surroundings. Noticing that her chest was uncovered from the blankets, she grabbed the edge of the sheet and yanked it up past her shoulders.

“Were you staring at me?” she asked.

“I just woke up,” I fibbed. “I wasn’t sure whether to wake you or not.” That part was true. Part of me wondered if I should have reached out for her in her sleep. Perhaps closing the distance when her guard was down would break the ice between us and give us a chance to talk about our past.

“Well, I’m awake now,” she said. She rolled off the edge of the bed, pulling the sheet with her and wrapping it around her small frame.

“Aren’t you getting up?” she asked.

“Um, in a minute,” I said.

My erection was still at full mast. The last thing I needed after her accusing me of staring was for her to see evidence of what that voyeurism had elicited. I cleared my throat uncomfortably as she continued staring at me.

“Fine,” she said, pulling the sheet tighter around her. “I’m going to go shower. The door has a lock, right?” She fumbled around in one of her suitcases, pulling toiletries and clothes from inside before shutting the lid.

“It does, but you won’t need it. I promise not to come in while you’re getting ready,” I said.

Leah eyed me suspiciously but seemed to take my word for it. She left the bedroom, and I heard the bathroom door shut behind her, the lock clicking into place. It seemed like I had a lot of work to do if I was going to get my mate to trust me.

While she showered, I took deep breaths, focusing on anything other than thoughts of her naked form in the other room. When I had mastered myself, I got out of bed,

changed into my jeans, and went to the kitchen. I opened the fridge and realized I had neglected to get any groceries prior to bringing Leah home. Cursing myself for my forgetfulness, I sat down to put on my shoes.

“Are you leaving?” Leah asked.

I hadn’t heard her leave the bathroom, and her sudden appearance startled me.

“I was heading to the store to get some food,” I explained.

For a long, awkward moment, we both stared at each other. I wasn’t sure whether to ask her to come with me or ask what she wanted me to get for her. It seemed she was having the same thoughts.

“I don’t know what you expect from me,” she admitted. “Should I come with you or stay here?”

“Whichever you prefer is what I want you to do,” I said, breathing a sigh of relief that she had brought up our mutual indecision. “Is there anything you’d like me to get, or do you want to come with me?”

“It will probably be easiest if we just go together. That way, you can tell me what you like to eat, and I can make sure to grab the ingredients for it,” Leah said.

She got her shoes on, and we left the house.

“Do you enjoy cooking?” I asked as we drove the short distance to the Pinedale grocery store.

“Sometimes. It’s easy to lose yourself in the process. I used to do all the shopping and cooking at home,” Leah said. “My parents didn’t want to waste their time doing

menial tasks.”

The way she said it made me think that food preparation wasn’t the only chore she had been responsible for. My heart hurt for her, realizing that she had been responsible for so much for a family that didn’t seem to appreciate her.

“My house won’t be like that,” I promised. “We’ll work out a system so we’re each in charge of an equal number of tasks.”

Leah began chewing her bottom lip, and I realized she was feeling anxious at the thought of a future with me.

We arrived at the small store, and I opened her door for her. “I have to be honest: I’m not used to grocery shopping,” I admitted as we walked inside. “When I was in the Dark Moon Pack, Alpha Jasper would cook for members of the pack at least once a day. I bought a few things to keep at my house, but nothing for real meals.”

“Then you brought the right girl,” Leah said.

We walked through the aisles together, talking about recipes and meal preferences. It felt like she was starting to open up when we ran into Luke and Brittany, a couple who had recently joined my new pack.

“Alpha Killian,” greeted Luke. “How are you?”

“Well, thank you,” I replied. “Just getting a little shopping done. How are you two?”

“We’re enjoying getting groceries without bringing the pups with us,” Brittany said with a laugh. “Those three are a handful.”

“I bet,” I said with a chuckle.

“How are you, Luna Leah?” Brittany asked kindly, shifting her attention toward my mate.

Leah’s eyes were wide as she looked at the couple in fear. “Fine, thank you,” she said quietly.

“I’m sure you’re used to many more options than we have here,” Brittany continued, trying to coax Leah out of her shyness. “But hopefully, you’re finding everything you need?”

Leah nodded but didn’t respond. I’d sensed that she had become more cautious and hesitant in the time since we first met, but I felt myself getting annoyed by her lack of effort with the pack. Where did the vibrant, intelligent, fiery woman I had known disappear to?

“Well, we’ll let you two get back to your shopping,” Luke said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Thanks,” I replied. “We’ll see you two later.”

The couple continued down another aisle while Leah and I headed toward the checkout area. She nearly jumped when the cashier greeted us, and it made me wonder what had happened to her. To have such a reaction to general conversations could only mean that her pack had treated her quite badly.

I wanted to ask her about it, but not out in public. We finished our shopping trip and put everything away when we arrived home. By the time we were done, it was lunchtime, and I made us sandwiches to eat. Once we had finished, I finally got up the courage to open a conversation about how she had acted at the store.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. “When we were at the grocery store, you acted like

you were afraid of the other pack members.”

“I don’t know how to act around them,” she admitted. “Having conversations with others isn’t something I have a lot of practice in.”

“You talk to me just fine. Or did you forget how you yelled at me yesterday?” I asked, trying to bring a little humor into the situation.

“That’s different,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re... you,” she said, waving her hand in the air. “I already know you, kind of. I don’t know anyone else here.”

“Well, I have a plan for that, actually,” I said excitedly. “Last night, you got to meet a few members of each of the packs, but tonight, they’re hosting an official welcoming party. All three packs will be getting together so you can meet everyone.”

I had expected her to look forward to being welcomed into the community, but her face showed that it had the opposite effect.

“Don’t worry, it will be fun,” I continued, trying to convince her.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” Leah groaned.

I winced. “No, it’s already set up. Everyone is really looking forward to meeting you.”

“Can I get out of it?” she begged.



I shook my head regretfully. I felt guilty that I hadn't waited to plan this until we had a chance to discuss it, but there was no choice now. She was my luna, and she needed to be there whether she liked it or not.

Leah threw her hands up in exasperation and walked to the bedroom. I followed behind her, hoping to make things right, but she had locked the door.

"Leah," I said, knocking on the wooden surface. "Can you let me in?"

"No."

"Just talk to me."

"I'm busy."

There was nothing I could do short of breaking the door down. Considering that wouldn't be the best course of action to make her feel safe, I decided to wait for her to reemerge.

Hours later, I finally heard the bedroom doorknob turn. She emerged from the hallway, and as she came into view, my heart skipped a beat. Her brown hair had been curled into waves that cascaded down her shoulders, which were bare. She had traded her t-shirt and jeans for a pink strapless midi-dress that hugged her curves.

It took everything in me not to lunge across the room and drag her back to our bed.

"Alright, let's get this over with," Leah said.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

After how Killian had abandoned me in the community center last night, I wasn't keen to go out to another party so soon, but I understood my role as luna meant I didn't have a choice as to whether I attended or not. The packs of Pinedale had been kind despite my nervousness, and had done me no harm. I owed it to them to give the party a chance.

Killian drove us past the edge of town and toward the tree line.

"Where are we going?" I asked. My palms were sweaty, and I wiped them on my dress nervously.

"Just up here, there's a clearing we use for pack events," he explained. "Just somewhere out of town, away from the humans, where we can be ourselves."

By the time we arrived at the clearing, I had managed to get my fear under control. I stepped out of the car and saw that all three packs had shown up en masse. A few hundred people were mingling under a canopy of pine trees and fairy lights while low dance music played in the background.

Killian took my hand tentatively and led me into the fray, where I was greeted warmly by everyone we met.

"Leah, you're here!" An excited April grabbed my arms as though she had been waiting for me all night. I smiled back at her, unable to help myself from responding to her happiness.

"Thank you for hosting," I told her.

“Are you kidding?” Jasper said, joining our group. “She’s over the moon about you. I don’t think I’ve heard a single sentence without your name in it for the past twenty-four hours.”

“A girl can’t be happy to have a new friend?” April teased her mate, pinching his side as she spoke.

“Ouch!” he said in mock pain. “You wounded me, darling.”

She winked at me, and I laughed at their playfulness. I wasn’t used to seeing happy couples together. I felt my chest tighten as I realized that I would never have what they did. There was too much baggage in my marriage to ever allow Killian and I to be happy together. The best I could hope for was that the position of leadership my parents had bartered for me would make it so I had a home to call my own.

As my thoughts spiraled, I felt Killian wrap his arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. The burning sensation that had been building in my chest began to dissipate at his closeness, and I took a deep breath to regulate my nervous system. His hand squeezed my side gently, reassuring me that he was still with me.

April didn’t seem to notice that my thoughts had been elsewhere, so I was sure that my face wasn’t betraying me. I wondered if our mate bond had alerted Killian to my emotional dysregulation.

“You two should go make your rounds,” Jasper said. “I know everyone is looking forward to getting to know you, Leah.”

We bid them goodbye, and Killian accompanied me as we moved from group to group, meeting everyone and hearing their congratulations on our marriage. Once again, I found myself surprised by how kind everyone was being to me. They seemed genuinely curious about my thoughts and feelings, and ready to welcome me into the

fold of friendship.

Before I knew it, I found myself feeling comfortable and able to let my guard down a little bit. The only hyperawareness left was keeping track of Killian. Unlike at the first meeting with the packs, Killian seemed determined to stay by my side.

“Would you like to come with me to get a drink?” he asked after we left yet another group, leaning over to whisper the question into my ear.

My stomach tightened at his closeness, and I felt myself pulled toward him as he spoke. Although we had been together all night, it was one of the first times he had spoken to me directly.

“Yes, please,” I responded quietly.

He placed his hand on the small of my back and gently guided me toward a table on the edge of the clearing.

“Lemonade or water?” he asked, reaching out to grab a cup from the table.

“Water,” I replied.

He poured a glass and handed it to me. As I took it from him, our fingers brushed, and I felt a tingle run down my spine at the unexpected contact. My heart skipped slightly, and I looked into his eyes, trying to gauge whether he realized how unsettled he was making me feel.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked.

“I think so,” I responded hesitantly.

I didn't want him to know that I was reacting to his touch like this. It was clear to me that I was meant to be a luna for display purposes only. He held no attraction towards me, and I couldn't let him know that I still had feelings for him. There was no way I could allow him to have that kind of power over me or give him the ability to hurt me any more than he already had.

"Do you mind if I go talk to Jasper and Nile really quickly?" he asked. "If you'd rather I stay here, it can wait."

"No, that's fine," I assured him. "Everyone here has been very kind. I'll be okay by myself for a while."

Killian looked at me uncertainly for a moment before kissing my forehead. His scent stayed in my nose as he walked away abruptly, and I quickly closed my mouth and arranged my face into one of passivity instead of the shock I was feeling.

"You're the new luna, right?" a woman asked from behind me.

I turned to see two women standing next to the refreshment table, both pouring themselves glasses of lemonade. They had identical long, blond hair and brown eyes. They were a few inches taller than me and, although skinny, had breasts that would make any red-blooded man stare. My first impression was that these were the kind of girls who had made my life in high school a living hell, but I immediately shook off that notion. I had never met them before and owed them the benefit of the doubt.

"Yes, hi," I said, smiling at them. "I'm Leah."

"I'm Nia, and this is my twin sister, Miranda," one of the women said.

"It's nice to meet you both," I said. "Which pack are you members of?"

“Pinedale,” Nia responded. “Although if your pack is ever looking for new members to join, we’ll follow Killian in a heartbeat.”

Something about the way she said my mate’s name made me feel uncomfortable, although I couldn’t put my finger on it. I thought perhaps it was from a lack of loyalty to her own alpha, but I decided to hold off any judgment. After all, I didn’t know how any of these packs were run.

“I’m happy to hear that you hold Alpha Killian in such high regard,” I said diplomatically.

“He’s got a really nice cock, that’s for sure,” Miranda stated.

“Excuse me?” I said, shocked at her brazenness.

“You heard me,” Miranda said with a smile.

“Didn’t you know?” Nia interjected. “K has fucked more women than you can count. Honestly, he probably doesn’t even remember all of us.”

I felt the color drain from my face, and my hands and feet went cold as my fight or flight response was activated. Both of these women had slept with Killian. My mate.

Mine , my wolf growled.

Take it easy, Destiny. We’re in the middle of three strange wolf packs, I reminded her.

“Is that so?” I said, doing my best to remain unbothered on the surface.

Nia and Miranda giggled at my response.

“Didn’t you wonder why the sex with him was so good when he fucked you last night?” Nia asked. “He’s had plenty of practice.”

“I’m just looking forward to when he gets tired of you,” Miranda said, twirling a strand of her hair between her fingers. “I bet he’ll be back in my bed within the month.”

Internally, I was screaming as I listened to their hurtful words. I wanted to call them every dirty name I could think of, but we were surrounded by a crowd of people. I was a luna now. There was no way I could allow myself to fall to their level of spite.

“I doubt it,” I replied confidently. “Killian has more honor than you give him credit for. And much more loyalty than you, obviously, since you’re both ready to leave your pack to chase after a man who has already taken his vows.”

They scoffed but had nothing else to say before slinking away into the crowd. I took a deep breath as they departed and glanced around. Killian was nowhere to be seen, but I needed to get out of the crowd.

I walked away from the table, heading outside of the clearing where I could be alone. Once I was out of sight, I slumped to the ground, placing my back against a tree trunk as waves of jealousy and hurt washed over me. Tears streamed down my face as I pressed a hand against my mouth to muffle the unbidden sounds of heartbreak.

“Leah?” a voice said.

I turned my head and looked up, finding a man around my age staring down at me.

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “I’m so sorry, I just... I...”

“It’s okay,” he said quietly, sitting down beside me and wrapping an arm around my

shoulders. “I heard everything they said to you.”

A quiet sob came up from my lungs, and he pulled me closer to his side.

“I’m Andrew,” he said. “But everyone calls me Andy. I’m sorry to meet you like this.”

“Me too,” I replied quietly, wiping my eyes furiously with my fingers. “Which pack are you in?”

“Alpha Nile Pinedale’s. Those two women you just met are my cousins,” he said, giving an apologetic grimace.

“Are they always so...”

“Mean?” He finished for me. “Yes, unfortunately.”

“So, I have that to look forward to,” I muttered.

Andy squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll stay here with you as long as you need.”

Tears spilled down my face again as I realized he was being genuinely kind. Aside from Sienna, no one had offered me comfort before.

“Thank you,” I replied, leaning my head against his shoulder.

After a few moments, I took a deep, shuddering breath as the tears came to a halt.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, and he stood to his feet before reaching his hand out to pull me up as well. I



stumbled a bit from light-headedness when I was upright, and he caught me in his arms.

At that exact moment, a deep voice growled from behind me. “What do you think you’re doing holding my mate?”

I whirled around in surprise to see Killian staring at me. His eyes were hard as he took in the scene. Andy’s hands were still at my waist as he stood behind me, and I realized exactly what this would look like.

“Wait,” I said.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

Jealousy boiled up within me as I saw how close Andy was standing to my mate. His hands had just been around her when I had come around the tree that hid them from the rest of the party, and despite common sense telling me that nothing untoward had happened between them, I felt livid with the man.

“Wait,” Leah urged as she turned to look at me.

“Alpha Killian,” Andy began, “I was just helping Leah back to her feet.”

If he doesn’t back away from her right now, I’m going to rip his throat out, my wolf growled.

Everything in me wanted to transform and allow Rocky to eviscerate any man who deigned to look at what was rightfully mine.

He didn’t hurt her, I reminded my wolf as I attempted to quell the rage inside me.

I don’t care. He’s. Too. Close.

“He’s telling the truth, Killian,” Leah said.

She took a step toward me, and I felt my wolf analyzing the distance between the two of them, wondering if she was far enough away to be out of harm’s way if I transformed and attacked him.

Rocky, stop. You’re not helping.

She's been crying, Rocky pointed out.

Rage mixed with pain when I saw Leah's eyes were slightly bloodshot. Her cheeks were pink, and her brown eyes still shimmered with unshed tears.

"Andrew, if you don't leave my presence right now, I cannot be responsible for what my wolf wants to do to you," I said through gritted teeth.

Andy's eyes widened as he realized how close I was to losing control. "Understood," he replied, backing away from Leah before hustling out of the trees and back into the clearing where the packs continued their festivities.

Leah watched him go, a look of confusion and anger on her beautiful face. "What is wrong with you?" she demanded. "He was literally just helping me. Is your fragile male ego so damaged that you can't handle me being away from you for two minutes?"

"Why were you on the ground?" I asked, ignoring her question. It came out harsher than I intended as I struggled to moderate my tone. I hated that I was arguing with her, but I couldn't seem to help myself from being upset.

"I needed a minute away from the crowd and decided to sit down," Leah replied. "Andy helped me stand up, and then you came around the corner."

I wasn't angry with her, but I was still battling with my wolf against the thought of following Andy and ripping pieces out of him.

"He could have helped you up without putting his hands on your waist!" I spat, throwing up my hands.

Instead of responding, Leah froze. She inhaled sharply as her eyes widened, and I

suddenly realized that my mate was afraid of me. My anger had been too much.

“Leah,” I said quietly, taking a step toward her. “I’m sorry for yelling.”

Her wide eyes flickered between my advancing feet, my arms, and my face as she remained unmoved.

“Leah?” I said again, softening my facial expression as I took one more step.

She flinched at my movement, and I sighed, realizing there was nothing I could do to make the situation up to her right now. I took a few steps backward and put my hands up in front of me, showing that I intended no harm. I wasn’t sure why she was reacting so strongly to our disagreement, but there was nothing I could do to get to the bottom of it right now.

“I’m going to stand on the other side of this tree because I can see that you don’t want me near you right now,” I told her. “I’ll make sure you’re safe, and whenever you’re ready to rejoin me at the party, you can, okay?”

She nodded, acknowledging that she understood me as I moved to where I had indicated I would be. After a few more minutes, I saw her leave the forest and come back to the clearing, heading for Luna April instead of me. As much as I wanted her by my side, I knew she needed space.

Luckily, Rocky had calmed down enough for us to have a conversation about it.

I’m sorry, my wolf said. I didn’t mean to scare her.

I don’t think you did. That was all me, I replied ruefully.

I know I overreacted to Andy, too. Can you apologize to him for us?

Just as Rocky asked that question, I saw Andy standing a few feet away to my left. He was looking at me uncertainly, gauging to see if my mood had improved since I'd scared him away from Leah. I nodded my chin at him, letting him know it was okay to approach.

"Alpha," he said hesitantly as he arrived at my side, "I just wanted to explain about what happened earlier."

"Before you do, I want to apologize for my reaction," I said. "It was over-the-top and uncalled for. Please forgive me."

"Of course," Andy said, looking surprised by my apology.

"Was Leah alright?" I asked. "She didn't want to talk to me about it."

Andy winced. "That doesn't surprise me. My cousins, Miranda and Nia, they came up to talk to her while she was by the refreshment table. They were... unkind."

"Ah," I said. When I heard those names, I felt my cheeks redden in embarrassment, but I needed to know what had been said. "I'd venture a guess as to what they talked about, but I'd like to hear it from you."

"Well, they, um..." Andy stammered, matching my embarrassment. "They told Leah that you had a lot of past partners and that you would return to them when you got tired of her. Leah held her own during the conversation, but I could see it took its toll on her. I saw her leave the clearing and wanted to make sure she was okay."

I cursed myself for ever allowing myself to get involved with women of such low caliber as those two. The truth was that I could hardly remember what—if anything—had transpired between us. I was sure that something had happened, but thanks to an unfortunate habit of losing myself in drink when I was at a low point, I

couldn't remember any specifics.

"Thank you, Andy," I said.

Andy nodded, his duty done, and left to rejoin his friends.

For the rest of the night, Leah avoided me, choosing instead to speak with other pack members. I had promised to stay by her side, so I made sure that I was always within sight of her. Needing space was understandable, considering the circumstances. But regardless of what had transpired, I still owed it to her to keep my word.

The party eventually tapered off, and I noticed Leah's expression becoming more distant during her conversations.

"Are you ready to leave?" I asked her.

She nodded, and we bid goodbye to the packs as we left the clearing and got back into my car. The car ride home was silent as we both lost ourselves in our own thoughts about how the evening had gone. At first, the silence felt comfortable, but as time passed, the tension grew stronger and stronger. By the time we got home, I couldn't handle it anymore.

"Leah, can we talk?" I asked as I shut the door behind us.

"About what?" she asked quietly.

"Anything," I admitted. "I can tell you've been thinking about a lot, and I'd like to hear what's going on inside your head."

"Nothing," she replied. "I'm fine."

She started walking toward the bedroom, and I followed. I didn't want to push her away, but her reaction to me in the woods had left me unsettled. She had been afraid of me. I needed to make things right.

"Leah," I repeated once we had gotten into bed. She had barricaded herself behind her pillow fort, so I sat up on my side to see her over her defenses.

I heard her sigh deeply as she turned to face me.

"I know you're not fine," I said. "I'm worried about you. Please, tell me why you were so scared of me tonight."

"Knowing won't change anything," she said.

"It will help me understand," I pressed. "I insist you tell me."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I couldn't think of anything worse than having to relive my trauma after the night I just had.

"You insist I tell you?" I asked Killian, propping myself up on my elbow and turning to face him.

"Maybe insist wasn't the right word," Killian said, backtracking.

I raised an eyebrow at him, wondering why he cared so much about my reaction. It wasn't like he held any affection for me anymore. Why should my feelings be any of his concern?

"Leah," he said earnestly, "I can't forget the way you looked at me tonight. You were terrified of me, and I have no clue why. I know I was upset, but you must know I wasn't angry with you. Please, help me understand what you were thinking."

My mate's obvious worry couldn't be explained, but it couldn't be ignored, either.

"You really want to know?" I asked. My brain scrambled to find an explanation that didn't force me to divulge the truth about my past. I had never said it out loud, although Sienna had guessed at what happened at home behind closed doors. There had never been anything that could be done about it, though, so I had never asked her for help. The closest I had come to telling her the truth was when we were on one of our long runs and she saw bruises on my ribs when I had taken off my shirt to cool down. In the end, I had lied, covering up my parents' abuse and choosing to continue to suffer in silence.



“Please,” Killian practically begged.

I sighed, steeling myself to begin my explanation.

“When you were angry and sort of threw your hands up in the air, I thought you might hurt me,” I said tentatively.

He didn’t react right away, just took in what I said.

“And then you took a step toward me, and I just... froze,” I finished.

“I never intended to hurt you—or even make you wonder whether I might hurt you,” Killian said, looking shocked by my revelation. “I thought you were going to say that you were frightened by my facial expression because you’d never seen me angry before, or that you thought I was going to hurt Andy. Not that I would hurt you .”

“It wasn’t necessarily... you that I was afraid of,” I said.

“I’m confused.”

I felt like I was too close to disclosing uncomfortable truths about my family, but I didn’t want him to walk on eggshells around me for the rest of my life, either, thinking that I was constantly afraid of his presence.

“It was the motion of you raising your hand and stepping toward me,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. “Just some sort of trauma response or something.”

Oops. I hadn’t meant to use the word “trauma.”

A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and I saw the wheels start turning in his head as he started to figure out what I meant.

“You had a trauma response,” he repeated.

There was no question, just a statement that I had no response to.

“A trauma response. To someone raising their hand in the air?” Killian asked, his voice escalating in anger.

He sprang up and began pacing next to the bed as he took deep breaths. I didn’t want to upset him further, so I remained silent as he attempted to get his feelings under control.

“Who?” he asked, stopping near the door.

“Who, what?”

“Who was the scum that hit you?”

“It really doesn’t matter, does it?” I asked. “I don’t live in Sparkle Hollow anymore.”

Killian closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Muscles tensed and flexed in his jaw, and I could see that he was struggling not to explode in rage. I had no idea he would be so affected by finding out such a small part of my past, but it was too late for me to take back what I told him.

He took a deep breath and exhaled forcefully before opening his eyes. Slowly, carefully, he walked back towards the bed and sat down gently next to me.

“Leah,” he began, moderating his tone as he took my hand in both of his. “I promise, on everything I have ever loved, that I will never raise a hand against you. I will never hurt you.”

I was shocked by the honesty in his voice, and although I nodded my head in understanding, I wasn't sure if I believed his words. He had hurt me before. Not physically, of course, but through his actions, my heart had been broken. There was nothing to keep him from hurting me again.

Nothing but his promise.

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The following day began quietly, with no rush of movement or thoughts as my eyelids flickered open. The only change I felt was an uneasiness in my stomach as I remembered Killian's promise to protect me from himself.

I looked to my left, peeking over the pillow wall to see that he was already awake and had left the room. His side of the bed was made up with the quilt tucked into the corners and his pillow lying neatly on top.

I climbed out of bed and put on my slippers before heading toward the kitchen. I expected to find him waiting in the kitchen or living room, but they were empty. Instead, I saw a piece of paper on the kitchen island next to an empty bowl, a spoon, and a box of chocolate cereal.

I don't remember buying that at the store, I thought.

I picked up the note from Killian and read:

Leah, I hope you don't mind that I snuck out early. I had some pack business to discuss with Alpha Jasper, but I needed to go to the store and grab this cereal for you first. I remember that it used to be your favorite.

I'll be back later today. Help yourself to whatever you need around the house. I left a

credit card in case you want to go out anywhere.

Have a great day,

Killian

Now that I had picked up the note, I saw the credit card that had been sitting underneath it. I had no plans of leaving the house today—I had gotten plenty of pack exposure for the time being—but even if I had, I wouldn't feel right using Killian's money.

I poured myself a bowl of the chocolate circles, added milk from the fridge, and wandered out to the living room to turn on the television. The first channel that popped up was some kind of reality show. As I ate my breakfast, I watched a handful of men and women make fools of themselves while trying to find love as they competed in challenges. It wasn't my usual choice of entertainment, but my brain seemed to latch onto the simplicity of it all.

Once I had finished eating, I switched the TV off and rinsed out my bowl. I hadn't gotten a chance to unpack everything yet, and that seemed like as good a task as any.

For the next hour, I unpacked everything I had brought with me. It took less time than I anticipated, but luckily, I had plenty of books. I got lost in one of my favorites, and before I knew it, I heard the key turning in the lock at the front door.

"Hey," I said, marking the page in my book and placing it on the couch next to me. "How did your meeting with Jasper go?"

"It went well," he said, heading to the kitchen and pouring himself a glass of water. "Nothing too serious, just going over some of the details on who belongs to which pack. Luna April wants to hold a formal ceremony where each member swears their

fealty to their respective alphas, but I think that's a bit overkill."

"I think that sounds like a good idea, actually," I mused.

"Really?" he asked.

"Having clear boundaries is never a bad thing," I pointed out.

Killian nodded, and I could tell he understood that I wasn't just talking about the packs.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said, eyeing his glass of water. "You used to drink, but ever since I've been here, you've only had water or coffee. Do you not drink anymore?"

"I do," he replied. "Just not as often as I used to."

I could sense there was more to that, but if he wasn't ready to talk about it, I didn't want to pry.

For the remainder of the day, Killian acted like the perfect gentleman. He didn't tiptoe around me, but he did give me space to do my own thing. When we interacted, he was kind and open without seeming to overcompensate for our argument the previous day. Never once did he mention my revelation about being abused or push me to talk about anything I wasn't ready for.

The following morning, I awoke and immediately wondered if his behavior yesterday was a one-off occurrence, but he continued acting as kind and respectful as ever. Over the next week, we fell into a rhythm as we learned how to live together.

As promised, Killian asked for my input on which chores I wanted to be responsible

for and which ones I would rather have him take care of. Both of us were used to doing everything on our own and were reluctant to give up control of the things we felt we were good at, but with his empathetic communication style, we were able to come to an agreement that seemed fair to both of us.

Since it had been a few years since we had known each other, we also talked about how we liked to spend our days. Killian's job kept him away from home each day, as did his pack duties, so I was left to my own devices for large stretches of time, which suited me just fine. I had always been an introvert. I enjoyed being able to let my guard down and just be.

What truly surprised me was that each time Killian returned home, he brought me a gift—everything from fresh flowers to my favorite candy. One night, he brought home a movie that I had mentioned wanting to see, and I was amazed that he had not only remembered it but had gone out of his way to find it for me.

As much as I tried to fight the instinct to warm up to him, I could feel my walls starting to crumble. I still didn't trust him, and I knew he didn't hold any real affection for me, but it was hard to argue with the fact that his actions matched his words.

Still, a large part of me believed that he was only being nice because he needed the alliance with Sparkle Hollow to work out. Without their support, he wouldn't be an alpha for long.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

“Is that really all you brought with you?” I asked, looking at Leah’s meager selection of clothes hanging in our shared closet. Aside from a handful of folded t-shirts in neutral tones, it looked like she had a total of five outfits to choose from.

“This is all I had to bring,” she replied, cheeks reddening in embarrassment. “My parents didn’t give me a large amount of money for personal purchases, and they insisted I only wear designer clothes. Kind of hard to buy those on a budget.”

“I can only imagine,” I said. “Now that I’m thinking about it, though, I don’t remember seeing you wear the same thing more than once. How is that possible?”

Leah smiled. “When you don’t have much to work with, you find ways to adapt. It’s all in the accessories.”

She seemed lost in thought, and I wondered what memories she was ruminating on. Something about her clothes seemed to trigger deep feelings for her.

If only I could find a way to help , I thought.

But I could, I realized. I know the perfect way to help cheer her up. Or, at least, to solve a problem for her.

“Grab some shoes,” I said. “I have somewhere I want to take you.”

She looked puzzled by my abrupt request but didn’t question it as she followed me to the car. In no time at all, we pulled up to a boutique run by one of the older women from Alpha Nile’s pack.

“What are we doing here?” Leah asked, following me to the door of the boutique.

“You’ll see,” I replied with a smile.

“Killian! Wonderful to see you, dear,” the owner said as soon as we walked in the door.

“Good morning, Kay,” I replied. “I was wondering if you had some time to do some measurements for us. My new bride is in need of a new wardrobe.”

Kay clapped her hands together as Leah’s eyes widened.

“Of course!” Kay said. “Come back here, dears. Let’s get this party started.”

“Why do I have to get measured?” Leah whispered to me as we followed Kay toward the dressing rooms in the back.

“So she can make your dresses,” I explained. “Kay is a seamstress—one of the best on earth. And she loves taking on commissions.”

“I don’t think I need handmade dresses,” Leah whispered back, casting her eyes furtively at Kay’s back as we walked.

Kay apparently heard her. “Nonsense!” Kay said enthusiastically. “Everyone needs new dresses sometimes. Although what you have on is lovely on you, dear.”

Kay patted Leah’s hand conspiratorially, as if their taste in clothing made them kindred spirits. My mate looked at me uncertainly, and I smiled back at her.

“You deserve to have nice things—whatever you want,” I assured her. “Kay is going to take good care of you.”



“That’s right, dearie,” Kay told me.

She helped Leah up onto a stepstool while pulling a tape measure from her pocket, then lifted her glasses and placed them on the end of her nose.

“Sit down over there,” she said, waving me toward a bench a few feet from them.

I watched as Leah allowed Kay to move her limbs and measure her from head to foot. All the while, Kay chatted with her, and before I knew it, Leah had broken out of her shell of shyness.

“...and when it got to the top of the hill, it was so covered in mud that it slid right down again!” Leah said. She had been telling Kay a story about her friend’s childhood puppy trying to play outside in a rainstorm, and the two women were both laughing and grinning from ear to ear.

“I wish I still had my old dog,” Kay said wistfully. “Animals bring so much light into the world, don’t you agree?”

Leah nodded, and I found myself completely mesmerized by her. She hadn’t even tried anything on, yet it seemed like she had already had a makeover. This had been the first time since her arrival that I had seen her true smile—the one she wore when she wasn’t concerned about what others were thinking of her.

“Alright, now that I’ve got your measurements, I’m going to pull some dresses for you to try on, just to get an idea of what kind of style you’d like,” the seamstress said. “Head into that dressing room behind you, and I’ll bring a few options in.”

I waited patiently, my mind wandering as Leah went inside the small, curtained room. A few moments later, she reemerged, and I felt my heart skip in my chest.

Everything she wore looked good on her, but this dress accentuated her curves in ways that I found hard to ignore. I realized my mouth had fallen open, and I hurried to close it before Leah noticed.

“What do you think?” Kay asked her.

“It feels comfortable, but it’s different from what I usually wear,” Leah said. “What do you think, Killian?”

It was taking everything in me not to kick Kay out of her own shop and have my way with my mate right here and now. That probably wouldn’t help my situation with Leah, though, so I tried to play it cool.

“You look gorgeous,” I said. “Absolutely stunning.”

Leah smiled at my response and began chatting with Kay about what styles she’d like to have done for her dresses. She tried on a few more to see what she thought of different hem lengths and colors, and then Kay dismissed us so she could get to work.

“Sounds good,” I replied to the seamstress. “I do want to take a quick look around the display cases while we’re here. My bride likes to accessorize.”

“Of course,” Kay said without looking up from her paperwork. “Just shout if you find anything you like.”

Leah gave me an unamused look as I guided her toward the front of the boutique.

“Oh!” she suddenly exclaimed. “I was so wrapped up in trying things on, I forgot to ask about payment.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I replied. “I’m taking care of it.”

Leah frowned, a crease appearing between her eyes. It looked like she was trying to be stern with me, but her expression was so cute, I couldn't take it seriously.

"I can't let you do that," she said. "As soon as I find a job and have the means to take care of it, I'll cover my own expenses. I insist."

"You can insist as much as you like," I replied with a shrug. "That doesn't mean you're going to get to pay for them."

"Stop being so difficult," she said with a huff.

"Only if you will," I teased.

After a few moments of browsing, I noticed that Leah had looked at one particular necklace multiple times but hadn't picked it up yet. Clearly, it had caught her eye. I was about to suggest that she try it on when I saw her sneaking back toward where Kay was working.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

"I just wanted to chat with Kay again."

She was trying to be nonchalant, but I could guess her motives. "You aren't paying for the dresses, Leah. I'm your husband. Providing for you is my responsibility," I said.

"Yes, I am," she said stubbornly. She started to walk more confidently toward the back to inform Kay of her plans, but I prevented her by grabbing her arm gently.

"Alright, alright," I said, admitting defeat. "I'll make you a deal. If you let me buy you this necklace that you keep eyeing, I'll let you buy the dresses."

She looked between me and the necklace, gauging whether I was serious or not before relenting. “Fine, it’s a deal.”

I grinned and called out for Kay to unlock the display case for us.

“Here you are,” Kay said after a moment. “Would you like me to wrap it up for you?”

“No,” I replied. “I want her to wear it.”

Kay placed the pendant in my hand, and I marveled at how the pattern of the moss agate swirled and flowed through the stone. I stood behind Leah and fastened the clasp. As she turned around, I admired the way it looked on her.

“It suits you,” I said.

True to my word, I paid for the necklace and informed Kay that Leah would be handling the expenses from the dresses once they were completed. The seamstress cocked an eyebrow at me, but I shrugged.

“Whatever the lady wants to happen is what happens,” I explained.

Kay chuckled at my response, but I knew my reasons went far deeper than what I had just said.

From what I could tell, Leah had spent most of her life being controlled by others. Never again would she be restricted or forced to do what others wanted. She deserved to have her independence now.

It was the least I could do.

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I woke up to the sound of birds singing outside the window and took a deep, contented breath at how warm and comfortable I felt. My eyes were still closed, but I could tell something was different this morning. I concentrated on my surroundings and suddenly realized why I felt so warm.

My eyes snapped open, and I saw an arm resting across my torso and a large hand resting on the bed in front of my stomach. I remembered the pillows had been between us when we went to bed last night, but at some point, they had disappeared. My back was pressed up against Killian's chest, and I could feel the steady rise and fall of his breath as he slept.

As annoyed as I was that I had found myself unsuspectingly sleeping in his arms, I couldn't help but be turned on by how it felt to be wrapped so securely in his embrace. It had been a long time since I had been in such close contact with a man. I had nearly forgotten what it was like to feel their muscles as they held you tightly and to feel the rough warmth of their skin.

Slowly, I rolled onto my back. If I could move away without waking him up, I could put the pillows back between us. He would be none the wiser.

But as I moved to lift his arm, his eyes popped open. "What are you doing?" he asked sleepily.

I cleared my throat awkwardly at being caught trying to manhandle him in his sleep. "Trying not to wake you up."

"Hmm," he said, looking down at where his arm still wrapped around my waist. "It

seems like you were trying more than that.”

“I think the pillows got kicked down to the bottom of the bed while we were sleeping,” I said quietly.

His face was so close to mine, and I was distracted by the way his eyes were roving over my body. I hadn’t expected him to see my pajamas since we usually had a barrier between us, let alone be close enough for him to touch them. The silky material was thin and left little to the imagination.

“It seems they did,” he replied, still holding me.

I breathed in the musky scent rolling off him, my heart fluttering with excitement and anticipation. All I needed to do was lean in a few inches, and I could close the distance between us. Just a little bit, and then our lips would touch.

But I couldn’t do that. He and I were not lovers, as much as he seemed to enjoy claiming me as his wife. I turned my face away from him and waited for him to move his arm so I could get up. I was glad that I was a female and didn’t possess any body parts that would alert him to how aroused I was by his proximity.

He, on the other hand, had a more difficult time hiding it. His body was angled towards mine, and I felt a slight prodding in my thigh as his morning wood stood at attention.

“Sorry about that,” he said, shifting away from me.

“It’s fine.” I wasn’t sure there was anything else to say in a situation like this.

We both got out of bed awkwardly and began getting ready for the day. Killian had to work, so he left while I dawdled around the house, looking for something to keep me

occupied.

After finishing my chores for the day and failing to find anything interesting to watch on television, I decided it was time to get out of the house. I hadn't done much exploring of the town yet. It was time I started putting down some roots in my new home.

Aside from that, I realized I needed to find a job. The dresses that Kay was making for me would be done in a few weeks, and I wanted to make sure I was ready to pay for them when it was time.

I put on some shoes and walked down the street, hoping to find something that would catch my eye. I made my way to Main Street, taking a mental note of a few places that I could inquire at later. None of them immediately jumped out as a place I'd be interested in working at, but anything was better than nothing.

I turned off Main Street to make a loop back to the house when I spotted a tiny bar. The sign outside read "Moondance Tavern."

The sound of our song drifted lightly in the air as Killian twirled me around underneath the moonlit skies. Promises of forever love poured from the car stereo.

"Someday, I'm going to dance with you at our wedding," he whispered into my ear.

With our bodies close together, it almost made me believe that it was possible.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to leave Sparkle Hollow," I said quietly. "No matter how much I want to."

He paused our dance, placing his hand on my face as he looked deeply into my eyes. His hazel eyes sparkled in the dim light from above.

“I swear, Leah. This won’t be our last moon dance.”

I stared at the sign in wonder. The memory had sparked my curiosity, and I felt a compelling need to venture inside. This was as good a place as any to work, I figured. My skill sets certainly qualified me for the service industry.

I opened the glass door and stepped into a dimly lit but well-maintained room. The sign said they were open, but the bar was completely empty. It was still early in the day, so that wasn’t surprising.

“Hello?” I called uncertainly. “Anyone here?”

The door behind the bar opened and out stepped the last person I expected to see.

“Leah,” Killian said, his face showing as much shock as mine must have. “What are you doing here?”

“I was out walking around and saw the sign,” I explained. “Do you work here?” I suddenly realized I had never asked him what his job was.

“I just bought this place a few months ago, actually,” Killian said with a smile.

“You own it?” I asked. “Did you name it as well?”

“It used to be called Pine Nuts Bar,” he said. His cheeks turned slightly red, and I wondered if he had realized the significance of the name he had chosen or if he was just looking for something classy to attract business. “The owner wanted to retire, and I wanted to settle down and have something of my own. It seemed like the perfect opportunity.”

I couldn’t help the anger and sadness that arose as I heard him talk about how he had



managed to make a dream of his come true in my absence. While I had been abandoned and alone in Sparkle Hollow, he had been off starting a new business and making a home for himself.

“Yeah,” I said noncommittally.

“Would you like a tour?” he asked.

I nodded, and he started to show me around the establishment. I had to admit, he had done a great job with the place. It was tastefully decorated, impeccably clean, and well-stocked. The entire place was upscale enough to attract visitors to town without being off-putting to local clientele looking for a more relaxed atmosphere. Overall, I was impressed. Although I was still slightly bitter, I was glad for him.

“It’s a really nice place,” I remarked as we made our way back to the front of the building.

“Actually, now that you’re here, I have an idea,” Killian said. “I’ve been wanting to bring on another part-time person to help with the busy nights and fill in for some of the other staff members if they need some time off. You had mentioned wanting to get a job sometime. Would you want the position?”

I raised an eyebrow at him for extending the offer so quickly. “Don’t you need to see my resume or conduct an interview? Maybe call some references?”

Killian laughed at my sarcasm. “I think I’ve got all the information I need to make a decision about hiring you, Leah.”

He seemed so confident, so friendly and inviting. It wasn’t that he had changed necessarily, but that I was focusing on a different part of the man I had known before. I was intrigued to learn more about this new side of him.

“Then you know my answer,” I replied.

“Great,” he said, grinning. “You start tomorrow.”

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There was no doubt in my mind that Leah would excel in her role at the bar, but when she showed up the following afternoon, she looked apprehensive.

“Are you sure you want me working here?” she asked, tying a black apron around her waist.

“One hundred percent,” I replied. “Now, follow me, and I’ll show you where everything is. We still have about an hour until we open, which should be plenty of time to show you the ropes. I should warn you, tonight will be busy. Saturdays always are. But it’ll start slow and build up, so I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Leah didn’t look convinced, but I couldn’t let her doubt affect her abilities. I needed to help her get some confidence before the customers showed up.

“We’ll have two other waitresses tonight since it’s your first day, but we usually just have two on the weekends and one on weekdays,” I explained. “The cook and assistant cook will be in the back. We just serve appetizers and bar food, really, but the cook is amazing. Me and another bartender will make drinks.”

I showed her where to bring food and drink orders, and the register the waitresses used to cash out checks. Leah surprised me by memorizing the entire food menu in less than five minutes. She was well on her way to memorizing the specialty drinks and beers on tap by the time the rest of the employees arrived.

“I’m impressed,” I said, squeezing her shoulder affectionately.

I saw a slight smile creep onto her face as I greeted the rest of the crew and set

everyone about their tasks.

“Leah, do you want to shadow Jillian tonight while you learn the ropes?” I asked. “Or do you think you’re good to go on your own?”

“Surprisingly, I think I’ll be okay on my own,” she said.

“If you end up needing any help, just ask anyone. We all want you to do well here,” Jillian called out to her.

Leah smiled back, and I felt hope that her nervousness had subsided. I believed in her; I just hope she believed in herself.

As I had promised, the next few hours were a slow and steady trickle of customers. Leah was in her element. She smiled and joked with the customers so much, I began to doubt my decision to have her work just part-time. She was keeping everyone happy, including the staff. It felt like she was the missing piece to our puzzle.

But even more than that, I was glad for the opportunity to observe her without her noticing. She wasn’t flashy or in-your-face, but there was an aura of fun that surrounded her that infected the entire establishment. Even me.

“You don’t seem like your usual serious self tonight, Killian,” one of my patrons observed as I poured him a shot of whiskey at the bar.

“No?” I said. “Must just be something in the air.”

“Aye, I know what it is,” he replied. He turned to look at Leah and raised an eyebrow before winking in my direction.

“Alright, that’s enough from you,” I said with a laugh. “Don’t tease me too much, or I

might stop bringing my wife into work.”

“You would never,” he said. “At this rate, it looks like she’s going to be solely responsible for the success of this place, if this is how well she does on her first day.”

I smiled at the compliment to my mate, making a mental note to share the praise with her later.

“Killian, do you have a second?” Leah asked from the register.

I walked over and saw that she was staring at the computer in confusion. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Table seven had a gift card, but you didn’t walk me through how to apply those to their bill,” she explained. “I tried to figure it out, but I didn’t want to make a mistake.”

“I can show you,” I replied.

I tapped the necessary keys and explained what I was doing while she watched in concentration.

“Okay, great,” she said. “I think I’ve got it from here. Thank you.”

“Need help with anything else? All your tables treating you okay?”

Leah smiled at my concern before answering. “Everyone is very kind, and I haven’t found anything else I need help with yet. I really do appreciate you giving me this chance to earn my own money, and for helping me get the hang of it.”

“Of course,” I replied. “In fact, that gentleman down at the end of the bar was so

impressed with you that he warned me you might take the entire business from me one day. I'd say you're having an amazing first day."

Leah laughed. "Don't worry, I won't take your bar from you. But I will be collecting all my tips for the evening. Don't get it into your head that I'll be splitting them with you."

I chuckled as she walked back to table seven with their receipt. I was glad to see that her feistiness was returning. Her confidence was one of her most alluring qualities, and I found myself beginning to think of all her other attractive attributes.

"Ki! Come back down here and pour an old man another drink," someone called from the bar.

I sighed, returning to my station.

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"Congratulations on the end of your first day," I said to Leah as I locked the doors behind the last customer. "Can I make you a drink to celebrate?"

"I'd love one," she replied.

"Anything in particular?"

Leah shrugged. "Surprise me."

I grabbed a glass, a bottle of tequila, lime, and grapefruit juice while Leah sat down at the bar across from me.

"That looks delicious," she said as I passed the paloma to her.

“It’s one of my favorites,” I said, putting away the items I had used and wiping down the counter.

“I was right, it is delicious,” she said, licking her lips after taking her first sip.

I chuckled at her expression. “Don’t get too drunk now. We still need to clean this place up.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, wiping the smile from her face and giving me a solemn salute.

“Calm down, sassy,” I joked. “We just need to wipe down the tables, put the chairs up, and sweep the floors. Everything in the kitchen is already done, and the opener will mop in the morning.”

She bent over the bar to grab a rag and the cleaning supplies from under the cabinet. Her chest pressed up against the wooden table. With her ass in the air, I realized I was going to have this picture of her seared into my brain for the rest of my life.

“Um,” I stammered, trying to wipe the stare from my face. “I’ll, uh, grab the broom.”

I came back from the storeroom and saw she had almost finished with the tables already. “Damn, you’re quick,” I said appreciatively.

“Faster than you, at least,” she teased.

I put the chairs up on the tables she had already finished, and before we knew it, we were done.

“I’m going to be honest, I don’t think I’ve ever finished night clean-up this quickly before,” I said as we put our supplies away. “Are you ready to go home?”

“Still need to finish my drink,” she said. “I’ll share if you ask nicely.”

I couldn’t resist her teasing. “Oh, please, my darling,” I said in mock servitude. “I am parched. May I have a sip of your delicious beverage?”

“Not a chance!” she said. The drink was halfway gone now.

“Please?” I asked, moving in closer to her.

She looked up into my eyes, and I saw her pupils widen. Her mouth opened slightly, and her eyes darted down to my lips. She handed the cup to me, and I took a swig before placing it on the counter. Her eyes had remained fixed on mine, and I knew it was now or never.

I placed both hands on either side of her face and leaned in. My lips met hers tentatively, but when she immediately kissed me back, I felt all the barriers between us strip down to nothing. Our mouths crashed together passionately, and I tasted the drink on her tongue, exploring her mouth with my own.

Her teeth caught on my bottom lip, nibbling gently as she pulled away before bringing me right back in. I felt my head spinning as I forgot to breathe, wondering if this was what ecstasy felt like.

For years, I had waited to be with her again. Now, I could finally show her just how much I wanted to be with her.

Our kisses before were tame compared to now. I felt like I needed to make up for the years I hadn’t been with her with this single moment, and I found myself pushing the boundaries further and further.

I picked her up easily and set her on the barstool behind her, wrapping her legs



around my waist. Leah gave a sharp intake of breath and looked at me in surprise. I wondered if I had misjudged her interest, but she wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and pulled me in to kiss her once again.

I took her greedily, allowing my hands to roam over her body. My hands found her breasts and squeezed. I moaned at the feeling of her firm, luscious bosom in my rough palms.

My hands roved down to the fastening of her jeans, and I began to unbutton them roughly. Her hands faltered on my biceps, and I stopped abruptly.

“Is this okay?” I asked uncertainly.

Leah didn’t respond right away, but a blush crept into her cheeks. She looked down at the floor, and I felt more than saw that she was backing away from me.

“I like kissing you,” she said quietly.

Realization hit me as I removed my hands from her waist and placed her hands gently in mine. I sighed, disappointed with myself for taking liberties with her before asking if she was ready to move forward physically with me. I was horrified that I had been so rough and demanding. What kind of man takes a woman’s virginity in a bar?

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

My hands felt cold and clammy as we finished closing up the bar and headed home. I was mortified that Killian decided to stop kissing me after I had hesitated with his advances. It was clear to me that he didn't want me—not like that. He had just been caught up in the moment, and I had been available. Something I did had snapped him out of it, and he had realized he held no interest in me beyond our formal obligations to one another.

“Before you go to bed, can we talk?” Killian asked when we got home.

Here it comes , I thought. He's going to clarify boundaries and let me know that nothing like that will ever happen again. Hope you enjoyed your last kiss, Leah.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, following him to the couch. I placed my hands on my lap and twisted them together to hide that they were shaking.

“I wanted to check that you're okay,” he began. “I think I came across too strong with the physical stuff, and since it's pretty obvious you don't have experience with that, I wanted to apologize if I took it too far.”

Although he wasn't wrong, something about the way he phrased it made me irrationally angry. The implication was there—even if he didn't spell it out—that I was inexperienced because I was undesirable.

“I'm fine,” I snapped. “And I'm not sure my past experience is any of your business.”

Killian looked at me questioningly. “I'm your mate,” he said. “Everything about you is my business.”

I scoffed at his statement. “Considering you haven’t told me much about yourself, I’m not sure that’s accurate.”

“Then let’s change that,” he said. “I want to know about you, and for you to know about me. So, Leah... are you a virgin?”

“Only because I was the pack outcast,” I spat. I could no longer take the underhanded assumption that I hadn’t been chosen through some fault of my own. “My earliest memories are of being ridiculed and teased, and that never changed. There was no man in the pack who would date me when the rest of the wolves considered me to be weird and defective.”

“So, you’ve never dated? Ever?” he asked after he had processed what I said.

“Of course, I dated,” I lied. “It was just difficult because I had to go outside of Sparkle Hollow to do it. But I went on plenty of dates where we fooled around. I just didn’t have sex.”

“You fooled around?” he repeated. For some reason, he seemed upset.

“Sure,” I said. Whether it was true or not, I couldn’t let him believe he was the only man who had made me feel alive and wanted. “I let them touch me.”

I didn’t expect him to care that I had experience with other men. I would have thought it would make him feel better about what we had done in the bar. But my statement seemed to have the opposite reaction.

“How did they touch you?” he asked, his voice low.

His jealousy was palpable, but I was determined to act unaffected. He couldn’t know that I cared about his opinion of me.

“Making out and hand stuff,” I said with a shrug.

“What kind of hand stuff?” he demanded.

“I don’t know how to answer that question,” I admitted. “I think it’s pretty self-explanatory.”

“On the contrary,” he said, his voice low again as he moved closer to me and angled his body toward mine, “there are many ways to touch a woman.”

I felt my stomach tighten at the desire and dominance in his eyes. It wasn’t fear but excitement I felt. It was the same look he gave me at the bar earlier this evening. He was turned on.

“Of course,” I said quietly. “But it’s not something I can explain with my words.”

Killian raised an eyebrow at me, and I realized that I had unwittingly invited him to begin a demonstration.

“Well, then,” he said quietly. He moved in closer and wrapped an arm around my waist so that our bodies were touching. “Did they touch you like this?”

He began to caress my torso, trailing his fingers under my shirt.

“Yes,” I said, determined to moderate my tone. “Of course.”

He lifted my shirt over my head and unclasped my bra, allowing it to fall onto the couch. His hands continued their circling motions across my skin as he lowered his mouth to my neck.

“Did they kiss you like this?”

His lips and tongue took turns trailing patterns from my ear to my collarbone. The warmth of his breath in the crook of my neck sent a tingle down my spine.

“Yes,” I said, my voice shaking a little.

Killian looked into my eyes while he repositioned us, moving me onto my back as he straddled me.

“Did they kiss you here?” he asked, palming my breasts and squeezing gently.

“Yes,” I said, barely maintaining my composure.

Still looking into my eyes, he lowered his lips to my breast, placing his nipple into my mouth and sucking lightly. I inhaled sharply as electric jolts traveled through me. His hands roamed down my stomach toward my waist, and I felt blood rushing toward my pelvis.

“And what about here?”

He began kissing me on every inch of my stomach, moving lower and lower as he teased me.

“Yes,” I breathed. I was no longer composed. The only thought in my mind was of his breath on my skin, the tightening of my stomach, and the tingling nerves in my clitoris. I yearned for him to be closer to me, to take my body and do what he pleased with it.

As he kissed below my belly button, his hands reached up and began tweaking my nipples softly. I moaned at the sensation of pleasure that was building in my body.

“Like this?” he breathed huskily.

I could feel his erection pressed up against my leg as he continued his ministrations. I crossed my knees and pressed my legs together as tightly as I could, putting pressure on my sensitive clitoris as I imagined him touching me there.

“Yes,” I gasped.

My pitch was rising, and I knew I was no longer answering his question. Instead, I was answering the unasked question: do you want me to keep going? The truth was, I had never felt like this before. I never wanted it to end.

He rubbed his hands firmly down my sides, massaging me. He rubbed his erection against my leg as he grasped both my wrists, pinning them to the couch.

“Did they do this?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered, practically begging him to kiss me again.

He obliged, darting his tongue in and out of my mouth as his lips moved in time with my own. My hips began rocking, seeking stimulation for the wetness that was pooling within me.

Killian released one of my arms, moving his fingers to one breast while his mouth found the other. As his movements became faster and more insistent, I felt the tightness in my stomach get more and more intense.

My back arched, unbidden, as waves of pleasure circulated throughout my entire body. My eyes closed, and Killian continued playing with my body as I rode the orgasm to completion.

“Oh my god,” I gasped once my body stopped shaking.

Killian sat up on the couch, pulling me up with him. “Did they make you do that?” he asked with a grin.

I was absolutely mortified by what had just happened. Although my experience was limited, I had never imagined a scenario where a person could orgasm without even removing all their clothes. I was in strange new waters, and I felt disoriented and confused.

“No,” I said simply.

“Good,” he replied. “I’m glad I am the only person who has made you cum. I’ve never gotten over you, Leah, and the thought of someone else making you feel the way I just did makes me sick.”

Anger replaced the calm that had come over me as he spoke of being the only person to touch me. “So, you would be mad if I had been with other men, but it’s totally fine for you to fling yourself at all the she-wolves in town?” I demanded.

“What are you talking about?” he asked with a frown.

“I know all about the women you hooked up with,” I spat. “You say you never got over me, and yet you slept with half of the women here. Both things can’t be true, so don’t lie to me about your feelings.”

Killian looked defeated. “I’m not saying that I don’t have a past,” he said. “But my feelings for you are true. I never stopped thinking about you. Not once.”

“Except for when you were fucking other people, right?” I scoffed. I stood from the couch, not wanting to be near enough for him to touch me again.

“Leah, please,” he begged. “Let me explain.”

“No.”

In a huff, I grabbed my discarded clothing, covered my chest, and stomped out of the room. He could sleep with whoever he wanted, but I wouldn't believe a word about his feelings for me. Never again.



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Although Leah had been upset with me, we managed to put our disagreement aside rather quickly. She clearly didn't want to hear about my feelings for her, so I decided I wouldn't bring it up until the time felt right. I would never give up on winning her, but I couldn't risk pushing her away.

Over the past week, we had been cordial with each other, if a little strained at times. With each passing day that we worked together, we got along a little better. Our daily life fell into a nice rhythm, and any animosity remaining between us dwindled. Leah truly was an asset to my life—both personally and professionally. I had been working toward being a better version of myself for a while now, especially after being inspired by Jasper turning his life around. But with Leah by my side, I had even more reason to improve myself.

Tonight was already looking to be even busier than on Leah's first night of work. Saturday crowds were always the toughest, but my team was working together well. Leah and Jillian were the only waitresses tonight, and I was impressed that my mate was holding her own with so many orders.

"Heads up, boss," Jillian said to me. "We just had a group come in. Looks like a bachelor party."

"I hate those," I grumbled. "They already wasted?"

Jillian nodded toward a table in the back. It was clear that the men had pre-gamed before coming in. They were still within the limits of being able to be served, but it wouldn't take much to put a few of those guys over the limit.

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” I assured her.

“Thanks,” she replied. “I’ll give Leah a heads up, too. They’re sitting in her section.”

My eyes flashed as I realized an unforeseen complication of having my mate work at the bar with me. I needed to treat her like I would any other employee, but the thought of her being in close proximity to men who had been drinking too much caused anxiety and anger to course through me.

Memories of how I had treated women when I was intoxicated came to my mind. It hadn’t been good, and I knew there were plenty of men in the world with even less restraint than me.

“Let her know I’m here if she needs backup,” I called as Jillian walked away.

You should switch her sections, my wolf growled. I don’t like this at all.

Calm down, Rocky, I reminded him.

How can I? She could be in danger.

Not while I’m here, I assured him.

That much I knew to be true. Nothing would prevent me from ripping any man apart who tried to harm or even intimidate my mate.

While serving drinks and responding to other patrons, I kept one eye on Leah, hypervigilant about the men who were becoming rowdier by the minute. Leah seemed to take Jillian’s warning in stride. She continued offering excellent service to all the customers while remaining professional and kind.

About an hour later, I saw her laugh at a joke someone at the bachelor party table said, and I felt jealousy burn like a hot knife through my stomach. A moment later, she brought their empty glasses back to the bar, and I decided to take a moment to check in.

“How’s your night going?” I asked, doing my best to keep all traces of concern out of my voice.

“Great!” she said enthusiastically. “It’s really lively in here.”

I nodded as she cashed out a table and brought them their change. Before she could return to the bar, one of the men from the bachelor party left his seat. I watched as he made his way to where Leah was standing and drunkenly tried to pass her a piece of paper.

Is he really giving her his phone number?

Just as I was about to launch myself over the bar and mark her as my territory, I saw that she’d put her hand out to stop him from giving it to her. Her face transformed from one of sweetness into a harder expression of warning.

It was impossible to hear their conversation over the music and chatter of the guests, but the gist of what she was trying to say was unmistakable. Leah shook her head, declined the paper, and jerked her head toward me at the bar.

The man looked at me with wide eyes as he turned a deep shade of red, then scurried back to his friends at their table. Within a few minutes, they placed a pile of cash on the table and made a swift exit.

“What was that all about?” I asked Leah as she brought the cash up to the register.

“He wanted me to call him when I got off work,” she replied.

“And I take it you said no?”

“I told him it was in his best interest to check if the person he was hitting on was wearing a wedding ring before trying to pick them up,” she said with a shrug. “Then I said my husband was watching him. He gave you one look and decided he made a bad choice.”

I chuckled at her summary of events. It was true. The guy had looked like he was going to throw up when he saw me behind the bar.

With the table of drunken men gone, the atmosphere in the bar got calmer and quieter. After an hour, I’d sent Jillian home and had the cooks close the kitchen. By the time the last customer left, only Leah and I remained to close down the bar.

I would have assumed that she would be animated and happy now that the workday was done, but as we set about cleaning the tables, she looked crestfallen.

“You seem off,” I said.

“I’m just thinking,” Leah replied.

“Can you tell me what you’re thinking about?” I asked. “I’d like to help, if I can.”

I saw tears welling up in Leah’s eyes, and my heart sank. There was nothing on earth I hated more than to see her upset.

“About... us,” she said with a shrug.

I turned her to face me, rubbing her arms encouragingly so she would continue

sharing.

“You never came back for me,” she said, her voice choking up.

The accusation stung all the more because it was true.

“I’m so sorry,” I said quietly. “I messed up. After I left, I thought you’d never want to see me again, that you’d hate me for the rest of your life. I thought I didn’t deserve you and that there was nothing I could do to make it better. I just tried to forget. Unsuccessfully.”

“You said you still care about me, but that doesn’t match up with how you acted while we were apart,” she said.

“I tried to fill my emptiness with things that didn’t work,” I admitted. “I drank too much, and fooled around with people I shouldn’t have. But I never had feelings for any of them. I hated what I had become, and I did whatever I could to forget.” I sighed. “I was stupid, but I’ve changed. I hope you can see that I’m not that man anymore.”

“I think I believe you,” she said. “And I need to admit something as well.”

My heart sank, thinking that she was going to tell me she had been in love with someone else after I left her in Sparkle Hollow. Whatever it was, I needed to hear her out. I nodded, letting her know I was ready to listen.

“I lied to you, that night we kissed. I’ve never dated anyone or done any of the things I said I did. It was stupid, but I thought if you knew how inexperienced I was, you’d think I was pathetic.” She grimaced.

I placed my hand on her cheek, tilting her face up until she was looking into my eyes.

“I could never think that about you,” I said quietly.

“I’ve only ever wanted you,” she whispered.

Hearing her say those words out loud broke my self-control. I had sworn to myself that I wouldn’t push Leah’s boundaries any more than I already had, but it was time for me to admit how hopelessly I wanted her to be with me.

“Leah, I want all of you,” I said. “What happened between us the other night was just a taste of how great it can be between us. I don’t want to pressure you, but I have to ask—are you ready for more?”

Leah smiled at my fumbling request and shocked me with her answer.

“Yes.”

It was the only word I needed to hear.

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Hearing that Killian still wanted to be with me after all this time was hard to accept, but if I wanted us to have any chance of working out, I needed to start to trust that he was telling the truth. If I wanted to believe him and build a true life together, we had to keep moving forward.

I couldn't deny that I had enjoyed exploring a physical relationship with my mate so far. I may have had no idea what I was doing, but it felt like my ability to get lost in my own head was playing out in my favor. I had heard many women say they weren't able to orgasm with a partner because they couldn't focus on their pleasure, but I seemed to be having the opposite experience. When he touched me, it was all I could think about.

So when Killian asked if I was ready to do more with him, my answer was obvious.

"Yes?" he asked, making sure he heard me correctly.

I nodded, moving closer and wrapping my arms around his waist. I didn't want there to be any doubt in his mind that I was consenting. No reason for him to back away from me.

"Tell me what you want me to do," I murmured, looking up at him through my eyelashes in what I hoped was a seductive glance.

He inhaled deeply and stared at my lips for a moment before coming in for a kiss.

Our kisses before had been rough, hot, and passionate. This was different. He was tender and careful, holding me gently while his lips parted mine sensuously. His

hands didn't roam over me as they had done before. He held me confidently and patiently, knowing that he didn't need to rush because we were going to do more than kiss very soon.

For the first time, I realized how drastic our height difference was. I had always been rather small, but for the most part, my height hadn't played any role in my life. Now that he was kissing me, I became aware that he was bending down to reach me while I was on my toes trying to reach him.

Killian seemed to realize the problem at the same time as I did. He bent down even further, wrapping one powerful arm underneath my ass. Grasping my thigh with his free hand, he pulled me up onto his waist and set me on a tabletop.

"That's better," he said, running a hand through my hair. "There's only one thing wrong with this picture."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Too many clothes."

My heart fluttered as he began unbuttoning my pants. He lifted my hips and carefully slid them down, pulling my panties down along with the jeans.

"Mm," he said, licking his lips as he saw me unclothed for the first time. "I like what I see."

As he reached my ankles, I kicked off my shoes, allowing him to finish his task. "Now you," I said, nodding at him.

"Not yet," he said. "It's always ladies first."



He pulled a chair up to the table so he was sitting in front of me. He placed my legs over each shoulder. I leaned back on my hands as he turned his head and placed his lips on my inner thigh. I moaned with pleasure as he moved closer and closer to my opening.

Killian wrapped his arms around the outside of my hips and over the top of my legs, and he parted my lips gently to expose the pink inside. The moment his tongue made contact, I felt a warmth spreading throughout my body, focusing on the places where his body touched mine. The contrast between the cold table underneath me and the hot heat of his lust sent shivers of pleasure through my body.

“Let me know if I’m too rough,” he said.

I grabbed his hair and guided him back down, insistent that he finish what he started. I felt his tongue caress the deepest corners of myself as my mind became blank, thinking only of how good it felt.

As my breathing became more ragged, Killian began working on my clitoris with his thumb while his tongue continued its ministrations. The slow, steady pulsing of his hand brought me over the edge, and I moaned as I reached orgasm.

I looked down at Killian, wondering what his reaction to my display of passion would be. His smile was wide as he continued rubbing my legs, which still rested on his shoulders.

“Good girl,” he said with a smirk.

I bit my lip, not realizing how turned on his praise would make me feel. “What do I do now?” I asked.

“Do you want more?”

“I want more of you ,” I clarified.

He contemplated my response and nodded. “Get down,” he said gently.

I hopped down from the table as he lowered his pants, revealing his erect member. “On your knees,” he said, putting a hand behind my head.

“Yes, sir,” I said quietly.

I wasn’t sure exactly what to do, but the basics seemed pretty straightforward. I wrapped one hand around the shaft of his penis, angling it toward my lips. Remembering how much I had enjoyed the slow, teasing journey he had made along my thighs, I decided to make him wait for a minute. My lips were still closed, but I placed the tip of his penis against them, dragging the smooth skin across them slowly.

“You like to tease me, eh?” he asked. I could tell his restraint was collapsing and that he wouldn’t be able to wait much longer.

“Maybe a little,” I said.

And then I licked the shaft of his dick. Killian’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he moaned, caressing the back of my head with one hand.

I took a deep breath through my nose and took as much of him into my mouth as I could, rubbing my tongue against the bottom of his penis as I bobbed back and forth.

“Leah,” he moaned.

The sound of my name on his lips made me yearn for even more. I began moving faster and faster, wanting him to say it again.

“Leah, touch yourself,” he gasped.

I looked up into his eyes with his cock still in my mouth as I took my free hand and began to play with myself. The combination of the desire in his eyes, the sounds he was making from the pleasure I was giving him, and the stimulation of my clitoris made me moan as well.

As the sound traveled from my throat, I heard Killian exclaim and knew he was close to ejaculation. Knowing he was nearly there sent me over the edge, and as I came, he did as well.

“Oh, god,” he said. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t think I was going to cum that quickly. I was going to have you pull out, so I didn’t do it in your mouth.”

I swallowed his load and wiped the saliva from around my mouth. “It’s okay,” I said. “You had me in your mouth. I was just returning the favor.”

Killian chuckled at my response. “That is not what I was expecting you to say.”

“What did you expect me to say?”

“Something like, ‘Ew, that’s disgusting,’” he admitted.

“I was a little too distracted by my own pleasure to worry about it, to be honest,” I explained.

I grabbed my clothes from where Killian had tossed them and began getting dressed as he did the same.

“I’m glad you were enjoying yourself, too,” Killian said. “I knew it would be amazing between us, and I promise there’s plenty more to come in our future. But I

want you to know that I'm not going to take your virginity until the time is right."

"And when will that be?" I asked impatiently.

"When we finally have sex for real, it will be in our bed, and it's going to take all night," Killian said. He was looking dead into my eyes, and I knew he wasn't messing around. He meant it.

I shivered with excitement, looking forward to the promise of even more experiences with him. As hard as I tried, though, I couldn't help but wonder if everything between us was physical. I hadn't given him an opportunity to explain the past yet—not fully, at least. There was a lingering feeling that no matter how close we became physically, there would always be something missing. My fear of abandonment was still fully present, but I was determined to allow myself a slight bit of hope.

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The following morning, I woke up full of anticipation for what the day may bring. Neither Killian nor I were scheduled to work today, and I hoped that he would make good on his promise to take my virginity.

I got dressed and went to the kitchen, ready to grab the cup of coffee that Killian always had waiting for me in the morning.

"Good morning, beautiful," he said with a grin.

I smiled back at him and was about to ask him if he had any plans for the day when the doorbell rang.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked with a frown.

He shook his head and went to answer it. But when he pulled the door open, all thoughts of sex disappeared when I saw who was standing on the front step.

“Good morning!” my mom said brightly. “I hope you don’t mind the intrusion, but we’ve missed Leah so much.”

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

Getting a visit from one's in-laws is a nerve-wracking experience on the best of days. When they show up with no warning, it is even more so. Still, they were my mate's parents—her only family. I wanted to do my best to show them they had done the right thing in entrusting her to my care.

“Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” I said. “Please, come in.”

I ushered them into the living room, where Leah stood with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

“Darling!” Mrs. Smith exclaimed, rushing to hug her daughter. “How are you? Is the pack treating their new luna well?”

“Mom, what are you doing here?” Leah asked, returning her hug awkwardly.

“Visiting you, silly,” her mother giggled.

“Aren't you happy to see us?” her dad asked. “We wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you certainly did,” Leah replied.

It was the most awkward family reunion I had ever witnessed, but I wanted to put my best foot forward to welcome them. I knew Leah hadn't always had the best relationship with her parents, but perhaps now that she was mated to an alpha, they would finally be satisfied. After all, they had gotten what they always wanted.

“Come in and sit down,” I said. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Ice water, please,” Mrs. Smith said, sitting on the couch next to her husband.

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Mr. Smith said.

I went to fetch the drink for Leah’s mother and tried to put together why the visit seemed so tense. Nothing they had said so far was rude or out of place. In fact, they were very kind and respectful. I thought back to our wedding, remembering how they had been almost overly nice to me. Perhaps it was just my title that forced them to show respect.

“Here you are,” I said. I handed the glass to Mrs. Smith, who smiled graciously.

“You’re so kind,” she said. Now that I was paying attention, I realized that her voice was dripping with a sweetness that made my skin crawl.

It’s just a glass of water, Rocky said sarcastically. She’s acting like you gave her the shirt off your back.

“What have you two lovebirds been up to these past few weeks?” Mr. Smith asked.

“You haven’t returned any of my calls, dear,” Mrs. Smith said to Leah, her face screwed up in a fake pout.

“We’ve been busy, Mom,” Leah said.

“Oh, I’m sure you have,” her mom responded, wagging her eyebrows up and down suggestively.

I blushed at her impropriety but couldn’t think of anything to say in response.

“Don’t suppose there’s any news of a grandbaby being on the way soon?” Mrs. Smith

continued.

“Mom!” Leah exclaimed.

“No reason to get upset with me,” her mom replied haughtily. “It’s a natural question after a mating ceremony. Particularly when the groom is such a handsome man. Say, how tall are you, Alpha Killian? Six-three? Six-four?”

“Six foot one,” I replied.

“Such an intimidating presence,” she continued, not listening to my reply. “I bet the entire pack thinks the same thing. You can always tell a good leader right off the bat, and I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were the alpha our family needed.”

I cleared my throat uncomfortably, unsure of how to respond to her awkward praise.

“Has our Leah been a good wife to you, Killian?” her father asked. “We did our best to raise her right and to know her place, but she’s had a stubborn streak in her. Is she doing her duties to you?”

From his tone, I could tell Mr. Smith was the kind of man who preferred his women to stay in the kitchen or the bedroom. What he didn’t know was that I preferred Leah exactly as she was.

“Um, yes,” I responded. “She has done everything I asked of her, which is mainly taking care of herself and getting to know the pack. It’s important for a luna to feel her best and be supported by her alpha, don’t you think?”

My reply seemed to take him aback, and I knew I had guessed his character correctly.



“As long as she’s taking care of you , too,” her mother pointed out.

“Killian is capable of taking care of himself,” Leah countered.

I saw her mother glare at her, and Leah gave her a hard look in return. I didn’t want Leah to feel like she had to defend herself to her parents, so I thought it was best to shift the conversation away from our relationship and back to what their plans were for their visit. After all, we’d had no warning that they were coming.

“How long are you going to be in town?” I asked.

“A week,” Mr. Smith said. “We want to hear everything about our daughter’s new home and meet her new pack.”

“I’m sure we’ll find plenty of opportunities to visit with each other while you’re here,” I said diplomatically.

They gave each other a confused look, and I wondered what I had said wrong.

“What do you mean, opportunities to visit?” Mrs. Smith asked with a frown.

“Just that we both have jobs and pack business to attend to, but whenever we’re able to get away, we can pick you up from your hotel and spend some time together,” I explained.

“Don’t be silly,” Mrs. Smith said. “We’ll stay here with you two!”

The thought hadn’t crossed my mind that they intended to stay at our home, and I could tell from Leah’s panicked expression that it was the last thing she wanted to happen.

“I’m so sorry, but we don’t have a guest room at the moment,” I explained.

If I thought Leah wanted her parents to stay, I could actually arrange something rather easily, but that clearly wasn’t the case. Something had happened between her and her family, and I knew it had to be deeper than their insistence that she marry an alpha. In fact, she seemed more upset by their visit than about our marriage. Once they left, I needed to get some more information about what was going on with her family.

“We don’t mind. There’s plenty of room on the couch,” Mr. Smith said, gesturing to the sectional.

“You don’t want to sleep on the couch,” Leah said tersely.

There was another glare between the two women.

“My mate is right, we can’t let you sleep on the couch. It’s very uncomfortable,” I said. I didn’t want Mr. and Mrs. Smith to sense that they were unwelcome, no matter how true it was. “I’ll make a reservation at the local inn,” I offered. “It’s very nice and owned by one of our own. They’ll take good care of you.”

They didn’t look appeased, and I braced myself for another argument, but thankfully, my firm tone seemed to mark the end of the conversation.

“That would be nice, thank you,” Mr. Smith answered, putting a hand on his wife’s arm.

After a few more awkward moments, I excused myself to make a phone call to the inn.

“Of course we have a room for them,” the innkeeper said. “Send them on down, and

I'll make sure they have everything they need."

"I appreciate it, Ben," I replied, careful to keep my voice quiet. "We weren't expecting them, and it's been a little strange even having them in the house. The luna doesn't seem too fond of them."

"High-maintenance, I take it?"

"You can say that again," I sighed.

"No worries, I'll handle it," Ben replied.

I thanked him again and went back to let them know they could head over to check in.

"Already? But we just got here," Mrs. Smith protested.

"We'll call your room after you get settled in and plan something for this evening," I said. "Dinner, perhaps?"

Grudgingly, they agreed, bid us goodbye, and left for the inn.

"Thank goodness," Leah sighed as they pulled out of the driveway.

"What was all that about?" I asked.

"My parents?" she asked. "That's just... how they are."

"Overly attentive and attached to their only daughter?"

"Is that what you think just happened here?" she scoffed.

I didn't know how to get her to open up if I didn't know what the issue was between them. At this point, I felt like I needed to be more upfront.

"Leah, I want to be supportive of what you need," I began. "I want to tell you that I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"I appreciate that," she said hesitantly.

"I can tell that something is off between you and your parents, but I don't know what it is. Can you tell me what's going on?" I asked.

"There's nothing to tell," she said flippantly.

Her inability to open up to me was starting to become frustrating, but I was determined to be there for her. My own relationship with my parents was nonexistent.

"Look, Leah," I said calmly. "I never got the chance to meet my dad, and my mom was a pretty poor parent. But I can say with certainty that if I had the chance to make things right, or even do something to understand them a little bit better, I'd take it in a heartbeat."

"I can't do this right now," Leah said, sounding distraught.

"That's fine," I quickly assured her. "Just know that I'm here. Whenever you're ready."

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

My parents' sudden arrival had thrown me for a loop. I knew that Killian wanted an explanation for my attitude towards them, but I was struggling to manage the tumultuous emotions that arose after they'd barged into my new life.

Killian had been watching me since my parents had departed. He thought I didn't notice, but his attentiveness was hard to mistake. Although I appreciated that he was available if I needed anything, I was having a hard time accepting his help.

"It's been about two hours since they left," he pointed out. "I'm going to give them a call and set up dinner plans for the four of us, if that's alright with you."

I shrugged. "I don't think we have much of a choice."

"You always have a choice," he said sternly.

I sighed. I knew he was right, but in my mind, it wasn't the full truth. They had traveled all the way here to visit us. There was no way they were going to leave until they got whatever it was they came for. Better to get it out of the way sooner rather than keep suffering from their presence.

"Can we do dinner here?" I asked. "I don't think taking them out in public is a great plan."

"I'll let them know we're ordering in and ask them to stop by around seven."

Killian left to call my parents, and I decided to clean up a little bit around the house. They hadn't spent much time here earlier, but I knew if they got an opportunity, they

would critique me on every last nook and cranny.

“Leah,” Killian said, coming back into the room. Something in his tone gave me pause, and I looked up from scrubbing the baseboards to see what was wrong.

“Is it my parents?” I asked. “Did they say something?”

“No, but Jasper called. There’s an urgent matter that he needs to discuss with Nile and me. He asked if I could come over to meet with them. I’m so sorry, I know I just made plans for your parents to come over, but I hope to be back by seven.”

I could see the disappointment on his face that he was leaving, though it didn’t soften the blow. But this was the life of a luna. There was nothing that trumped his duties as alpha.

“Okay,” I said, resuming my cleaning.

Killian gave me one last look before leaving. For the next hour, I scoured everything my parents might take issue with and then went to change for dinner.

I was just slipping into a modest blue dress when I heard the doorbell ring. The clock read six-thirty.

Must be the food , I thought.

I zipped up my dress and hustled to the front door so the delivery person wouldn’t have to wait long. But as I opened the door, I saw my parents looking excited. When they saw it was me instead of Killian, their faces dropped.

“Hello,” my mother said curtly.

“Come on in,” I said, holding the door open for them.

“Where’s the alpha?” my father asked.

I sighed at the confirmation that they were only here to get in Killian’s good graces. “He had a meeting with the other Pinedale alphas,” I explained. “He said it wouldn’t take too long and that he’d be home around seven. The food should be here soon as well.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t even bother to make us a welcome meal,” my mother scoffed. “I thought we raised you better than to offer restaurant food to guests.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

I didn’t feel sorry, but with them in my house, I felt like a child again. There had never been anything I could do to please them, but for some reason, I had always tried.

“Do you have wine at least?” my father asked.

I nodded and went to the kitchen to pour a glass of red for the three of us while they walked around the living room, eyeing my new home.

“It’s not much, is it?” my mother scoffed.

“Very small,” my father added, not bothering to keep his voice low enough to avoid me overhearing. “He must have another home that he keeps separate from Leah. I’m sure an alpha like him has plenty of mistresses to keep him occupied when he’s away from home.”

Blood rushed to my face as embarrassment and anger coursed through me. Over the

years, I had gotten used to them making snide, hurtful remarks about me, but the past few weeks had apparently been enough to make me sensitive to their abuse in a way I hadn't experienced in years.

"Here's your wine," I said quietly.

They accepted their glasses and took a seat on the couch, leaving the armchair for me.

"Actually, we're glad to get a chance to talk to you alone," my father said. "Your mother and I have high hopes that with your new position, you'll finally be ready to help us out a little."

"It's time that you repay us for taking care of you all those years," my mother said.

"Excuse me?" I asked. "Repay you for what, exactly?"

"For taking care of you, of course," my father said. "We didn't have a child just so they could grow up to be selfish. All the time and money we spent on you won't be wasted now that you have an alpha for a mate."

"What exactly do you expect me to give you?" I asked.

My parents chuckled in a way that reminded me of times from my childhood when they would withhold meals and other comforts until I had completed their list of tasks. Something about their faces struck a chord of fear in me as they began to list their demands.

"First of all, we expect to be given a home here so we can move out of Sparkle Hollow," my mother began. "As parents of the pack luna, I think a four-bedroom home should be sufficient. We'll need to be able to entertain guests, after all, so it should have at least three living spaces for us to host events."



“I also expect that your mate will give me a spot on the pack council,” my father added. “And I think a nice sum of money to get us started in our new home is in order. Not all upfront, of course, but at least fifty thousand a year so we can live comfortably.”

As their list continued, I sat with my wine glass halfway to my lips and mouth open in amazement. Just one of those requests would be extravagant, but to demand all of them was ludicrous. It wasn't just that they didn't deserve it, but their requests were impossible for a small pack like ours to meet.

“Why are you looking at us like that?” my mother snapped. “You should be writing this down.”

I inhaled sharply at her reprimand. The child in me wanted to promise her that I would handle it, but the new version of myself was thinking of Killian. He supported me and gave me the freedom to make my own choices instead of following my parents' orders. He would never want me to accept treatment like this. Even more importantly, I couldn't allow them to take advantage of my mate the way I had been abused my entire life.

“No,” I replied in a small voice. I had rarely used the word around them, and it came out more like a question than a statement.

“What did you just say to your mother?” my father demanded.

I stood up from my chair and took my wine glass back to the kitchen before turning around to face them again.

“No,” I repeated, more confidently this time. “You won't get a cent from me or my pack. My mate will not give in to your ridiculous demands, and you will not have me on your side if you try to convince him.”

My father stood up quickly, his face full of rage as he smashed his wine glass on the floor between us.

“You ungrateful bitch!” he shouted.

“I will not accept you speaking to me that way,” I declared.

He strode toward me and grabbed my shoulders, shaking me roughly.

“Let go!” I shouted.

When he released me with one hand, I realized what was about to happen. Knowing I could escape his grasp, I closed my eyes so that I wouldn’t see his hand as it swooped down to smack me across the face.

But before he could make contact, I heard a low growl from the doorway.

“Get your hands off of my mate.”

My father whirled around, releasing me as he poised to defend himself against the sudden threat. Killian had overheard my argument with my father and was standing in the doorway, poised to attack.

When my father saw that he was standing face to face with the alpha, his eyes widened in fear.

“Alpha Killian,” he said, putting his hands up to placate the anger rolling off of my mate. “It’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh, really?” Killian replied, striding toward my father menacingly. “Because from what I can see—and what I overheard before I opened the door—you’re threatening

my mate inside our home.”

He reached the spot where my father stood, grabbed him by the shirt, lifted him in the air, and pressed him up against the wall. My father’s feet dangled a foot off the floor, kicking as he struggled to free himself.

At the sight of my father being restrained, my mother leapt into action. “Put him down!” she screeched.

Killian tossed him onto the couch, where he landed with a crash in the exact spot my mother had just been standing. He tumbled onto the floor with a loud smack. My mother grabbed his arm to help him up, but he shook her off.

“You are no longer welcome in my home, or in this town,” Killian declared. “If you don’t leave immediately, I promise you’ll regret it. If you ever return here again or contact Leah in any manner, I will kill you.”

“You have no idea what kind of trouble you just landed yourself in,” my father declared.

Killian laughed maniacally at his feeble threat, stalking towards them with a look of unbridled fury on his face.

“I’ve killed men much stronger than you,” he said. “Don’t test me.”

“We’re going straight to Alpha Lex about this,” my mother declared. “Your behavior today has been despicable! This is not the life we were promised for our daughter. We will be nullifying your marriage and bringing her home. Tonight.”

“Leah is mine,” Killian growled. “She isn’t going anywhere.”

I saw the hairs begin to rise on his arm. He was moments away from shifting, and once he did, I knew it would be the end of my parents. As much as I detested their treatment of me, I couldn't allow their lives to be lost. Not by Killian's hands. Once he came to his senses, he would never forgive himself.

"Killian," I said calmly, approaching him as I would a wounded animal.

His head whipped toward me as I reached him. I placed my hand gently on his bicep and looked into his eyes.

"I'm not going to leave you," I vowed. "Just let them go."

He breathed deeply as he regained control, nodding to let me know that he would obey my wishes.

With the bloodbath avoided, I grasped my mate's hand and turned to stare at my parents. "If you have any sense of self-preservation, I recommend you do what he said. Leave, now."

With furtive looks over their shoulders, they backed out the door. I heard their car doors slam and the tires screech as they sped back to Sparkle Hollow.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

Fighting against Rocky's determination to rip the throats out of Leah's parents was one of the hardest things I had ever done. If it hadn't been for Leah's soothing presence and assurance that she wasn't going to leave when her parents demanded it, I was positive that tonight would have ended with their deaths.

It still could, my wolf growled. They aren't too far away. I could catch them.

No, Rocky, I commanded. They're Leah's parents, and she asked us to let them go.

I sensed him huff, but he accepted my order.

I walked to the front door and shut it calmly, hoping that the bad vibes that had come with the Smiths had left when they did.

"Leah, are you alright?" I asked.

"I will be," she responded. "Are you?"

I shook my head. Adrenaline was still coursing through my veins, and I felt like I might pass out from the effort of controlling my baser instincts.

"I'm going to message the other alphas," Leah said.

She grabbed my phone and sent a quick text to Jasper and Nile while I paced the living room. I wasn't sure what she typed, but whatever it was had the desired effect. Within minutes, they both arrived.

“Tell us what happened,” Nile said calmly, entering the house without knocking.

They waited for me to begin, but when I was unable to answer, they turned to Leah. She gave them an explanation of what had happened with her parents while they listened intently.

“It’s a good thing that they left before things got too physical,” Jasper said. He turned to me. “To be honest, you showed much more restraint than I would have if I were in your shoes. But that doesn’t mean this is over.”

“There will surely be consequences from Sparkle Hollow,” Nile added. “No pack takes a threat against their pack mates lightly, no matter how wrong the actions may have been.”

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault,” Leah said quietly.

“No.”

All three of us alphas had spoken in sync. I gave them a look of gratitude that they were sticking up for my mate after everything that had just happened. The risk to their own alliances was tenuous because of us, but they were still standing by our sides.

“No matter what the response is from Alpha Lex and Sparkle Hollow, we will be behind you,” Nile said to Leah.

“You two should get some sleep,” Jasper said. “Let us know if you get any calls or messages. We’ll be on standby.”

“Thank you,” I said.

They left. I was glad that Leah had called them, but now that we were alone, I was ready to get some answers from her.

“Leah, we need to talk,” I said.

“You’re right,” she sighed.

I patted the spot next to me on the couch, inviting her to sit, and angled my shoulders toward her. As she sat next to me, I saw how guarded her stance was. Her shoulders were hunched as she stared at the floor, hands between her knees.

“Help me understand,” I began. “What happened between you and your parents?”

She took a shaky breath and closed her eyes.

“My parents are the reason I was an outcast in Sparkle Hollow. I was never allowed to have friends. If anyone showed me kindness, they were quick to put a stop to it. From the time I was a small child, I was forced to rely only on them for love, affection, and friendship.

“By the time I was four, the verbal abuse began. Physical abuse followed soon after. Any form of disobedience—any mistake—was met with a harsh punishment. They made me believe that they were doing it for my own good, and because I had no one else to turn to, I accepted that. I believed that I deserved to be punished—that it was the only way to become the daughter they wanted me to be. If I could do that, then maybe someday they would love me.”

Her voice began to break as she poured her heart out to me, and I could tell that she had never spoken about any of this before. I reached out and squeezed her hand gently, letting her know that I was listening.

“My best friend, Sienna, was the only person who ever put up with my parents long enough to become my friend. They were scared of her, and of her coven, and that was why they couldn’t force her to leave,” Leah continued.

“Did she know what your parents were doing to you?” I asked quietly.

Leah shook her head. “It wasn’t until I met you that I realized my life could be different. I fell in love with you so quickly that it felt like a fairytale,” she said with a sad smile. “You told me I could leave Sparkle Hollow with you someday, and the thought of being with you and being free from my parents gave me the strength to continue living under their thumb.”

My heart sank as I realized where her story was heading.

“And then you left,” she said with a quiet sob. “I felt so alone and so defeated that I wondered if life was even worth living anymore. Sienna helped me realize that I still had things to live for, but it was a long road. While I was recovering from my heartbreak, my parents were even crueler than usual.”

She shuddered at the memory, and I lowered my hand from hers. I had never imagined that my departure could have caused such pain to someone as perfect as Leah. Guilt riddled me as feelings of worthlessness filled my heart. No wonder she had been so opposed to our marriage. I had destroyed her happiness without any explanation and left her to the cruelties of her parents.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled. “Those words don’t even come close to expressing the remorse I feel for the pain I put you through. I never should have left. I don’t deserve you and wouldn’t blame you if you hate me for the rest of your life.”

I didn’t expect a response from her, but she surprised me by turning toward me and lifting my chin to meet her gaze.



“I don’t hate you,” she said, shaking her head as if it was out of the question. “These past few weeks with you have been some of the best of my life, and today, you showed me more support than I ever dreamed of. You were willing to fight for me.”

“I will always fight for you,” I whispered.

The look in her eyes transformed as she processed my words, and I sensed that everything between us had just changed. With her hand still resting on my cheek, she moved toward me, softly placing her lips against mine.

I inhaled her sweet scent, feeling the soft pillows of her lips moving against mine as our kiss deepened.

Before I could process what she was doing, I felt her rise up on her knees and push me backwards onto the couch. She straddled my waist, still kissing me as I wrapped my arms around her. Her hands trailed down my torso and under my shirt. She lifted it over my head, tossing it on the floor beside us.

“Leah, wait,” I said breathlessly as I took in what she was trying to do.

“Shh,” she said, placing a finger against my lips.

She kissed my neck, my collarbone, and my chest. When she reached my abdomen, my breathing became erratic. My self-control was waning as her hands and lips explored my body freely, and my erection became more pronounced.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

She undid my belt buckle as she stared at me with dark eyes like pools of chocolate. That was the only signal I needed to allow my desire for her to show.

I reached around the nape of her neck, grasping the zipper to her dress. Slowly, I pulled it down toward her waist, trailing my fingers along her exposed skin as I did. Her back arched as I teased her.

Once the zipper was undone, I pulled her dress down, revealing her full breasts. Her nipples were hard and erect. The pink circles stood out prominently against her pale white skin, and I drew her toward me and placed one in my mouth. Leah emitted a low moan as I kissed her, gently tugging as I licked.

“Killian,” she moaned.

The sound of my name on her lips drove me insane, and I dug my fingers into her back, desperate to get closer to my mate. Her hips began grinding back and forth against mine.

“There are too many clothes between us,” I said.

Leah slid off my lap and shimmied out of her dress, revealing a pair of lacy blue panties that hugged her hips. The sight of her standing in front of me, almost completely naked, made removing my jeans difficult, but I somehow managed it.

Without any further preamble, I picked her up, wrapping her legs around my waist and kissing her passionately as I carried her down the hallway to our room. Her long brown hair tickled my neck as my walking caused it to sway back and forth, brushing against my arm. The feeling of her body against mine caused shocks of excitement to pass through me, electrifying each touch.

When we reached our bedroom, I kicked the door shut. It felt like she and I were the only two people in the entire world.

I laid her on the bed gently, drawing my hands across her skin in worshipful

admiration of her beauty. Knowing that this was going to be her first time, I was determined to go slow and make each moment count.

She closed her eyes as I touched her, a slight smile playing on her lips as she enjoyed my caresses. I grinned at her expression, happy to bring her pleasure in any way I could.

When her eyes reopened, I stared into them as I gently removed her underwear, then my own. It wasn't the first time she had seen my penis, but her eyes widened as she took in my full form standing completely naked in front of her.

"You're beautiful," she breathed.

It was a term I had never applied to myself, and hearing it took me aback. Her voice was full of rapture, and I realized just how possible it might be for her to fall in love with me again.

"You are beautiful," I repeated.

She smiled as she scooted up on the bed so I could lie with her. I parted her legs with my hand, positioning my pelvis between them. I heard her breath hitch as the tip of my cock touched her opening, but I refrained from taking her harshly or suddenly.

Instead, I began rubbing her labia gently, feeling the soft flesh of her mound as it warmed to my touch. Her chest rose and fell with each motion until I moved my fingers inward, playing with her until I could feel her wetness begin to pool.

"This might hurt a little bit at first," I warned her. "Just tell me if you want me to stop."

Leah nodded as I moved into her with my penis firmly but carefully, moaning in

pleasure at the sensation. She winced slightly at the insertion, but her expression shifted quickly. Her hands moved from my chest to my neck, encouraging me to continue.

With steady movements, I began to thrust my hips, moving in and out as I felt the pressure of my release rising. Each moment felt better than the last as her hips began to move in sync with mine. I lowered my lips to her neck, kissing her gently as I concentrated on her pleasure. Our tempo rose in a gradual buildup until I felt Leah's thighs grip me tighter.

"I want you to cum for me, baby," I whispered into her ear.

As my final word reached her ear, I felt her body shudder, and she moaned in pleasure. Knowing that I had brought her to completion, I allowed myself to fully focus on the feeling of her body and the sensation of finally being one with her. I looked into her eyes as I gave a gasp and spilled into her with a shudder of my own.

Concerned that I would crush her if I let my weight down, I rolled onto my back next to her and gathered her into my arms. Our sweat mingled together as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"Being with you is the best thing I've ever felt," I told her.

Leah gave a sigh of contentment as our breathing slowed.

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Based on everything I had heard about having sex for the first time, my experience with Killian had been anything but ordinary. As expected, there had been some pain, but the pleasure had far surpassed any discomfort.

My usual self-consciousness was gone as our bodies lay entwined. One leg was draped across Killian's as he held me in a tight embrace. His heartbeat was audible through his chest as I lay with my head resting on him.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked.

"I feel amazing," I replied, squeezing his chest tighter.

I knew he was worried that he might have hurt me, but I wanted him to know he had no cause for concern.

"I'm glad," he said, squeezing me back.

I rolled onto my back to stretch and felt Killian do the same. I turned my head to look at him, admiring his powerful form in all its glory.

"You ready for round two?" I asked seductively.

Killian chuckled. "Actually, can we get dressed for a minute? I wanted to talk to you about something, and it's going to be difficult for me to concentrate with you looking so tempting."

I giggled, rolled out of bed, and grabbed an oversized t-shirt from the dresser before

returning to sit cross-legged next to him. He had wrapped the blanket around his waist and was looking at me intently.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, noticing his serious expression.

“Nothing,” he assured me. “But you told me about your past earlier, and I was hoping you’d give me a chance to do the same.”

He was hesitant with his words, and I sensed that what he was about to tell me had rarely been spoken of before today.

“Of course,” I said. “I want to know everything about you.”

Killian swallowed hard before beginning.

“My mother was a human who got pregnant by a shifter rogue, who made her life a living hell. Luckily for her, he died shortly after I was born. Unluckily for her, she soon got caught up with another shifter who was even worse,” he winced. “My younger brother, Franco, was born shortly after. She stayed with Franco’s father for almost a decade in the vain hope that her love could change him. When it became clear that wasn’t going to happen, she decided to leave. She took me but left Franco behind. She knew that his father would never allow his firstborn son to be taken away from him, and she didn’t have the strength to fight him. Franco had always been his father’s golden child, and she was sure he would be safe—if not morally, at least physically.”

Listening to Killian’s story brought tears of horror to my eyes. I had thought my life had been difficult, but his mother had been through far more pain than I could imagine.

“Don’t feel too bad for her,” he clarified, seeing the pain in my eyes. “She found

work in a brothel run by Jasper's mother. The women there—including my mother—were cruel and vicious. Especially to Jasper.”

“Why?” I asked. I couldn't imagine a group of women who had been forced into such circumstances wanting to cause pain to their own children.

“Because they had been hurt by men, and we were going to grow up to be men,” he said with a shrug. “After being neglected and beaten for a few years, Jasper and I decided to run away. We joined Aiden's Moonstone Pack, and soon after that, I met you.”

My heart began to beat faster as I realized he was going to explain what had happened between us from his point of view. I was glad he had asked me to put a shirt on, and I wrapped my arms around myself like armor.

“The secret relationship I had with you was the brightest spot in my life,” Killian continued. “But it was shortly after that when I crossed paths with Franco for the first time since my mother had abandoned him. He asked me to come with him to start a new pack, one even more ruthless and conniving than the Moonstones. He said that I owed him for abandoning him so many years ago, and since the tensions between Sparkle Hollow and the Moonstones had gotten so far out of hand, I felt like I needed to let you go before our alphas caught wind and punished us.”

“Would they have?” I asked, not realizing that could have been a possibility at the time.

“Jasper was Aiden's beta, and he had told me that any fraternization between our packs would end in death.”

“I had no idea,” I whispered.

Of course, I had known that our packs were at war with one another, but I had never been in a position of being made privy to the details of the turmoil.

“When I rejected you, it broke my heart in two,” he said. “I’m so sorry for hurting you. It was, without a doubt, the biggest mistake of my life.”

Tears spilled silently down my cheeks as his remorseful apology hung in the air. “I forgive you,” I assured him.

He took a moment to compose himself before continuing.

“I spent a few weeks with my brother, but his behavior was out of control. There was no mercy or self-control, only destruction and hate. I went back to the Moonstones, a man with no purpose. I was a shell of myself. After rejecting you, I knew there was no way you would take me back, so I stuck with Jasper—the only person aside from you who has never turned their back on me.”

“He’s been a good friend to you,” I agreed.

I didn’t know Jasper well, but from what I could tell, he had always supported Killian and had been able to turn his life around better than most men ever had the opportunity to do.

“I wouldn’t be where I am today without him,” Killian acknowledged. “He was the one who made me alpha and gave me the opportunity to marry you.”

I reached out to grab his hand, holding it tightly in mine. “I’m glad he did.”

“Leah,” he said. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”



We fell asleep in each other's arms that night with no barriers left between us. But as the dawn rose, I felt in my heart that our peaceful bubble was about to burst.

Sure enough, only moments after getting up for the day, a loud rap came from the front door. Killian and I looked at each other, nodding in understanding that whatever came next, we were in it together.

He opened the front door, and Alpha Lex strode into the room, flanked by four of his warriors. In the front yard, I spotted a few more scouting the perimeter of the house.

"Leah?" he called loudly.

"I'm right here," I said from the kitchen.

"We weren't expecting you," Killian said. His tone was moderated, but I could see his hand shaking imperceptibly.

"I'm here to investigate a very concerning complaint from Mr. and Mrs. Smith," Lex said to Killian. "They arrived in Sparkle Hollow late last night, saying that you had physically attacked them when they tried to protect their daughter."

"I assure you, that is not what happened," Killian replied through gritted teeth.

"Really?" Lex said doubtfully. "Because, according to them, you have been keeping Leah hostage ever since your marriage. They stated that they were concerned for her physical safety due to your cruel and aggressive abuse against her."

Killian growled, and the alpha's guards began to close in ranks.

"Stop," I said, walking toward them and waving the guards away. "Everything they said to you is utter bullshit."

Both Killian and Lex looked shocked by my language, but I had lived with my parents' lies long enough. It was time to expose them for what they truly were and stop enabling them and their bids for power and popularity.

"My parents are not good people," I told Lex. "They never have been. I have waited for my entire life to get away from the constant terror of being their daughter."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"All they have ever wanted is power. But since they didn't have any in the pack, they chose to exercise what little they did have over me—by any means necessary. I have been starved, beaten, and ostracized from the pack. They have been spreading rumors about me since I was a child to ensure I never made any friends, and they forced me to marry against my wishes. I am happy for that, now," I added, turning to Killian.

"But what were they doing here, then, if not trying to bring you home?" Lex asked.

"They wanted me to force Killian to give them money, property, and a spot on his alpha council," I explained. "My father said they wanted to leave Sparkle Hollow and join our pack. We rejected their requests."

Lex placed a hand to his forehead and began massaging his temples as he processed my explanation.

"Leah," he began. "I swear to you, your parents will be punished for the lies they have told and for how they treated their daughter."

I nodded at him, thankful that he had accepted the truth of my words and not been blinded by prejudice against me.

"They have been warned not to set foot in Pinedale," I added.

“But that decree doesn’t extend to anyone else from Sparkle Hollow,” Killian clarified. “Only them. I will not allow anyone who has hurt Leah before to do so again.”

“I understand,” Lex said. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t aware of this situation years ago, Leah. I wish I had been, so I could have prevented you from suffering as much as you did. I failed you as your alpha. I should have been more observant.”

“I forgive you,” I said.

And I meant it sincerely. As much as I’d dreamed of having someone save me from my maltreatment as a child, I realized now that we can’t always escape from the bad things that happen to us.

A strange mixture of sadness and relief washed over me as Alpha Lex and the other members of the Sparkle Hollow Pack headed home to enact Lex’s punishment on my parents. I would always hold a love in my heart for my parents. Their behavior was misguided and harmful, but I wanted to believe that deep down, they cared for me as their daughter. Our relationship now was permanently broken, but I was whole.

I looked at Killian and saw our future spread out in front of us, bright and inviting. He mattered to me more than my parents ever had. He was my family. We would move forward, together.

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“Hey, let’s get out of here,” I said.

Leah had been looking down since Lex had left yesterday, and I knew she was mourning the loss of her parents. As much as I wished I could punish them for hurting Leah, I knew she still cared for them. I knew from experience that losing a parent was hard, no matter what your relationship with them was like.

“Where did you want to go?” Leah asked.

I shrugged. “We haven’t left the house in a little bit, and we could both use some fresh air. Would you like to go for a walk?”

Leah nodded and smiled, seeming content with my choice of activity. I wished I could have planned something more extravagant and special for us to do, but sometimes, the quiet moments of togetherness were better.

We left the house and headed toward the bar, meandering through the residential streets on our way toward the more bustling town center.

“It feels good to stretch my legs,” Leah said, placing her hand in mine.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t plan something more special for us to do.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Besides, I think this is our first official date as a married couple, so it’s perfect. What could be more domestic than taking a leisurely stroll through town?”

There was plenty that we could have talked about, but neither of us felt the need to interrupt the peaceful feeling of being in each other's presence. With the sun on our faces and birds singing around us, we walked the two miles into town and ended up on Main Street.

We stopped at the ice cream parlor on Main Street to mark our turnaround point and got two small cones to keep us company on the way back toward our house. I had expected that she would want to go back home after our walk, but then she surprised me.

"Can you take me to the forest?" she asked. "Destiny hasn't gotten to run in a long time. I can hear her whining right now."

I grinned, knowing that Rocky would love nothing more than to chase his favorite wolf around the trees.

When we got to the forest, I made a beeline for a secluded area where I knew no humans frequented, pulling Leah along behind me. Our pace quickened in excitement the closer we got, until we were practically running. We arrived at my favorite location to shift, completely out of breath but smiling.

"It's been a long time since we ran together," Leah said.

"Do you think you're fast enough to catch me now?" I teased.

"Guess we'll find out!"

Leah transformed, and I saw Destiny's brown fur dash away. I followed suit, and Rocky followed in a gold streak. Within seconds, I caught up to her.

With no plan and nowhere to be, Destiny and Rocky ran and frolicked to their hearts'

content for hours. When they eventually tired themselves out, we made our way back to the clearing.

“Thank you for today,” Leah said. “I think we all needed that.”

“I agree.”

“Oh no!” she exclaimed, stopping short and causing me to bump into her. “My necklace. I was wearing it earlier, but it’s not here!”

“It’s okay,” I replied. “It’s just a necklace.”

“No, it was the necklace you bought for me,” she said tearfully. “I swear it was just here. I feel so stupid.”

“Leah, you are not stupid. Come here.”

I pulled her into a hug, willing her to calm down as I tried to embody peace and tranquility. She truly loved that necklace, but I had a feeling it was more about the fact that I gave it to her than the necklace itself.

“Let’s get you home. I’m sure it’ll all work out,” I assured her.

By the time we got home, Leah was still upset, so she decided to take a relaxing bath.

“I actually need to run an errand, if that’s okay,” I told her.

She waved me off, so I left her and headed to my car. The necklace I had bought her was pretty, but the next town over had a silversmith who worked with unique materials. I knew I would find something there that would be even more meaningful for both of us.

It didn't take me long to get to the shop, and even less time to find exactly what I was looking for: a pendant necklace with a meteorite in the center, surrounded by a halo of small diamonds.

"Excellent choice," the shopkeeper said as he pulled the necklace out of the case and placed it into a box.

I paid, accepted my purchase, and was heading to my car when a noise startled me.

The street had been empty, so when something bumped into my back, I whirled around in shock. Thanks to my werewolf reflexes, it was difficult for anyone to sneak up on me. But when I turned, there was nothing there.

"Hello?" I said uncertainly.

I saw a flash of light brown fur out of the corner of my eye and turned. Thinking a rogue shifter had found their way into our territory, I was prepared to chase them down and remind them to stay out of settled land. But instead, I found myself standing ten feet away from a man who looked similar to me, but with eyes that were ice-blue.

"Franco?"

"Killian, I thought that was you," my brother replied.

My mind spun with memories of our times together, from our childhood to the brief period we spent together a few years ago. I felt as if I were looking into a vision of an alternate future. The way he was now was exactly how I would have been if I hadn't gone back to the Moonstone Pack.

It had been so long since I had seen him that if it weren't for the family resemblance,

I might not have recognized him. His appearance was that of a man who hadn't spent the time or effort to keep himself presentable. The dark blond hair on his head was stringy and long, and his clothes were covered in cigarette ash, lint, and dust.

It wasn't just his physical appearance that concerned me. Franco had an air of dark destructiveness around him. The way he moved, calculated and lithe, reminded me of a poisonous snake waiting to attack his unsuspecting prey. If I hadn't been recognized, it was possible that I would have been Franco's next victim.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you were living out west."

"Things weren't working out in my favor with the wolf packs on the coast," Franco said. "Even I know when it's time to cut my losses and start over somewhere new. But you know all about leaving, don't you, Ki?"

The nickname from our childhood stung me. No matter how sure I was of my decision to leave Franco's pack, the fact that I had abandoned my little brother to such a dark world would always be something that haunted me.

"Sometimes starting over can be a good thing," I replied. "Are you living around here now?"

"Just moved into town a week ago," he said. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket, flipped open the top, and pulled one from the container with his teeth. Without breaking eye contact with me, he lit up and took a long drag.

"What brings you here, big brother?" he asked.

"Just doing a little shopping."

"Ah, a little trinket for your newest toy," he said with a malicious smile. "I hope you



didn't spend too much on her. You know those females are only good for one thing. Better to take things off them than to put them on, I say."

"There's a time and a place for everything," I replied diplomatically.

I wasn't surprised by his comments, but it was hard for me to ignore his jibe at Leah. Regardless of whether he knew about my mate, any slight toward her felt like a physical blow.

But with Franco, I had learned it was best not to let him know what cards you were holding. I was wary of his intentions but determined to remain civil. There was no reason to stir up unnecessary trouble.

"Of course," Franco said, inclining his head toward me at a tilted angle.

I recognized the mannerism as something he had always done when he was plotting something. My heart squeezed in my chest as I thought of Leah, just a short distance away, who had no idea she was related to someone who would do anything to get his way.

"I'm tempted to keep you here for a while," Franco continued, the threat in his voice barely concealed. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

"You're right," I said. "I'd love to come back later and spend some time with you. I can give you my phone number, and we can catch up soon."

"No need," my brother said, finishing his cigarette and tossing it away. "I'll find you. I hope you have a nice day, Ki."

Without another word, he turned his back and walked away.

By the time I returned to Pinedale, my body had calmed, but my mind still spun in circles of thought, wondering what my half-brother could be planning. It was possible he just wanted to talk, but unlikely.

Jasper and Nile needed to be warned. I took out my phone and typed a message to both of them.

I ran into my brother, Franco, in the next town over. Be on alert. There might be trouble.

I sighed as I hit the send button, praying that I was wrong.

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

Killian walked in the door, and I immediately sensed that something was off with him. My first thought was that I had done something wrong, but I stopped that thought in its tracks. I recognized the trauma response from my upbringing, and knew I needed to ask him to explain instead of assuming his mood was directed toward me.

“How was your trip?” I asked.

Killian shrugged and balled up his fists. “Fine.”

“It doesn’t seem like it went fine,” I pointed out. “You’re very tense.”

“I didn’t find what I was looking for,” he said.

“What were you looking for?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said with a groan.

He sat down on the couch and took off his shoes before staring off into space. It was clear that his brain was working overtime, but without him opening up about what was on his mind, I knew there was nothing more I could do to help ease whatever problem he was having.

“I wasn’t sure what time you were getting back, so I ordered some food for dinner,” I said. “I’m going to head out and pick it up. Do you want me to grab you something on my way?”

“No, I don’t want you leaving the house without me,” Killian said.

His voice was loud and commanding, completely out of character as far as how he usually spoke to me. The directive to stay by his side on top of his demanding tone rubbed me the wrong way.

“Excuse me?” I clarified, hoping I had misheard him.

“There’s just... a lot going on right now,” he said. “I need you to stay in the house. I’ll go and get your food.”

“Killian, tell me what happened,” I pressed. “You’re keeping something from me.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” he said as he put his shoes back on.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t care if I left the house,” I pointed out.

“I’m not discussing this with you anymore,” Killian said. “Just stay in the house. I’ll be right back.”

His tone left no room for argument, and I decided it was best to do as he asked. If whatever was causing him to be overprotective was bad enough that he didn’t want to talk about it, all I could do was trust him. As hard as that was, I would try my best.

He returned quickly, and we ate in silence before heading to bed.

The following day, his mood had not improved. If anything, he seemed more anxious, jumping at the slightest sounds.

“This is getting ridiculous,” I finally said. “If you don’t tell me what’s happening, I’m going to start throwing my books at your head.” I was halfway kidding, but the sentiment behind my words was true.

“No need to be dramatic,” Killian said with a sigh. “If you want to assault me, you’ll have to wait until later. I need to go to a meeting at Alpha Nile’s place. Get your shoes on. You’re coming with me.”

I rolled my eyes but did as he asked. Soon, we were sitting in Nile’s front room.

“You wanted to see me?” Killian asked.

“Yes, but let’s wait for Jasper to get here,” Nile said.

A knock on the door came, and we all looked at each other in confusion. Jasper rarely knocked.

Nile left to answer it, coming back into the room followed by a man who looked suspiciously like my mate. The only differences were in hair and eye color. In place of Killian’s light blond locks and hazel-green eyes, the stranger had darker blond hair with eyes the color of a winter sky.

“I told you I’d find you,” the man said, staring at Killian with a dangerous look.

“Franco,” Killian replied, his jaw locked. “Welcome to Alpha Nile Pinedale’s home. Nile, this is my brother.”

“Half -brother,” Franco corrected. “I believe we’re waiting on one more?”

“I’m here,” Jasper said from behind him.

Franco’s mouth broke into a sinister smile as he turned to greet the newcomer. “Excellent,” he said. “Why don’t we all sit?”

The ease with which he commanded the room unsettled me. Here was a man who had

never been in town before, ordering around three powerful alphas.

Killian said down next to me and placed his hand on mine. I hadn't realized I was shaking, but his closeness comforted me enough to halt the unbidden tremors.

"You must be Killian's pet," Franco said to me lasciviously, eyeing our enclosed hands.

"Leah," I said coldly. "I'm his mate."

"Ah, how wonderful. Congratulations."

Although his words were kind, the tone was anything but. I felt a shiver of fear run up my spine as he locked eyes with me, but I held his stare until he broke it.

"If I had known I was going to have a guest, I would have prepared better," Nile said nonchalantly, ignoring the tension in the room. "But we didn't know you were coming."

"Yes, what exactly are you doing here?" Jasper asked Franco, getting straight to the point.

"I'm here to let the three of you know that I'm in town," Franco began. "I know that alphas are territorial, so I didn't want my presence to come as a surprise and invite any... violent attention toward myself."

"Have you done anything that might encourage us to use violence against you?" Nile asked politely.

"Of course not," Franco said. "But you know how it can be. A strange man comes into town, and everyone's emotions run a little amok. But I assure you, I mean none

of your packs any harm.”

“As long as your presence here is peaceful, you have nothing to fear from us,” Jasper said. His voice sounded as though he doubted that Franco’s intentions were anything but malicious.

“I’m so pleased to hear that,” Franco said. “All I want is to catch up with my big brother. It’s been so long since we had a chance to spend some quality time together, hasn’t it, Ki?”

Killian’s hand squeezed mine, and I knew he was struggling to control himself. I had known he had a brother, one who had chosen a much different path than Killian. But there must have been many more details that Killian hadn’t shared with me yet for him to react so strongly to this man.

“Yes. It’s been a long time,” Killian finally said.

“Well then! No time like the present, I say,” Franco slapped his knees jovially, at complete odds with the tension in the room. “Would the three of you mind giving us the room? I think Killian and I should have a private talk before I head out.”

The alphas exchanged glances, and Killian nodded to them, letting them know he was on board to talk with Franco alone.

“Feel free to let yourself out when you’re done,” Nile said to Franco. “And next time you need to talk, give us a call. No need to come all the way here.”

Franco’s parting smile didn’t reach his eyes as Jasper and Nile left the room.

“You too, sweetheart,” Franco said, jerking his head for me to go.

“No,” I replied.

“What?” Franco hissed.

Killian inhaled sharply at my response, on high alert for any danger that might be headed my way. My palms began to sweat as Franco and I maintained eye contact.

“I’m staying right here,” I said defiantly, lifting my chin up as a challenge.

Franco smiled slowly. “I like this one,” he said to Killian. “Very well, you may stay.”

“Why are you really here?” Killian asked.

“I already told you. I’ve missed you,” Franco replied. “I want us to spend some time together. Drink a couple beers, go for some runs—you know, relive the glory days.”

“Those weren’t the glory days, brother,” Killian said.

“Semantics,” Franco said, flippantly waving his hand. “I want to get to know you again. Maybe we can find more common ground than we had before.”

Killian didn’t have much choice, it seemed, on whether he would accept Franco’s presence in town. The best thing for him would be to get their reunion out of the way as quickly as possible and let Franco go back home.

“Alright,” Killian said. “I’ll drop Leah off at home, and you and I can go grab a drink.”

“No, no,” Franco replied in mock hurt. “You won’t hurry me out of town. In fact, I’m going to stick around for a few days. I’ll spend some time with my favorite brother and show the alphas that I mean no harm to your precious packs.”



I could sense Killian's frustration grow the longer Franco spoke, but I felt powerless to help him. This was between him and his brother. All I could do was stand by his side in support.

"Of course," Killian said through gritted teeth.

"Wonderful!" Franco exclaimed. "Now, I must be going. I need to find a place to stay. I don't suppose you have an extra room for your little brother, do you?"

"No," Killian said. "Only the one room, I'm afraid."

"How disappointing. But no matter, I'll find a place and be in touch with you very soon. Goodbye, brother."

Franco stood up gracefully and slid from the room. We heard the door close, and Killian took a deep breath to steady himself as Nile and Jasper came back inside.

"You two alright in here?" Nile asked.

"I'm so sorry about this," Killian said. "It seems like my personal issues keep turning into problems for you."

"Don't think twice about it. You know I'll always have our back," Jasper assured him, clapping Killian on the shoulder.

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Killian took me home, locking the front door before doing a thorough sweep of the house. Now that I knew what he was worried about, his overprotective concern made much more sense. What I couldn't bear was his fear.

“Come lay down,” I urged, pulling Killian away from the storage closet he was investigating and toward our bedroom.

“I need to check outside,” he said, heading toward the back door.

“Killian,” I said, using my most commanding voice. “Stop right now and look at me.”

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. His head tilted back, and his eyes closed. He paused for a moment before turning toward me, dropping his arms to his sides and slumping his shoulders. I had never seen him look more defeated than in that moment.

“I’m sorry, Leah,” he said. “I’m so afraid that I won’t be able to protect you, I’m driving myself crazy.”

“I know,” I said. “But you need to take a minute and breathe. You can’t protect me or yourself if you aren’t thinking clearly.”

Killian nodded and allowed me to walk him into our bedroom. I shut the door behind us gently, and together, we lay down on the bed.

“Come here,” I said gently, pulling his head onto my chest.

His arm wrapped around my waist, and I felt him melt into me. I breathed a sigh of relief that he was finally beginning to relax.

“He’s bad news, Leah,” he mumbled into my stomach. “He always has been. But I’ve never seen him like this before. I don’t know what he’s planning or how to stop him.”

“Shh,” I said. “You don’t need to do anything right now. We are safe, and we’re together.”

I ran my fingers through his hair as we held each other. After lingering like that for a while, he sat up to sit cross-legged on the bed and looked into my eyes.

“All I want is to protect you,” he said.

We had barely had any real time together as a mated couple, and already, our future was at risk. I refused to spend tonight living in fear of what might happen.

“I want more from you than just your protection right now,” I said.

“Anything you want. I’ll give it to you,” Killian replied.

“I want all of you.”

I got up onto my knees and put my hands on his shoulders, kissing him deeply. He was initially startled by the mood shift, but without hesitation, he leaned into my embrace.

In a flurry of fabric, I began tearing our clothes off while Killian’s hands explored my skin. When all our layers had been removed, Killian returned to a sitting position. I straddled him.

“Make love to me, mate,” I whispered into his ear.

If we were going to have to fight for a happily ever after, I would make sure that our first time together wasn’t our last.

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

“Is this really necessary, Franco?” I asked.

He had been in town for two days already under the guise of reacquainting ourselves with one another. So far, that had meant drinking in the bar and making lewd comments about women. For the third day in a row, he had shown up on my doorstep at noon, wanting to go out again. This time, however, he had brought his motorcycle.

“Are you telling me you don’t still have your bike?” Franco asked.

“Of course I have it,” I answered. “I just don’t ride it much anymore.”

“That’s your problem, brother. You need some more danger in your life,” Franco said. “Come on, grab your gear, and let’s get out of here. That whiskey isn’t going to drink itself.”

“Give me a second,” I replied, closing the front door and heading to grab my helmet and keys.

Franco was the one who bought me my motorcycle when I had temporarily joined his pack. Because they were easy to hide, more maneuverable than cars, and had the bonus of being slightly intimidating, Franco insisted that all his wolves own a bike. It was his favorite mode of transportation. Ever since I left him, though, I hadn’t been able to bring myself to ride my motorcycle very often. There were too many bad memories associated with it.

“He’s back again?” Leah asked.

“Unfortunately,” I responded. “And he wants us to ride our motorcycles today.”

“You don’t seem happy about that.”

I shrugged. “We used to like riding together, but I still can’t figure out what angle he’s playing. It makes me uneasy. Especially since I’m leaving you here by yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. You know Jasper and Nile would be here in a second if I needed them,” Leah assured me.

I nodded and gave her a kiss before heading for the garage.

Leah had been my rock ever since Franco had shown up in Pinedale. I had been tempted to ignore his invitation to spend time together and tell him to get lost, but she had reminded me that if no one ever showed him any kindness, he wouldn’t have the chance to learn how to be better.

Although I hoped she was right about him being able to change, part of me knew he was too far gone. Still, I owed it to him, and to my mate, to give it a try.

Franco revved his engine as I pulled my bike out of the garage, and I followed him as he sped down the street. He had never worn a helmet when he rode. Fear of death hadn’t stopped him from riding recklessly.

We continued out of town, driving for a few hours until Franco finally pulled off onto a secluded spot to take a break.

“I almost lost you back there,” he teased.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” I jibed back. “I kept up just fine.”

Franco punched my arm amiably and laughed. “I’ve missed this,” he said.

“So have I,” I admitted.

Even though I had needed to part ways with him, Franco was still my brother. Aside from Jasper, no one had endured as much by my side as he had. And no one was more deserving of an apology from me.

“I need to say something, and I need you to not act like a dick about it,” I said.

“No promises,” Franco replied with a grin. “What’s on your mind?”

“I’m sorry,” I said earnestly. “I’m sorry for not being the brother you needed, and for all the pain and hurt you’ve gone through because I wasn’t there to protect you. I wish I had been strong enough to take care of you the way you deserved when we were kids.”

Franco didn’t react to my apology, remaining stoic and cold as I continued.

“I know that nothing I can say or do will make up for what happened, but I want you to know I’m here for you now. If you need any support, I hope you come to me,” I said.

It was doubtful that Franco would accept any help from me—or admit if he needed it—but it felt like the right thing to do. I had gotten used to solving problems with violence, but I wanted to prove to Leah, Jasper, and Nile that I wasn’t that man anymore. I wanted to be an alpha worthy of the name.

“That was really heartfelt but unnecessary,” Franco said. “I didn’t come here for your apology, and I don’t need it. I’ve done just fine on my own so far.”

I nodded, expecting his response. “Whether you needed it or not, the apology is there,” I said.

“Noted,” Franco replied. “But I actually wanted to bring you out here to let you know I’m leaving town. No offense, but Pinedale is boring. I need to go where there’s more excitement.”

His statement was unexpected, and I felt a sense of relief wash over me at hearing the words.

“Will you be back?” I asked.

Franco shrugged. “Someday, probably. But for now, I got everything that I came for.”

“Next time, call first,” I joked.

Franco flashed me an evil grin as he remounted his bike. “What’s the fun in that?”

For the third time in our lives, my brother and I parted ways without a goodbye. But this time, it was Franco leaving, and I was left behind. I smiled faintly as he passed into the distance, excited to go home to my mate.

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“He didn’t say why he left?” Leah asked as I told her about Franco’s abrupt departure.

“Just that he was bored,” I said with a shrug. “But it was for the best. Men like Franco aren’t built for places like this. He’s got a lot of work to do before he’s fit to be around anyone but other rogues.”

Leah looked at me with concern, and I knew she was wishing that Franco had made a different choice, been a different person.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“Now we get to go back to that happy bubble we were in before our families came and popped it,” I replied.

I wrapped her in a hug, breathing in her sweet scent as I relished the peace of being at home with her.

It was at that moment that I remembered what I was doing before Franco had suddenly appeared and distracted me.

“Wait right here,” I said, retreating to our room.

“What are you doing?” Leah asked.

“I just need to grab something!”

I rummaged underneath the bed for the jewelry box I had stashed behind some old shoes. Once I located it, I opened the box to make sure all was well with my purchase. The tiny diamonds sparkled in the light around the unique stone before I snapped the box shut, too excited to wait a minute longer before giving it to my mate.

“I have something for you,” I said, returning to where Leah remained waiting for me. “After you lost your necklace the other day, I went to get you this. I wanted you to know how thankful I am that you are giving me a second chance to prove my love for you.”

I presented the box, which she looked at quizzically before gently lifting the lid.



“Killian,” she gasped. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s a meteorite,” I explained. “You are everything I have ever dreamed of, Leah, and I never need to wish on a shooting star again. Not when I have you right here in my arms.”

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be,” she said. “I love you, with my whole heart.”

My heart soared as Leah handed me the necklace, allowing me to place it around her neck.

Leah and I were finally together, and all was well. There was nothing in the world that could bring us down. Not when we were together.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

The past few days with Killian had shown me that our relationship was strong enough to continue building and growing together, and I couldn't be happier. In fact, I felt like I was floating whenever we were together.

I had never understood the phrase "on cloud nine" before, but now that we had finally disclosed our demons and faced our family issues together, I knew exactly what people were talking about.

With my parents and Killian's brother gone from Pinedale, we finally had the chance to be open, flirty, and playful. And we were taking every opportunity to do it.

"Hey, gorgeous," Killian said. "What are you doing in here?"

"Making dinner," I said. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving." He licked his lips while looking me up and down. I laughed at his innuendo.

"For food," I clarified, tossing the kitchen towel at his face.

"Yes, that, too," he said with a laugh. "After we're done eating, I actually have a different kind of physical exercise I want to do with you."

"Oh? What's that?"

"You haven't gone with me to the pack skirmishes yet," he said. "We're holding one tonight."

“You told me about those,” I said excitedly.

Killian smiled at my obvious enthusiasm. “We’ve found it’s a really great way to bond while also staying ready for any threats that might arise. If you want to participate, just let me know.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “I think I want to observe for a little bit. Do the lunas usually join in?”

“Anyone of shifting age is welcome to participate as long as time allows,” he explained. “April and Violet have both done skirmishes pretty regularly. The only rules are that we never attack to maim or injure, and typically, if there is going to be a group skirmish, we set those up in advance—just to make sure that the playing field is as even as possible. But individual challenges can be done spur of the moment.”

Killian and I finished our meal in companionable silence, ending the evening at home by cleaning the kitchen together. It was amazing how two people who had only lived together for a short time could work together in unison. Although doing the dishes wasn’t necessarily a romantic gesture, there was something about doing the chores together that brought me happiness and healing from my past.

I smiled at him as he passed me a plate to dry.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I replied. “I’m just so glad we’re here together.”

“Me too,” he smiled back.

When we were finished, we got dressed and headed out to the forest to watch the skirmish. Wolves from all over town took all evening to sneak out at random

intervals so as not to draw the attention of the humans to the mass exodus of people toward the tree line. We were some of the last to arrive.

“I’ll go talk with the other alphas for a minute before we get started,” Killian said. “Will you save me a spot next to you?”

“Of course,” I said.

I gave his hand a squeeze, letting him know he should hurry back to me. Killian looked at me and took a shuddering breath. I looked at him inquisitively, and he responded by leaning down and giving me a not-so-chaste kiss. For a moment, I forgot that we were surrounded by people.

“You’re so gorgeous,” he said quietly as he pulled away. “I’ll be back soon.”

I watched him walk toward Jasper and Nile with a satisfied smile on my face. We had been through so much together and overcome so many obstacles, but we were finally able to move forward together as alpha and luna, husband and wife.

The packs took their places around a circular wooden fence, shifting from foot to foot in anticipation. The ring was about forty feet wide and contained various obstacles spaced randomly throughout. I stood next to one of the wooden posts and looked around at our people, pride welling within me. Soon, I was joined by Killian, and I heard Nile call everyone to attention.

“Welcome, packs of Pinedale, to another skirmish,” Nile began. The crowd cheered in excitement as he continued. “We’re going to start with a group capture-the-flag event before moving on to individual challenges. Contestants, please enter the ring.”

Two groups of three climbed over the wooden fence into the ring and began making their plans of attack.

“Each group has a flag,” Killian explained to me in a low voice. “They can carry it or hide it, but if they are holding it, they have to be in human form. The goal is to reach the other team’s flag before your own is captured.”

“You may begin!” Nile shouted.

I watched in fascination as a few of the contestants burst into wolf form. There was a flurry of activity as some hid, some ran, and some feigned a chase. Both groups were evenly matched, and it took nearly ten minutes of clawing, tackling, and biting before one group emerged victorious.

A wolf from Jasper’s pack transformed into his human form, holding the opposing team’s flag into the air for all to see as the crowd went wild.

“What did you think?” Killian asked.

“It’s more vicious than I realized,” I admitted. “But it’s exciting.”

“The only rule is to avoid intentional maiming or killing. It’s lucky that our kind heals quickly.”

The winners were celebrated and the losers consoled as they exited the arena. Nile then announced a shift to one-on-one events.

It was clear as the night went on that most of the individuals were friends who wanted to have a good time and practice new skills. However, a few spats took place between obvious rivals—especially once Nile moved the objective from capturing a flag to hand-to-hand combat.

“It’s not a bad way to settle scores within the pack,” I acknowledged to Killian.

“We’ve had almost zero in-fighting since we began this,” he replied. “It keeps the arguments contained to a specific night. Everyone has accepted the outcome of the fight and kept it in the ring.”

“I’m impressed,” I said.

Killian smiled. “I had a feeling you’d enjoy this. Do you think you’ll volunteer this round? It looks like things are slowing down, so if you want to, now is the time.”

“Not tonight,” I replied, shaking my head. “I’ve enjoyed watching, but I think I’ll wait until the next event.”

Killian nodded in approval, and I looked toward the ring where the next contestant had entered.

It was Miranda, the woman who had informed me that Killian would come back to her bed when he got tired of me. I saw red flash in my vision as she smiled at me from across the clearing.

“I have no chosen opponent. Is there anyone brave enough to accept my challenge?” she asked, looking directly into my eyes mockingly.

She had challenged my authority as luna and my desirability as a mate, but I wouldn’t allow her to challenge me openly like this. Not without putting her in her place. I cocked my head at her and narrowed my eyes as I made my decision.

“Changed my mind,” I said to Killian tersely.

“Leah, are you sure about this?” I heard Killian mutter.

I could sense the nervous energy in his voice as he strived to keep it steady, but

nothing could dissuade me from my goal. This was between Miranda and me.

I placed my hands on top of the fence and vaulted myself over it, landing on my feet opposite the conniving she-wolf. Cheers from our pack rose up from the crowd, with the other two packs joining in. None of the alphas or lunas had participated in tonight's event, and I could sense that they were all looking forward to seeing what skills their newest luna had.

I may not have had a lot of friends growing up in Sparkle Hollow, but what I did have was a lot of free time to practice maneuvers and build my strength. I hadn't seen Miranda fight, but I felt confident I could take her down. I was stronger than I looked, and my moves were precise.

"Just a refresher of the rules before we begin," Nile said to Miranda and me. "You may not go for the opponent's throat or face. Do not use intentional force to break your opponents' bones or aim for their major organs. Are you both clear on the boundaries?"

We both nodded, not breaking eye contact, as we began to circle each other in the ring.

"You may fight in human or wolf form," Nile said. "The winner will be declared after they pin the other person to the ground. Begin!"

Miranda and I ran toward each other at full speed and launched ourselves into the air while we transformed. Destiny and Miranda's pale gold wolf collided with a thud, falling to the ground as the audience cheered and screamed. Her golden wolf had the advantage of size, but Destiny was more agile. She avoided each pounce and swipe with relative ease, returning a few minor blows of her own.

As time went on, the golden wolf began to pant in frustration and exhaustion. Destiny

circled around her menacingly, snapping at her legs.

The golden wolf lunged and was about to catch the fur at the back of Destiny's neck when I suddenly changed into my human form to slide underneath her. I rolled on the ground under her paws, narrowly avoiding being hit.

I landed with a smile on my face, kneeling on the ground as she spun around in surprise. "Don't you have any other tricks?" I teased.

The crowd laughed, and I wondered how often others switched between forms during their skirmishes. I hadn't seen anyone do it tonight, but Nile had said it was allowed. What made Destiny and I such a great team was that we always played to each other's strengths. There were times when one of us could accomplish something that was beyond the abilities of the other. Since we were always working as a team, it only made sense for both of us to participate.

Miranda transformed as well so she could respond. "Stop playing around and attack me!"

"Why would I do that?" I asked, rising to my feet and brushing the dust off my jeans. "You're doing such a good job of defeating yourself, I don't think you need my help."

Another laugh from the audience met my jibe, and Miranda's fury overcame her. She ran at me full force, transforming into her wolf once again. When she was only a few feet away and unable to stop her trajectory, I stepped nimbly to the side and allowed Destiny to take over.

Realization widened the eyes of the golden wolf as she saw that she had placed herself in the perfect position to be trapped. Destiny pounced on her back, rolling her to the ground as she barreled past, and landed with her paws pinning the other wolf to



the ground.

I howled in victory, stepped off the golden wolf, and we both transformed. Miranda's face was red with embarrassment—where it wasn't covered in dirt—as she lay on the ground.

I bent down to help her up, but as I leaned over, I looked into her eyes. “Don't ever try to take what's mine again,” I whispered. “Understand?”

Miranda nodded in fear as she realized she was completely outmatched and allowed me to help her to her feet. She limped out of the arena toward her sister as the rest of the group clapped.

“Congratulations to Luna Leah on her first win!” Nile announced.

I smiled and waved at the assembly as I made my way back to Killian. I was thrilled with my win, and even more pleased when I saw the bright smile on my mate's face.

“I won!” I cried excitedly, running the last few steps toward him in celebration.

He pulled me into an embrace and twirled me around in celebration while I laughed.

“That was incredible,” he said. “You have no idea how turned on it made me to watch you take your rightful place as luna to the pack.”

I raised one eyebrow, wanting him to continue. “Oh, really?”

“You were so intimidating, tough, and collected,” Killian said, keeping his tone low so he wouldn't be overheard. “I've never seen anything hotter. All I can think about now is how badly I want to touch you.”

“Want?”

“Need,” he growled into my ear.

A shiver ran down my spine at the seductive timbre in his voice. The power I felt after my victory made me want to feel even more. As much as I wanted to be with him, I also wanted him to work for my attention. Just this once.

I looked around to see if I was being watched by anyone else. Noticing that the attention had shifted away from me, I decided now was the perfect time to test Killian’s need for me.

“Come get me, then,” I dared him.

I walked away from him, and once I was sure he was following, I sprinted into the forest.

## Page 23

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No one had ever been able to get to me like my mate could, and the sight of her tight ass walking away from me into the forest after completely obliterating her competition was a new high. One I needed to chase.

The moment she got past the tree line, I saw her form shift into Destiny's brown fur and dart away. I hustled after her, determined to take her the moment I caught up to her. But I hadn't expected her to be so fast. Apparently, the last time we ran in the forest, she had been taking it easy on me.

Our game of cat and mouse was exhilarating. One second, she was right in front of me, about to be mine, and the next, she had completely disappeared, leaving me frustrated and eager. With each passing moment, my senses became more heightened.

Faster, Rocky.

If I could go any faster than this, don't you think I would, my wolf growled in frustration.

I knew he was just as eager to catch Destiny as I was. I shouldn't have goaded him, but her scent was driving us both insane. Her smell led us around a small hill, where we spotted an enclosed area of pine trees. Some had fallen over, creating a kind of wall.

There , Rocky said excitedly.

But before we reached it, Leah stepped out from behind one of the trees. "Finally caught me, huh?" she teased.

Rocky pounced on her, gently tackling her to the ground and pinning her beneath him. She giggled as he nuzzled into her neck, licking her cheek with his tongue.

“Hey, now,” she protested. “Is that really fair?”

I shifted and grabbed her by the wrists, raising them above her head. “Is this better?” I asked.

“Mmm, much better.”

Leah’s brown hair created a halo around her head against the backdrop of the forest floor. Our eyes locked as I reached down with one hand, keeping my other one firmly on her wrists, to unbutton her pants.

“Let me go, and I can help you with that,” she said.

“No,” I responded. “You made me chase you all around the forest. What makes you think I would let you go ever again?”

I lowered her pants just enough that I could insert my free hand inside and watched as her eyes widened. Slowly, teasingly, I began to caress the outside of her underwear as she panted. Every time I motioned like I was going to take it further, I could see her eyes glimmer with excitement, only to cloud over when I resumed my caresses.

Finally, I felt her panties begin to saturate with her desire. I moved them aside and placed a finger inside her, grinning as she gasped.

“More,” she begged.

I shook my head, removing myself from inside her and circling her clitoris. She wiggled her hips in frustration as she tried to move out from under me.

“Are you getting impatient?” I asked.

She growled in response. The low rumbling from her diaphragm reverberated through her body, heightening my desire.

I plunged my finger inside her once again but was almost immediately overcome with a need to be closer. Unable to withhold any longer, I released her arms and yanked her pants down to her ankles. With a swift movement, I turned her onto her front and lifted her rear into the air, until her ass was touching my pelvis.

She let out a moan of pleasure as I caressed her opening with my fingers. The view of her backside made me quiver with anticipation of what was about to come next.

“You’re so wet,” I observed gruffly.

“I want you, Killian.”

I freed my erection from my pants, not bothering to fully remove them, and plowed into her roughly. She gasped at the sudden entrance, and my eyes closed as I threw my head back in rapture as our bodies became one.

“Yes,” she moaned, curling her fists.

My strong hands grasped her hips firmly, feeling the soft flesh in my palms. I placed one hand on her lower back to serve as a brace and began to thrust my pelvis slowly and steadily. The chase had made me impatient to be inside her, but I was determined to ensure that she reached orgasm before me.

As my cock moved in and out of her, we both began to pant and moan as sweat dripped off our bodies, mingling together. I moved my hands to her shoulders, lifting her torso towards mine so I could access her front.

Leah's head tilted to the side, resting against my shoulder. As I felt her body begin to shudder, I reached one arm around her, holding her against me firmly so she could focus on her pleasure.

My other hand found the soft nub of her pelvis. Her moans became louder, more animalistic.

"Don't stop," she ordered.

As I rubbed her clit, she began to bounce against me. I halted my movements, allowing her to take control of her own penetration, and focused on keeping myself contained for a few moments longer.

Her speed increased, and just as I thought I wouldn't be able to hold out any longer, I felt her climax. She screamed as waves of pleasure coursed through her.

Finally, I allowed myself to reach the pinnacle as well. My arms tightened around her, holding our bodies close together as I ejaculated.

Our bodies relaxed, and I helped Leah untangle herself from me before we clothed ourselves. I sprawled on the ground to catch my breath, and Leah plopped down next to me. I wrapped my arms around her, drawing her close to my chest.

"I could stay here all night," she said contentedly.

"No one's saying we can't," I pointed out. "Give me about fifteen minutes, and we can go for another round."

Leah slapped my chest lightly at my teasing. "As much as I enjoyed you taking me in the forest, I think our next round should be in our bed at home."

I rubbed her arm in agreement as we continued basking in the aftermath of our coupling. The night was peaceful as we held each other and looked at the moon.

“It’s really quiet out here,” Leah said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Actually, does it seem a little too quiet to you?”

Leah sat up and looked around the forest, and I was suddenly on alert. The forest was still, but something didn’t seem right.

“Follow me,” I said, getting to my feet.

Leah and I ran quickly and quietly back toward Pinedale.

“What do you think is wrong?” Leah asked.

“I don’t know if anything is. It’s just a feeling.”

As we reached the outskirts of town, everything seemed normal. The packs appeared to still be in the clearing, continuing the skirmish event. Only those who couldn’t shift—the children and those too old to fight—had remained in town.

At first, I thought that I had made a mistake and all was well, but as we approached the community center, I smelled something out of place. There were wolves in town—and they weren’t ours.

And then I heard it. The sound of crying and shouting was unmistakable.

“It’s coming from inside the community building,” Leah whispered.

I nodded at her and tilted my head toward the back entrance. Whatever was

happening inside, we needed to find out what it was.

We ran in a crouched position until we reached the back of the building. A hedge surrounded the backyard, and I motioned for Leah to disguise herself in the branches while I went to get a closer look. A crease appeared between her eyebrows as she shook her head vigorously, placing her hand in mine. We were too close to the building to speak without giving away our position, but her message was clear. Where you go, I go.

I held her hand to my heart and looked at her pleadingly, hoping she would understand my message in return. I can't do this if I don't know you're safe.

She sighed, nodding her head as she understood what I meant. After a moment, she hurried away, hiding in the hedge to watch.

With my back to the wall, I shuffled around the perimeter and located the back door. It was already cracked open slightly, so I peeked inside.

Every member of the packs who had remained in Pinedale—from the smallest infants to the most venerable elders—was seated on the floor inside. They clutched each other in fear as they hunkered down, occasionally glancing fearfully at the figures that prowled around them.

My blood ran cold at the sight. I barely had a moment to analyze what was happening when the door opened with a swift bang that shook the wall, revealing my hiding place.

“Big brother,” Franco said. “I thought I smelled you skulking around here. Would you like to come inside?”

“Franco. Let them go,” I seethed.



“Oh, I don’t think I can do that,” he said. “My pack is here with me, and I promised them this territory. You know how it is, right?”

Indeed, now that the door was open, I saw that he had nearly twenty men and women—the very same violent and destructive shifters who had been following him for years—waiting inside.

“So that’s how it is?” I asked. “You saw me in town and thought you’d bring your posse to destroy what we’ve built here?”

“No, no, you’re mistaken. I’ve been looking for you for years. Ever since you ran away and turned your back on me, I’ve been plotting my revenge against you. Imagine my surprise when I heard the name Alpha Killian Stone a few weeks ago. Finally, you were within arm’s reach. All I had to do was pretend that I wanted to catch up with you so I could scope out your territory, infiltrate your pack, and voila !”

Franco finished with an interjection, twirling his hand as if he had made his plan magically appear in front of my eyes.

“So, everything you said to me was a lie?” I asked.

“You sound surprised.”

In honesty, I wasn’t surprised by Franco’s lying or scheming. The violence and disregard for life were par for the course as well. What I was surprised about was that I had fallen for his plan for even one second. My idiocy had jeopardized the lives of not only my pack but the packs we were in alliance with. Now I stood here, alone and severely outnumbered, trying to come up with a plan to stop him.

As Leah waited, hidden somewhere behind me, I realized that I had let her down as well. I refused to have my last moments be those of defeat or cowardice, especially

witnessed by my mate. It was my duty to defend the helpless people in front of me. I only wished I had time to say goodbye to Leah before it was all over.

Run, Leah , I thought.

If she could escape, then I would gladly accept my fate.

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I couldn't see inside the building from my position outside, but from Killian's body language, I understood that even he knew that he was outnumbered. So far, he had remained outside, but if he entered the building, there was no doubt in my mind that his life would be forfeit.

We need to protect him! Destiny shouted, trying to force me to change.

Fighting right now won't help him, I pointed out. Even with my help, Killian and I are outnumbered. We have to go get help.

I can't leave him! My wolf argued my point, seemingly unable to see reason when facing the prospect of losing our mate to his deranged half-brother.

I turned around quietly, shifting our focus toward the trees where the pack warriors still met.

Destiny, we don't have time for this. Run for the other alphas. Right now.

With Franco's focus still on Killian and the hostages inside the community center, I sprang into action. I shifted, hoping against hope that Destiny would follow my plan and get help. It was the only chance we had at saving Killian.

My heart soared as my wolf ran towards the trees, knowing we were doing everything we could at the moment. But the next moment, I felt a feeling of loss and grief wash through me. If we didn't hurry, I might never see my mate again.

You were right, Leah, Destiny said. I needed your perspective to understand that this

was the best plan. Now let me help you.

She pushed herself even harder until the wind whipped through her fur so fast, it felt like we were flying. The rhythmic beat of her paws on the ground and the feeling of speed were enough to wash the fear from me, replacing it with adrenaline.

We careened into the clearing at breakneck speed, sliding to a stop at the edge of the arena. The stunned faces of the three packs looked at us for a split-second before half of the wolves shifted.

“Luna Leah,” Jasper said in a loud, commanding voice. “What happened?”

“Franco is back in Pinedale,” I answered, shifting at once. “He and his pack have taken the remainder of the pack members hostage in the community center. Killian is trying to stop them, but he’s outnumbered.”

“How many are there?” Jasper asked.

I shrugged, feeling the panic rise up in my chest. “I don’t know. I didn’t see them.”

Without giving an order, the entire assembly shifted, following their alphas back toward town. Jasper and the Dark Moon Pack took the lead, while Nile’s Pinedale wolves took the right flank.

To my surprise, Killian’s wolves followed me as I ran on Jasper’s left side. It hadn’t struck me until this moment, but with their alpha in danger, the pack would look to their luna for leadership. Pride filled my heart as they obeyed my silent orders.

In what felt like less time than it had taken me to reach the forest, we arrived at the hedge where I had spied on Killian’s conversation with Franco. To my horror, Killian was no longer standing in the doorway. Instead, his wolf Rocky was backing away as

Franco and his enemy shifters circled around him menacingly.

Jasper, Nile, and I nodded to a few of our wolves, who circled around to the front of the building to begin evacuating the civilians from inside.

With the rescue mission underway, I threw my whole focus into Killian. One of his legs appeared to be broken, as he wasn't putting any weight on it. A large gash ran down the length of his front leg as well, leaving a trail of blood on the grass wherever he walked.

At the sight of the blood dripping from my mate, I howled, letting out my pain and fury. The sudden cry drew the attention of the wolves toward me as Jasper, Nile, and I jumped in unison over the hedge, aiming directly for Franco. Our packs followed closely behind us.

Chaos broke out as nearly a hundred wolves fought each other. Fur, teeth, and snarls filled the air as we bit, clawed, and slammed each other to the ground.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Killian recover the full use of his legs as his quick healing mended what had been damaged. He lunged for the wolf protecting his brother's flank—Franco's beta—grabbing him by the throat and tossing him to the ground.

He then turned his attention toward Franco.

I rushed to Killian's side, ready to defend him from any of the other wolves backing his brother. As we squared off against our nemesis, I saw Nile and Jasper leading our wolves, working together to drive the attackers back. Instead of a disordered melee, we now had battle lines. The tides were turning.

Just as we were about to attack Franco, pushing him back once and for all, a flash of

silver whooshed from behind us and hit Killian on the back. I whirled around as he howled in pain, trying to find where the hit had originated from.

The beta wolf that Killian had attacked was no longer lying on the ground. He had been faking how badly he had been injured, and he'd used the opportunity to shift into human form and surprise him from behind. He held a strange silver knife in his hand—apparently, the same weapon that had been used moments ago to strike him.

Realizing he had been spotted, the beta dropped the knife. Shifting back into his wolf form, he attempted to flee over the hedge, but Killian and I pounced in unison. Together, we finished him off, ensuring he wouldn't attack again.

“Well done, big brother.” Franco had shifted and was taunting Killian, clapping slowly in mock celebration at his kill.

“It's over, Franco,” Killian replied as he turned to face him. “Your wolves are being driven out. Your second is dead. You've failed.”

“On the contrary, brother. I never fail,” Franco said. His blue eyes flashed in anger, and I wondered what other sinister things he had planned for us.

Killian narrowed his eyes, not backing down. “You are no longer my brother,” he declared. “You are nothing to me. For so long, I wished I could make things right between us, but you've proven that will never be possible. There is nothing left for you here, Franco.”

The man glared at my mate with fury, but even he could see that there was no winning this fight.

“You aren't going to kill me?” Franco asked incredulously.

“There would be no point,” Kilian said simply. “You’re already dead to me. Leave now. If you ever return, I assure you that you will be killed.”

With one last look of fury, Franco backed away, following the path his wolves had made as they were pushed out of Pinedale.

We all stood, waiting for the sounds of their running footsteps and howls to fade into the distance before we finally realized that the fight was over.

“Are they gone?” Luna Violet asked.

“They’re gone,” Nile assured her.

With the wolves routed from the area, I shifted, turning to look at Killian. My face beamed with pride and relief, knowing that we had succeeded in our goal to protect our packs. Against all obstacles, we had overcome the attack. Together.

I was about to run into his arms in celebration of our victory when I noticed that he had turned pale. It was as though all the blood had drained from his body.

“Something’s wrong,” he declared. His voice seemed distant, almost robotic, as his eyes became unfocused.

“Killian?” I asked, unsure what he was talking about. The attackers were gone, and we had won. What could be wrong?

He looked down at his leg, and I saw that blood was still gushing from the wound he had received earlier. Instead of healing, it had reopened, and the blood was soaking what remained of his pant leg.

“What is happening?” he asked, fear rising in his voice.

Killian's leg gave out, and he slumped to the ground. As he fell, I lunged forward, barely managing to catch his head before it hit the ground.

"No!" I screamed as fear and loss overwhelmed me almost to the point of insanity.

Never had I seen a werewolf in such bad shape before, and the sharp contrast between the strength and command Killian had shown during the battle and the lifeless shell he was becoming was too much for my mind to handle.

Tears streamed down my face, obscuring my vision as I stroked his blond hair. If he could only open his eyes, I would know that everything was going to be okay again.

This has to be some cruel trick, I thought. We're finally together. Everything has to be alright.

I was aware that other hands were touching Killian, but I couldn't tell who they belonged to. All I knew was that he was slipping away from me.

"Leah, you need to let us help him," Jasper said.

I looked up at him, pushing through the shock so I could comprehend what he was telling me. "Help him?"

Jasper nodded. "We're taking you both to Nile's house. It's closest, and time is of the essence. April and Violet are going to help you get there, and we're going to heal him. But I need you to let go so we can move him."

I looked back down at my hands, realizing that I was still holding his head in my lap. I nodded mutely, allowing Nile and Jasper to lift him away from me.

A small sob shook my body as he was taken away, but the next second, two pairs of



arms encircled me. The lunas were here, wrapping me in their circle of protection and helping me toward the house where my mate was being carried.

“We’re here,” April said. “We’ve got you.”

There was nothing more they could say, but they didn’t need to. After years of being on my own and having to take care of myself, I finally had people looking out for me and my mate. I had to believe that he was going to survive this.

“I can’t do this alone,” I said.

“You’ll never have to,” Violet replied.

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

I woke up slowly, feeling the warmth of the bed I rested in and the quiet hum of chatter somewhere near me. My hand was enclosed in someone else's. It took me a moment to realize it was Leah's.

My eyes opened slowly, taking in the low lighting of the bedroom at Alpha Nile's house. A group of people—the town doctor, Jasper, and April—was huddled around the foot of my bed, discussing my injuries. Leah sat by my side with her head bowed and eyes closed.

“Once the wolfsbane is fully out of his system, his recovery should be straightforward,” the doctor said.

“How long should that take?” April inquired.

The doctor shrugged. “As you know, werewolf injuries aren't my specialty. My predecessor has far more extensive knowledge, but I have only just begun making headway on his notes.”

“That isn't good enough,” Jasper said tersely. “His recovery is the most important thing right now—to all of the wolves in Pinedale.”

I saw the doctor's eyes widen. This must be the new human doctor. Our own pack doctor had passed away fairly recently, as had the town's human doctor.

“You're scaring the poor guy,” I croaked quietly. “Don't you know a calm doctor is a happy doctor?”

“Killian!” Leah sobbed, raising her head so quickly, I was surprised she didn’t get whiplash.

She smiled at me brightly, and I smiled back. The small movement of my face sent tremors through my body, and I hunched over in pain.

“What’s wrong?” she fussed.

“The poison is passing out of his system,” the doctor explained. “He’ll have side effects for a while, but the fact that he is awake is encouraging.”

When the shaking subsided, I took a deep breath. “You said it was wolfsbane?”

“Or something like it,” the doctor said. “There was a silver blade that slashed through your thigh, and whatever coating was on it went through your system. It isn’t wolfsbane, exactly. My instruments aren’t advanced enough to test all of its properties—nor do I have enough of the elements left on the knife—but they put the wolfsbane through some kind of chemical transformation to make it more potent for wolves.”

I sat quietly, taking in the information from the doctor.

“But you’re healing,” Leah said encouragingly. “It’s just going to take a little more time than usual. Your arm was broken, and you had a lot of deep cuts.”

I smiled at her, this time managing to avoid the crippling pain that had accompanied my last attempt.

“We’ll go make you some food and let you get some rest,” April said, pulling gently on Jasper’s arm.

“It’s good to see you awake, brother,” Jasper said.

He wasn’t a man of very many words, but I knew by those few words how much he cared about me. I had always considered him to be my brother, but rarely did I feel that sentiment reciprocated.

I nodded at him, my eyes filling with tears as Jasper, April, and the doctor left. Leah remained by my side, playing quietly with my hand.

“Were you injured?” I asked her. “I barely remember what happened. Everything seems so blurry.”

“The doctor said it might take some time for your memories to return,” she said. “The poison didn’t just attack your body; it attacked your brain, too. But to answer your question—no, I wasn’t hurt.”

I sighed in relief. When I confronted Franco at the community center, I remembered wanting to keep Leah safe, but I wasn’t sure if I had kept my promise to do that.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I asked.

She shuddered as she put herself back in the moment. “You asked me to hide in the hedge while you investigated the sounds coming from inside the building,” she began. “When I saw Franco in the doorway, I knew we were in over our heads—especially after he said that his pack was inside with him. I couldn’t see how many wolves he had with him, so I convinced Destiny to run back to the forest to get help.”

Her voice broke before she continued.

“When we got back, they had you surrounded. Killian, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have

left you behind. I should've stayed with you."

"No," I said firmly. "Don't think like that. You did everything right. I was outnumbered, and even if you had stayed, I would have gotten hurt. And so would you. We probably wouldn't be sitting here talking about it."

She nodded, wiping her eyes. "We split up—some of our wolves going inside to evacuate the prisoners and the rest fighting Franco's pack outside," she said. "Franco's second baited you into attacking him. We had the rest of the wolves to our front, and we presumed he was too injured to attack our backs. But he transformed, grabbed a knife from somewhere, and cut you with it. We were able to take him down almost immediately, but the damage had been done."

I concentrated on her words as images came back from that night. I remembered fighting the wolf, as well as the pain the blade had caused when it pierced my skin. But there was something else I remembered. A look of victory in the ice-blue eyes of my half-brother.

Franco had to have known what his beta had planned to do. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if he had orchestrated the entire night to end my life and get retribution for my abandonment of him.

I understood his hate and anger, but I also knew that they came from hurt. I had experienced that hurt before, but I'd had Jasper by my side to pull me through it and help me find light and hope on the other side. Franco had never allowed himself to get close to anyone—even me. My heart broke for what had transpired between us, and for the loss of the brother I would never have.

"What about the people in town?" I asked, suddenly remembering the din of the fight. Surely, the snarls and howls of the wolves had been noticed. "Did the fight raise any alarm among the humans?"

“No,” Leah said. “Luckily, it was quick and on the outskirts of town. Since Nile’s pack owns all the homes in that area, there weren’t any humans to overhear the chaos. Our secret is still safe.”

It was a relief knowing that my brother’s presence in town wasn’t going to force everyone to leave. Because of how integrated the werewolves were with the humans here, it was of paramount importance that we keep our abilities a secret. Anything else would cause problems for more than just us. The entire werewolf world would be at risk.

I shuddered, thinking how my relationship with my brother could have caused such catastrophic consequences.

Leah noticed my dark thoughts and reached out to place her palm on my cheek. “It isn’t your fault,” she said.

“I know,” I replied offhand.

“No, you need to hear this, Killian,” she said, looking into my eyes with sincerity and love. “What happened with Franco wasn’t your fault.”

My chest tightened as tears threatened to spill out of my eyes. “I abandoned him,” I choked out. “Twice.”

“You and I both suffered trauma in our lives. Plenty of people all over the world—including the alphas of the other packs here—have gone through unimaginable horrors. We’ve all made mistakes, yes, but we’ve learned from them and become better. Franco didn’t do that. He made his own choices, and those choices are not your fault.” She emphasized her final words, wanting the truth behind them to fully sink in.

As always, Leah was right. There was no one who could control Franco if he decided to go down a path of destruction, just as no one could control Jasper, Aiden, or me when we had done things that we later came to regret. Life was a series of choices, and my brother had chosen the wrong ones. All I could hope for was that someday, somehow, something would open his eyes to a better way of living.

I prayed that day would come before we met again.

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Over the next few weeks, Leah never left my side. It took nearly a week for the wolfsbane to completely leave my system, and probably would have been longer if it weren't for the diligent efforts of all three Pinedale lunas.

Violet had dug up some old books from Nile's extensive library, which detailed various herbs and potions that could be used to remove wolfsbane from the bloodstream. With April's help, they had made an array of concoctions to ease my symptoms, making the time I spent awake more bearable.

Leah ensured that I didn't fall into despair at the prospect of being bedridden. I wasn't used to being confined, let alone forced to stay in bed. I didn't take too kindly to the idea at first, but after the third time I had fallen while trying to get out of bed, she put her foot down.

"Killian Leonard Stone," she stated, using my full name for the first time. "If you don't sit your ass back in that bed and stay there I'm going to tie you down. You are an alpha, and so help me goddess, you will do as your luna commands!"

"Yes, ma'am," I acquiesced.

We spent days talking about our pasts, our wishes and dreams for the future, and

everything else under the sun. Although the reason for my convalescence was less than ideal, the time we spent together ended up being some of the best days of my life. I was convinced now more than ever that Leah and I had been designed for each other. There was no universe or time where she and I weren't meant to be mates.

As I regained my strength, I was allowed to go back home. Finally, about two weeks after the battle, I felt like myself again.

Leah had just returned from the bar, where she had taken over my management duties in my absence.

"How was everything?" I asked as she hung her purse in the closet.

"Everyone's doing a great job," she said. "I thought I might have to stay longer, but they've really picked up the slack for us. All I had to do was place orders. They handled the rest."

"I'm glad you're home early," I admitted. "I have somewhere I want to take you."

"Oh?" she asked, an eyebrow raised. "Did your jailer parole you?"

I laughed at her self-deprecating humor and pulled her into a hug. "I'm healed, darling," I said. "I feel better than ever. Will you come out for a walk with me?"

She walked toward the door, holding her hand out for me to take it, and I led her down the street toward a park. The sun had already set, and a full moon was shining bright in the sky.

"What are we doing here?" Leah asked as we walked into a rose-filled garden.

"Dancing," I said, twirling her around in a circle.



She laughed lightly but settled into me happily as I swayed her back and forth, her head resting on my chest. I held one of her hands in mine as the other wrapped around her waist.

“A moon dance,” she said quietly.

“I promised you I would dance with you in the moonlight again,” I pointed out. “And I want to keep my promises to you.”

“You have,” she said, looking up at me with love in her eyes.

“You deserve the world,” I said. “So far I haven’t given you that, but I want to change that.”

“You’ve given me everything,” she argued. “I have you.”

I nodded, but I was determined to continue with my speech. “You married me because you wanted to escape from Sparkle Hollow,” I pointed out. “I’m so glad you agreed to be my mate, because it’s allowed us the time to fall in love with each other again. To get to know each other, better than we ever did before. My one regret was that I wasn’t able to give you the fairytale from the very beginning.”

I stopped dancing, placing a hand inside my pocket to pull out a ring. Leah’s hand covered her mouth as I got down on one knee and held the ring out for her to see.

“Luna Leah Stone, I have loved you from the moment I met you and will continue to love you until my last breath,” I said. “Will you do me the honor of being my wife?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, her eyes shimmering with tears.

I placed the ring on her finger and got to my feet, pulling her into my arms for a long,

passionate kiss.

“I want a real wedding this time,” I told her. “The white gown, bridesmaids, flowers, champagne, and cake. All of it. You deserve to have everything you ever dreamed of.”

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

The proposal from Killian had been completely unexpected, and absolutely perfect. The whirlwind of that night had subsided, and after a few weeks of intense planning, the day was finally here.

Killian had been hands-on with every step of the planning. He seemed hell-bent on making our wedding the most magical and perfect event our packs had ever seen. The only snag we had met so far was with the guest list.

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” Killian asked.

“I wish I was, but Alpha Lex said they refused to attend, even with our express invite to come back to Pinedale,” I answered.

“I assumed they would realize that we could make amends if their behavior changed, not that they would cut off contact with you forever,” he said angrily. “I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. There wasn’t much that either Killian or I could do to make my parents into better people. Still, I wished my parents were invested in my future as much as they had been interested in what I had done in the past.

“I’ll be alright,” I answered him. “Besides, we only have a little while left until the ceremony. Guests should be arriving soon, and I still need to get ready.”

We had been setting up at the community center, where I had asked for our ceremony and reception to take place. The fight between us and Franco’s pack had left scars in the minds of many of the Pinedale wolves. I felt that a happy event was just what was needed to wipe the slate clean for everyone.

“There should be a gift waiting for you when you get home,” Killian told me. “If you don’t see it, message me so I can check where it is. I want to make sure you get it before the ceremony.”

“Mysterious,” I commented. “Will I like this gift?”

“I think it might be the best gift you’ve ever received.”

I headed home and unlocked the door, looking around for a package of some sort from my mate. Everything looked exactly as it had when we had left this morning, but I did notice a pair of shoes by the front door.

“Hello?” I called out.

A head of red hair popped her head around the door to the hallway as someone screeched loudly in excitement.

“Leah!”

“Sienna?” I asked. “You came!”

“Of course I did, silly goose,” she replied. “Your parents didn’t let me come to your first wedding, but there’s no way in hell I was going to miss this one.”

“I can’t believe Killian kept this a surprise from me,” I said, still in shock at seeing my best friend.

“For you,” Sienna pointed out. “You got yourself a good one there.”

I agreed with her wholeheartedly, and we moved to the bedroom so we could both get ready for the wedding. As we did each other’s makeup, we caught up on the parts of

life that we had missed.

“That dress is amazing,” Sienna gushed as I put on my gown.

When Killian and I had said our vows to each other at the civil ceremony, I hadn’t worn anything fancy. In fact, I couldn’t remember what I had been wearing because so many other things had been going through my mind. But today, in my floor-length, strapless silk dress with lace detailing, I was the epitome of “bridal.”

“Time to go. It’s nearly dusk,” I pointed out, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Why are you so nervous?” Sienna asked with a laugh. “You’re already married to the guy.”

“I’m not sure,” I replied. “This time, we’re choosing each other. It’s about love, not duty. We’ve seen each other’s flaws and issues and are making a commitment to stick together, anyway—to become a new version of ourselves, together. It means more this time around.”

Sienna nodded in understanding as she drove us toward the community center. We arrived just as the last guests went inside. She opened the door for me.

“My lady,” she teased, giving a gallant bow as she helped me to my feet.

We walked inside and waited by the door leading to the backyard, where the guests were being seated. Light, classical music drifted through the speakers as everyone sat in white chairs decorated with tulle and greenery.

At the head of the group, waiting on the other end of the aisle, I could see Killian shifting nervously from foot to foot next to Jasper. I was pleased that he had asked Jasper to be his best man, as well as to officiate our wedding. There was no one better

suited to either task than his true brother.

“I should get up there,” Sienna said. “Can’t get married without your maid of honor!”

I giggled as she winked at me before striding confidently down the aisle. It didn’t surprise me that all the young men in the pack eyed her as she walked past, but as usual, she paid them no mind.

As Sienna reached the front, I saw her bend down and pick up her violin. I hadn’t even realized it, but Killian must have set it up for her while we were gone. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she began to play the most beautiful song I had ever heard. Her talent had always surprised me, but the combination of the romantic setting, my joy at seeing her, and the fact that she was playing just for me was overwhelming.

I began walking down the aisle, tears already in my eyes as I walked toward my mate and our best friends, surrounded by the rest of our found family. I reached the front as Sienna held onto one wavering note and clasped hands with Killian.

“Welcome, friends and family, to the marriage ceremony of Alpha Killian Stone and his true mate, Luna Leah Stone,” Jasper began. “Love is more than a contract; it is an eternal bond between two souls who are prepared to go through fire for each other. No couple has shown this more than Killian and Leah.

“You two have already exchanged your formal vows, cementing your bond,” Jasper continued, turning his attention to us. “As you start the next chapter of your journey together, each of you has asked to share new vows that signify the loyalty and commitment you have for one another.”

Killian gazed at me. “Leah, my love for you has no beginning and no end,” he said. “Being your husband is the greatest gift that I have ever been given. Loving you gives

me purpose and drives me to be a better man each and every day. You are the sun in my storms, the stars that guide me, and the moon that lights up the dark. I promise to always protect you, always serve you, and always love you.”

My heart burst with love for him as I listened to his promises of forever. Killian deserved to be loved for everything he was and everything he could become, and I found myself struggling to speak now that it was my turn to share my vows.

“Killian,” I began after clearing my throat of the emotions that had risen. “You are the most dedicated and loyal man I’ve ever met. I am honored to call you my mate. I promise to stand beside you, no matter what we face. I promise to be your comfort and a safe place to rest from the storms of life. And I promise that from now until forever, you will never need to be alone. I will choose you today, tomorrow, and every day, for as long as we live.”

When I finished, Killian’s eyes had filled with tears to match my own. He smiled at me happily.

“By the power given to me by the parties gathered here today, I name you, once again, husband and wife,” Jasper declared. “You may kiss the bride!”

Killian took me into his arms and kissed me with the promise of a thousand kisses to come.

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Our wedding reception was the biggest, most elegant party I had ever attended. Everyone we knew had come to celebrate us with food, drinks, and dancing. We mingled and chatted with everyone, thanking them for their attendance, before the notes of our song played from the speakers.

“Mrs. Stone, may I have this dance?” Killian asked.

I blushed to hear my new name and accepted his request to join him on the dance floor. Polite applause greeted us as he twirled me around the dance floor.

“Are you having a good time?” he asked in a low voice.

“Amazing,” I answered. “It’s everything I dreamed of. Especially because I’m here with you.”

“I have a feeling the party is going to go on all night.” Killian grimaced.

“I’m thinking I don’t want to stay much longer, to be honest,” I said. “As much fun as it’s been, I’d rather spend some alone time with my husband.”

Killian dipped me as the song ended, planting a kiss on my lips. I smiled into his mouth, realizing he had given me the picture-perfect finale for our wedding.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said as he brought me upright once again.

“Everyone, can I have your attention, please?” Killian said to the room. “The bride will be tossing her bouquet. If we could have all the single ladies to the dance floor.”

A mad rush of feet followed his announcement as people cleared a space for all the women to huddle together. I spied Miranda and Nia elbowing for a position in the front row and rolled my eyes. Our spat had ended, but I knew that a part of me would always find their presence slightly annoying.

With my back to the group, I threw my flowers in a high arc over the top of my head. I turned around just in time to see Sienna snatch the bouquet from midair before it reached the waiting hands of Miranda. She smirked at me and gave me another wink.



“Better luck next time,” I overheard her say to the girls as I walked forward to give her a parting hug.

“You’re staying for a few days, right?” I asked her.

“Of course,” she said. “I’m staying at Nile’s tonight, but I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Actually,” I said, spying the look Killian was giving me, “better make that the afternoon.”

Killian and I waved goodbye to the crowd, and we headed back home.

“You need to keep your eyes on the road,” I pointed out.

“I can’t,” he said. “You look too damn good in that dress, mate.”

“As long as you get us home in one piece so you can take it off me, I suppose I’ll allow the ogling,” I replied.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Actually, I think I want to leave it on.”

I raised my eyebrows, grinning in anticipation of what he had planned.

When he pulled into the driveway, he opened my door, but before my feet could touch the ground, he picked me up.

“It’s customary for the groom to carry his bride across the threshold,” he pointed out.

“Something tells me you just wanted an excuse to hold me.”

“That, too,” he smirked.

As he opened the door, he kissed my lips deeply. I closed my eyes, lost in his touch, and when I opened them, I found myself in our bedroom.

He set me down, and I immediately moved to unhook my dress.

“No,” he said, staying my hands. “I meant it. I want you to leave it on. For now.”

“Yes, sir.”

I climbed onto the bed, allowing my dress to splay out around me as I watched him remove his clothes.

“You look like an angel,” he said.

I bit my lip as he leaned over me, trailing his hands up under my dress to remove my underwear.

“I’d be anything for you,” I told him.

“All I want you to be is yourself.”

My breathing hitched as his hands traced the most intimate parts of my body, sending shivers through me as electricity tingled and crackled in my ears.

“You have no idea what you do to me, Leah.”

His head disappeared under my dress, and I moaned as his tongue brushed against my inner thigh. He moved steadily toward my center as my fingers squeezed the bedspread underneath me. With practiced movements, he teased me before resurfacing.

“Still doing alright in that dress?” he asked.

“I’d be doing a lot better if you would stop teasing me and let me make love to my mate,” I replied.

I sat up, tracing his muscles and scars with my fingers as I watched his eyes close in rapture. “Get on the bed,” I told him.

He lay down, and I straddled him, fanning my dress off to the side as I slowly lowered myself onto his cock. He gripped the fabric of my dress at my waist, pulling me firmly onto him with a satisfied groan.

“Leah,” he whispered.

I ground up and down, sliding him in and out of me without hurrying. After all, we had the rest of our lives together.

“I love you, Killian,” I said.

“I need you,” he replied. “All of you.”

Without halting my movements, I reached behind me and unzipped my gown. Once it was undone, Killian lifted it over my head and tossed it aside, returning his hands to my body.

Our pace intensified as we both became overwhelmed by the growing urge to bring the other person to their release. Killian’s selflessness won out, and I felt my body wracked with the intensity of my climax. As he joined me in ecstasy, a feeling of completeness washed over me.

The profoundness of what Killian and I had was at the forefront of my mind as he

held me in his arms.

“I’m yours,” I told him.

“Forever.”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 7:02 am*

Four Months Later

“Do you have to leave your shoes right in front of the door every time, Sienna?” I asked.

“Have to? No. Will I keep doing it? Yes,” Sienna said.

She and Leah were sitting on the couch after our trip back from Sparkle Hollow, where we had met with Alpha Lex and Luna Grace about expanding diplomacy between our towns.

They both laughed at my sour expression as I moved Sienna’s shoes to the hallway closet.

“You’re lucky that my mate likes you, or I’d toss these outside,” I pointed out.

“You’re lucky she likes you,” Sienna quipped, “or I’d turn you into a frog instead of a wolf.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t know how to turn him into a frog,” Leah argued.

“Just because I haven’t turned anyone into a frog doesn’t mean I can’t turn someone into a frog.”

Over the past few months, Leah and I had been making regular trips between Sparkle Hollow and Pinedale. To Leah’s delight, her best friend often came to visit us here as well. As much as Sienna’s personality differed from my own, it made me happy to

see my mate reunited with her friend.

Leah was on civil terms with her parents now, but there was no fixing what they had broken between them. Just like I had found a brother in Jasper, Leah had found a sister in Sienna. The loyalty between the two of them rivaled anything I had ever seen, and Sienna had become a sister to me as well.

“If you two are done fighting, can we decide what we want for dinner?” Leah asked.

“You already know I don’t get a vote,” I told her with a laugh. “Just let me know what you decide. I’m going to grab the bags out of the car.”

As I walked outside, I did a quick visual sweep of the area. There had been no reports of Franco or his pack so far, but the thought of him returning was never far from my mind. He would hold a grudge against me until his dying day. I just had to be prepared for whenever he decided to settle it.

“Did you decide yet?” I asked the women as I came back inside.

“Pizza,” they said at the same time.

“Your wish is my command,” I said with a formal bow.

“I could get used to this,” Sienna joked.

“Don’t,” I said.

“Touchy,” she replied. “Come on, Killian, why you gotta be such a spoilsport? You know that teasing you is my only entertainment while I’m here.”

“Help me out here, Leah?”

“Sorry, my love. Sienna says whatever is on her mind. There’s nothing I can do about that,” Leah said apologetically.

“It’s true,” Sienna agreed. “She’s been trying her whole life. Now, you two relax while I go get dinner. I need to see if that hot guy is working at the pizza parlor today.”

She wagged her eyebrows at Leah, who laughed in response. As annoying as I found my surrogate sister-in-law, I was secretly grateful for her presence in our lives. Leah was happy with me, but her exuberance when she was with her friend was something I could never give her. All I wanted was for her to be happy. If Sienna was a part of that, I would just have to deal with it.

It helped that Sienna always seemed to know when to make herself scarce. As she left to get pizza, I took her vacated spot on the couch next to Leah, who snuggled up next to me instantly.

Ever since the attack from Franco’s pack, she had been extra careful to make sure I knew just how much she loved and cared for me. Almost losing me had been traumatic for her, but she was handling it admirably.

“I love you, Leah,” I reminded her.

“I love you more.”

“Impossible.”

“Now that we’re home, I actually have a surprise for you,” Leah said. She stood up and walked to her desk, opening a drawer and taking something out.

“What’s this?” I asked as she placed a manilla envelope in my hands.

“I didn’t get a chance to get you a wedding present because we’ve been so busy with peace talks and planning,” Leah explained.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I protested.

“I wanted to.”

I opened the envelope and pulled out a booking for an all-inclusive resort in the Caribbean.

“A vacation?” I said excitedly.

“We didn’t have a chance to go on our honeymoon,” she said with a smile. “I hope it’s okay that I picked a spot for us. I just wanted to make sure we went somewhere we could spend as much time together as possible. We deserve a break from everything, I think.”

“You read my mind,” I replied. I pulled an envelope out of my pocket, placing it on Leah’s lap. She looked at me in confusion as she opened it, revealing two plane tickets with flexible dates to a location of our choice.

“I wasn’t sure where you would want to go, but I figured I could handle the transportation,” I said.

We laughed together, pleased with the fact that we had simultaneously purchased complementary gifts.

“I say we leave as soon as Sienna goes back to Sparkle Hollow,” I continued.

“I could kick her out, and we can leave tonight,” Leah chuckled.

I laughed. “You would never.”



“You’re right,” Leah sighed. “But the second she leaves, I’m dragging you to the airport, mister.”

“Deal,” I replied.

“Did you ever imagine we’d be here?” Leah asked as we settled back into each other.

“Every day, since the moment I met you,” I told her. “There has never been anywhere else I would rather be than with you, and there never will be.”

“Me too,” Leah agreed. “Forever and infinity.”

“Until my last breath,” I said.

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THE END