



# Stone (Griffin Brothers #6)

**Author:** *Kathi S. Barton*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A Heart of Stone, A Fate Unfolding

Stone Griffin thrives on order and purpose, balancing his life as an elementary school teacher with his ancient legacy as a wolf shifter. But when a chance encounter hurls him into the orbit of Sage Tigner, a fiercely independent woman on a reluctant rescue mission, his iron control begins to crack.

Sage has no time for complications, especially ones that involve supernatural creatures and the secrets they keep. But as danger closes in and Stone's protective instincts awaken, Sage discovers there's more to life—and love—than she ever imagined.

Bound by fate, Stone and Sage must learn to trust each other and the fate that binds them. Can a lone wolf find his mate and the courage to embrace his destiny? And can a woman who's always stood alone accept that sometimes fate knows best?

Dive into a thrilling paranormal romance where love, loyalty, and danger collide.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

## Page 1

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Charles, Charlie to most people who knew him, was so lost that he hadn't any idea if he was walking on the ground or the sky. He knew the difference, of course, but it was so dark out tonight that if there had been a moon shining, he couldn't see it. When he sat himself down on a log to get his bearings again, he paused in his thinking to look at what could have made the sound he'd heard.

Terrified out of his mind when he saw glowing eyes looking at him, Charlie sat as still as he could. The eyes grew larger and incredibly more shiny as the beast made his way to him slowly. It was the brightness of the teeth almost glowing that had him more fearful than he'd ever been in his life. He didn't run, knowing that even if he knew where he was at the moment, the wolf would know it better. It would chase him down and kill him without any hesitation. He knew that as surely as he was sitting there.

The wolf, a big gray fella, just stood there within a few inches of his outstretched legs. When he laid down, putting his heavy head onto his leg, Charlie had another moment of fear. The thing never took his eyes off him either. As soon as he felt he was brave enough to try and talk to the wolf, he was gone and in his place was a man.

A fully clothed man with the gray of the wolf's fur colored into his hair. Not like he was a gray wolf but he'd been around for a bit. His darkening fur had him wondering, too, if the man had been in a few fights that he might well have only just come out on top over the years as well. Even his eyes were the same as the wolf, dark with bits of gray in them that he thought them beautiful. Charlie thought him to be intelligent, too. Still, neither of them moved until the man sat back on his butt and regarded him.

"You live on the property not far from here, is that correct?" Charlie told him he was

only squatting there until they found him and ran him off again. But he was a mite lost at the moment. “Yes, I’ve been following you for some time. And in all that time, did you harm any other animal you came across? And there were plenty, too. Why is that?”

“You mean the rabbit and the family of deer?” The man nodded with a smile on his face. “I don’t have a need for meat just now. I only kill when I have to, as it should be all the time. When my belly feels like it can’t go another minute without some meat in it, I take what I need and leave the rest for the next person or animal. And even then, I use it up to the best I can. What I can’t use, like I said, I find some other animal that will use the rest. Why do you ask?”

“I’ll get to that in a few minutes. You didn’t seem that surprised when I changed from wolf to man. Can you tell me why that is? Most would have been terrified out of their minds at the sight of that. But you didn’t.” He nodded and told him what he’d been seeing a lot of lately. “Yes, war will make a man wish for better times. So you were surprised but just wrote it off as being another strange thing that had no explanation. That’s a very good reason, I think.”

“They say that the war is about over. I don’t know much about that. I can still hear shooting when I’m out and about. Have to be careful of that. I don’t want to lose my head on account of someone ain’t ready to call it done with. I don’t have any land left because the soldiers took it all when they were coming through. Not that it was much more than a bunch of rocks and stumps to begin with but they didn’t want a man that wasn’t in some kind of uniform having something more than they did.” The man only nodded. “I’m Charles Griffin. Most call me Charlie. Some call me a great deal more, but I ignore them. Not everybody was able to go to school all the time. I had my family to feed when my daddy up and got sick. Momma died a few weeks ago, and I’ve been roaming around since looking for work. I don’t suppose you know anyone that might be wanting an extra hand around or two, do you?”

“I do, as a matter of fact. My name is Romeo Hank. The Hank is for when I need a last name. Not that I have much use for it under normal circumstances. But I do have something that I’d like to propose to you if you’ve got the time to listen.” Charlie told him he didn’t have anything but time right now. “All right. “I have a medium-sized pack of wolves that answer to me. You can see a few of them over there watching over us, so you don’t be hurting me. But I don’t know that you’d hurt neither man nor beast unless they hurt you first. They’re all just wolves. I’m the only wolf shifter that I know. They’re a good bunch, the wolves, but hungry most of the time, but then all of us are, correct?”

“Yes. Some more than others. At least I can find me a bit of string and fashion me up a hook to use when I’m thinking I can’t go another day without some food in my gullet.” Romeo told him that was excellent. “You need me to fish some fish out for you and your pack? I don’t mind at all doing that for you. In fact, I’d be powerful happy to help you out.”

“Not just yet. But I think that I will take you up on it soon. I have a daughter. Her name is Luna. Such a beautiful name, don’t you think?” Charlie asked if it meant moon. “It does. Thank you. You’re very well educated for a man with not much in the means of living.”

“My mom was a school teacher when I was born. They fired her, of course, when she had me. She didn’t know my daddy so that didn’t help her none. She taught me to read and to figure. I can write too but I do have to think about the spelling of things. Can you write?” Romeo said that he’d been given a great gift in that. “I think so, too, if you can read the written word when you have a chance of it. When I find me a newspaper or some little old book, I treasure it for a bit. Then, I pass it on if I can. I don’t have to know the people in the paper. I just like reading about their stories. Are you going to tell me what this is about?”

“I am. I was working up to it but I believe you to be a man that can be trusted with

things in life. I would like to change you into a wolf. One such as I am. You'll be a man when you wish. A wolf when necessary. There will be magic as well as wealth." Charlie told him he didn't have use for wealth, but food all the time would be nice. "That is precisely what I'm speaking about, Charlie, my good man. You're a good man who only wants what he needs to get by."

Throughout the rest of the night and well into the morning, they spoke of things that Romeo needed from him. It wasn't brought up again about him being changed, but Romeo did tell him about his daughter and found out that he, plain old Charlie was her mate. If that wasn't the darndest thing, he didn't know what was. The soul reason that he'd not been harmed while wandering around in the woods is because of what he was to her. Or the other way around, he supposed, as he'd not given it much thought about being a mate to anyone.

"Do you understand what it is I want you to do?" Charlie said that he thought so. "No. I'm sorry. I can't allow you to go into this only thinking you understand. Please, ask me anything that you'd like. You must be clear on this. I need for you to be clear on how it is I wish for you to someday take over for me."

Romeo never got upset with him when he asked his questions. If Charlie was honest with himself, which he usually tried not to be, he was afraid that Romeo had picked the wrong man. That he'd be better off finding himself someone else to take over his empire, as he called it. But he'd do right by the man and his daughter if that was what he needed. It sounded to him like it was a good job. If nothing else, he'd be able to eat more often than he'd been able to of late.

"You're the right man, Charlie. When I told you that I'd been following you around, I wanted you to know that it wasn't just last evening. But for some time now. I've seen you share your last bit of food with people. Work for someone who cannot do for themselves and not take anything but a bit of bread and water. You're a very good man. A better man than I am." Charlie started to protest. "No. I'm correct in picking

you as my replacement. And if that is some of your worry, being an Alpha, you've no worries there either. I will not leave this earth for the next until you are comfortable with what is needed of you. Now. If you've no more questions, I shall leave you to allow you to think on it. I'll be back here tomorrow so that you can tell me your answer. I know I have picked the right man, Charlie. It's something that you can do easily to save this pack and my daughter."

Luna followed him as he walked around. He'd thought about calling back Romeo and asking more questions but he didn't. Sitting down again, his leg bothering him from sitting so long, he looked at the big, beautiful wolf.

"You're not really his daughter, are you?" She shook her head. "I didn't think so. Is there any more of the others that he claims are his children?" She nodded this time, and he determined by asking questions that it was one other female. "I don't know what to think about all this, to be honest with you. Are you my mate? Is he telling me the truth? I just don't know what to think."

She nodded or shook her head after each of the questions he put to her. Yes, she was his mate. Yes, Romeo was telling the truth. There were many more questions and answers. He was headed back to the area where he'd first seen Romeo when he felt the pain take his breath away as it slammed into his left shoulder. He might well have just let it take him if not for the promises that he'd made and the she-wolf beside him.

Falling back, he hit his head and laid there while trying his best to catch his breath. That was when he heard the other gun shots, the wolf howling and trying to hide. Pulling Luna toward him, he whispered harshly into her ear, hoping that at least she'd understand him enough to know that she must warn the others.

"Go. Tell Romeo to hide the pack. To make sure you and all the others are safe." She didn't want to leave him, whimpering at him as she laid her head on his shoulder. "Go. Please. Run and escape before they hurt you, too. And if they find you with me,

they'll surely kill us both on account of me having a bit more than they do, even if it's your meat."

When she left him, Charlie closed his eyes. Opening them when he felt the shadow darken over him, he looked up in time to see the barrel of a large rifle. He was a goner, he knew that. He could only hope that Luna and the others were safe.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:38 am*

Lucas didn't understand why all these people were here in the courtroom because it had been his parents who had been killed. He would have rubbed his hands together, excited to see just how much they left him, but he'd been chained down like an animal and looked bad in front of the others.

It was really only Katie that he hated looking bad in front of. Not that he liked her, no he hated her as much as he was sure that she disliked him. But there she was, dressed up in a new suit like she'd had the money to go out and buy something for today, and he was sitting there in the ugliest shade of orange jumper that he'd ever seen. Christ, orange wasn't his color, and he was never going to wear it again once he was out of here.

"Mr. Barnhart, are you listening to what I'm saying to you? There is a great deal to go over and if you have any questions, ask them now so that we can get on with the estate of your parents." He asked why the others were there, such as Katie Donahue, were there. "You've been told several times now that her name is Katie Griffin. Also that she's named in the last will and testimony of your parents. If there is nothing else, can we please move on?" Lucas snorted before answering.

"All right, but I don't like it. I guess we can move on, but once this is done with, I'm going to fire her and deal with the estate, and it's a big one too, I'm betting just the way I want to. I have plans, and once I'm out of here, I'm going to be watching heads roll like they should have done years ago." He looked around the room. "I don't know that big man there. What's he doing here?"

"Again, that's Katie's husband." The attorney for the estate, something that he was just coming to realize that he loved saying, was getting annoyed. Lucas didn't care.



He should have been having things moving the way he wanted to when his parents were killed.

Three weeks ago his parents had left for some kind of trip without him. Why they thought that he'd be all right with that was beyond him, but they did it, and it was too late for him to be able to take it out on them. The plane they'd been in, one that had over two hundred other passengers on it, had nosedived into the ocean and had killed them all. Because his dad and mom had bought first-class tickets, like he would have approved of that for them, they'd been the first to die along with the pilot. It boggled his mind that they were both dead, and he was now their sole heir to their lovely, wealthy estate. He was going to be so rich.

He wasn't paying half as much attention as he should have been; he knew that, but when they said his name, he sat up higher in his seat and smiled at Katie. She was going to be on his shit list for the rest of her short life, as far as he was concerned. And it was going to be one of a lot of pain, too, for her. That was when he realized that the attorney had moved on to someone else.

"What did you say?" That got him a glare from the man, but he didn't care. "You'll have to repeat what you said. That couldn't have been enough words for you to have told me what the estate was worth. And I demand that you tell me slowly this time. I have shit that I have to do as well, but we're not leaving here until this shit is taken care of."

"Certainly. Right here is what it said. "My only child, Lucas Mark Barnhart, I leave one dollar. I didn't want him to think that I'd not thought of him while addressing the distribution of his mother's and my estate. We have both agreed that since we have been pulling him out of one thing after another, that one dollar U.S. is all he deserves. The rest of the estate, including all lands and property that has not been—"

"No. That can't be right. A dollar? He had to have been made to do that. Katie did it."

The attorney told him that Katie had had nothing to do with the estate will that his firm had taken care that it was filed the day before they left for their ill-fated vacation. “There has to be a mention about me someplace else. He told me that he was leaving me the money.”

“Did he now? Do you have any proof of this? Anything written down?” Lucas said that it was just between the two of them. Before he’d been arrested. “I was the one that was with the family just days before they were killed, Mr. Barnhart. That’s when they changed their will to reflect the changes that they made. There is no way that either of them would have had the time to change their mind about things since I know that for a fact.”

“It was implied as I’m their only living—who gets it all then? They didn’t have any friends so that’s not the way things went. Tell me who I have to kill so that I can get this straightened out?” It was explained to him that since they had to keep going over the records again and again for him, they’d not gotten that far into the will to know what was going on. “Then what the fuck are you waiting for? I’m not getting any younger sitting here waiting for you to get your ass in gear. What does the rest of the— What’s going on?”

“I told you before we brought you in here that you could stay for the last of the reading of the will if you behaved yourself. Since you can’t seem to keep your mouth shut up and your language under control, I’m taking you back now. You’re finished with the reading anyway.” He told the guard that he wasn’t leaving. “You’ll do as you’re told, or so help me, I won’t have any trouble taking you back there unconscious.”

He was dragged out of the now empty room by his chained-up arms when he said that he wasn’t going to let someone else have his money. He’d been waiting all his life for it to come to him, and they weren’t going to get it now that he could. As he was tossed into the cell, he nearly ran at the cop when he put his hand on his tazer. That

fucker hurt and made him piss himself the last time it had been used on him. And no amount of yelling at him that he'd be good from now on would get him back in that room.

"Mother fuckers." He just knew that Katie was going to get all his money from in here, and there was nothing he could do about it. Not only would she have his money, but she'd probably use it for good shit like she was forever spouting off to him about when she worked for him. He was a moron for hiring her. It was then that he remembered that his father had hired her and that he'd not been able to have her fired. She was too good anyway about knowing all the rules and shit about laws.

Lucas was an attorney in name only. He'd gone through law school but hadn't ever taken a test if he didn't have to. Even his boards had been taken by a man that had answered an ad in the paper about it and Lucas had been working at the firm, Barnhart and Barnhart since. Getting paid weekly to show up or not at his office and beat the shit out of people that didn't do what he wanted. Especially that Katie. She'd been much too smart for him, and not only that, his dad would come down on his ass when he made the slightest slap to her.

His hope had been to make his family so embarrassed about him that they never wanted him to be around them. They didn't, but it had nothing to do with the way that his dick swung. Being a homo had been disturbing to him more than it had to his parents. The fuckers even joined clubs about the gays. Christ, they even paid off some of the men that he'd tried to fuck when they didn't want anything to do with him. He hated his parents now more than ever.

The clicking of heels, a sound that would usually make him ill, was coming down the hall. He knew that it was going to be Katie. However, when someone that looked like her showed up, he asked her what the fuck she wanted. The woman smiled and he thought her the most beautiful creature that he'd ever seen.

“I’ve come to warn ye off me cousin, Katie Griffin.” Her accent, whatever it was, made his dick hard. “You’ll be staying away from her if’n you get out of here. Her job with you is finished, and I’m warning you now that if’n you don’t back your arse off, I’ll be taking you apart with the nice whip that I have for meself.”

“Come closer so that I can have you give me a hand job. I’d love you to take me into your mouth, but I want to hear you telling me what it is that you’re doing to me. You can do it. No one cares.” She said she’d rather cut her throat than to let him touch her. “I don’t have to touch you, moron. Just you do the touching. Christ, I could really come right now if not for the fact that all I can think about it— mother fuck. What was that?”

“A spray bottle I got for me cat. It worked so well on her that I thought that it would work on you, too. I’m not giving you shite, you mother fucking prick. I’ve come to warn you off not to live out some kind of sick fantasy that you’re having.” For as pissed off she was sounding, it was making him harder, like a stroke to his dick. Standing up, he pulled out his dick and came all over the floor, and just missed her by an inch. Christ, he’d never come so hard in his life.

Staggering back, he didn’t even care that she was talking to him in another language. The spray of water on him was like a balm to him, cooling off his hot body like he’d taken a dip in a kiddy pool and was being cooled off. The next thing he knew, after closing his eyes, he was hurting all over his body, and it never seemed to stop.

The water on him, he would swear for the rest of his life, was making the tazer that was sticking out of him worse. His dick, free of his pants, was spraying piss all over him, and he hoped to fuck that he was pissing on the men hurting him. Unable to even form words, Lucas felt his head hit the wall and then bounce on the floor a couple of times before he was out cold.

When he woke up, he was chained to his bed. Not only at his feet but his wrists too

were stretched out too far from him to even scratch his fucking nose. Working to get himself free, he was pissed off when everyone seemed to ignore him. Even when he realized that he was still without his pants on, did anyone come along and pull them back up. He couldn't even ask for the girl. And he wanted to see if she enjoyed their interlude as much as he did.

“You're being bound over to prison.” He asked what he'd done when he could work up enough spit to talk to someone. “You exposed yourself to a visitor. And if that wasn't enough, she's also pressing charges against you for making her sick. I didn't know someone could do that, but it's sure enough a law and she's using it.” The man laughed. “Funniest thing that I ever did hear of. But it would be you that would have had it used against you.”

He didn't want to go to prison. He was supposed to be getting out. Asking the cop why she was able to do that when he was sure that she enjoyed it as much as he did, he was told that she'd been ill for ten minutes for what he'd done to her and that they'd had to send her to the hospital when he'd passed out. Lucas asked if she'd been worried for him.

“No. I told you that she was sick. Thought that she was going to puke her guts up that it was that bad. What the fuck made you think that she'd be all right with you masturbating all over her? Christ, you're lucky that she didn't pull out her gun and blow your fucking balls off.” He told the cop that she was covering up how much she'd enjoyed it. “You go on thinking that. The poor woman said she'd never get over that. I don't doubt that she's going to be suing your ass for something more. Wouldn't surprise me if she were to get her cousin to press so many charges against you that you never see the light of day again.”

He didn't mind. Really. Lucas couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to get off so well, and it made him feel a little more relaxed than he had ever been. Thinking about his body, he was concerned that his head was hurting him and asked the cop

what had happened to him. He told him how he'd passed out when he'd been tazed, and that had put a knot on his head as big as an egg. Still worth it, he told himself.

He wasn't able to get any lunch while he was chained up. They told him that he wasn't going to be unchained until such time as he was picked up. He didn't even care where they were taking him so long as he was able to take a long hot shower, get the juice off his body, and for him to put on one of his nicer outfits. It had been too long since he'd been able to dress up.

It was nearly dark in his little cell when someone pounded in the cell door. He could tell that the man was pissed off but about what, Lucas didn't really care. He was still on a slight buzz, and no one was going to take that away from him. As he was beginning to feel less and less on his little high, he thought about what was being done to him.

First of all, he was told to put on another jumpsuit. All he could do was grab it before it hit the floor, before he realized it was not a suit but a jumper like the one he had on. Secondly, he wasn't able to take a shower, unless, they told him he wanted to be hosed down with a fire hose. He'd heard that those suckers would peel your skin off, so he told them he'd be all right. As quickly as he was able to get his clothing changed out, he was in a large bus with bars on the windows, and he was chained down again with two other people. Lucas had no idea where he was going. No one would tell him shit, either. If they thought that he was going to go down easy—he never knew what that meant, but there was no way they were going to do shit to him without a fight. And they'd be sorry too that they tangled with him.

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Stone loved coming back after break. The kids were full of energy. While not ready to learn, they were getting along better because they missed the friendships that kids made during the rest of the school year. Spring especially was wonderful because

they all knew that summer break was right around the corner. It did take him some extra time to get them to settle down, but he had a hard time with it as well and didn't mind so much.

"Okay, class. We have to get to work." The usual groans but he was happy to see that he didn't have to remind them a second time that they needed to get out their books. Ready, especially for the younger kids, was his favorite class. "How many of you did your listening over the break?"

The usual three held up their hands but there were others that he could see seemed to be getting into the story they'd been reading. Some of the kids he knew didn't have anyone that would read to them, no matter what they said they'd do, but he was just as happy to see that more than half the class had been read to a little bit.

They were on the second page of the story, only about three lines per page, so it wasn't difficult to do for him, he heard from the office. They all loved it when the intercom sounded, liking it when someone was called to the office. Usually, it was him and a student, but this time, it was just him. Putting one of the shier kids in charge, he made his way to the office to see what was going on so early in the morning.

"Mr. Griffin, this is Ms. Rachel Cummings. She is looking to have her niece put into our system and she wanted to meet one of the kindergarten teachers. I thought of you first thing." He didn't point out that as of two weeks before break, he was the only one who wasn't pregnant and already asking for time off. "Mr. Griffin also has been the teacher of the year for the last six years running."

Eight, but he wasn't going to correct their principal at this point. He shook hands with the woman and pulled his hand back, barely catching himself from wiping his hand on his shirt. It was as if he was handling slimy meat or something. The woman wasn't human, but worse than that, he knew that she wasn't in charge of her "niece" either

and had taken the child from her parents after killing them.

It happened a good deal more than he wanted to admit. Not the killing part but that someone wanted to hide their child—one that they'd gotten by other means until the heat was over and they could move on. This woman wasn't looking for a good school, not even a good teacher. She wanted a place in a small town that wouldn't, she hoped check into things that she'd rather they didn't.

While the woman was going on and on about how she'd been in other districts that had demanded that the little girl be tested before putting them into a grade. Of course, too, she was the smartest kid in the room at her last school. He reached out to Storm, his sister-in-law.

After telling her what was going on, he waited for her to tell him that she was going to come and get the child. He didn't see the little girl because Ms. Cummings said that she was napping in the car and that's why she had left her husband there with her.

"I didn't think that anyone would mind about me parking in a no parking zone so she'd not wake up." He did mind but kept his mouth shut. The little girl in question was being held by Cummings's accomplice, her longtime boyfriend, Harry Jones. "My husband just dotes on her. I get jealous sometimes if you know what I mean."

Again, she made him slightly ill, but he smiled and waited for Storm to get back to him. When she did, she was laughing hard and he had to smile. To know her was to love her but to hear her laugh, you knew that someone was going to get their asses handed to them in short order, and you could only wish that you were around when she did it. It was a nice show when she got all fired up.

"The police are on their way. Believe it or not, they're both wanted by the feds. Imagine my surprise when I read that." He asked her how many times they'd pulled



this trick . “First time on a child. They’re branching out, so to speak. They used to only take infants to sell off, but that’s getting harder for them to do with all the security that goes on at the hospital nowadays. You should be seeing the first cruiser pulling in now.”

He nodded to the open doorway and asked if something was going on with the parking lot. Knowing full well that it was about the couple, he stepped back, taking Mr. Sharp with him, his boss and hoping that the woman ran out rather than taking a hostage of either one of them. He’d go before he let Sharp, but he wasn’t keen on getting hurt today.

Cunnings not only had a gun, but she was firing at the police as she left the school. Diving for cover, hoping that the shattering glass was something more than the front of the school, Stone pulled the alarm that would have all the teachers going into lockdown. He wasn’t taking any chances with his class and made his way there as soon as he realized that Ms. Bonnie, the longtime secretary, was on the phone with the police as well.

His class was going through the motions of what they’d been going on once a week since they entered his room. Not only did they know to not open the door unless it was him but they already had the blinds pulled down and the steel plate pulled in front of the door so that it engaged the locks. Getting them to go to the bathrooms in their room, he was thrilled when one of the kids knew how to get the class pet. Mr. Moons was a cat that the kids had adopted on the second week of class.

“Mr. Stone, are we in trouble?” He said that they were safe so long as they did what they’d been told. “It’s my birthday today, and I need to get home. My momma is baking me a ‘nilla cake for my birthday. Will we be going home?”

“Yes, Thomas. I’m hoping that everyone goes home.” He heard the police, only because his hearing was far better than most anyone else’s in the bathroom, and

looked to the two children who were not human. With a small shake of his head, they both nodded and wouldn't tell that the police had the couple taken down. "We should have sung happy birthday to you. I should have remembered."

Small talk to the kids was better than telling them that he was afraid as well. He wouldn't die, but there were things going on that he didn't like having no control over. He checked on the other kids and tried cheering them up as well. Before he could get back to the other students, Rain and Storm popped into the room.

"It's over. You guys did great and no one was killed but the two people that started this whole thing. We were on hand to save the little girl, too." He asked her if her parents were really dead. "Yes, I'm afraid that they are. But there is other family that will take her in, hopefully. Your kids are going to come out all right with this. They did what they were told and managed to feel good about not getting hurt on top of that."

"That doesn't mean that we'll stop practicing." She agreed with him. "When will the lockdown be over? I don't want them to think that they're still in danger."

"The police are here now, so it shouldn't be much longer. You did a good job, Stone. I'm very proud of you for taking care of the kids. It could have been much worse had you not notified us when you did." He told her that he knew she had his back. "We do. Forever and a day."

After the lockdown was released, he continued with the class projects as if nothing happened. It was good, he thought to keep normal around the kids. After about an hour, it was like nothing had ever happened. They were in the reading circle when one of the kids, Davy Markus, asked if the people were dead."

"Yes, they are. They did a very bad thing, and the police had to take care of them so that they'd not do anything like that again." He put the book aside and asked if they

had any more questions. There were only a couple at first, but by the time lunchtime was ready, they were talking about how they'd had such a good time on break. Normal is just what they needed and he was glad that he had such a good class that seemed to understand that he was there for them all.

Rest time was better than he thought it would be. They were resting on their cots when he decided to get some of the grading that he'd been putting off for a few days. There wasn't that much but it was enough to keep his mind from going over this morning. When it was time for them to start waking up, he put it all away to spend some good time with the kids. It was coloring time, and it was his favorite time of the day.

The kids could write their names now and were able to say their alphabet. There were other things that they could do as well but he was most proud of all of them as they were working hard to be able to go to first grade. It was like a passage of something special to them, and he was working to make them the best kids to go forth that he could.

"Mr. Stone?" He looked at Valeria and asked her what it was she needed. Of all his kids, she was the most difficult to get motivated on things. She could do the work, they all could but she wanted to wheedle her way out of as much work as she could all the time. "Do you think that we could take a longer nap today? I'm worn out."

"I'm sure that most of you are. But we have a time schedule to adhere to, and it's important that we keep to that." She told him that she was powerful tired, a word that he was sure that she picked up at home. "Maybe I could take a longer nap, and the rest of the kids could just do their work."

"No, that won't work. We all have a schedule, as I said." Ignoring her little tantrum, he began helping the kids put their cots away. "Come on now, everyone. We have work to do."

Preparing the kids for the next grade was a daily thing. They had to know so much now that it boggled his mind that anyone was able to keep up that didn't go to preschool before coming to his class. The ones that had been in the pre-k classes excelled in their work and were better at getting along with the other students. They also seemed to understand the rules better than the ones that hadn't. Most of his class had gone to pre-K and they were all doing very well and didn't mind helping the other students that hadn't been able to go to the classes for one reason or another.

By the time the end of the day was coming around, he was exhausted. It had been a stressful start, and it seemed to be more or less stressful for the rest of the day. Two students had forgotten to bring their money in for lunch, and he'd made sure that he sent home notes with them. It had been a policy to not allow the kids to have their lunch if they didn't have a paid-up account but he'd had his family nip that in the bud right away.

A child couldn't function without a meal to eat. And for a lot of the kids, it was the only meal that they had all day. There was a breakfast program in place that would have hot food for the kids who weren't able to have a hot meal at home, but that was nearly too much for the cooks, and they'd had some of the pack come in and serve it to the kids. It was a good win for everyone and some extra pocket money for the women who had come in to help out.

Stone had bus duty today and was looking forward to it. Most of the parents that did pick up would have to stop and talk to him about this or that when they would be in line and it would make it slow moving for the kids. So being on bus duty like he was meant that he'd not see the parents at all and just made sure that the kids got on the right buses so that they'd make it home. Hall duty was just as nice for him. Just making sure that the kids didn't run through the halls to get out of school was one of his all-time favorite things to do. It sheltered him from parents, mostly women, about making passes at him.

Stone knew that he wasn't a bad-looking man. He made sure that he kept himself in good shape and ate right. Running after twenty four kids a day would do that for him. But he was also single and wealthy. Having all his brothers with wives made him the last time anyone could get their hands on the Griffin money. Or so they had thought. He wasn't waiting on a mate. She'd come or not. But he wasn't going to change his life by getting one.

He knew that he was being harsh about it. But he liked his quiet time, and he also enjoyed being single. Not that he dated all that much. He rarely did. But if he wanted to go out, he usually made sure that he was out of town and went out with someone who was aware there would be no wedding bells between them. Most of the pack knew that, so that's where he dated most of the time.

## Page 3

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“I don’t understand what this is supposed to be.” Sage didn’t bother looking at the new hire, who had started a month ago when he complained about the work they were doing. Instead she kept up with her work, ringing out people through her line while keeping up a conversation that they’d bring up to her. Mostly the price of food. “Why is it called an avocado when it looks nothing like one?”

“If you don’t know what it is, then all you have to do is look at the number that is stamped on the sticker. Put that into the computer like I told you. A dozen times.” He’d been told at least a dozen times an hour if you were to ask her. “Just put it on the scale and put in the number of them that they bought. Just like I showed you before.”

She wasn’t allowed to train people anymore, which suited her just fine. The last man that she’d trained had complained about her not being nice to him and not training him right. His idea of her training him had been for her to do the work while he played on his phone. Finally having enough of the little shit, she’d ‘accidentally’ knocked his phone on the floor and had stepped on it. The only reason that she’d not had to pay for him to have another one was to claim that he wasn’t supposed to have it out in the first place. He quit that afternoon. The level of frustration was getting louder by the time she was on her third customer, most of them from the line next to hers.

“Sage, can I see you for a moment?” She said sure as soon as she was finished with Mr. Humphrys. “That’s fine. Then put the closed sign on your register.”

She didn’t think that would go over well with that, meaning that everyone would have to go to the new hires line. She didn’t doubt that there would be a lot of people

pissed off about it too. Once she was finished with her order, she hurriedly put up her sign before anyone else came to her line. She went to the office to see what Mr. Danielson needed from her. It didn't bode well that he closed the door, she thought.

"I'm going to have to let the new hire go." She didn't so much as blink at him. "As I'm sure you've heard, he's not catching on as well as I had hoped. That means that it's going to be a little more work for you, I'm afraid."

"I'm not afraid of some extra hard work, Mr. Danielson. You know that." He nodded and then sat down at the corner of his desk. "Just tell me. I can take it. Do you have to fire me or something?"

"The store would literally collapse if I were to do that. No, I need a favor. It's a big one." He pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose. He was the only person that she knew that still used a cloth handkerchief. "My granddaughter and her husband were killed this morning. Some other couple killed them and took my great-granddaughter, Hailey. I'm not sure of the details yet, but that's about all I have."

"I'm so sorry." He broke down then, and she helped him to his chair. The man was a mess, and her heart hurt for him. "What is it you need for me to do? You know I'd do anything for you."

"Margaret can't travel with me. She's got that heart condition that keeps her from being able to fly. Not to mention the stress." She knew where this was going and didn't want to have to tell the man that she wouldn't want to travel either. It was too much to ask of her, she thought. "I was wondering if you'd be a gem and stay with her while I'm gone?"

"Yes." She more than likely should have given it more thought than she did, but being so thrilled that she didn't have to travel with him made her happy. "She and I will get along well. How long do you expect to be gone? I'm assuming not too long."

“A week, they told me. I’m going to have to see about bringing little Hailey home with me to raise. It’ll be difficult. We’re not exactly getting any younger, but there is literally no one else to raise her. Bobby, our son, has four children of his own and doesn’t want to be bothered with her. What a thing to say if you were to ask me. But I guess I can understand. None of us have ever met the child. She and her mother were supposed to come here for the holidays, but that didn’t happen.”

A lot of things didn’t happen during the holidays that she could say as well, but she kept her mouth closed. Her mother was supposed to come and visit with her new boyfriend, but at the last minute—she was at the airport to pick them up when she called to cancel. Even having the week off to spend with her didn’t pan out as she worked because there was no reason for her to stay at home alone.

“You’ll do it? You’ll stay with Margaret?” She told him that she’d be honored to and told him to make arrangements and she’d even take him to the airport so he’d not have to leave his car. “I expected you to tell me...well, I don’t know what I expected, but I’m so happy that you’ll be able to do this for me. Yes, I am.”

After making the arrangements for her to babysit his wife, she went home to pack. It wasn’t going to be difficult for her to gather up her things; she didn’t have that much in the way of clothing or anything else for that matter, but she did need to make sure that she could do her laundry while there as she’d certainly run out of things to wear at some point. After gathering up her things, she was on her way to the house as Earl Danielson was leaving first thing in the morning, and she’d be in charge of keeping his wife occupied.

By the time she was in the little bedroom that she was given while there, she was exhausted. It was only seven-thirty in the evening, but the Danielsons were upset, and it was something that she wasn’t used to dealing with. Keeping them together, at least as much as she could, Sage was ready to go to bed long before their beloved show, Jeopardy, came on at eight so that they could have something normal in their lives.



The poor couple decided that they'd go to bed early rather than their normal time. It was just nine, just after, when she found herself in her room with the lights off.

She'd be spending the next week with Margaret Danielson and that would mean that she didn't have to work at the grocery store at the same time. Keeping the elderly woman company, she was happy that she'd not have to go to work, too, but then she thought it might be nice to have a distraction. But since she didn't have any idea what she'd be doing all day with the woman, she also brought her tablet as well as a couple of books that she'd been wanting to read.

Taking Earl, Mr. Danielson, to the airport turned out to be a drama. Margaret decided that she didn't want him to go and the two of them were crying in the airport. Asking her if she'd go, they turned over their ticket and money so that she could purchase whatever she needed when she got there. This was not the way that she wanted to spend her week off. Much less traveling to an unknown place to pick up a child that she didn't know and bring her back to them in a few short days. Sitting on the tarmac, Sage didn't even know if there would be anyone there to pick her up. Christ, this was worse than she thought it might be.

The ride wasn't all that long. By the time she landed, there were two phone messages on her cell. One that the Danielson's got home all right, and two that there would be a couple, Edwin and Storm that would be picking her up and taking her to the hotel. She only hoped that the hotel was all right, with it being her instead of Earl. Sage shouldn't have done this in the first place and wished that she'd stayed home to work.

There was a couple there with a sign with them that said her name. Sage Tigner couldn't have been that common but they did ask her to verify her name. After digging out her driver's license, she handed it over to them and told them that she didn't have any luggage. Instead of being upset, the two of them laughed.

"Hailey has been staying with my brother and his wife. They have other children,

four little girls that are about the same age as your niece.” She explained to them that she wasn’t related to either the child or the Danielsons but was simply doing them a favor. “Oh. I guess I knew that, too. All right. How about some lunch? Then we’ll be on our way. There is a hearing in the morning for the couple that killed her parents. I’m to understand that you’ve been asked to go to that as well.”

“Yes. I’ve been asked to do a lot of things that I have no idea what I’m doing.” She didn’t mean to sound bitter but she wasn’t in the best of mood. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take that out on you two. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

The child behind her had kicked her the entire trip, and it had been all she could do not to kick his mother in the head when she couldn’t be bothered to get off her cell phone long enough to keep her kid in line. Sage never wanted to have children, much less meet some man who might want to have them with her. She didn’t care for kids at all. And the thought of marriage of any kind was something that she never wanted to think about in her life.

The lunch diner had good food. When the bill was paid by Edwin, she thanked them after telling them that she was on a tight budget. The Danielson’s only had thirty bucks in cash between them and decided that their credit card would get her into more trouble than not. She was going to have to watch every penny and shop for second-hand clothing while she was here. This trip was something that she wished had never happened.

The hotel, of course, had trouble with her staying in the room that Earl had booked. Even after talking with him, they said that they couldn’t be scammed and that if she had the cash, she could get her money back from the Danielsons when she returned home. Like she had that much ready cash on her right now. In the end, she ended up staying with the Griffins, telling them that she was only there to pick up the child and return home. The sooner, the better.

“I don’t know that you’re going to have any better luck with that than you did with the hotel.” She just knew that Storm was going to be right about that. Why should that part, the only part that she’d come out here for, go any better than anything else so far? “I’ll see what I can figure out and pull some strings for you. I hate that you traveled all this way for nothing.”

“This was very last minute.” She told them how the Danielsons were an older couple in their early eighties. She thought that they were much too old to be raising a child but hadn’t voiced that to anyone. “Mrs. Danielson as been ill for some time now, and she couldn’t make the trip due to doctor’s orders. I was set to stay with her, but she wanted her husband at home, so I was persuaded to go instead. I have no idea how this is going to work at all.”

“No matter. We’ll figure it out.” She was happy that they were confident about the way things were going. Not only had the Danielsons not met the child, but she’d never met her parents either. “Now, let’s get you to our house, and you can unwind a bit. It’s been a hard couple of days on you and you need the rest.”

What she thought that she needed was a tall glass of tea. Along with as much chocolate as she could stuff in her face. Not only weren’t things even remotely going her way, but she doubted that things were going to go well for the kid either. Other than her name being Hailey, that was all she knew about her.

The ride to the house was quiet. She found herself dozing off and on, and it took her a while before she was ready to wake up. The house, a mammoth of a thing, was looming over her in the afternoon sun that made her think of money. And a great deal of it. That was when she noticed how the couple was dressed. Yes, they were monied, all right.

“I can read your mind, Sage. Yes, we’re monied but we don’t flaunt it around like some would do. Also, we’re considered old money. I’m not sure how that works but

we have had money all our long life.” She asked him how old he was. “I don’t know exactly. I know that I’ve been around when things were much simpler. A handshake was as good as a contract and there were no homes, not a one around that we didn’t have a hand in building for the town’s people.”

“You’re not human.” When she thought of what she had said, she told him she was sorry. “Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of my head, and I just say what is right there.”

He laughed, and she felt embarrassed. When they welcomed her into their home, she went in with the knowledge that she’d never be able to count the amount of money that this home was worth. And she knew as surely as she was standing in the front hallway that she’d never be able to just hang out with these people. They were beyond anything that she’d ever encountered before.

“Remember, I can read your mind.” She told him that if he was offended, then he should stop invading her thoughts. All he did was throw back his head and laugh. Being embarrassed, usually, that sort of thing never bothered her. She asked where she’d be staying. Sage found that she was exhausted from all the stress that had been going on.

“There is a room set up for you. Also, I wanted to clarify that you’re correct in saying that we’re not human. The family are wolves. Ancient wolves that have, as you were told, been around for a very long time. Longer than dirt, I’ve been told before.” She asked Edwin again when he’d been born, and he told her once again that he really didn’t know. But long enough to see things that wouldn’t bother her at all today. “My family is coming over for dinner tonight, and my brother, Jeffery, will be bringing Hailey over with their children.”

“I’m not good around a lot of people. I’ve lived alone since I was eighteen, and I like that.” Storm asked her about her family. “I have my mom. She goes through

boyfriends like someone with a cold does tissues. I've not seen her in years, which I usually think of as a blessing. I know that I shouldn't say that, but that's just the way I feel about her."

She told them about how she'd been to the airport to pick her up and she cancelled at the last minute. They told her that was cruel of her and that she might well be better off with her not coming to visit.

"Thank you. I needed that." After being shown her room, Storm handed her a bag. It didn't have any kind of printing on it and it did seem to be empty. "Thanks." She laughed and explained to her what the bag was for.

"Just think of something that you'd like to have on, and when you reach into the bag, it will be there. It's unlimited—I noticed that you only had your backpack for you to use, so I didn't think you'd have much in the way of clothing." She said that it had been last minute in her coming here. "I think you mentioned that. But the bag will help you out with anything you need. Even a toothbrush as well as paste."

Thinking about the pretty sundress she'd seen in the airport, she was shocked that not only was it the dress she'd seen but her size as well as the green color that she wanted. Laughing, she asked her if she could have shoes as well.

"Whatever you wish. And you'll be able to keep the things that you pull out, so we're going to get you some luggage to take things back with you." They both laughed and she found the pretty little sandals that matched the dress in the bag as well.

"A girl could get used to this." She went to the bathroom and changed. It was a little big on her at first, but it molded around her petite body as soon as she realized that she'd gotten the wrong size. Giddy with the things that she was doing, she asked Storm why they'd do such a thing for a stranger.

“You’re not. A stranger, I mean. You were a person who was asked to do something nice for someone, and we wanted to make sure that you had all that you needed. And just so you know, I think that you’re right in thinking that the Danielsons are too old to raise a five-year-old. Perhaps things will turn out better for the two of you soon.” While she had no idea what that meant, she let it go.

For the first time in, she didn’t know when, Sage felt pretty. Having her room set up the way she liked, Sage took the advice of the other woman and laid down for a short nap. She’d gotten very little sleep over the last couple of days, and she was ready to do just what had been suggested.

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Stone was happy that it was the weekend. He’d been keeping up with the kids in his class by answering questions that they had about the shooting that had happened earlier in the week. Just as he was ready to go home, the principal asked to see him. While he didn’t have much respect for the man, he was his boss and needed to do what was required of him to be able to keep his job.

“Are you...let me phrase this another way. I need for you to work this summer for the kids that are coming in for summer school.” Stone told him that he didn’t volunteer for that. “No, you’d not. But I still need for you to do it. All the other teachers have things that they’ve planned and since you have no family of your own, then I’m telling you that you need to pick up the slack and do this.”

“No. I’m a kindergarten teacher. And I know for a fact that none of my students need to stay over for the summer. And I do have a family as well. A large one, as a matter of fact.” Principal Jorden waved him off. “I have no idea what that means but I’m not going to work the summer. I have plans.”

“You’re just going to have to change them. I told you what I need, and that’s the way

that it's going to be. You're a good team player, usually Stone, and this is something that I am ordering you to do." Stone stood up. "I'll expect to see your schedule on my desk on Monday morning. Thanks."

"I quit." Before he could think about what he'd just done, Stone left the office and went to his room to start packing up his things. There wasn't any way that he was going to work the entire summer when he wanted to just relax. It was his downtime, and he needed it as much as the teachers with families did. Edwin contacted him just as he was putting his things into his briefcase. The entire room of things were his, but he didn't have time to pack them up just yet.

"Mr. Jorden just called me. He said that you were fired. That can't be right, is it?" He told him that he'd quit and then explained to him what had happened. "I'm on my way there. Storm and Rain are with me, so expect the worst."

"I can't understand how it could be any worse right now. I'm out of a job that I love, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do now." He heard the ruckus at the front of the school and told his brother where he was. "Try to keep them from killing anyone, please? I just need help in packing up my room."

"I'll try, but I can't make any promises. You know how they are when it comes to this family—maybe you should come down here. Things aren't going well." He rolled his eyes and picked up his briefcase. "Stone, I've been told to keep you from saying much. All right?"

"I can do that." He looked around the big room and wondered what he'd do with all the stuff that he'd collected over the years. Deciding that he'd just leave it for the next person if they wanted it, he contacted his brother again. "I've decided that there isn't anything that I want in here. I'm headed to you guys."

The police were in front of the school by the time he made his way to the front

offices. Whatever happened, he hoped the hell that he wasn't going to prison over it. He'd hate to spend his summer months in prison for something that he'd not done. Putting a little more pep in his step, he was just coming into the office when he heard Roland Jorden being read his rights.

"He hit me." Stone asked Rain if she was all right. "Of course I am. But the man thought that hitting me was the way to go. And since my mate is an FBI agent, the police were called in. Can't have the little missus beat up, now can we?"

Stone was accused of causing a riot. The police, most of them laughing behind their hands, told Roland that he'd only just entered the room when they did. Case in fact, he'd let them in.

"He called his family in when I fired him. That's bad enough." Joan, the first cop on the scene, asked him if he'd been fired. He explained the situation to her and told her that he just wanted to have his summers off like everyone else did. "He doesn't need the summers off. What's he going to do? Lay around the pool all summer? I needed him to do what he was told, and like a little panty waste, he called in his family. I had it under control."

"What is it that you think you had under control? From what I'm hearing, you demanded something, and he turned you down and quit. Here, you had one of the best teachers around, and you ticked him off enough that he's packing up to leave here. My daughter is nearly ten years old and said that he was the best teacher ever born. That's saying a lot if you ask me."

"No one asked you. And no, I'm not going to take him back if that's what you're all here for. He's been a pain in my backside since I started working here. It's Griffin this and Griffin that. Durn it all to heck and back, the world does not revolve around the Griffin family and their money." No one said a word. "Well, you quitting or not?"



“I’m finished.” Edwin said that he was, as well. Looking at his brother, he could see a bit of his wolf there, like he was more pissed off than he was.

“You don’t work here. Why should this school care that—”

“No more funding from us. No backpack drives. No stadium repairs. Nothing.” Roland just snorted. “You’ll not think that in a few hours once the board finds out what it is you’ve done. Come on, Stone, it’s time we headed home.”

“There you go again, thinking that you’re all that simply because you have money. This school has done just fine without your family, and we’ll go on being just fine from now on.” No one mentioned that the school was only here because of their funding. There were only enough buses because of them. There was a great deal riding on them being around, not including the teachers being paid well beyond what other teachers were making. “Get out of here before I have you arrested for trespassing. That means all of you, too.”

“Did you hear that? He just trespassed us. All of us.” Joan said that she’d heard and would escort them off the property. “I’ll be seeing our attorney about the rent that is due as well.”

They owned the land that the school had been built on. All of them. Stone thought about what would happen if the board went along with the trespassing of them on the land, not to mention finding out about the family stopping all forms of money coming to the schools. Not even the band and school teams were going to be able to go very long without their funding. Stone wanted to be in on that meeting more than anything now that he’d thought about it.

“I believe your construction company is working on the new field, aren’t they?” Edwin said they were about half finished with the work. “Seems to me that they’re trespassing, too, since you hired them. I’ll go with you to make sure that they get

their things loaded up—it only just occurred to me, too, that your family was going to pay for the gardens that the kiddies plant about now. I'll stop that work too."

"This is going to be bad, isn't it?" Joan laughed and said it might be the best thing that has ever happened to Roland. "You think that they'll fire him?"

"He'll be lucky that the parents don't run him out of town tarred and feathered. A great many people depend on those drives you guys set up for the kids. Not to mention the fields and uniforms. Yes, sir, he's going to be one lucky man if they don't burn his house down for this." Joan laughed and said that she would be called as a witness to the things that went on today, and she could not wait. "I think I might enjoy this more than my wife having my firstborn. Please don't tell her that. But boy-oh-boy, this is going to be epic."

Edwin and Joan were headed to the ball fields, and he and Storm with Rain headed to the house. He needed to get a home set up now that he was off for the rest of spring and into summer. Stone wouldn't have believed it, but he was actually looking forward to having some extra time to fiddle around the place he owned or get himself a home instead of a condo where he owned the area. Maybe he'd find himself a lover or two and never come out of his bedroom again. It was worth some thought.

By the time he was in his condo, he'd passed seven homes that were for sale. It was time that he got out of living like he was. Hearing the neighbors fighting. The kids screaming in their yards and his. He didn't mind the kids so much as the fighting. One night, the police had had to be called, and he'd been keeping his head low since then. That was when he remembered that he and his brothers were going to an auction on Saturday. He was going to get a jump on things and make sure that he knew as much about it as he could. The house wasn't for sale, but the land surrounding it—about fifty acres were. He might build if he didn't find himself something to live in before then.

Calling someone who would know about the land, he got in touch with his dad. He'd know everything there was to know and also who might be putting up their homes for sale, too. He wasn't a gossip or anything but he did listen very well. Stone loved his parents very much.

Dad told him of four homes that he knew would suit his needs. While he had no idea what his needs were at the moment, he trusted his dad. Once he'd made arrangements about getting things squared away, at the last minute, Dad was called away to an emergency school board meeting. Mom was going too, so he decided to go to the homes on his own.

"Hey." He turned and looked at the woman that he'd bumped into when she came out of the store. "Watch where you're going, please? You could have killed—you must be a Griffin family member. I've never seen a family that looks so much alike as you guys do."

He bent over to help her pick up her groceries and knocked heads with her. Telling her he was sorry again. This time, he reached for the things that were spread out all over the sidewalk instead of what was right in front of her. The bag was ripped, so he offered to carry things to her car.

"I don't have a car. Of course not, right? I'm going to have to make a couple of trips." Just as she was speaking, Odell Armstrong came out of the store with several bags that were cloth, the ones that he sold for people and helped them put things in the bag. "How much do I owe you, sir? I'll gladly pay for them."

"No trouble, miss. None at all." He shook hands with him and said that he'd seen it happen and wondered if they were both all right. "I know that Stone here has a hard head that's why I'm asking. How are you, son? Heard about the kerfuffle at the school. Sure going to miss having you around."

He told him how his dad had been called to an emergency board meeting. Telling the man that he'd decided to look for a house. He told him to wait right there he had some information that he might need.

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“Are you sure you don’t mind going with me? I have a bit of trouble with women.” She asked him if he was a plaything for them. “Plaything? I don’t know that I’d go that far, but women especially expect me to marry them on the spot simply because I’m a single guy with money. One of the main reasons that I don’t date much. Too much drama.”

“And you’re good-looking. That probably doesn’t help you, either. You have that boyish charm to you as well.” The man, she knew his name was Stone, asked her if she thought he was good-looking. “Yes. And while I think you know it, you’re not arrogant about it. I work in a grocery store back home and I see that type all the time. They think that just because they’re good-looking, they’re also charming. Which most men aren’t.”

“Thank you. I think.” He pulled into the drive of the house that they were sent to look at. “Odell said that it’s not even on the market yet but I can see it being snatched up quickly for the way it looks on the outside. Do you suppose that he believes that and hopes that selling it to me will be something that he doesn’t have to mess with later?”

“I don’t know. It seems to have a lot of...well, charm again, and most people want modern with cable and shit ready. Also, I’m betting this place has one of those really nice eat-in kitchens with a dining room that’s formal. Most people, at least I think so, want a kitchen to entertain in.” He asked her why she’d think that. “The wrap-around porch. Also, the rocking chairs and swing. They don’t look to me like they’re only there for curb appeal but they get used by the owners of this place. Like the couple would sit out there instead of watching whatever crap that’s on their phones.”

The realtor had been called away, which was fine by them, and using the key that

Odell had given them, they walked into the house and she was blown away by the front entrance. It was like she had thought. Made for inviting people into your home—not a house but a home, and all would be welcome.

There was a double-wide staircase with the most beautiful railing that was on both sides. She could see a bride at the top of it, waiting for her life to get started with someone who would own the place. As they were going through the house, still furnished because Odell's mother had passed away a month ago, and he was just now getting around to wanting to sell the home. She wandered around the place with Stone and kept her mouth closed. That had been her plan anyway.

“You know, I'd like your opinion about the place. You don't have to bite your lips in not saying anything.” She told him that she'd buy this house if she had the money. “What about it that appeals to you so much that you'd buy it without looking at the rest of the place?”

“Are you making fun of me?” He said he'd never do that and that he really wanted her opinion. “All right. I can see from here that the dining room is one for entertaining not just getting together with people that you don't know well. I'm betting that the books on the shelves in the library are well worn and all of them have been read. I noticed too that there are books of different genres too.”

“I noticed that as well. I love the big windows in this room. I'm betting that when spring is in full swing, it'll be beautiful. All year round, I think.” The two of them were standing in the middle of the library, looking around, when he pointed out the chandelier. “Can you imagine holly hanging from here in the winter or even mistletoe? The trees, because I think this house screams for a Christmas tree in every room, would be a perfectly beautiful addition to this room, standing near the fireplace. And that is funny to me because since I moved out of the house, I've not put up one decoration for any holiday.”

She thought it was funny that he pulled out his phone and began taking pictures. Even putting notes on it as if he was making a list of things that needed to be taken care of. When they did enter the dining room, a very large one that opened out onto a deck with a pool in the back yard. She wanted to sit in one of the many chairs to see if they were as comfortable as they looked. The house was checking all her boxes in the perfect home to live in.

“On to the living room, I guess.” The room that she could see with yet another tree by the huge fireplace sparkling with lights, the room was lovely. In addition to the four large overstuffed couches, there were little sitting areas with a chair and a little table next to it if you wanted to read. Or to play a game or two while enjoying the crackling of the fireplace.

There wasn't any television in the room, Odell had told them that he'd taken it out when his had broken, but it was something that sat over the fireplace. He told them that he thought that it was too small for the room anyway. It needed to be much larger than the forty-five inch one that had been there.

“I didn't know they made much larger televisions than that one. I think that's the size that I have, but I rarely watch it.” She told him that she thought they were about seventy-five and laughed when he found one on his phone for one hundred and twenty inches. “You'd feel like you were standing on the field—any field of any sports that you were watching with one that big.”

The kitchen was next to look over. Odell had told them that the kitchen had been updated recently so he didn't think that they'd have to do that. It was up to date but it still needed some work, she thought. While it did have an eat-in table like she had thought, there was a pantry that she thought was much too small for the size of the house and room they were in. However, she loved the large room and the herb window that was filled with half-dying herbs. Sage got to work with watering them all while they were in the kitchen.

There was a study, too, that was devoid of any furniture. There were marks on the floor like it had held a large desk as well as some chairs. But again, Odell had forewarned them about that, saying that the desk had been in ill repair and had had it removed even before his mother had passed away.

“It had been my father’s desk and Mom thought that someone could make a go at it in cleaning it up. But once it had been to the place to have it repaired, it was found to be beyond restoration and had been thrown out.” Along with the matching chairs that too had been his dad’s as well. “Mother was devastated, of course, but whoever buys it wouldn’t care for it anyway. It was just a pine desk that someone had made for Dad a very long time ago.”

The stairs in the back of the house were there for them to use. A set had been for the help, they’d been told, and it not only led right to the kitchen but there was a small elevator to take things from the first floor to the second. On the second floor, they were both surprised to find that there were six bedrooms, not including the master suite, and each bedroom had its own bathroom. It was beautifully laid out.

“Here’s the elevator.” The gilded elevator was just at the back of the house nearest to the master suite just as they’d been told. Not only did it seem to be large enough for several people to be brought up or down in it, but it was also beautifully decorated as well. They were going to use it when they decided to go back down, just to test if it still worked. “I can see this being used to bring furniture up here, too. And anything else that would be brought up that would be too heavy for the stairs.”

She agreed with them as they looked into each of the bedrooms after seeing the master suite and marveling at the large window that was in the back of the room so that a person could see out the back of the house and into the yard below.

After glancing into each of the bedrooms, all of them in soft hues that seemed to be in the bedspread that was on the large king sized beds that took up space in the big



rooms. She wanted to fling herself into the bedroom and have a nap. She figured that the rooms, all of them, were perfect for taking a long nap in them. Even to snuggle deep within the blankest on a cold winter night too.

“I think you love the house as much as I do.” She was slightly embarrassed about how much she’d gushed about the home when they were riding down the quiet elevator. “And I do love everything about it. I wonder what the price will be with all these things, too.”

“I would imagine that the house will cost a great deal anyway. All the things in it? Well, it’d probably double whatever he has as the asking price. Do you have furniture to fill it out?”

“Nothing. A bed with some odd blankets but nothing like this place has.” They were in the living room again. “I can see my family coming over here to watch any game that’s on, especially with the television that would go up there. Staff would be helpful, too, but I’m guessing that they might stick around if someone were to buy the house like it is. I shouldn’t say this, but I’m thinking that he’ll be able to charge me double the price, and I’d pay it simply because the house is everything that I want.”

“I don’t know that I’d say that to him. You don’t want to tip your hand just yet.” They both laughed and she found it hard to leave the house. “You’ll be happy here, I think. And be able to have this as a forever home. With the elevator, you won’t have to worry about steps when you get too old to climb them.”

“I’m immortal. The stairs wouldn’t be an issue because I’d stay just as fit and strong as I am right now.” She didn’t know what to say about that, so she said nothing. “Did you notice too that I’d be living a bit from my family? That would be nice if I wanted to have some privacy. Also, having them close enough—what’s wrong? Did I say something that upset you?”

“No. Why would you ask that? I think it’s about time that I got back to your brother’s house. He must be worried that I’d gotten lost or something.” He said that he spoke to his family as they were touring the house. “That’s good. I should have remembered that you have that link thing going on. I should be heading home. Don’t you think?”

“I said something wrong. What did I do?” She just stared at him. “Come on. We were having such fun until now. Is it the house or me?”

“Neither. I don’t know...it’s all right. You and some very lucky woman will enjoy this house, and I’m happy for the two of you. I think that I should be headed home.” She made her way to the door and was stopped because it was locked. “Do you have a key still? I think that we’re locked in.”

“I have the key.” He seemed upset with her, and she was fine by that. He needed to find himself a wife so that he could have this beautiful home to raise little wolves in. She was nearly to the car when he stopped her by pulling her around to look at him. “Please tell me what has you so upset. I hurt in thinking that I’ve done something wrong to you. Please tell me so I can fix it.”

“There is...” She sighed heavily. “You have money. I’m aware of that. And I love this house just as much, if not more, than you do. I’m jealous, I guess you could say. Whoever lives here, you or someone else, will be able to afford all the things that will fill this house out as a home. It’s no big deal. Really. I’m just being my usual self right now.”

He helped her into the car and she wanted to cry for being so stupid. As soon as he started the car, he turned it off and looked at her. Not sure what she’d done now, she asked him if he was all right.

“No. I mean, yes. I’m a little dense.” She told him that he was far from that. “I’ve spent the entire day with you and didn’t even think about why it felt so right. Why

you being with me was the perfect thing to have.”

“I don’t know what it is you’re talking about. Don’t you think that...your parents are having dinner with me tonight so that I can finally meet the little girl that I’m bringing back to the Danielsons.” She turned away to wipe at the tears that seemed to be falling for no reason—there was a reason, but she didn’t want to think about it right now. “I think that I’ll walk to your brothers if you don’t mind. I’m sure you have someone that you need to—”

“You’re my mate, Sage. I didn’t understand this before now but you are. May I smell you?” She decided that there was something wrong with him and asked him why he’d want to smell her. His laughter wasn’t doing her temper any good. “No, what I meant, can I smell your neck? There are other ways that I can figure out if I belong to you, but that’s the simplest way that I can think of.”

“What will that mean? Whether or not I’m your mate? Does it mean that you’re settled with me or something?” Before he could answer her, if that was what he was going to do, she tore open the door and got out of the car. Just as she was reaching into the car to get her things, the glass to the window shattered. The next thing she knew, she was on the ground with a very large...”You’re smashing me. Are you—” The paw over her mouth made her a little pissy but she allowed it when she realized that she was getting loud.”

There was a second shattering glass, and that was when she realized that someone was shooting at her. Not moving, she nearly cried out when the big wolfman licked her face. She was going to murder him if he didn’t stop—

“I need to find out who that is.” Before she could nod at him, or, more importantly, ask him how the hell he was talking to her, he was gone. Coming back when she started to sit up, he licked her once more. “You’re my mate, love. Don’t move, or whoever it is might just test the theory of whether or not you’re immortal, too.” Then

he was gone. She was going to kill him. Or he was going to get killed, she realized.

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Just as he was running toward the tree line, he realized what he was doing. First of all, he had no idea where the shots had come from and that he'd left his mate there veritable and bleeding. Turning around, he made his way back to her only to find that she was lying very still with her eyes closed. She was dead. He just knew it.

He got close enough to her to be able to smell the blood again when she smacked him on the nose. Sitting up, she looked at him with so much fire in her eyes that he felt his cock get hard. It was the stupidest reaction that he'd ever had before. Being turned on by a woman's anger.

"You just left me here." He nodded, backing away from her, when she got up on her knees. "What would have happened had the person come up behind you and killed me?" Stone thought that he'd be better off without saying that she was an immortal again. He might just be able to have sex again someday if he didn't. "I know you can talk to me. You did it already—and that's another thing. What makes you think that I'd be thrilled to death knowing that all you had to do was to lick my face and be able to speak to me? You didn't in the event you were going to say something stupid."

He watched her as she sat on her knees. Stone also thought that it was best if he didn't mention that he thought that she was sexy, being as pissed off as she was at him. He also thought it was cute. He might be in love with her, but he wasn't going to mess up his body when he happened to tell her that.

"Well?" he shifted, thrilled beyond words that he was dressed. There was no telling what she might have done to his poor body had he not been. "You're human again. I asked you a question."

“I don’t know what it was. I’d have an answer for you if I knew, but I don’t.” When she stood up, he realized that someone was still out there and begged her to sit down. “While I have no doubt that you could take on someone who is trying to kill us, I’d rather you didn’t do anything but sit on your pretty bottom and wait for my brothers.”

She growled at him. It was adorable but scary, too. Again, he kept his mouth shut and decided that he’d let her cool down—another thing he wasn’t going to tell her—before he mentioned that he loved her and found her growling at him to be off-the-charts sexy.

It was then that he decided to contact his brothers. “I’ve been shot at. So has my mate.” It was Garfield who asked him if it was Sage. “Yes. She’s none too happy with me right now but I’m not going to mention to her how beautiful I think she is right now. But we’re now hiding behind my car, which has been shot up, waiting for someone to come and save the two of us.”

Edwin told him that he was coming into the driveway now. Almost as soon as he said that, he could hear the crunch of gravel as someone pulled into the house. Not standing up, he was glad that his family was there for him but he didn’t know what to do about getting someplace safe. Edwin didn’t get out of his truck but did tell him that the police were on their way as well.

They were ushered into the house in a very short time, and he was glad, too, that they were safe from the shooter. At least, he hoped they were. As soon as the door closed behind them, he pulled Sage into his arms and held her. She started crying then, and he was at a loss as to what to do next.

“Storm and Rain are looking for him. Whoever he was, he won’t get far now that they’re looking.” Stone believed that. “The good news is that you have your mate, and you’re both all right.”

“All right? Did you just say, all right? You’re saying that someone shoots at us, and it’s no big deal because we’re all right?” Edwin took a few steps back when Sage started for him. “I got cut, you moronic fuck. From someone shooting at me. How is that remotely no big deal that—I think I’m going to be sick.”

Stone was glad that she remembered where the bathroom was on this floor, as he had been drawing a blank. When the door slammed behind Sage, he looked at Edwin, telling him that he might have a clue as to who it might well be. He thought it was the principal of the school, Roland Jorden.

“Because you quit or because he’s going to get fired?” He said he’d not known about him being fired. “Mom contacted me a little while ago. The board voted to have him fired because he gave you such a hard time that it caused you to quit. Are you going back if he’s gone?”

“To be honest with you, I don’t know. I’ve been teaching since before I graduated from college, and I never take a vacation unless it’s over the summer months. I don’t know, but I think I don’t want to—I found my mate, and I find that I want to do things with her that we did today. Just hang out. We won’t be able to do that if I have to work too.” He asked him if he was going to buy this house. “I think we are. We both love it very much. And it’s perfect for the two of us.”

When Sage came toward him, her hand over her mouth like she was going to be sick again, she told him how she had puke breath and didn’t want to breathe on them. Nearly laughing, he caught himself just as he was about to let it burst out. Christ, there had to be something wrong with him if he thought that pissing off his mate was funny.

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Her cuts were superficial. By the time she was in a better frame of mind, she was nearly healed up. A person could get used to this if it was something that everyone could have. Sage looked over at Stone and asked him if he was ready to take her home.

“I’m hoping that we’re both home.” She asked him what he meant by that. Sage didn’t want to get her hopes up about the house they were currently hiding out in. “I called Odel and asked him what he wanted for the house as it sits, including the furniture. I figured that if we wanted to change things out later, we could do that, too. But for now, it’s move-in ready.”

“What would you have done if I hated this place?” He told her. “You’d give up your dream home simply because I didn’t like this place? That’s stupid. You need to have a say in things, too, you know.”

“I do know that. However, in this, I’m very happy that we both love the house. I think that’s the way the fates or whoever is in charge of us finding out other halves took that into consideration. That we’d have the same tastes and such.” She asked him if he had been dropped on his head as a child. “Not that I’m aware of. But I have gone toe to toe with my brothers occasionally.” He laughed then, and she thought it was a sound that she could get used to. It was an uninhibited sound that brought a smile to her own face.

When his cell phone rang, he answered it quickly. After asking if it was all right that he put it on speakerphone, Odell said it was fine with him. Suddenly, she thought that she could hear a pin drop in the room, things were that quiet. After laying the phone on the coffee table that separated them, Odell started laughing.

“I had me a price in mind when you went to see the house. With and without the fixings to make it into a home. Now, I need to rethink things. I believe that I was going to charge you too much after thinking about how much trouble it was going to cost me to get the place emptied out. But why don’t you just take the furniture and we’ll try and negotiate a good price between us.” After telling him how much he wanted for the house, stating that it would be enough to settle up his mother’s estate, Sage looked at Stone. “I don’t want you to think that I’m selling it to you at a higher price because it’s you, Stone. But you and your family have done a great deal for this old man, and I couldn’t be happier either with the way you taught my children.”

“What about your family? Won’t they be upset for the price you’re giving me?” He told him that his only sister had passed a few years ago from cancer, and she was all he had left but his mom. “Odell, you know you could get twice what you’re telling me if you were to put it on the market.”

“I do know that, but now I don’t have to. I’m getting a fair price on the place, and I don’t have to do much more than sign my name in a few places and have it taken off my shoulders. I like that more than you can know.” Stone said that he’d pay the closing costs. “All right. I forgot about that. You do that, and we’ll have us a good relationship if you keep me in mind when you need some food in that place.”

“Deal.” They were going to meet in the morning at the bank. The two of them decided that they couldn’t have done any better than the deal that they had, and Sage was excited to have the place. She was afraid if she was honest. Just meeting Stone, there was plenty that she didn’t know, but it felt right. Like it was in the fates for her not just to meet Stone but to buy this house with him as well.

“I don’t have any money.” She blurted that out, and he told her that was all right. “No, it’s...you know what? I want you to stop saying that. You use it entirely too much. But I don’t have a pot to...the only clothing that I have besides from the few things that I took to the Danielsons—holy shit, I’m supposed to take Hailey back to



them when that's all settled."

"We'll get it worked out." She wanted to tell him that he smiled too much but thought that he really didn't. She had a feeling that he didn't get the opportunity to smile at all until now. "I have more money than we can spend in a hundred lifetimes. Buying this house will not put a dent into what I have. Even on some of the investments that my family and I have together is more than enough to see us through."

"Not to sound too greedy, but just what sort of number are we talking about?" He told her that if she were to put sand from the beach into her hands, and each grain was a dollar, it would be less than what he had. "You're kidding me."

"No. I wouldn't kid you about something as important as money. Also, while we're talking about that, you should know that I can't lie to you either. Nor will I ever cheat on you. You are my one and only true love."

Instead of asking him what that meant, she asked about his family. Sage knew they were a huge part of his life and was again jealous about the relationship he had with them.

The family decided that the dinner tonight was going to be a celebration. She was nervous and a little afraid of meeting them all at one time. Then there was the child, one that she had no relationship to other than coming here to bring her to the Danielson home.

After talking to the Danielsons at length about things that she'd found out about Hailey, she was to send pictures to them as soon as she met the child. Sage only hoped that the little girl didn't hate her because she was there to take her home.

They decided too that they were going to spend the night in the new house. She didn't know what Stone's plans were about sleeping in the house, but she was going to put

her foot down about them sharing a bed. She didn't know him any more than she did Hailey and wasn't jumping headfirst into a sexual relationship with a stranger. No matter how much she liked him. Then there was the money situation.

Could he really have that much in the way of money? It was more than she could have thought, a number for what he'd told her. He did say that he couldn't lie to her, but that could have been a—

“You're thinking way too hard. Just ask me what it is that's bothering you, and I'll answer it. I promise you when I tell you that I'd never lie to you. About anything.” She told him that was hard to believe. Everyone lied. “I won't to you. Not ever. Ask me?”

“What do you want from me?” He asked her what she meant. “What is it...am I going to be one of those women that you get tired of as you never get older? Are you going to toss me aside?” He shook his head, and before she could tell him that he needed to use his words, he spoke to her.

“You're immortal as well. Nothing can kill you. You'll not die of old age simply because I'm your mate. You'll never gain weight, but only if you were to be pregnant with our child. If you want any.” She asked him what that meant, thinking for the first time in her life that she wanted to have this man's child. “We'd have to have sex to begin with then—ouch. You're very painful to be around sometimes.” His laughter took away some of the sting of what he said. “I love you, Sage. So very much.”

“You've only just met me.” He told her that it didn't matter, that he did love her with all his heart. “You're a romantic, aren't you? I don't know if I've ever had anyone want to woo me or not. I'm not good around people.”

“I'll help you with that. I'm very good around people. Most of the time, anyway. I get frustrated with humans sometimes. Not so much kids but the adults are bad. They

take advantage more than not.” She pointed out that she was a human. “No, not anymore. You have magic. A great deal, too. I shared with you when you became my mate. Rain and Storm have also shared simply because of I being your mate. Edwin as well though I have no idea how much he has given you. He’s the pack leader now, and you would have gotten something from him.”

“What can I do?” He said that he’d not know until she told him. “Okay, I’m not going to freak out again like I did yesterday, but I was in the shower and decided that I needed something less manly for myself. Suddenly, it was just there.”

“That’s good, right?” She glared at him. When he laughed, she did as well. “Look, you’re not going to die ever, and everything that I have is now yours. Everything.”

A sudden thought popped into her head, and she felt stupid for thinking of being sexy for Stone. When his cell phone rang, he pulled it out of his pocket without breaking eye contact with her. She didn’t know what was going through his mind, but she got up to go and get her jacket. They needed to get to the Griffin house soon.

“That was the school board. I have to decide if I want to go back to teaching or if I can take over the principal job. And Jorden has been arrested. He’s the former principal at the elementary school that I taught at.” She asked him if he was the one that shot at them. “Yes. Storm and Rain found him after figuring out where he was standing when he shot at us. Mostly, it was me, but it doesn’t matter. He hurt you, and for that, he’s going to pay.”

“Good. I don’t know what I can do to help the process, but hopefully, he won’t be getting out of jail anytime too soon.” He told her about a hearing that was going to determine if he was going to go to prison or not. “I guess it would be attempted murder.”

“Yes, times two. He shot at where you and I were both standing and made it so that

we were both hurt.” She asked him about his wounds. “He shot me in the head. But as soon as I—breath honey. Just breathe.”

She found herself kissing her bottom, as her grannie used to say, and could only stare at her feet. He’d been shot. In the head. And he was making it sound like that was no big deal. When he told her that his family wanted to know if they were going to dinner with them, he asked her what she wanted to do.

“Dinner with your family. And just so you know, the next time that you’re shot anywhere on your body, I don’t want to know like you just told me. I know you can’t lie to me, but if you could give it to me in bits and pieces, I might well be...” She looked up at him. “It just occurred to me that I love you. How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve loved you since...to be honest, it feels like I’ve loved you all my life. I just needed for you to find me before I knew what true love is.” She told him he was a romantic. “I guess I am. I’ve never thought of myself as one until now. I do so deeply love you, Sage. With all my being.”

They walked over to his brother’s house. She knew that it was being catered, she’d been asked several times what sort of food did she like. Mexican had always been her favorite, and the hotter, the better. She was told that Edwin liked it hot, too. The family was wondering who could take it hotter. Also, the triplets liked it spicy, too, she’d been informed.

It was a little overwhelming at first. All the men in the family were large. Not fat but tall and well-toned. She wondered again if they lifted cars in their spare time to keep in such good shape.

“I heard that you got to see Stone’s wolf.” She said that he’d been protecting her from the gunshots. Harman asked if she’d been hurt. “You should get to used to seeing all of us around. That way, our wolves will get your scent to find you if you need us to.”

“Mostly just small cuts that healed quickly. I think that it was the glass from the windows. Or perhaps the stones that were in the turnabout. I don’t hurt at all.” He told her that was good. “I am happy that it didn’t hurt me all that much.” She looked over at Stone, who was talking to his other brother. “He told me that he was shot in the head. That scared the crap out of me. I really would hate for something to happen to him when I’ve only just fallen in love with him.”

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Hailey didn’t want to be around all these people, but she knew that she was going to have to be in order to go home to her grandparents. She didn’t understand how they were her great-grandparents, but it didn’t matter right now. This woman was telling her that she was going to take her to them.

“But I don’t want to go to them. I like it here.” She said that they were looking forward to raising her. “I’m not going.”

“I’m sorry, honey, but it’s not up to you. You’re just a little girl that has been dealt a crappy hand, and now that you’re parents are gone, you have to go someplace.” She asked why she couldn’t stay here. “Because they’re not your family. Earl and Margaret Danielson are.”

She knew that it was a done deal, as her mom used to tell her. But she didn’t want to have to stay with strangers again. It was all right now that she had the other little girls around, but these people were going to take her from them, and she didn’t want that to happen.

“You keep me then. I’ll be the best little girl you’ve ever seen. I don’t want to go away again.” She started to cry and remembered what her dad used to tell her. That tears didn’t get you anywhere. No one at the other house had said that to her, and she loved having friends in the other four little girls like her. “I won’t do anything to get

you into trouble. I promise. I just don't want to move again."

"I'm so sorry." When she started to cry, tears again, she let the other woman, she thought her name was Sage, hold her. It was a nice feeling to be held by someone. When she asked her if she was all right, she wanted to tell her no, but she was just a kid, and her opinion didn't matter to anyone. "You'll see, honey. Things will work out for you. They're going to be good for you."

She heard her cell phone ring, but instead of answering it like her parents did all the time, she just held her. Telling her about the house that her great-grandparents had wasn't anything like the one that her new friends were living in. They didn't even have a pool.

After they talked for a bit more, Sage telling her that she'd love living with them, she decided that she was going to run away and never come back. It wasn't going to be a good thing, she was just a kid, but she didn't want to move again and be with people that she didn't know again.

"When I was a little girl, my mom used to have her friends over all the time. They were mean to me, and I decided that I was going to run away." She looked up at her, shocked that she knew just what she was thinking. "I didn't get very far before the police found me. But I did learn a valuable lesson in it. I was only a child, and there were far more scary people out there than my mom and her friends. People that would take me and sell me off for unthinkable things."

"You mean like sex?" Sage looked at her and asked her where she'd heard that. "My mom used to say it to me all the time. How she was going to sell me off to one of her friends so they could have sex with me. It's how she punished me. Telling me that anyone would want me as I was young and pretty. You bet that I straightened up right then after telling me that. I don't know what sex is, but it sounded dirty, and I didn't want that to happen to me."

“That’s a horrible thing to frighten someone with.” Hailey told her that she didn’t mess up anymore after being told that. “I would think not. My goodness, I’d never say that to a child of mine. Or any child, for that matter. That’s horrible.”

She decided not to tell her the other things that her mom used to tell her. There were a lot of things, too, that she didn’t think were right. Like the time she told her that she had to go to school or she was going to have to watch her and her husband, not her dad, have sex while she watched.

“We can’t have it with you around. I like to get loud,” her mother had told her. She’d heard them in the middle of the night once, and it scared her enough to keep her door locked. They were more than a lot noisy, and it terrified her. It sounded to her that the mister was beating her mom, and she kept telling him that she wanted more. It made her sick, too, that night when her mom screamed that she was coming. She never asked her where she was going but kept her mouth shut even the next day when she had breakfast with them.

She never called the man that mom lived with anything but mister. If he had a first name, she didn’t know what it was. He would be mean to her when she called him anything but dad, but she knew for a fact that he wasn’t her father. The man hadn’t been around all that long, and her mother told her that he wasn’t her dad, but she was hoping that he wanted the job someday. She didn’t. She hated him.

Hailey was free to go and play with the other little girls. They were so nice to her that she sometimes forgot about her mother being dead. It didn’t matter to her all that much. She’d never treated her like Mrs. Griffin, or Paige as she said to call her, treated the little girls. It shocked her that they called Mr. Griffin, his name was Jeffery, Dad when he wasn’t. He didn’t even seem to mind, either.

“Did you know that they’re going to be getting married?” She asked one of the triples, she couldn’t tell them apart just yet but thought that her name was Libby.

“Maybe they’ll take you in, and you’d be our cousin. That would be awesome, don’t you think?”

“But I don’t want any parents. I didn’t like the one that I had.” Amy told her that they’d be better because they were the Griffins. “How is that supposed to make a difference? I don’t want someone selling me off for sex.”

“They’d never do that. I swear it. They’ll make sure you have everything you ever need too. Not that we ask for anything but it’s nice to get a hug or two when we need one. And parents like them is something that you’re never going to get with humans.”

“What do you mean? They’re all humans, aren’t they?” She told her that they were wolves that shifted into men. “No, I don’t believe that. They’d be really hairy all the time. And what happens if they bite me? Then I’ll be a wolf, too.”

That had merit. If she was a wolf, she could scare the grandparents and they’d not want her. It was something to think about, but she listened to Glory when she explained that it didn’t happen like that. That just a bite wouldn’t do it.”

“I don’t think I want to know what would make it happen.” She said that was fine, but when she did, they’d tell her. “How come you know so much? I mean, you’re not a wolf, too, are you? Any of you?”

“No, but we’re not human either. We have magic, too. See?” When Libby changed into another outfit, it startled her. After doing that a couple of more times, it was clear to her that she was going to have to get away from this family sooner rather than later. There was something very wrong with them all. “You try it.”

She could do it as well. It scared her at first, being able to change with just a thought but the girls were confused about it as much as she was. She wasn’t a part of their family and so she shouldn’t be able to do it. Hailey asked if she should tell Sage.



“I would. Or Uncle Stone. He might understand more. He’s been a wolf a lot longer.” She didn’t want this to be a fluke. Hailey had never had new clothing before other than the stuff that her mom would pick up at the clothing drives. The little dress she had on was one that one of her classmates had had, and she fell in love with it. “Come on, we’ll go with you to see what is going on.”

She didn’t want to interrupt the family. They were having a good time, but food had been brought in and she was suddenly starved. Almost as soon as she asked to speak to Mr. Stone, he noticed that her dress was different. That got the whole table staring at her then. She didn’t much care for that either.

“That could only mean one thing, you know that, don’t you, Stone?” He said that it could be plenty of things that he didn’t want to talk about it. She didn’t either and moved away from the big man in favor of going to see the girls again. They had beautiful rooms, and she loved hanging out with them. It wasn’t until after they ate that Sage came to talk to her again.

“I just heard from your grandparents. Your great-grandparents, I mean. They had something happen that makes it so that you can’t go and live with them just yet. Mrs. Danielson passed away in her sleep last night.” She asked her what that meant, knowing what passed away meant, but wanted to know if this was somehow different. “Margaret had a bad heart, and she was very stressed out about your mother dying, and she had a heart attack while sleeping.”

“Now, what am I going to do? Do I live with my great-grandda?” She said that she didn’t know yet as Earl was still trying to figure out what he was going to do with his life. “I’m betting that it has nothing to do with me, huh?”

“I don’t know, to be honest.” She sat there on the edge of the bed and looked around the lovely room that Amy had. “You’ll have to stay with me, I guess, until things are settled up. I don’t want you to think that this is going to affect you in any way, but

with her passing on, it's going to be doubly hard on Earl than it was before to care for you."

"He's old, too." She told her that he was eighty-three. "Libby told me that when I'm able to drive that he'll be gone, he's so old."

"I don't know but they're both in poor health as it is." Sage pulled her into her arms. "This is a lot to take in. I only came here to get you and then go back home. Now I find that I don't want to leave, and I think I might well have purchased my forever home with Stone."

"I'll be a good girl for you." Sadly, Sage told her that it wouldn't be up to her but to the courts. "You tell them that you think I'll be a good girl. You don't even have to take care of me. I'll go and stay with my friends until they toss me out."

"If I take responsibility for you, honey, it'll be me taking care of you. But we'll talk some more, all right? There is plenty of time as Earl has to go through the courts on his end as well." She looked at her, lifting her chin up so that she could see her. "It'll be all right, Hailey. I have this under control but I have to talk to Stone too. If and right now, that's a big if, if he wants to take you into our home, we'll have to go through adoption just like everyone else has."

"I don't think that anyone wants me." She started crying and held onto Sage as hard as she could. "My mom didn't want me around, nor do you guys, and I have nobody to love me like the girls do. I'm so hurt right now." She might only be almost six years old, but she knew that the pains in her heart were there because she knew what she was talking about.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:38 am*

Leslie looked at the newspaper that had been left at her door this morning. She was surprised to find her daughter's name written in the headlines about some man, but she didn't know much about what the article said. She could read her name and that of her daughters, but not much more than that.

She'd been a child when they told her that she'd have trouble with reading, and it was like a challenge for her to not learn to read at all. By the time she was sixteen and old enough to get out of going to school, she was in the sixth grade, having failed every class at least twice to get as far as she had been.

"Whatcha reading there, Less?" She didn't know why Albert continued to call her that when she'd asked him several times not to do it. "It looks important. Want me to read it to you?"

"Yes." She hated the man she was with. His name was Oliver, of all things, and she was sick of him treating her like a big dummy head. The way everyone did when they found out that she could only not read, but she didn't know her numbers either. Not enough to tell people what kind of dollars they were handing her. "Just read the part where it talks about the man. He's a good-looking fella, and I wonder what he is doing with her."

"Let me see here." It took him forever to get to the part where it explained who the man was. "His name is Stone Griffin. I've heard of them, I think. Well monied. It says here that he's going to be marrying Sage Tigner. Hey, that's your kid, isn't it? She must not be a kid, I guess. I don't remember the last time you even spoke about her."

“We were supposed to meet her for Christmas, but you won all the money at the races, and we didn’t go there. I might well have went anyway if I’d known you were going to be selfish with the winnings you made.” He pointed out that it was his money that he’d won and she snatched the paper from him. “So you said. About a thousand times.”

They’d been at the airport, and Vegas, like a lot of little places around the town, had one armed bandits. She didn’t know what they were really called, but she knew that she didn’t play them as much as she used to. She did for a long time, but when she ran out of money for the hundredth time, she didn’t go back to them.

There was no way that she could afford them and eat as well. But while they were waiting to be boarded, he’d won some money. She knew that it sounded like a great deal to her, but she didn’t think that five grand went as far as he’d hoped it would. They were broke again by the following day.

She asked him how he knew that the Griffins had money. He said that it was in the newspaper all the time about this or that. How they were the saviors of the school system. Then he remembered how the principal of the little kid’s school had been arrested for trying to kill one of the teachers.

“He’s a Griffin, too, and some upstanding person. Anyway, after he got fired, I’m not sure of all the details like I was there, but he went and got him a gun and went after them and a lady friend of his. I’m betting now that it was your daughter. I wonder if she was hurt.” She didn’t know but asked him where it had happened. “It says here that it happened in Ohio. I had no idea that was where she lived. I thought you told me she lived in Chicago or someplace like that.”

“She did. She worked for a grocery store doing bagging or something. I didn’t know that she moved.” Not that there was any reason for her to know that her daughter had moved. She never kept in touch with her unless she contacted her. That was the only

reason that she had a working cell phone so that Sage could get in touch with her when she wanted. And right now she wanted to talk to her about how she'd been engaged and not thought to tell her about it.

Leslie didn't hate her daughter. Most of the people that she and Albert hung out with did hate their own kids. Sage had been a good kid, she supposed. Not that she had wanted her around all that much but she did make sure that they had a roof over their heads as well as money in the bank. That was all gone now that she'd gone off on her own when she'd turned eighteen years old. But that had been all right, too. She needed to sow her oats like her mom did. Whatever the hell that meant.

Waiting until Albert left the room, she pulled out her cell phone and called her daughter. A man answered the cell, and she was afraid that she'd pressed the wrong button that was there for her to simply call her kid. The man laughed when she said she had the wrong number.

"Are you looking for Sage? She's right here but talking on the other phone right now. My name is Stone. Who might this be?" Leslie told him. "Her mom, I guess. She came here on business for the Danielson's but that is turning out all wrong for her. Do you want me to have her call you back?"

"Yes, please do that." She thought of asking him if it was true that he was marrying her daughter, but she didn't know what else to say to him. Leslie hadn't ever been good at small talk, either.

After hanging up with the man, she thought about what she was good at. There wasn't much that she'd be able to say, she told herself. While not being able to read at all, she had gotten books from the library and listened to them with recordings. Leslie had had to do that without Albert around, or he'd just make fun of her. But she'd enjoyed it so much there were times when she would just go outside near the pool where they were staying and listen to them instead of sunning in the sun. Loving

how the music would tell her when something was going to happen. Leslie thought that she could enjoy any book ever if she had the time to listen to them. That reminded her that she had a book to take back soon, and she decided to go out and get her something else to listen to for fun.

Her cell was ringing as soon as she was able to get to the library. Not wanting to air her phone call to others, she sat down on one of the few benches around the building that weren't occupied by someone else. The first thing that she noticed about Sage was that she was upset about something. She told her to call her back when she was in a better mood.

"I'm sorry. Nothing is going right. The couple that I came here for has had a death in the family, and now I don't know what to do." She heard the noises in the background shut off when a door closed and figured that she was someplace where she could talk to her. "I was going to call you tonight anyway. Didn't you say that boyfriend of yours goes out at night?"

"I'm headed to the library. They had books on tape, and I love listening to them." She felt stupid for saying that and asked her about the family she was staying with. "That man, he sounded nice."

"He is. We're going to be getting married. I don't know when. He's not asked me yet, but Storm told me that it was a done deal. I'm not sure what that means, but I believe him." Leslie asked her if she was pregnant and needed to get married. "No, nothing like that. But I was going to call you to see if you could make it out for summer. We just bought a nice house, and I'd like for you to see it. However, I understand that you might have other things to do."

"I want out of this." She only just realized that was what she wanted more than anything. "I don't want to be around Albert anymore. He's mean and cruel...he doesn't beat me, but he's not at all nice to me, and I want to get to know you." She

laughed just a little. “I know that sounds like I’m crazy and not what you called me about, but it only just occurred to me that I want out of anything with him.”

Sage didn’t say anything, so she just waited. The need to fill in the silence was nearly overwhelming but she didn’t know what she’d say if she did talk. The thought of her daughter turning her down after all this time hurt her heart. While she was rubbing the area where she knew her heart to be, Leslie still waited for her to fill in the quiet.

“Did you know about the money?” It was a fair enough question but it hurt her all the same. She explained to Sage how Albert had told her that they had money, but that’s not why she wanted to come home. “You wanted to come home before, and I had it all planned out, too, but you ditched me at the very last minute.”

“I wanted to still come but Albert won some money and didn’t want to leave. I should have come on my own, I wish with all my heart that I had, but he had it in his head that we needed to keep going on a sure thing. I don’t know why he ever thinks things are going to go his way. He loses more than he wins every time.” Sage asked her if she’d do the same thing again. “If you help me to get to you, I’ll not leave you again, Sage, honey. I’m getting to the point in my life where I want you around.”

“You’ve said that to me before.” She nodded and then remembered that she couldn’t see her and told her that. “I don’t know what to think, Mom. You’ve treated me like crap since I was a child. I want to see you. I want you to meet Stone, but I don’t know about the long term. Or is that the plan again. You come here, hang out for a few days then take off again on some adventure? I don’t know that I could take that again. You up and leaving me when I think that my life is settled.”

“I don’t want that either.” She realized then that she wanted to have a relationship with her daughter. One that meant them getting to know one another, too. “I know next to nothing about you. I know that it’s all my fault, too. I would love to meet your man and his family. Albert...well, he can be damned for all I care. Did I mention that

when I asked him if it was too late for me to learn to read, he said it was too late for me to do anything but stick around the house, making it nice for him? I don't want that. I want someone to make things nice to me, damn it. I want to see you, Sage. Even if you'll only allow me to have ten minutes a day with you, it's more than I think I deserve."

She was crying then and hated herself for it. Talking to her daughter had never made her feel like it did this time. She found that she wanted to beg her daughter for another chance to get to know her and that she'd go to the ends of the earth to do so. As soon as she asked her to wait for a moment, Leslie just knew that she was going to hang up on her and never call back.

As soon as she got back on the line, she told her that there was a ticket going to be waiting for her at the closest airport. The same one as before. She told her three times that she wasn't going to pay for Albert and that if she really did want to get away from him, now was her chance.

"If you leave me hanging, Mom, I'll never speak to you again. As a matter of fact, the phone that you have now won't work again either. I mean it." She told her that she'd be there. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. Stone said that there is a flight going out...hang on again."

When she came back this time, she seemed happier. "Stone said that his brother has business out that way and will be coming in on the plane. I'll not be with him as I have to get things going on this end for Hailey. But he and his brother will be there with a sign on them that says your name. Don't bring Albert." She told her that she'd not do that. That she'd get to the airport one way or another. "There will be a car...are you still at the library? If I send you a car there to take you to the airport, will you go with them?"

"Yes. I'll be waiting. Oh, Sage, I can't believe this is really happening. I don't have



squat at the apartment that we were living in. I have my purse and ID with me.” A picture showed up on her phone, and she nearly dropped it. “Oh my, is that your man?”

“Yes. His name is Stone Griffin. Be nice to him.” Leslie said that she would, she promised. “I need a picture of you so that I can give it to the driver that is coming for you. He’s a friend of Stones, so I don’t know him but be nice to him too.”

She deserved that, her own child telling her to be nice to people. And when she told her that she would be extra nice, they hung up the phone. Sitting on the little stone bench, she couldn’t believe her luck. And Albert wouldn’t have any idea where she’d gone, and that suited her just fine and dandy. She was going to see her daughter and her man.

Just as she was beginning to doubt anyone was coming for her, she was asked if she was Leslie Tigner. Once she was in the car with the woman, she told her that she owed her life to Stone Griffin.

“Nicest family you might ever meet. And they don’t talk down to you none either when they have something to say to you.” She asked her how long she’d known them. “Oh, since I was a little bitty thing. Stone, he’s a good deal older than he looks but the nicest man ever. And that daddy of his is something special, too.” She went on and on about the Griffin family and all that they’d done for her and Leslie hung on her every word. She wanted to know as much about her future son-in-law as she could get. When the cell phone rang again, she saw that it was Albert. Turning it off, she was nearly ready to toss it out of the window but was afraid that Sage would call again.

“I plum nearly forgot.” She was handed a bag from a telephone company that she’d seen on television. “Sage had me pick this up for you to give to you—that’s why I’m a bit late in getting here. She told me to remind you that Albert, whoever he is, wasn’t

going to be able to contact her once she moved to Ohio. You hand me that other phone, honey and I'll take care that he can't get in touch with you. Sage is number one on the dialer."

As soon as she got the phone out of the box, she was pushing the right button to talk to her daughter. Leslie was crying so hard that she almost didn't understand Sage, so she must have handed it off to someone else. Someone by the name of Tony was on the phone.

"She's been having a rough day, and I'm glad that this is turning out so well for her." Again, the silence was harsh, but the man was still on the phone. His voice sounded hard as well, and she found herself thinking that he might be a wolf, like she'd been told was true. "You hurt her or my brother, and they'll never find even a drop of your blood around so that you'd be identified later. Do you understand me?"

"Yes. I don't want to hurt her anymore. I've never...she's never asked me for a thing since she was five years old and wanted me help her glue cut-up paper with her. All I can think about now is how her little face looked when I told her to go away." She started to cry again. "I didn't ever get the chance to be with her as a momma does again. She never once asked me to help her with anything. And you know what? I'm the loser in all that. I fucked up badly, and I want so badly to be with her until I take my last breath."

"It might well be if you hurt them." She didn't take offense when he said that to her. Nor did she get upset about it, either. He was a man that loved his family, she'd bet and he wasn't going to tolerate her or anybody else messing with them. If only she had that sort of family when she'd been a child. She might well have turned out better herself. "I want you to remember this, too, Leslie, I can read your mind as well. If you even think of hurting them, then—"

"I'll kill myself if I hurt them." He didn't say anything, and she nodded. "I promise

you all I want is to get to know her like I should have a long time ago. I don't want her money or anything that she has. I just want a chance like I've said. To get to know her like I should."

After hanging up when he did, she handed the other phone to the driver. She might well have gotten her name, but she didn't remember it. Her heart was hurting again, and she just wanted to talk to Sage again. Once she was at the airport, things were taken out of the trunk for her to use.

"There is a card for you to use, too, so you can have some supper. I wasn't to give it to you until we got here. I guess your daughter didn't want you changing your mind." She was thankful for that. "My name is Smokey Ridge. You need anything from me, you just think about me. You and I, we have a connection just like them wolves do. If you get scared again, just think of me. But I think you're going to be doing all right, Leslie Tigner."

Since she had no idea where anyone would be coming from, she was going to get her some dinner at one of the fast food places. Almost as soon as she was in line, she decided that she'd go and find herself something more and was seated in the nice place when she realized she had no idea if she could afford it or not. It was Smokey who told her that she had plenty enough if she wanted to buy the restaurant but to enjoy herself.

"Thank you so much." She said that she had her back and that she thought of her as her new friend. "I hope I have as many friends as I can get once I get to Ohio. I'm sort of afraid now."

"Don't be. Your daughter has thought of everything, and you'll be just fine." A woman came into the restaurant. It was hard not to notice her, but when she sat across from her, she nearly asked who she was but waited to be free of speaking to Smokey.

“My name is Storm Griffin.” She picked up a menu that was dropped off when she sat down. “We’ll have a nice dinner, the two of us, and I’ll decide if I have to kill you or not. I’m sure that you can understand that my sister and I are very protective of our family, and since Sage is going to marry Stone, she’s my family as well.”

“If it comes down to killing me, will you please tell my daughter something? Tell her that I love her more than I thought possible.” The woman stared at her before laughing. “I don’t know what you found to be so funny.”

“I know, but that’s all right. We’ll still get to know one another.” As she started asking questions about herself, it never occurred to Leslie to lie to her. Telling her that she’d been a terrible mother had the other woman laughing again. She was either first-rate insane, or she was funnier than she’d ever been before.

By the time their dinner plates were taken away, Leslie felt better. She didn’t let her guard down, however, because what the woman had shown her that she could do was scary. Even when the waiter got snippy with her when she said she didn’t know what to order, Storm slammed her hand down on the table and told him that if he didn’t want to lose his job, he’d better be nice to people he didn’t make fun of her again. Thankfully Storm ordered for her and was glad that she’d ordered her something that she wanted instead of what she thought that she needed.

“Albert did that all the time. He’d point out that I couldn’t read so he’d make fun of me until the waiter was laughing too. I never got what I wanted, just what Albert wanted. I’m not big on steaks or seafood, but I love pork chops. I want to thank you for ordering that for me.” She asked her why she couldn’t read. “I have dyslexia. When I was a kid, no one knew what was wrong with me, so I played around enough that it was something that I never wanted to do. It’s too late for me now.”

“It’s not really. I can fix that for you. I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t read something. If you pick up that flyer there on the table, I think you’ll be able to read

that as well as I would. If you don't want it, just say so, and I'll take it back."

She picked up the little flyer talking about spring meals and was surprised that she could read it. Not only that, but she didn't have to figure out the words that she knew were all messy for her. Taking out the recorder that she had gotten for herself a long time ago, she read the instructions on it that had been over her head when she'd purchased it.

"I take it you like it." She nodded looking at the specials board that was just inside the restaurant. Reading each word, because it was a treat for her to be able to do so, she looked at Storm with tears falling down her cheeks.

"Please don't take it back. I've never...I can read now, and I don't know what to do with myself." She said that she could do anything that she liked now. "I know that too. Oh my, what will Sage say when I see her. I hope she'll be proud of me. And I was just thinking that if they have children, I can read to them too. Oh my, what a thing you have opened up for me."

They both had dessert, Leslie reading off the choices for Storm. As they were getting finished up, two men joined them. She knew right away who was Stone as he looked just like his picture. The other man looked like him, he was his brother, after all, but she knew that the man sitting next to her was her daughter's soon-to-be husband.

"Storm said that she was enjoying your company. Had I thought about it before, I would have asked her to bring Sage along. But there are things going on at home that she needs to take care of. The little girl that she came here to get has lost her great-grandparent, and it looks like her grandfather isn't going to make it either. True love will do that to you, I suppose. I know that I love Sage." She told him that was lovely. "Yes, it is. I hope that we can get along well, Leslie. I don't want her hurt again."

"By me, you mean." He said that was right and she didn't know if she liked his

bluntness or not. “I’m just a man that is in love with his mate and I want to protect her as well. She’s had enough going on in her life right now without you hurting her too.” He smiled and put out his hand. “I’ll give you a chance if you’re willing to understand that she will forever come first in my life, and I won’t allow anyone to take advantage of her.”

“I only want what’s best for her as well.” The two of them shook hands. “Thank you for that, Stone. I really do thank you for giving me this chance.”

Since they had arrived so late, Harman had to take care of his plans in the morning. Stone told her that they’d go shopping for a little bit, then head to the airport again. She wasn’t just given a room but an empty bag as well. After Storm explained how it worked, all she could think about was a warm pair of pajamas and slippers. The rest could wait. Right now, she was mentally and physically exhausted and wanted to get home to her little girl.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 8:38 am*

Sage was at the airport with Hailey. They'd been getting her some clothing that she could take back with her, and they were having a good time. The little girl was like her, nervous at first about the trip, but almost as soon as Rain and Storm joined them, they were having the time of their lives. And spending money had never been so fun for her before.

"I thought that I'd like this dress. Libby has one just like it, but I don't care for it now." Sage asked her what she thought was wrong with it. "I don't know. It's too tight, which I know I can change, but I don't like it on me. I'm not as old as they are, can that be it?"

"If you could have anything that you want to wear, what would it be? Nothing that the other little girls have on but something that you want to see if it works on you. And just so you know, I had a top on this morning that was pretty but it felt like it was trying to crawl over me. I had to take it off before I had a panic attack." They were having fun with just being honest about things. Even when the other two women showed up, they were telling Hailey that her grandparent had entered the hospital and that he was very ill. She asked if she thought he was going to make it.

"No, it doesn't look good. His only thoughts were that his wife was gone, and he didn't want to go on without her. I think that happens to a lot of older people nowadays. They don't have much in the way of family like the Danielsons didn't, and they just give up when the other one dies. Sad, but it's true love." She asked Rain if he'd said anything about her and the little girl. "No. It doesn't look like he will either."

Sage didn't know what that meant, but she figured that he was close to dying, too.

Knowing that he'd had a heart attack a few months ago made her think that both of them were on the verge of losing their battles as well. She didn't know what to think about Hailey and what was going to happen to her.

Getting to the airport in plenty of time, she was thrilled to see that her mom and Stone were talking about something as they came up the runway. They were both seemingly in a great mood and that's all she thought that she'd ever wanted. As soon as they were close enough for her to get a hug from her mom, Stone told her that they were getting along great and having fun.

"Oh, your husband is such a wonderful person. I've spoken to Storm as well. She tells me that the two of you are already wed in the eyes of the law." Mom leaned closer to her. "She's sort of scary, too, isn't she? But I've had a wonderful time, and they couldn't have made me feel any more welcome."

"I'm glad to hear that. I wanted you to know that I've heard from Albert." Mom stiffened up, telling her that she wanted nothing to do with him. "Good. He asked me where you were, and I, at the time, had no idea where you were at that moment, and I told him that. He said that you owe him for rent as he was tapped out. Again. He has a gambling problem, doesn't he?"

"Now that I think about it, I'd say that's a good hard yes. I don't care for it all that much. I'll use a roll of nickels when he wants me to go with him until they're gone, but I don't bet anything on anything bigger. I have won a few hundred dollars a few times, but I don't tell him, nor do I share. He doesn't either if you were going to ask me." She asked what he spent his money on. "More scratch-offs. The ponies. Most sports games. He's never any good at the latter, but he still plays. If he's asking for rent, that means that he didn't have any of it. We'll be on the list—no, he'll be on the list again for not having it. They usually give us thirty days, but here lately, that's not been working on either."



“I don’t know him, do I?” She said she’s been with him for nearly twelve years now. “Then no, I don’t know him. He sounds like he’s pissed off a great deal. He told me that if I heard from you, I was supposed to have you call. Something was wrong with your phone. Did you give it to Smokey when she asked for it?”

“I did. Yes. She said that she’d take care that he couldn’t trace me. I don’t know that he’d know enough on how to do that but I’m glad to be done with him.” Mom laughed and hugged her again. “I’m so glad to be here with you. And with your family. I’d like for us to be friends. I think that I’ve burnt the bridges of us being mother and daughter. Who is this lovely little thing with you?”

“This is Hailey. She’s the reason that I’m out here. And that I met Stone. I’m considering her my good luck charm.” Leslie got down on her knees and spoke to the little girl. She was still shy around people and it took a few minutes for her to warm up to her mom. “We’re still waiting on what is to happen to her now that her grandparent is ill.”

“If my daughter is in charge, you can bet that it’ll be done correctly. I don’t know her all that well yet, but I’m sure that she can make things happen when they need to.” Hailey said that she wanted to live with her and Stone. “Well, I don’t know anything about that, but I’m sure they’ll do what is best for you. Sage always did for me when she was a little girl.”

When her mom started tearing up, Stone changed the subject. They talked about what they were going to do for dinner, and since they were already in Columbus, they’d have dinner now. She was glad that she’d only eaten a small salad for lunch when they suggested a steak house. As they were leaving, Hailey held her right hand and her mom the left, she was excited to be able to just be around them all. And hoped that things turned out for all of them.

Mom was giddy to tell her that she could read. She was very quiet about Storm

having given her some magic so that she could do it, and was excited to be able to read the menus wherever they went. It was nice to see her mom so happy, and it rubbed off on her.

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Stone kept an eye on the two women. He liked Leslie, all right. There wasn't much in her mind other than to make up with her daughter and live close to them. Not that she didn't mind living with them, but she wasn't going to ask. Neither was Stone. Let the two of them figure that out on their own.

Leslie had broken down in tears on the way back to Ohio. She'd been telling him of the terrible things that she'd done to Sage that had gotten her into trouble. Some of the things weren't that bad, missing school appointments and not having money for lunches. But there were things that were terrible, too. She'd left her alone as a five-year-old for an entire two weeks so that she could have some fun. But she told him that Sage had done well.

"She'd not missed a day of preschool and did the laundry. What kid do you know does the laundry when they're just a little bitty thing?" Stone asked her what she'd said about it. "She told me that she needed clean underwear and didn't know when I'd be back. I should never have left her in the first place."

"No, you shouldn't have." Leslie nodded and looked out the side window, where she could just see the plane's wing. "She's doing all right now. Before I became her mate, she was holding down a good job that paid her well and had some friends. She's been making a lot of them since coming here, too."

"She was always good at that. Making friends. Mostly to older people, she didn't know a stranger. It seemed to me like, but she was a good girl. After she left home—I'll be honest with you and tell you that it took her a while to notice that she

was gone—things began to fall apart for me and I sort of lost hope in getting someone to love me again. I know how that sounds. It's been beating on me since I spoke to her when she called me back. I wasn't ever a good mother to her, but I want to be a good friend to her now. If you don't think that it's too late."

"It's never too late for friendship. My family will all tell you when you fuck up. You might want to consider that when you get to our home. Any one of them will take you out if you hurt her too." She told him how his brother had already told her that. "We all love her to pieces. She's my all, and I'd die for her."

Now, they were headed to dinner, and he was glad that he'd invited his parents to come and join them. It was a lot to through at Leslie, but he wanted to get to the point right away that if anyone had a problem with her, they'd never find her body. Old saying? Yes, but he didn't know any other way to put it than that.

Hailey was getting tired by the time they were ready to leave the nice restaurant. They'd all had a good time and he was surprised to find out that Storm had made it so that Leslie could read. It had been a long time since he'd been around adults who couldn't read, but her having dyslexia since she'd been born made him realize that teachers now knew how to help someone with that. Leslie might well have been skipped over when she didn't catch on right away.

Carrying Hailey in his arms, they got into the waiting cars and sat in the seats. He could tell that the two women didn't know how to act around each other and didn't care at all when Sage moved to the seat facing him to sit by her mother. They were talking softly when Edwin contacted him.

"Earl passed away about an hour ago." He said that was a shame, the poor man. "Yes, he'd spoken to his attorney before his wife passed and had the will changed. I don't know what that means for Hailey, but I'm sure that he'll have left her something. Probably through Sage, too, if I don't miss my bet."

“Are you saying that I should adopt her?” He asked him if he’d already thought that in his heart. “I suppose I have. She’s been a good company for Sage and me when we run out of things to say. She wants to stay with us from now on. Even before we knew that Earl was going to pass.”

“She and Jeffery’s daughters got along well enough, but they’re the same age and girls, so there was a little bit of fighting. Jeffery said that she held her own, but it was too much of a change for her to have sisters around and nothing before.” He asked him if he was going to file the paperwork now. “You’d better be talking to Sage about that. I like her a great deal, but I’m afraid that she’s one of those quiet, crazy women. You know she can go off the handle at a second’s notice.”

“I’m going to tell her that you said that too.” He said if he did, then he’d not tell him when he was going to auctions again. “Christ, that one is tomorrow. I wanted to do with Sage, too.”

“Take your new daughter. It might be good for her to be around more strangers. She seems to come out of her shell the more she’s around you and Sage. How is the mother doing? I hate to say this, but I think that we’re all wondering when and if she drops the other shoe. It wouldn’t hurt me at all to take her out if she so much as breaths the wrong way around either of the women in your life.” He told his brother that he was having a good time with them all. “Good. One thing that I can mark off my list of shit to do.” They both laughed. “I’m going to let you talk to your family, Stone. If you need me, you know all you have to do is reach out. I don’t want anything to happen to any of you now that things are becoming normal around here.”

After closing the connection between him and Edwin, he listened in on the other two’s conversation. Mostly, they talked about the house. There were sprinkles of Albert in there, as well as himself. He was glad to hear Sage say that she loved him, as he loved her so much more than he could count the stars in the heavens. It was wonderful, too. He told himself that they were ready to move some of the other things

into their new home that would make it their own. He wished that he'd had a house before now, then negated that. He wouldn't have this house if he'd done that.

It was nearly totally dark out when they arrived home. He carried Hailey into their home and put her in one of the bedrooms close to their room. Well, it was Sage's room, but he'd been close by in the event that she needed him. Hailey was nearly asleep when she changed herself into pjs and rolled over to sleep. Stone was still laughing when he made his way down to the bedroom that he'd been using.

The stress of the last week was starting to weigh on him. He'd been fired and found himself a home, a mate, and a daughter. He'd been keeping an eye on Sage in the event that her mother turned out to be some sort of demon. He didn't really expect her to be a demon, but with this family and their outside families causing trouble, he honestly didn't know what to expect. He was glad that Leslie had turned out to be all right.

He found Leslie in the kitchen and asked her if she wanted anything. "I would love something to snack on. The time difference is catching up with me. I usually have dinner about now." He asked her if she wanted something big or small. "Small. Just something to tied me over until breakfast. Do you all eat together?"

"It's the first time that Hailey has spent the night here, so I don't know what the plans are. I know that I was supposed to go with my brother to an auction he wants to go to. You can go too if you'd like. It'll be a nice, fun day for us." She said she'd never been to an auction before. "They can be a blast if you don't mind not getting everything that you want. And you should tell yourself that, too. That its all right to not get everything. I usually set myself a budget for the things that I want, and when it goes past that, I'm all right with it, too. Not to say that I sometimes get caught up in the moment and buy something that I didn't really want, but that's all right."

"I'd like to go, but I won't bid on anything. I don't have any money anyway. Sage

told me that it didn't matter; she'd make sure that I didn't have to do without, but I'm betting she didn't mean me going out and spending a great deal of her money either." The two of them laughed, and he told her what he'd told Sage. Whatever was his is hers, and hers is for her. "That sort of sounds one-sided. I'm sure you don't mean that."

"But I do. I love her very much and now that you're my mother-in-law, that includes you as well in my family." She blushed brightly but didn't say anything more. "There is leftover meatloaf if you'd like some of that. I love cold meatloaf sandwiches very much. With bread and butter pickles on them."

There was just enough for him to have two thick sandwiches and for Leslie to have one. There were chips to go with it and he noticed that she didn't eat any of them but did enjoy some carrots instead of chips.

"I know so very little about my daughter. Does she still love Mexican food? Does she douse everything down with hot sauce? She used to do that as a child. I don't know what her favorite color is or even if she went to college."

"I don't know that much about her either. You were told that we're all wolves, weren't you?" She told him that she'd been told that several times. "Good, then you'll know that when we find our other half, our mates, it's forever. And quick. I fell in love with her before I even knew what she was to me. We were just a couple of people who were looking through a house together, this one, and ended up being mates. I would do anything for her."

"I would as well if I knew what she needed." Leslie put the dish that she'd been using on the sink. "I'm a little afraid that Albert is going to show up. He will know where she lives, in Ohio, but maybe not...I couldn't read then, so I couldn't tell you if the city was put in the ad announcing that you were off the market. I guess you're a big deal, aren't you?"

“I’m just a former kindergarten teacher who just decided that I’d rather be home than going to a job every day. I don’t know that I’ll always feel that way but that’s the way I feel right now. Summer is coming up and I find that I want to go on a long vacation with my little family—that would include you as well and have a blast.” She blushed again. “I’ve been all over this world when it was just starting out. I’d like to see things again that I had some help in making.”

“I don’t have a driver’s license, much less something that will allow me to go on long trips like you’re talking about.” She looked at him again. “You’re a nice man, Stone. I’m so glad that my daughter has someone in her life like you. I want her to be happy.”

“I do as well. And you happy as well.” The two of them started for the stairs, and he heard someone closing a door above them. “That would be Sage, going to check on Hailey again. She’s been a mom for less than a day and already acting like she’s been at it forever.”

“Unlike me.” He said that he’d not meant that. “I know you didn’t. But I know that I was a terrible mother and want to make it up to her if she’ll allow it. If not, then as I said, I’ll be her friend. I think that’s what we’ll end up doing anyway. It’s much too late for me to expect her to call on me for motherly advice.”

Stone didn’t get into the bed that he’d been sleeping in the last couple of nights. He wanted to go on a quick run and then take a nice dip in the pool. As he was sneaking out of the house to do just that, someone cleared their throat. It was Sage.

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought that I’d come down here and mellow out.” He said he’d been thinking of going on a run and then a dip in the pool. “Go ahead and go on your run. I will more than likely go upstairs before you return. Storm was telling me that you and your brothers get together about twice a week to go running. I have to admit, I’m sort of jealous that I can’t do that as well.”

“I don’t know if I can change you or not. We’re still looking into that around our family. My parents weren’t shifters when they first met. In fact, my mom was a wolf and my dad a human.” He told her how they’d met and how his dad had saved the pack when he’d sent his mom back to warn the others that poachers were coming. “It turned out well for them and when we were born, we were the first shifters of wolves ever made. The mother of all the earth, Grace, she keeps tabs on us as well. You’ll have to meet her sometime soon.”

“Of course I will.” He told her he was serious. “If it’s all right with you, I’m still boggled about how much money you have. Let’s just let that settle in for a couple of days before we touch on that again.” He laughed and let his wolf take him.

Stone wanted to hang out with Sage and just talk about things, but he wanted her, too, and thought that if he had this run, like the one he’d had before leaving to get her tonight, he’d be able to stave off his need for her again. As it was now, the pool was getting more use than he’d thought it would with her being around him all the time. He was glad now that the heater hadn’t been turned on, and he could enjoy the quick cold sensations when he needed to.

Not only did he find a couple of the pack out on a run but he was able to join them when they were checking out the properties. They had been hired by Edwin and were being paid good money to keep them all safe. With all the money they had, it would be just like some fool to try and kidnap one of them to get his sorry ass killed. And they would die, too.

The sun was coming up when he went back to the house. Almost thinking that the cold dip would pull him from exhaustion, he did get in and swam laps. After getting out, leaving his towel hanging on one of the many hooks that were there, he dressed himself, just in case someone was awake this time in the morning, and he came in through the back door. The kitchen was alive with laughter, and he thought that it was a sound he could get used to.



Even as tired as he was, he still had pancakes with the women in his family. While Leslie made them, by reading her first ingredients to make something, he thought that they were a little light on the sugar. But he was happy with the results as she was an that made his day that it took so little to bring joy to her face.

After taking a shower, he was ready to meet the day. While he had no idea what was in store for him, he was about as ready as he could be when Edwin asked him to testify at the courthouse in the principal case.

“They don’t need you as a witness as the police were able to apprehend him when he shot at you and Sage, but it might be helpful to his state of mind to tell them what had happened before that. And that you quit. He’s telling everyone that he fired you and that you’d forced his hand in having to shoot at you.” He told him that he’d be glad to do that. “However, the auction is the first thing. I heard from Sage and she and Hailey and her mom were going. This will be a good one for them to get their feet wet in because most of it is box lots.”

Box lots, just junked-up boxes, were things that the auctioneer didn’t find of any value and knew that he’d not make a great deal on. Once, when he’d been looking for some glasses for his home, he’d gotten eleven other boxes when all he’d wanted was the one. He’d sold off most of the things to other collectors of junk and was happy that he’d gotten a nice dozen glass glasses for his condo.

They usually showed up early for these things. About half an hour before the bidding was to begin. Since they were all going in separate cars, he was happy when they arrived first. Hailey and her grandma, he supposed, went to look at the box lots of dolls that were being auctioned off.

“You think she’ll be safe on her own?” Stone laughed and said if she wasn’t they’d learn a great lesson in letting a newbie go by themselves. “She and Hailey have a budget for the things that they want. I’m so glad that you sent them that link so that

they could go over some of the things before we got here.”

There weren't many people there when they arrived. He saw the usual people, ones that had shops that they'd buy junk for. There were also collectables that they'd spend a great deal of money at. He'd never been in any of their shops, but they had to be doing good if they were able to spend as much as it seemed they were buying.

He had to remind himself that he didn't need anything for his classroom. A few of the parents that were at the auction talked to him about being fired. After explaining what had happened, about the shooting, too, they were applauded by the things that had transpired. It was different than the other man was telling anyone who came to see him.

When the bidding was ready to start, Hailey and Leslie came to join them. He had his eye on a couple of things for the back yard, and he thought that the things that were for swimming, life jackets, and the such would be perfect to have around if the other kids joined them in the pool.

Hailey told him that she was going to see if she could get herself her first doll. It hurt him that she didn't have anything but he was going to make up for her life up until now. As he started bidding on the box lots, he told Sage to get her the dolls even if she had to pay a hundred bucks a piece for them.

He lost sight of the women for a while. Seeing his brothers and them bragging on the things that they'd gotten, he showed off his glass paperweights he'd gotten for next to nothing in several boxes. Dad was able to find a stand with pipes.

Dad's passion was to take them apart, clean them up, and resell them for some profit. All his life, he thought that his dad's natural smell was a mild cherry smell about him. It had been the pipes that he cleaned that made him smell so wonderful. Dad had been doing that since he'd been able to afford to buy his first one.

“I got the dolls.” He asked her how many . “I don’t know if you’re going to be happy with me, but Hailey is over the moon. Not only were there the dolls but there were boxes of clothing too for them. So if you want to be the one to tell her she can’t have three dozen dolls, that’s all on you, Buster. I made her happy, and that’s all I care about.”

“I hurt when she said she’d never had a doll before. Between the two of us, we’ll get her fixed up. There’s doll furniture over here that I can get her. A doll bed with some other things that only a little girl might understand. Even a stroller for one.” She asked him if Hailey could be there when he got them. “I’d love to spend time with the two of you when it’s time for them. I’ve already fallen in love with the little girl.”

“I have as well. The look on her face when she picked up the first doll was like magic. I’ve never wanted to see someone smile as much as I do her.” He nearly lost track of what he was bidding on when he had to wipe at his own eyes. “I’ll see you in a bit. We’re having fun.”

He was able to bid on a few other items. There were some stained glass birds that he liked. At one point in his life, he made glassware for churches and homes. He thought that if he could get the birds for a good price, he could make some nice ornaments for the tree. Speaking of which, there were several of them at this auction.

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Roland couldn't understand why he'd been caught. He'd worn gloves so that when he loaded the rifle that he'd gotten secondhand, it didn't have his prints on it. Even for the gun residue, he'd worn gloves so that he'd not have any on his hands when tested. There wasn't any way that they'd been able to pick up his DNA. He didn't leave one thing behind. Yet, as soon as he got home, the police were there to arrest him. Of course, he'd not had a chance to get rid of the gun. That was something that he'd meant to burn in the fire pit that he'd had outdoors.

"Mr. Jorden, do you have anything to say about your actions against Mr. and Mrs. Griffin?" He asked which Griffin he was talking about, knowing full well which one it was that he wanted dead. "Stone and Sage Griffin. I believe he used to work for you."

"He did until I fired him." Again, he was told that he'd done no such thing and that Stone had quit when he ordered him to work the summer holidays. "I don't know what his beef was. It was just a few months out of the summer. He could have done that standing on his head. I fired him before he told me that he quit. So there."

Roland didn't like that the people around the room snickered at him. They were grown men and women, and they acted like he was some kind of plaything. Well, he didn't care. Stone was out of a job and that was because of him. Of course, it looked like he was out of a job as well. But he figured that once the school year started back up, he'd have to be rehired as there wasn't anyone that could do the job as well as he did. Or at least he made it look like he did a good job.

Mostly, he just spent his time at his desk. He didn't play on the computer. That would get you caught. But he did use his phone a great deal as well as the little tablet that he

had hidden inside the lower part of his desk. There were other things, too. A deck of cards that he used. He also had himself a stash of whiskey that he hid, too. No one was the wiser when he pulled out the bottle and took himself a nice swig just to get him through the day. He wasn't a drunkard or anything like that.

Roland also had a change of clothing along with several ties so that when he took too many drinks from the hidden bottle. He was able to look like he was the first person in that morning and would hold it over everyone's head how he'd come in early. When in reality, he'd slept on the floor of his office when he'd been too drunk to drive home.

He had no family to speak of. His mother had died when he'd been about six. His father, not a good man either, had dropped him and his sister off at their grannie's house and never returned for them. Not even when he graduated from college. He could be depended on to come around and knock them around a bit, take the money that Grannie had, and then leave them again. His childhood had been one of rough fights and sleepless nights, thanks to the people in his life.

"Mr. Jorden? You're not paying attention again." He asked them for the tenth time at least when he was going to be able to get out of jail. "As it stands right now, you're in for attempted murder of two people and drinking on the job."

"Who said I was drinking on the job?" The attorney for the Griffins, a damned Griffin herself, said that after his arrest, his room had been gone over and they found his stash. "You had no right to go through my office. I was going to go back there to work. You probably planted the things that you found that were in there."

"Your fingerprints were all over the bottle. As well as your DNA around the lip of it. We also found your computer and tablet, as well as the stash of kid's games in the drawers." He asked her what that was. "A coloring book with crayons. There were checker games as well as marbles. All with only your fingerprints on them."

He didn't know what to say about that. He'd never thought of a coloring book as anything but a way to relieve stress. It helped him, too, when he forgot to refill his whiskey bottle and he needed a little bit of calmness in his day to get through. Then he remembered something.

"There was a bunch of chocolate in there too. What did you do with that? Claim it as your own?" She asked him if he meant the empty candy bar wrappers that were in his second drawer. "Oh yeah. I forgot that I ate them the last time I was—your honor I'm sure that you have a few things stashed around your office that might get you into trouble if it was taken out of context. I didn't mean any harm in having that there. It's my way of calming my nerves. You've no idea how taxing it is to be around hundreds of kids all day. Them wanting things from you, and my goodness, you have no idea how many times they want a hug." He shivered some. "I don't care for hugs, but I have to do it."

"Mr. Jorden, how long have you been principal there, if you don't mind me asking?" He told him he'd been there eleven years. "Eleven years, and you've never come to like hugs from kids? My goodness, man, why did you become a principal of an elementary school if you didn't care for children?"

"Children are icky. They carry germs and crap." He shivered again, thinking about the snot that most of the kids had in the colder months. "I got the job there thinking that I'd only stay for a little while, but I began to enjoy all the perks. And there are a great many of them if you know just where to look. You don't think that all those donations end up with the brats, do you?"

"Are you telling this court that you stole from the donations that were to help out the school and thus the kids?" He waved him off, thinking that it was something that everyone did and that he shouldn't be surprised. "I need words, Mr. Jorden, not you waving your hand around. Did you or did you not just admit to taking donations for your own personal use?"

“You do it too. You can’t tell me that the money for your campaign goes to just you being elected. I’ve seen how much you guys get donated to you. It’s no different when it comes to the schools. A few bucks here, a few there. Even gift cards come up missing and into my pocket. What’s the difference? No one counts that money.” He looked over at the attorney for the other side and sneered at her. “I’m betting that she makes more money than you do for working for the almighty Griffins, too. It’s all water under the bridge right now. I’ll go back to work when this sham of a trial is over and I’ll go on doing what I’ve been doing. You’ll see. No one cares.”

“I care.” Again, he waved the man off and told him that he didn’t count as he was a judge. “And in being the judge, I’m remanding you over to a higher court. I cannot believe that I’m having to tell you this, but you’re never going to be able to work within any government system as long as I’m still kicking.”

“So you’re saying that after you die, I’ll be able to go back to work? I don’t suppose you have any illness that is going to hurry that along, do you?” The judge just stared at him. “I’d like to make some plans, you know? I have a life that I need to get going on.”

“Get him out of here before I do something I’m sure that I won’t regret.” He was still fettered to the table in front of him, and it looked like he was going to be that way for a long time. The judge didn’t look all that old, so all he could hope for was that he got cancer or something and soon. He needed to get his job back so that he could benefit from the things that he had before.

As he was being taken away, he realized that he’d not gotten any answer as to when he was going to be getting out of jail. It was a stuffy place and he didn’t want to have to sleep on that nasty cot again. There was no telling what sort of criminals had been using the bed before he had.

Once he was back in the cell, he was given a lunch. It wasn’t anything that he wanted

but since they wouldn't let him order out, he was stuck with it. Who ate bologna sandwiches anyway? Not him, that was for sure.

Lying down on his cot, the stupid thing wasn't nearly as comfortable as he thought that it should be for someone like him. He started thinking about all the things that he was going to do when he got out of jail. Almost as soon as he was ready to take a short nap, he was asked to go to the back of the cell.

"I'm getting out of here?" The cop told him that he was. "It's about time. I have things to do. Why are you putting handcuffs on me just to let me go?"

"I didn't say you were being let go. I just said you were getting out of here. You're being taken to prison until such time as a trial can be set for you. And I wouldn't count on that being anytime too soon. The judge put you on the last of his list, and you're going to be at the prison for a good long time." He asked if he'd be getting out when the judge died. "I wouldn't count on that. You've upset a great many people with your confessions. I'm thinking that you're going to be a very old man when you finally get to see the other side of freedom. And that would be in a body bag if I don't miss my bet."

"That isn't what I want." He told him that it was too bad. That's what he was getting. "I demand that you get that judge to come here and tell me what he thinks that he's doing. I have a job to do, and I can't get it done with being in here."

"Too bad." They put shackles on his ankles that had a bar between them so that he had to walk weirdly. His hands were cuffed behind his back and chained to the ones at his ankles. Even if he needed to take a leak, he'd not be able to do it. Not with the crap that they had him wearing.

He was put in a van and locked down to the floor. It was humiliating to be treated this way and he was going to make sure that they paid for this when he was free. And he



would be if he had to kill off a few people on his way out.

By the time he was at the chain-linked fence that housed a large institutional-like building, he was sore from being tossed around. He would swear all his life that they hit every pothole on the way here, and he was going to sue them for it, too. They were treating him like he was some sort of monster, and he was just a man who knew how to work the system. Yes, he thought, he was going to get out of this and heads were going to roll.

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She didn't know what to do about having sex with Stone—or making love, she thought. He had been sleeping down the hall from her since they moved into the house. And she loved that he was being so good to her, but now all she wanted to do was to have him make love to her.

“Will you sleep with me tonight?” Stone didn't even ask her if she was sure but pulled her into his arms and held her. She could feel his cock at her belly, and she wanted to have him inside her as soon as she could. “Are you going to kiss me, Stone? I want to feel you touching me so badly.”

“Yes. In a moment.” She reached up and curled her hand around his neck. “Are you going to always be this greedy?”

“Yes.” She felt his weight on her as he took her to the bed. She'd not even realized that they were in the bedroom until then. He told her that he had willed them there and that he was glad for that magic. “I like that magic. We might use that a great deal if I don't disappoint you tonight.”

“Never. Never can I think of you as a disappointment, love.” He kissed her lightly on her mouth and then moved to her ears. She had never thought of her ears as being an

erotic zone before, but she could feel her pussy swelling. To have this man inside of her was more than she wanted her next breath. Lying her on the bed, he joined her.

His body moved over hers as he deepened the kiss. He was firm in all the right places. Soft in others. As his hands roamed over her, all Sage could think about was how much she wanted him to take her, make love to her.

Her breasts were bared to him. As he suckled at the tip, pulling her hard nipple into his mouth, Sage reached down and cupped his cock in her hand. When he moaned, she could feel it all over her body.

Sage liked sex, all right. Usually, she was left sort of disappointed, but she figured that was her, not her partner. But this man, even touching her, she knew she was going to enjoy this like she had nothing else. She couldn't wait to have him inside of her, yet she wanted it to last as well. Forever.

He moved off her and stood by the side of the bed. Sitting up, she reached for him, and he told her to wait. He wanted to see her first. Her body warmed more. She could feel something move over her body then. It was as if she were two different people and that something akin to a wolf was there for her.

“Take off your clothes. Start with your shirt.” He'd already torn it, but she pulled it over her head and let it drop to the floor. Her bra was next. He moaned loudly, the sound of it like warm butter being spread over hot biscuits. “Your breasts are the most beautiful I've ever seen. And your nipples taste like gumdrops.”

“Let me see your cock, Stone. It's all I can think of. I know that you're thick, but I want to see it.” He nodded and reached for the pants. “All I can think about is sucking you into my mouth. Having you come down my throat over and over.”

“Christ, woman, are you trying to kill me?” He freed his cock and wrapped his hand

around himself. Sage licked the tip of him, just enough to taste the cum that was streaming from the tiny hole there. “Strip, baby. I need to fuck you.”

She stood up then, making short work of her clothing. When he reached for her, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her flush to his body, she felt her pussy gush hotly. Cream began to slowly seep from her to her thighs. It was the sexiest thing she’d ever known. And when he leaned down and took her breast, all of it in his mouth, she cried out when he bit down on her.

He rocked into her. Not entering her, not yet, but his cock was at her pussy and touching off all kinds of sensations within her. Sage could have easily come then. Just let her body have its release as he made love to her. Every place his fingers touched her it was like a brand on her skin. Each breath he took was like a lick of flames over her. Sage was needy, her body simmering for his. She had no idea that sex could be this consuming, and when she touched her breast with her fingers, it was almost as if every nerve ending was centered in that one place.

“Come for me.” Like she’d been primed for it, her body let go. She screamed out her release, his cock rolled over her clit twice more, and she came a second time. Her body was hot for his—his cock inside of her was all she could think about. The need for him to take her was there but he wasn’t finished just yet. Turning her around, Stone had her lean over as he went to his knees. He spread her legs wider as he filled her with his fingers. Again, she came as if she had no control over her body, but it was all his.

His mouth was all over her. Her legs, her ass. He licked the back of her knees, his fingers filled her pussy. Every time she thought she was going to come, he’d move again. Her body was burning up with need, and he was making her crazy.

“Please, Stone, I need you.” He told her she was in too much hurry. “Please, I beg of you. Fuck me.”

She felt his movements. Knew when he was standing behind her. And when she felt his cock at her entrance again, she rolled her hips backward, trying her best to get him to fill her. And when he did move forward, his cock filling her at last, she knew a new kind of torture.

He was thicker than she'd imagined. Fuller too. As he moved in and out of her, slowly like he was bent on killing her, she felt his balls as they touched her backside. She needed. Not just to come but needed it all. And he was denying her that by teasing her, holding her back.

As he moved into her as slowly as he could, Sage tried to get him to hurry. To finish her. Even going so far as to reach between her legs and touch him. Nothing was working. He was on a mission it seemed to make her suffer greatly. However, it was the best kind of suffering that she'd ever encountered. Christ, he was taking her to a slow death with each stroke of his cock, and she didn't even care.

"Please?" He laughed, a gentle sort of sound that didn't upset her but made her smile in return. "I want you to know that when I have my way with you, I'm going to make you suffer in ways you cannot imagine."

"I don't think you can do that." He slammed deep, taking her breath away with it. "If I fuck you hard, will you scream out my name? Or will you perhaps come so hard that you faint on me?"

"Fuck me. Now, Stone, fuck me." He pounded her. His hands at her hips held her steady as his cock felt like a jackhammer inside of her. "Yes, more. I need more."

He took her to the bed, his cock deep inside of her. She screamed when he grabbed a handful of her hair and lifted her up. His command to come, to let go, had her body pausing, her heart stopping. Then she came.

Nothing could have prepared her for the feelings that she had in that moment. And she did feel everywhere, everything. Sage came, hard long strokes of her body. When she screamed out her release the next time, his name was there for him to hear, but she was coming a third, then a fourth time as he slammed his cock deeper, harder as his hand dug deep into her flesh.

The world around her narrowed, her heart stopped beating altogether and she let the darkness just take her under.

When she woke up, her body immediately seized up. It was as if every muscle in her body was regretting the lovemaking that they'd had. Reaching for Stone to see if he was as sore as she was, she was glad to hear him moan.

"Never again." She laughed, and he did as well. "Good Christ woman, I've never in all my life felt like that...well, I've never felt like that in all my years."

"I know just what you mean." Rolling to her back, her body protested loudly, and she cried out when she moved her legs. "I'm not ever moving again. I'm stuck right here forever."

That made him laugh, and she smiled. "I have to get up and go to the bathroom. Am I too old to whimper like a baby when I do?" She told him that she was in the same position. She needed to go to the bathroom as well but was fearful of crying.

"You go ahead and cry, love. That way I won't have to feel so bad when I get up and go myself. I think that every muscle in my body has been abused. In a good way, but damn, I'm going to be sore when I get up." The two of them lay there for a bit longer until she decided she was going to wet the bed if she didn't get up soon.

Even sitting on the side of the bed cost her. Her breasts were sore, and there were little bruises all over her breasts. When she tried stretching out her feet just to get the

kinks out of her toes, she sobbed. Smiling, she thought that every pain had been well worth it. She was as satisfied as she'd ever been. And she'd do it again if she felt better.

Going to the bathroom, she had to hold onto the sink before she could sit down. It seemed as if now that she was up and moving around, her body couldn't take sitting again. Even her bottom was sore.

Smiling at Stone when he tiptoed into the bathroom with her, she decided to brush her teeth later as she needed a nap now after all that moving around. As she headed back to the bed, she realized that she wasn't nearly as sore, and as soon as she laid down, she wondered if she would ever be the same again.

Getting up the second time wasn't nearly so painful. The other side of the bed was empty, but it was warm. Going to the bathroom she heard the shower running and decided to join Stone. That way, he could wash her back and make it feel less stiff.

"No way am I going to be able to make love to you again. Not right away anyway." She laughed and told him that she was thinking the same thing. "The warm water is working out the tightness. I was thinking that we need a hot tub. I think that would be perfect for us after making love like we did."

"I'd love that." He did end up washing her back and she did feel the muscles loosen up. When she was ready to get out, Stone turned off the water and then got out. When he handed her a warm towel, all she could think about was wrapping her body in it and taking another nap. Dressing herself to ward off the temptation, she was headed to the kitchen when she remembered that Hailey had spent the night at their home. She was sitting at the kitchen table having toast when she entered.

Kissing the little girl on the head, she asked her how she slept. She'd be embarrassed if she heard them, but she said that she'd slept like a log. Then she told her about the

dolls.

“Ms. Fitz said that she’d wash all the clothing for me. And we’re going to give them all a bath, too. I hope that’s all right.” She told her, of course, it was. “And her mister is going to clean up the toys that came with them. There are a lot of them, too, don’t you think?”

“I think that it’s the perfect amount if you love them.” There was a trunk too that the dolls were in that she’d managed to get, and she was thrilled that someone had thought of cleaning them up. The years of dust on them made her think that was the reason that she’d gotten them so cheap. They were very dirty. “I have some things that I have to clean up, too. Getting the big desk is going to take a while to get ready for the office for Stone.”

“What’s ready for Stone? Hello, my beautiful ladies.” She told him what they’d been talking about. “Oh, I have some things to go through as well. I found a couple of more paperweights in one of the other boxes. I’ll have to get my collection of them from storage. I’ve been collecting them since I was younger.”

The three of them, along with Ms. Fitz, talked about the summer months. They had a pool, so she could see them all spending a great deal of time outside. It occurred to her that she was thinking like Hailey was going to be staying with them. She only hoped that was true. Sage already loved the little girl.

“Oh, Sage, dear, there are some phone messages for you. Could have knocked me over with a silver spoon when the thing rattled like it did. I put them on the table in the hallway for the two of you.” She went to get them and was surprised to hear from an attorney by the name of Walton. She called him back first thing when the note said for her to call as soon as she got the message.

“Thank you for getting back to me so quickly, Mrs. Griffin, but I’m the attorney for

the Donaldson estate. He mentioned you and the little girl, Hailey James, in his will. He had changed it only on the day that his wife passed. I hurt for the man, but he said he didn't think he was long for this world and wanted to get things straightened out."

"Do you know what happens to the little girl? She's been staying with the Griffin family, my family, for some time now and I need to get things rolling on her if she's going to someone else." He explained that the Danielsons had a son, but he didn't want anything to do with his parents or the little girl. "That's sad. I worked for the Danielsons for years, and I found them to be the best people."

"I don't know the entirety of everything, but the young man is getting up there, and he's raising his three grandchildren and one of his own that is handicapped. It's a terrible thing, I think, when grandparents aren't able to...well, that's for another time. I was wondering if I could get you to come to see me as soon as tomorrow. The estate, believe it or not, is quite large. The couple invested in a great many things over the years and it's paid off well for them."

"I'll have to see if I can get a flight out tomorrow." He said that he'd come to her, knowing that she lived in Ohio now. "All right. You tell me where we're to meet and we'll be there. My husband will be as well. Stone and I haven't been married all that long, but he'll need to come with me."

"Yes, yes, that's good." He told her of the hotel that he was staying in and gave her a time. "That way, we can get things cleared up for that little one and make sure that she had a good life that she might well have had if she'd been a bit closer to the Danielsons."

After getting off the phone with the attorney, she told Stone what was going on. He said that Storm had done a background check on the couple when she'd gotten here and was surprised as well by how wealthy they'd been.



The three of them hung around the house for the rest of the day. Eating a light lunch, they were ready for a big dinner when Stone suggested that they have a nice cookout. Ms. Fritz was happy with that and had made them side dishes to go with the steaks and burgers that they were going to cook. She was excited too to be able to go through the box lots that she'd gotten and to find little treasures that she was going to keep.

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Sage sat in stunned silence. Except for the house that they gave to their son, everything else came to her. To care for their only great-granddaughter. She looked at Stone when he asked her something but for the life of her, she couldn't understand what he was saying to her.

"Honey, you're scaring me. Say something." She nodded but still didn't speak. Picking up the list of things that she now owned, all she could think about was that she was a millionaire several times over. And that wasn't even counting the stocks and bonds that they left to her as well. "We can adopt Hailey now. Isn't that good?"

She stared at him, not really understanding what he was telling her. As things began to settle around in her brain, she realized something else. That Earl knew that he was going to die soon and that he didn't care to be around without his wife. It saddened her in so many ways. Then she looked at Stone.

"I would do the same should anything happen to you. I couldn't go on living without you, and I'd die of a broken heart. Like...it's like you're my heart and soul, my life and my everything. I'm so very happy that you can't die. I just don't know what I'd do without you in my heart." He kissed her, and she realized that they were the only two in the room. She asked him where the others had gone.

"Mr. Crank had some other things to do now that he's told you about the will that the Danielsons had. He has some money for you too, he said. It's quite a bit so he's making sure that the bank that we bank at is aware of it. I didn't think that you wanted to cash it out, but that'll be up to you." She asked him what amount, and he told her. "It's to pay off any of their outstanding bills. It's doubtful to me that you'll need all that to pay things off. Mr. Crank said that they rarely left bills unpaid when

they had the money.”

“There was a mention of the son, correct?” He told her what he got in the will and why. “So they weren’t very close then. That’s sad, but then I’m not very close to my own mother. She’s trying to make amends, but I’m not sure what her motives are. She’s never been someone that I could depend on.”

“That’s really sad. I’ve been able to depend on my family for everything.” When his cell phone rang, she got up to go to the window in the room they were in. There were children playing in the yards out from them, and she smiled when they seemed to be having a great time. The weather had turned warm and the kids were enjoying it as much as they could, it seemed.

“That was my dad. He wanted to make sure you were all right. He said that he’d heard about what was going on here, and he was worried about you.”

“I’m fine. Really, I am.” She turned and looked at him. “I want children with you. I don’t care if we have to adopt or not, but I’d like to have a houseful of little ones running around. I’ll tell them daily that I love them and make sure they know that they count. For us and everyone around them.”

“I’d like that too. We can get started as soon as you’re ovulating again.” Nodding, she told him that she’d stop taking the pill then. “It wouldn’t matter if you’re on the pill or not. I’m that powerful.” They both laughed, and he pulled her into his arms. “I love you so much, Sage. I can’t think of this world without you in it with me.”

They made their way back to the house. They were still going through boxes and decided to leave things in the garage until they could sort through things. It was so much fun. There were a couple of times that he got as many as six flats of junk for a buck. And he loved finding things that he’d not thought about in years. Setting aside the pipes that he’d found, he wondered if his dad had already gotten a start on cleaning up the ones that he’d purchased.

It was nearly noon when they decided that they'd take a break. He'd been able to unearth a lot of odds and ends that he thought that he could resell. It was fun sorting through things with Sage. Whenever she found something, she'd make a little squeal noise, and he'd have to go and see what she'd discovered. It was like a treasure hunt they were having in their own garage.

"Are you going to sell the paperweights?" He told her that he'd keep a couple of them because they weren't any that he had already. "They're so beautiful. I looked up how they're made, and it's amazing how much time it takes to make just one of them."

They'd been doing that all morning. Once he would tell her what something that she'd found was, she'd look it up on her phone and see not only if it was worth anything but how it was made as well as the year that it was made in. Some of the things that she'd managed to get were very old and worth some money. But since neither of them needed the cash, she decided that she'd keep them around just because they went with the décor of the house.

After lunch, they decided to stop with the boxes and start to make a bigger list of the things that they needed. Hailey had been with them all morning, and she seemed to be having as much fun as they were. He could see her at an auction, having the time of her life and picking up a few items that she could turn over. It was wonderful to watch her face light up when she found something that she hadn't found before.

"My dolls are cleaned up now. And Ms. Fitz ironed all the pretty little dresses that I have now." They asked her if she wanted to put them in a room, the one next to hers, so that she could have a playroom. "No thanks. I think it's wonderful that I can see everything that's mine while in my room. I love all the doll furniture, too."

"If you change your mind, let me know. We can have one of the rooms set up just for you to play with your things in." She said that was fine with her. "I'm assuming that next weekend you'd like to go to another auction with us."

He couldn't have turned her down if his very life depended on it. Her eyes brightened up and her smile was enough that he could go on for years from the energy from it. Smiling to himself, Stone was going to make it a point to look up auctions for every weekend so he'd be able to see that bright smile of hers.

They were working in the house, making sure that there were things that Odell might want of his mother's when his brothers came up the drive. He was excited and surprised that they had a large box in their truck that they came to 'break in.' The big screen television was not only put up, but they were having a good time watching a few games on the large sucker. The women showed up with bags of food, and they were all set for the afternoon. He was glad that the kids came over, too. It gave Hailey a chance to show off her new dolls. Even Jeffery's daughters had a good time playing with them.

It was the best afternoon he'd spent in a while. Not only did they have good company but good food as well. When their parents showed up with pies and other desserts, they went at them like they'd not had a single thing to eat all day. Dad and Mom sat with them, watching television on the large ninety-five-inch television as well.

"We also came to help you move the desk in. I know that you got it delivered, but we thought that if you're finished with it, we'd get it situated in the room for you guys." He thanked Harman and the others for their help, and in no time at all, not only was the desk set up in the room, but the bookshelves were loaded after being put in place, as well as the new computer that they'd gotten just yesterday. It was great having family around.

Trying not to be upset with them, his parents brought up that they were ready to fade. They told them that they'd been around a great many decades and there was little to make them want to stick around anymore.

"The grandchildren are a great addition, but we're both so tired." It was the first time that he noticed that his parents were looking like they needed to rest. "We'll be

around, but not like we are now. It's been a long time in coming but when you've been around as long as we have, it's time to settle up our affairs and fade away."

"I guess I can understand that, but I don't have to like it." Mom hugged him, telling him that she loved him. "What will we do without you around to give us the advice that we need? Tell us when we screw up."

Mom laughed. But he could see the sadness in her face. It hurt him deep in his heart when she looked at him. As soon as she put her hand on his cheek, he turned into it so that he'd be able to kiss her.

"You all have mates now that can do that for us. And it's time, honey. It's been so long that I don't remember the world like it was anymore. And I miss that. The bits and pieces of our life before will come to me hard, and I just want to find myself a place to cry with my memories. That feels like all I have now. Just memories that are of a world less complicated along with being a nicer place." He told her that he loved her. "And I love you, too, my baby boy. What did I do before all of you came around? I'll never know. My life has been wonderful as a mother to the six of you but I'm tired too. So tired that all I want to do is go to bed and now wake up again."

That hurt him in his own heart. To think that he'd not be able to go and talk with his mom. To not be able to share a day with either of them. They'd been there his whole life, and to not have them around would leave such a void in his life. He just wasn't sure that he could survive it.

"You're going to be just fine, Stone. Better than the others, I think. You have a fresh life now, a mate and a daughter to keep you on your toes." She kissed him on the cheek before looking at him. "I don't want you to feel like we're abandoning you. We'll be around watching over you from time to time."

"I want to understand but it's difficult to. I will miss you more than I think I can put into words right now. I won't be able to...Mom, Sage and I want to have a houseful

of children. How will I know if I'm doing a good job with them if you're not around? How will I know that I've taught them right? I'll miss you both so much in just having you around to hug and to hold sometimes."

"You have a wife, son. One that will keep you on your toes and will love you forever. We all knew that this day was coming, a day when we had enough. We've been talking about it for years about how much we needed rest." He felt the tears burning down his cheeks. His own heart breaking for the day that was coming soon. But he also knew that he couldn't be selfish. They'd been there for him all his life, and he was going to be there for them, as much as he could for them in this decision that they were making.

It couldn't have been easy for them to decide that they'd had enough. Before Sage and Hailey came along, he was having the same feelings. He'd been bored with his life. The same kind of days that he'd had the weeks before. But now it was different, like he had a new outlook on life. Then, there was something that his dad had said to him before.

"There are no more changes in the world that we can be excited for. We've seen it all. From the new country to all the electronics that are now around. The world was taking small steps, it seemed, where there was something every day that was coming along. Something new was being discovered or improved. There is so little of that now going on that we've decided that we can't take another change. It's become just too much for us."

His dad had been trying to tell him then that they were finished with this world and he couldn't believe how much he missed them already and they were still around. His parents, like his brothers, were his life, and he couldn't imagine a day without seeing them all, even if it was just for a few short minutes. But he also knew that they needed this more than he did them being miserable and hanging around when they wanted to be elsewhere. To be resting up for the next stage of their life. It was while he was sitting alone in the kitchen when Hailey came to talk to him.

“What does it mean to fade away?” She crawled up into his lap and cried. “I don’t want them to die. I don’t want them to leave me without any grandparents who love me and want me around. I don’t know what I’d do without Grandpa Charlie giving me nuggies. Or Grandma Luna showing me how to knit.”

He held her until she looked up at him. Christ, he thought, there was such love in his heart for this little girl that he didn’t know if he was going to have room for anyone else there. Kissing her on the nose had her giggle, and he tried his best to explain to her what fading meant.

“They don’t die so much as they become spirits of this world. We’ll even be able to see them on occasion, but they’ll forever be watching over us. Mom told me once that they’d be able to whisper in our ears when we needed it. To give us a hug, a tightening in our hearts when we’re thinking too hard on something. But the most important thing is, they’ll be around for us when we need them the most.” She asked him how that was different than dying. “I’m not sure, really. But I do think that knowing that they’re around forever for us is better than thinking that they’re going to just die and not be there at all.”

“You mean like my parents?” He said that he thought that it was like that. That humans believed that they died and that was the end.

“Shifters believe that they don’t die; they just fade. We also believe that they watch over babies when they come along. That they give us the boost, like I told you about. That they’re there for us even though we can’t see them, but know, within our hearts, that they’re keeping an eye on us all the time.” He thought that was the best way to live without not having them there, believing that they were around to guide them in their lives. “You know how sometimes you have a thought about doing something, but for whatever reason, you change your mind because it might have been something terrible or dangerous for you? Well, I believe with all my heart that that’s what our ancestors do for us. They keep us on the straight and narrow so that we’ll be there for them when they want to take a nice visit.”



Hailey laid her head on his shoulder and didn't speak for some time. When she did, he could have kissed her for having a better outlook on things than he was having. He had only been focused on losing them when he should have been happy that they were still around for him all the time.

"It's like blowing bubbles." He didn't ask her what she had meant but held her tightly. "When you blow a whole bunch of them and some of them land on the grass but don't pop. That's them, I'm betting, if you look really hard at the bubble, you can see them there, looking at you and wondering what you're about. Isn't that right, Dad?"

He nearly didn't answer her. She'd never called him dad before. When he was able to get his tongue working with his mouth, he told her that he'd buy her bubbles so that whenever they needed to talk to Grandma and Grandpa, they could go into the yard and blow lots of bubbles that they'd be in."

Stone went into the house to find Sage. She needed to hear this as well. That bubbles you blow with your breath would be like having your family right there in the beautifully colorful bubbles. He liked that more than he thought of anything to do with fading.

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Charlie walked along the well-worn path. He knew it like the back of his hand but watched where he was stepping so as not to disturb the creatures that might well be on the same track as he was on. He just wanted to see his children. Today had been a hard day in that this was the anniversary of his fading from twenty-five years ago.

The woods that he was walking in were just as he remembered all those centuries ago when he'd met up with Roman, a man who would change his life forever. He had hated the man for leaving him but after a while, he began to marvel at the things he was able to see. And the boys that he had with his wife and mate Luna.

“Grandda, are you around?” The grown woman was sitting on the same log that he’d seen her on the last time he’d come to visit her. Little Hailey was now a grown woman with a family of her own. He watched as bubbles, he so loved watching them float through the air and land on the toe of his worn boot. “There you are. I knew you’d come.”

He reached out and ruffled her hair slightly. Touching one of the rainbow bubbles and making it pop had her giggling. As she laid the small child on the ground, he couldn’t have stopped himself from moving toward it had he been shot like the first time he was in this very same woods.

“I wanted you to meet your grandson. His name is Charles Wolf Griffin.” The little boy turned and looked at him and smiled. Reaching down to touch his little head, he was rewarded with a soft giggle from him and laughter from his mother. “He’s a good boy and full wolf. Stone couldn’t be more proud than if he’d delivered him himself. We’re going to call him Wolf because one of Edwin’s grandchildren is called Charles, too.”

“He’s so lovely. Just as handsome as you are beautiful, my child.” She was the only one that came to talk to him anymore. Or he to her. She had been talking to them and bringing them news since the day that he and Luna had faded. Then he’d go back and tell Luna if she didn’t come with him and they’d spread the news far and wide to the other Griffins that were with them.

Charlie had learned a few tricks so that she’d know that he was around. A breeze through the trees that would send leaves chasing each other. A branch would fall from the tree would allow her to know that he was thinking about her and her family. All were things that she’d noticed, and then she would tell him that she knew that he was around for her.

“Dad and Mom have gone on a trip—they’re traveling to another pack for Uncle Edwin. I think I told you how he had the biggest pack in the world, didn’t I? Anyway,

Dad is excited to be doing this. He's retired from teaching again and he said that this is the end of it. He'll not go back. But we both know that it's only a matter of time before he wants to go back and do it again."

He had known that he was ready to retire again, but this time, he thought it might stick. Stone had grandchildren now, two of them, and more on the way. They—Sage and Stone had been, like his brother Harman, a person who helped kids out by taking them into their home for one reason or another.

Harman, too, had grandchildren but he loved to study things. Several times in his search for his next book, he'd been to places with his children and wife. It wasn't normally a place that he'd go, calling it a family trip, but they enjoyed it so much, and the kids, most of them adults now, were well versed in several languages as well as how some of the other world lived.

All of his boys were doing well. Edwin loved being pack leader but had been training his son to be the next great one. Eddy had been ready to take over but fearful that when he did, his dad would fade away like they had. He doubted that would happen but he was proud of the young man all the same.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. Storm has been working with the ground with Aunt Grace. They're replenishing some of the earth that had been damaged when the rains came through the other country. They do such great things together, her with Aunt Rain." She blew some more bubbles that reminded him that he wasn't sitting right there with her. "Did I tell you that I've found a way to make bubbles with flavor? They're a huge hit right now. I even put on the bottle that they were a perfect way to talk to the dead. And how I knew long ago that I could call upon you when I just needed a little bit of reassurance."

"I will be here with you forever, my heart." When she inhaled sharply, he had a moment where he thought that she could hear him. When she told him that she was there for him as well, he had to smile and wipe at the little tears that would replenish

the earth as much as his granddaughter did.

Charlie was just about at the end of his time with her. He couldn't stay long—well, he could, but he'd be too worn out to talk to his life mate, Luna, about what they'd talked about. Hailey had told him about his other boys and their families. How much they were getting done for the earth and the packs around them. Even the little town was thriving better than it ever had and he was happy for that too.

“Grandda, I hope that you are well. And that you're not taxing yourself too much. I wanted to also tell you how much I love you. Even though you weren't that much a part of my life growing up, these times that we get together make such a wonderful addition to what I know about you. You have a kind and loving heart and I hope someday my children will be as kind and good to people as you and Grandma Luna had been.”

He made his way home, floating on the breeze that would take him back to his faerie garden, where he shared the magic with Luna. By the time that he had arrived, he was about as exhausted as he'd ever been but he wasn't so depleted in his energy as he usually was when he returned from his trip.

“It's the babe.” Charlie asked Luna what she meant. Not because he was questioning her, he knew that she was right on everything, but because he'd not understood what little Wolf had to do with him being more able to stay awake this time. “They're full of a special kind of energy that we can feed off of. Not enough to exhaust him too, but enough that we can hang around longer than we should know better than to be.”

“I have a feeling that wasn't meant as a compliment for me leaving you to yourself for a while.” She reached out and touched him on his cheek. He would swear that it felt as good to him as the first time they'd met. “I don't tell you this enough, Luna love, but I love you with all that I am and more.”

“Good.” The same answer that she gave him when he said the same to her over the

years. The love that he felt for this woman was beyond measure. And even though they didn't speak daily, his love for Luna had grown and grown over the last few years because of the things that his granddaughter told him and they were able to share. "Tell me about the little baby."

He did so, telling her how he watched him as he leaned down to see him. "I will tell you, love, he's a good deal more alert than any of our boys were when they were just newborns. And a beautiful head of hair on his head like his father had. Bigger, too, she told me, by a whole pound. I bet in no time he's as big as his daddy is now."

They spoke about the other children that they'd had. Edwin had gone back in the army for a while because he'd been bored. Tony had been running for mayor of their little town again and would more than likely win because he kept the people in mind while working.

"Garfield is a big man on Wall Street, it seems. Not only is he keeping the family in money, but a whole lot of other people, too. Such a smart young man. He gets all that from you, I think?" Luna said that was the child that had taught her to read and write the most. "Yes, I can remember that. The three of us sitting around the table with a candle between us, learning to decipher words like we were. Numbers for me were a bit harder than they were for you if I remember correctly. I could get there eventually, but it would take me some figuring, I remember."

They spoke about the things that they'd taught the grandchildren as well. There were two of them that could make her jam as good as she did. Also, two others who could read the trees and the weather so they'd be prepared for whatever came their way. Three times now, they'd had enough food and water to last out the weeks they'd be without electricity.

"She said that Jeffery was going to be able to keep them in the internet that no one could break into." It has happened once. And that was enough. Someone had hacked into their computers and was able to start moving things around to suit themselves.

Lucky for them, Rain was able to get their money back and fix things up for them so that they'd not be hacked into again. "Rain and Storm sure have kept our family safe from outsiders that I just don't understand."

"They've done more for the family than I think we ever did in all the years that we were around them." Charlie had to agree with that. They'd been so powerful that there wasn't any way that any of them were going to need anything from the world around them. Good thing, too, as they were there for not just the town but each other as well. He was very proud of his family and would brag about them for hours on end if he was given the chance.

The two of them talked about different things as they drifted through the woods. She didn't join him very often but when she did, her laughter would make his heart sing with enjoyment. She was all he needed in the world, the before and after. The children and the grandchildren and beyond had been a blessing that they'd never dreamed of when the children were little. As they were floating to their garden again, he could see that someone had left them a beautiful family photo that he and Luna loved. They couldn't take it with them when they traveled but knew that sometime soon, it would be replaced with another family picture that they'd treasure just as much.

As they settled down in their garden of flowers, his last thought was of his sons. He did surely miss them but knew that they were doing their best because they had taught them well. It was more than he could have hoped for as a father.