



The Hunt

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Category: Fantasy

Description: This couldn't be happening. Calliope Masters knew she and Jaxson Crease didn't have the best start to their mating. At the age of eighteen when the pack declared they were mates, they rejected one another. She was a human, he was a wolf. He made it abundantly clear that he didn't want her.

They were now trapped within The Hunt. A mystery realm that forced mates to confront their need for one another head on. Jaxson didn't go to the Elder. He knew Calliope was his mate, and the truth was, he wanted her. When they were kids, they were inseparable. His own fear was what pushed them apart. He didn't care that she was human. He had loved Calliope all of his life.

Now, within the rules of The Hunt, they had to fight to survive. They were about to face obstacles and challenges neither of them ever anticipated. Pushed to the breaking point.

Only there is something interesting about The Hunt. It is not the same for all couples. It changes as if it has a life of its own. And there is something so very similar about this one. But what could it be?

Will Jaxson and Calliope find one another and come to terms with their mated connection? Or, will they give up, and never see their pack or life again? The only way to get out of The Hunt is to be mated.

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C alliope Masters groaned , rolled over, and then opened her eyes. She gasped, sitting straight up, because this wasn't her bedroom. This wasn't her parents' home where she'd fallen asleep.

She was surrounded by trees and earth, and the scent of mud and grass. At the sound of another moan, she tensed up, and then glanced less than two feet away from her.

This couldn't be happening.

Her heart started to race as she got to her feet. At first, she didn't dare move, because she didn't want to know the answer, but that would be crazy.

Then Jaxson Crease opened his eyes, and he clearly had the same sense of panic she did. He turned his head and stopped.

"No," he said.

"I hope that is hell, no, this can't be happening," she said, trying not to panic. What was the point in panicking? If what she thought was happening, they were in for a whole load of crap she couldn't deal with.

There was the sorry fact that she was only ... human. That was right. Jaxson was the wolf in this situation. She was just a human that lived among wolves and witches, and a whole lot of other things that went bump in the night.

"This is not ... The Hunt," he said.

Calliope pressed her lips together and tried not to cry. Throughout high school Jaxson had always accused her of being too emotional, and that humans were in some way less than wolves, which made her hate him just a little bit. Actually, not even a little bit. It made her hate him a whole lot.

He was always saying how humans were weak and pathetic, useless to have around, and so many other insults that they became just words. His insults quite quickly stopped having meaning to her.

“It can’t be, right? I mean, that is impossible. There is no way.” She started to laugh, and then she wanted to cry. “It’s just not possible. They heard what we said when we were eighteen.”

Jaxson rubbed the back of his neck, which was not a good sign.

“What?” she asked.

“They told us that if we didn’t ... figure this out, it was going to lead to The Hunt?”

“No, no, no, absolutely not.”

“Calliope, we knew this was coming.”

“No, this is not that. This is not us having to work together, to come to the realization that you and I are mates, or whatever you call it.” She felt her heart start to race.

The Hunt was cruel, archaic, and so damn wrong on many levels. Calliope didn’t know when this started, but it happened in some kind of mystical realm, that was all forest. If an unmated couple failed to mate by their twenty-first birthday, then by pack law they have to be entered into The Hunt.

This was not a game. This was survival.

Every couple that had gone in hating each other's guts came out mated, in love, and living happily ever after.

She and Jaxson were mated three years ago.

She pressed her lips together, hating what was happening right now, so much so that she wanted to cry.

It would be up to them to combat every enemy that came their way. They were mystically bound so they couldn't run from each other. She always imagined it was like having invisible handcuffs wrapped around their wrists.

Right now, she couldn't feel it, but as she took a step, then another, and another, she felt that pull when she suddenly couldn't move anymore.

"No, no, no, no, no," she said, spinning around and looking at him a little wildly. "I thought they had agreed. They were happy we both agreed our suggested mating was wrong."

Jaxson shrugged. "I guess not."

"I thought you said there was a way to avoid this?" she asked.

"I thought there was, but it doesn't matter."

She held onto her face and tried not to panic. "How are you not freaking out right now? How are you not panicking?" She bent forward and put her hands on her thighs, trying to take deep breaths.

This couldn't be happening. Could it?

“Regardless of what we think and feel, there is no going back. We've got a choice to make. Either we work together, and by the end of it mate and get out of here alive, or we die.”

No one had died during The Hunt.

She lifted her head. “You're talking about failing.”

“No, I'm talking about winning here. Failing is the other option, but I don't want to die.”

She watched as he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets.

Calliope hated failing. She studied for every single test she took.

Throughout high school, she worked her ass off.

When it came time to pass her driver's license test, she nearly failed because she got so nervous around new people.

Even though she lived within a community, she didn't know everyone well, and she was shy.

On the night of her eighteenth birthday, there had been a party.

There had been several peers who shared the same birthday week as her.

Every Friday, regardless of whether it was a party, an elder came to the pack, sat down, and they would watch as his wolf would take over.

He was known as the Mate Maker. All she knew from rumor was that his wolf had a way of seeing the connections of soulmates.

It was all freaky and scary, and she hated it, but she had watched people come together.

She saw their love and happiness at knowing they were destined to be mates.

Then, of course, there were people that were heartbroken.

In her case, she and Jaxson had burst out laughing, and then denied it.

For three years they continued to deny it, with the threat of The Hunt looming over them.

“Okay, okay, so, we’re not failing. We’re going to survive,” Calliope said. She didn’t want to be mated to Jaxson, but at twenty-one years old, she didn’t look forward to death either.

Jaxson moved toward her. “You know what this means?”

“This means that you and I share a common goal. We’ve got to make it out of here alive.”

“No one makes it out of here alive unless they are mated, Calliope. Mated, marked, and fucked. We both know what that means. So, until that happens, I guess we have no choice but to work together and survive.” He took a deep breath.

“And seeing as you don’t have strength or speed, you better watch my back. ”

“I can totally take care of myself.”

She gasped as he suddenly cupped her face. It was the first time he'd touched her. At first, she didn't know what to do. It was easier when there was no touching involved.

They shouldn't be doing this.

She hated him. Didn't she?

Did The Hunt mess up feelings as well?

None of this made any sense.

“You and I both know, without me, you cannot take care of yourself. There are going to be things that attack us, Calliope. Scary, monstrous things. There is a lot you can do, but taking care of yourself is not one of them.”

With that, he started to move, and she had no choice but to follow.

J axson had a little secret. He never went to his parents, nor did he go to the elder to ask him to withdraw the mating between him and Calliope. He had every intention of doing so. Each time he did, some other excuse came up that stopped him. He couldn't explain it.

His father advised it was because he knew Calliope was his mate. That made no sense.

Sure, they had kind of grown up together. When they were kids, they had been best friends. Calliope had been a little bit of a tomboy, climbing trees with him, and they would run around wild in the forest. There was a time she'd been his best friend.

Then, something happened. She suddenly turned into a girl—a girl he noticed with beautiful thick, rich brown hair. Gorgeous brown eyes, that always had that sparkle in them, as if she was trying not to laugh about something. He adored her.

Then, she stopped wearing dungarees, jeans and shorts, and instead wore skirts and dresses. She started to wear makeup and pin her hair back. She looked beautiful, and he started to become attracted to her, and that was a bad thing. A very bad thing.

So, he'd been a little surprised when the elder stated they were mates. Sure, his feelings for her had never quite gone away. Somewhere along the way, their friendship had changed, and they'd become enemies. That was what they were now—enemies.

Although, she did look really pretty.

Thankfully, she wasn't wearing a skirt or a dress right now, but jeans. Jeans, and an oversized sweater, which was a good thing. She was always cold, he remembered.

Making their way through the forest, he inhaled deeply, and he'd been warned there would be no way of knowing what enemies they faced.

“This is insane,” Calliope said, whispering.

That he agreed with.

The Hunt was fucking dangerous. People had struggled through, but no one had failed. No one had opted to die. They all came out loving one another, being together, having kids, mating, and living their perfect lives.

Right now, he didn't know if they were going to be able to ... succeed. He was more than capable of taking care of them. He had the strength, and had been honing his

abilities with his wolf for the past three years. He was the one in control.

But he had never had to focus on keeping anyone else alive, least of all Calliope. The girl he'd teased. The girl he'd insulted. The girl he missed and knew he was one hundred percent in love with—which was why he made her life miserable.

Calliope looked fine. She looked happy. Like she didn't have any feelings for him whatsoever, and why did she get to have all of that freedom and fun, while he couldn't?

He was trapped by his feelings for her. Feelings that were technically, completely justified, because their elder stated as such.

“So, we agree on that,” Jaxson said.

“Okay, at least we can agree with ... things. What's the plan?”

He stopped and turned to her.

“Plan?”

“Yeah, we've got to have a plan. I mean, I don't know how long these things are supposed to last. We've got to find food and shelter, and figure this out. They have left us with nothing.” She held her hands open. “Nothing.”

“That's because we have to work together to survive.”

“And that's why I am saying there is a plan, isn't there? Do we know when nightfall will hit?”

“Calliope, we're in a mystical land, and I didn't stick around long to listen to how

other people survived this.” He’d seen how happy they were, and in all honesty, he didn’t think he’d ever have to worry about being thrust into The Hunt.

He remembered bits and pieces of conversations, but he wasn’t about to scare Calliope. The truth was, it could turn to night with the click of fingers. It could be burning hot or freezing cold. They could be attacked without any warning whatsoever. Food could be found when they least expected it.

The fact was, the only guarantee with each other, was ... each other. They were their only hope.

“You’re right,” Calliope said. “I didn’t either. I was happy they lived, but I didn’t stick around for the details. I only know this place is scary.” She glanced around.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said.

“I hope so.” She turned to look at him. “Because I really don’t want to die.”

He couldn’t have agreed more. “At least we’re in agreement with that. Neither of us wants to die.” He saw the smile on her face, and it had been so long since she last smiled at him.

“What do we have to do?”

There was no way Calliope was just going to sit back and allow him to do all the work. She always had a hands-on approach to everything.

“We’ve got to keep moving and I guess we’ve got to start looking like we’re open to the idea of being mated.”

He heard her sharp intake of breath.

“That shouldn’t be hard, right? I mean, that should be quite easy.” She nibbled her lip and he loved when she did this.

Her lips were already plump, but in some odd way, they looked plumper when she nibbled her lip. He couldn’t describe what it did to him, but it did drive him crazy watching her.

“Yeah, it should be easy.” They started to walk, and he looked left and right. There was no discernable landscape. Everything either kept changing, or they were going around in circles, or ... it was a maze.

He just didn’t know. The scent hadn’t changed either. Jaxson tried to stay on alert, just in case they were attacked.

Calliope didn’t say a word. They kept walking in a straight line, a circle, or zigzagging, for all he knew. Randomly, he kept looking in her direction. Neither of them said a word. He had a feeling this was dangerous.

“What were you doing?” he asked. “I mean, before you woke up here?”

“I was sleeping. I had a long day, and I went to bed early.”

“Me too,” Jaxson said. He’d been training with all the other wolves, honing in on his connection with his wolf, so when it came to changing, it didn’t hurt.

Sometimes, even after three years, and changing once a month, it still hurt like a son of a bitch.

Not that he’d complain to anyone, and certainly not his dad, who also happened to be the alpha of the pack.

“It’s exhausting, right? Trying to figure out your place?” Calliope asked.

He agreed.

“I know a lot of the pack didn’t want me around because of ... well, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Some of the pack thought he was nuts in not trying to pursue Calliope. Trying to make a mating work was more important than ending up on The Hunt.

It was like the bogeyman for wolves. The Hunt.

He didn’t realize how real it could be until this moment, and at that precise second, he heard the snap of a twig and instantly reached out for Calliope. She had already tensed up.

“Did you hear that?” she asked, whispering.

He nodded his head and tried not to make a sound as he kept her close and moved in a circle, trying to figure out what it could have been.

A twig snap suggested something large, something ... hunter-y. He didn’t want them to be the prey. They were the predators.

“So, uh, I kind of heard that anything can attack? I mean, I think I might have heard, but I didn’t exactly hear it from anyone who has actually been here,” Calliope said.

“It’s a fight for survival. It’s why it’s named The Hunt.”

No one appeared. No threat.

Letting go of her arm, he watched, and then suddenly, a small bunny appeared.

“Aw, he’s so cute,” Calliope said.

The bunny didn’t stay long and started hopping away.

“Come on,” Jaxson said. “I think we need to keep moving.” And with that, she didn’t argue as he took her hand and they started walking again.

He didn’t have a clue which direction to head, but it was good to just keep walking, and if he was honest, it was also good to be holding her hand.

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There was nothing Calliope hadn't been prepared for. She crammed for every single test. When it came to cooking dinner, she practiced until she could now cook many foods with her eyes closed. She liked to be the best she could be.

She liked to be prepared. This was not prepared. This was the biggest mistake of her life.

From the moment she turned eighteen and the elder declared the two of them mates, she should have been preparing. Getting close to Jaxson once again, and understanding and believing The Hunt was very much real.

She had witnessed other couples who had come out of this and were closer. Every part of her being always told her to not look away, to not back away.

She took a deep breath and couldn't help but feel a little sick. This was her fault. Instead of going to the elder herself, or being by Jaxson's side when he went, the elder clearly thought they wanted to be together.

"What did the elder say when you went to him?" she asked.

"What?"

"You know, you were going to the elder to petition him to retract his ... mating thing." Jaxson squeezed her hand a little tighter, and they may not have been friends for quite some time, but she knew what that squeeze meant. "Jaxson?"

"I didn't go!"

“What?” Calliope asked.

“I didn’t go to the elder.”

“How could you not have gone to the elder? You’re a wolf. You said you were going.” She tried to pull away from him, but he refused to let go of her hand. Instead, she came to a stop. So, he had no choice but to either let her go or stop. It wasn’t like he was going to get very far.

“Damn it, Calliope. Does it even matter now?” he asked.

“Of course it matters. We’re in a damn maze or a game, whatever this is. You did this, Jaxson. You should have gone to the elder. Damn it, I should have gone to the elder.”

“We’re both to blame for being in this situation, so stop playing the victim.”

“How dare you!” She wanted to stamp her foot, growl at him, but the truth was, he was right. Exactly right.

She hadn’t gone to the elder, because in the back of her mind, she figured it would have been rude. Instead, she sent Jaxson, which had been the cowardly thing to do. He didn’t deserve her yelling at him. She was just about to apologize when a roar suddenly permeated the air.

Looking toward Jaxson, he tightened his hold around her wrist, and together they didn’t argue but took off running. Neither had a weapon on hand, and they kept running.

She didn’t know how, but the bushes that suddenly appeared seemed to be getting thicker, making it impossible for them to get away.

“Don’t look back,” Jaxson said.

Now, most people when told not to look behind them, automatically did. Not her, she was going to take Jaxson’s word for it. She wanted to keep running and moving forward.

Part of her wanted to scream.

Instead, Jaxson’s grip tightened, and then, as if by magic, they came to a cliff edge that hadn’t been there, and the sound of running water exploded into their senses.

Her heart pounded and as she looked back now, she saw it. The roar had come from something that looked like an ogre. One look at Jaxson, and they both knew what to do.

She held on tightly to him, and together they jumped over the edge, heading straight toward the water.

Calliope prayed that whoever was controlling this world kept the water exactly where it was, and made it deeper so she and Jaxson didn’t plunge to their death.

They both connected with the water, and during the hit they somehow let each other go.

She didn’t open her eyes, because the truth was, she had a little fear of the water. At least she did here, as she didn’t know what could be lurking beneath.

Quickly breaking for the surface, she gasped for breath and opened her eyes. There could have been sharks, or mermaids, or the kraken, or other sea monsters that scared the crap out of her.

Jaxson suddenly grabbed her, began to swim to shore, and she did the same. The moment they were out of the water, she crawled a little further away, and then kissed the ground.

“You kept your eyes closed, right?” Jaxson asked.

She took a deep breath. “Yeah, I kept them closed.”

“That’s good. That is a good thing.”

Calliope frowned and turned to look at him. “Why?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you lying to me?”

“No. There is nothing for you to worry about.” He looked ahead of him. “I guess we must have passed whatever the test was.”

She couldn’t look where he had, but glanced back to the water. Was the water moving? Did something appear? Okay, her imagination was running wild now.

“Jaxson, what did you see?” she asked, rushing toward him.

Now, she was able to see what he meant. There were several backpacks, and Jaxson was already opening them. He pulled out an apple, and as if right on time, her stomach decided to start growling.

“Food,” he said.

She took the apple from him and had a large bite. She was starving. Calliope looked

back to the edge of the water.

“What did you see?”

“Did you notice how that ogre roared when we had an argument?” Jaxson asked.

“Yeah, so. Isn’t that the point of this place, to test us?”

“That’s the point,” Jaxson said. “I know how freaked out you are by the water and what could be lurking beneath. Even though it scares you, you’re always watching those kinds of movies, and well ... something was in the water.”

“It was?”

“Yeah, and I have a feeling this place is a combination of challenges and manifestation.”

“Did anything in the water attack you?” she asked.

“No, nothing, which is why I think it’s all connected.”

“But while we were arguing, I didn’t think of an ogre? Did you? Did you think I was being an ogre?” She didn’t know if she should be insulted or not, instead, he chuckled like it was the funniest thing he had heard.

“No, I didn’t think you were an ogre, but it was a distraction—which is what I meant by a combination of challenges and manifestations.”

“If I opened my eyes, would I have been attacked?”

“I honestly don’t know. They were just there.”

“They were?” She felt the fear starting to tangle up inside her.

“Yeah, there were mermaids, sharks, and a couple of octopuses, other bits that clearly freak you out. So, we’re going to avoid the water, that way we don’t have to deal with your fear manifestations.”

“That sounds like a good idea. I like this plan,” she said.

She’d never been one who needed to swim. Not even in the height of summer. She was perfectly content to enjoy some ice cream and complain about the weather.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“We ... make it work.” He finished his piece of fruit, and then dived back into the bag, holding out a cheese and pickle sandwich for her.

“How do we do that?” she asked, taking the sandwich from him.

“Simple, if these are challenges and manifestations, we focus on being friends. We were once, so that would be easy.” He took a large bite out of his own sandwich.

“And what do we do about your manifestations?” she asked. Hers were all horror related, but she knew when they were kids, he feared being thrown out of the pack, tossed aside as if he wasn’t good enough.

“I’ll handle them. I have a feeling they only work if you and I are arguing.”

“I don’t know,” Calliope said. “This sounds a little too easy. Don’t you think?”

“Right now, it is all we’ve got to go on.”

She couldn't argue with him and took another bite of her sandwich.

It had been freaky as fuck.

The mermaids in the water, as well as a couple of giant white sharks, some killer-looking octopus, and there may have been some kind of alien. Again, Jaxson wasn't sure, but he knew it was Calliope's imagination running wild. That had to be part of the challenge of this place.

"It's getting dark," he said. Only a moment ago, it had been lighter.

"Can we find somewhere else to sleep that is not next to the water?" Calliope asked.

"You've got it."

He didn't know how long they had been in The Hunt. There was no time limit, unless it was due to death, or mating.

The bag had more food inside, and he wasn't going to let that go. They needed sustenance. Zipping it up, he slid it onto his shoulder and then reached for Calliope's hand, which she did hesitate to hold.

"Come on, the last few hours haven't taught you anything? We've got to make this work."

She slid her hand into his. They used to hold hands all the time.

It hadn't been a big deal then, but clearly it was a big deal now.

He tightened his hold on her, and they made their way further inland, away from the water's edge.

Once again, the landscape became the same, and they didn't know if they were getting closer to the forest, at the edge, or what.

All too soon, it was dark and they came to a stop. His sight was perfect, being part wolf.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

When they were kids, Calliope had been afraid of the dark. He didn't know if that had changed in recent years.

"I don't have much choice. I'm okay, but I don't like how quickly it got dark."

That was his answer. There was no glare of the full moon. Nothing.

He was more than able to see her wide-eyed stare as she looked back at him. "It's going to be okay," he said.

"You don't know that."

"Calliope, I know you hate losing, and failing is not an option for you. Give me some credit for having the same feelings."

She nodded her head. "You're right."

"We're going to have to make do here."

"Camping outside," she said.

It had been a long time since they had slept outside, staring up at the stars. They used to do it all the time.

The ground was firm. They had no blanket. He took the bag off his shoulder and pushed the food to one side. With the other part of the bag, he made a makeshift pillow and placed it on the ground.

Lying down, he reached for her. "Come on."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Sleep? There is nothing else we can do. There is no camp, no sleeping bags. It's going to get cold, and you're going to freeze, and I'm warm. You know this. Stop being a pain in the ass, just lie down and snuggle with me. It's not that hard. We used to do it as kids."

He was pretty sure she rolled her eyes. Jaxson had good vision, but that didn't mean he could see every nook and cranny.

Calliope didn't argue with him and collapsed onto the ground, moving close to him.

"I can't believe we actually have to do this to survive. Don't you think it's crazy?" she asked.

"Yeah, it is totally crazy."

She laughed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I don't know. You saying the word crazy, it is kind of funny."

He couldn't help but smile himself. It was good to hear her laugh. It had been too long since he last heard it.

“So, an ogre on our first day. That is pretty impressive, huh?” she asked.

“Please tell me you're not thinking of turning this into one of the scariest adventures the pack has ever heard of.”

“As fun as that sounds, and attempting to put your theory to the test, I don't have a death wish.

We have no way of defending ourselves. All we've got is you being able to turn into a wolf.

” She placed a hand on his chest. “Not that there is anything wrong with that. It is perfectly fine, but that's the point.

You can turn into a wolf, and I won't do anything to risk your life.

I'm not going to think of something we can't .

.. get free of. It's just not going to happen.

We've got to make it out of here alive.”

He wanted to point out the way to do that was to mate. Neither of them said a word, but he had a feeling she already knew that. They were not at that point yet, to just sink into each other and give in to mating.

Calliope sighed. “It has been years since I've camped outside. I mean, it is freaky there are no stars.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“But this is kind of fun. Do you still do it?”

“Not since you and I used to do it.”

There was a brief silence.

“That seems like such a long time ago now,” she said.

“It was,” Jaxson said. “We’d spend hours outside.”

“Climbing trees, finding our own sense of adventure. I know you were teased a lot because you spent all your time with me, and never with anyone from the pack.”

“You were pack.”

“I’m part of the human segment.”

“Doesn’t matter. You were still pack, and those days of adventure and camping, and climbing anything that was tall ... they were awesome, and no one is going to take that from us.”

Calliope tilted her head back. “Do you promise?”

“Yeah, promise.” He kissed the top of her head and then they both froze.

“Ugh,” Calliope said.

He was about to apologize. Why the fuck did he kiss the top of her head? What was going on with him?

“Let’s get some sleep. I think that would be good. We’re going to need our strength for tomorrow,” Calliope said.

It sounded like a plan.

Even still, he kissed her head and she was curled against his body. It had been so long since they had done this, but it felt good. It felt right.

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Something warm was pressed against Calliope's back. It felt so good, and she couldn't help but snuggle against it. She wriggled her ass, and that was when she became aware of multiple things.

First, she opened her eyes. Then, she remembered the awful realization that she and Jaxson were in The Hunt. The ogre, the lake, or sea-monster-riddled water. Finally, the sudden nightfall. Jaxson kissing the top of her head.

And now, she was snuggled against him. Sometime during the night, she must have rolled over, as his arm was her pillow, and Jaxson had snuggled against her.

One of his large, thick arms was banded around her waist, and, well, she felt the hard ridge of his dick pressing against her ass.

How would she get out of this without embarrassing him?

This was crazy. But that decision was taken out of her hands as she felt the change within him.

Jaxson was awake. He didn't move. Neither did she. It was like they both stopped breathing, and then quickly, as if on some kind of drug, they pulled away from one another at exactly the same time.

She looked at him, he looked at her. They stood, with only a small gap between them. "Morning," she said, realizing if they even argued right now and an ogre appeared, they were going to die. Neither of them was prepared for an attack.

The best way to deal with this was to pretend it wasn't happening.

"Morning," he said.

"How did you sleep?" she asked. It was a perfectly reasonable and non-loaded question as far as she was concerned.

"Good. You?"

"Yeah, I slept well."

Calliope didn't know the last time she had slept that well. It had been a long time.

She didn't know what to say to him. If she looked down, she might bring the direction of the conversation to the fact his ... dick was hard. Not that she knew if it stood out against his pants. This was just too much.

"Uh, how are you?" she asked.

"I'm good. You?"

"I'm ... great." She offered him a smile.

They were going around in circles.

"I need to pee," she said.

"Right, right. I guess we use cover around us, and some of these leaves, which might help."

She chuckled. "That is a good idea. Such a great idea." And she was reaching.

They turned their backs on each other, and Calliope found a spot. This was insane. She couldn't believe she was using the great outdoors as a bathroom. It was odd, but a small bucket of water appeared, and she knew it was there for her to wash her hands.

"Okay, manifestation," she said. "This is pretty neat."

She couldn't deny how cool that was. Also, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and even a comb, and some deodorant appeared. Now, this was just plain creepy, but she was not about to say that to the ... magic apparatus. If they wanted to appear out of thin air, then so be it.

Once she had washed herself as best she could, brushed her teeth, and even combed her hair, she felt good. Alive. Like herself.

As if by magic, her clothes changed as well. She was still in jeans and a shirt, but this time, the shirt was not thick, and she was wearing a vest.

"Oh," she said.

Stepping out from beyond her cover, she found Jaxson standing near a fire.

"Did you make this?" she asked.

He wasn't wearing a shirt, and his jeans were riding low, showcasing his body. A body she hadn't seen in a very long time.

"I came back and here it was," he said. "I guess we did good, and we get to eat. There is bacon and sausage, eggs, and even some tomatoes."

"That sounds good. So, uh, after, you know, you used the bathroom, did water and

stuff appear?" she asked.

"Yeah, they did."

"Thank you. I thought I might be going a little crazy, but it's nice to know this place is providing everything. Even the change of clothes." She picked at the vest top she was wearing.

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'm liking this change," Jaxson said.

"Where is your shirt?" she asked.

"I wasn't given one."

"And I was given this vest top. Okay, so I guess today it's going to be hot?" Calliope didn't even need to take a second guess, as the heat was already rising. "They do know I am human, right?"

"Yeah, they know."

"So, what do we think this change of temperature is all about?"

He shrugged. "I guess the heat gets to a lot of people. They either make sound decisions, or bad ones, or ... you know..."

"Sexy ones?" Calliope asked.

Jaxson nodded.

"Yeah, they really are attempting to take this out of our hands, aren't they?"

“I guess we could say they’re acting in our best interests,” Jaxson said.

She couldn’t help laughing.

Jaxson looked good without a shirt on.

It didn’t take long for their breakfast to cook, and by the time she took a bite out of the sausage, she was starving, and it was getting hotter with every passing second.

They finished their food without a word, and then had some gulps of water. Calliope leaned back and tilted her head toward the burning sun.

“Do you think we should stay here?” she asked.

“No, I think we need to keep moving. It will help us.”

She nodded and got to her feet. There was now a second backpack, and she picked it up and followed behind Jaxson.

“It feels wrong to be leaving this camp. We’ve got everything set up for us to make some food and possibly get some good sleep.”

“Yeah, and an easy place for us to get attacked,” Jaxson said. “Remember, there are still dangers around.”

“Yeah, but what if they are only part of our manifestation? What if we actually get along and nothing bad happens?” Calliope asked. She sounded a little too hopeful, even to herself, and it made her wrinkle her nose.

“I want to agree with you, but you and I both know the challenges the pack will send us. No one has ever fooled The Hunt, gotten out, and then not been mated. Do you

feel like mating me?” Jaxson asked.

She pressed her lips together, because the true answer was a hard one.

Yes, she wanted to be mated to him, and at the same time, no.

He’d been a dick to her. Admittedly, not all the time, but that was beside the point.

There was a time he had been her best friend, and she adored him.

Actually, there had been a point where she had loved him.

They had grown apart, as kids often did. Now, there was no love, there was no ... feeling. There didn’t need to be. He had moved on, realizing she was human, and he had more important things to do.

And she, well, she had moved on to making her life work, knowing she was not a wolf. She and Jaxson were not the same, and never would be.

Sure, it had hurt. And part of her still loved him. But that part was long buried. She didn’t want anything bad to happen to him, but she knew he didn’t want to be mated to her. She was just a human.

“We keep moving,” Calliope said, trying to change the subject rather than answer him. They were not ready for this, or at least she wasn’t ready. She didn’t know if she would ever be ready.

Jaxson looked so sad, but she couldn’t just put the last few years aside. He had said some horrible things, and she had retaliated. She never said anything bad about him being a wolf, or different. She just called him an asshole, or dumb, or a loser. Sometimes, she only said that in her head.

Pushing those thoughts out of her mind, she started to walk. This time, it was up to Jaxson to follow, only she got so far and had to stop. She glanced behind her and saw that Jaxson hadn't moved.

“Come on, we've got to go. You're right and we need to make this work.”

J axson was ready to mate with Calliope.

Most of the night, he had watched her, feeling her sink deeper into sleep.

Kissing the top of her head hadn't been a mistake.

The truth was, he wanted to kiss those full, kissable lips.

To slide his tongue across and inside her mouth, to deepen the kiss.

To taste her. He wanted to strip the clothes from her body and make love to every inch of her.

There were so many things he wanted to do to her, but what was he doing instead? Oh, that's right, he was watching her walk ahead of him.

She didn't want to mate him, and he understood it.

The last few years, he had been a dick to her, before they turned eighteen, before the mating.

That was when he'd been a dick to her as well.

When she suddenly became a girl, he just couldn't seem to handle it.

Which pissed him off. It shouldn't bother him that she was a girl.

Right now, it didn't, but back then, it had changed so much, and he didn't know what to think or feel. His feelings were all over the place.

He needed to get his shit together, and staring down the length of her back, he couldn't help but admire the curves of her juicy ass. The tight round globes that were making him ache to be with her. Jaxson felt an overwhelming need to touch her.

All too soon, she stopped and put her hands on her waist.

"It feels like we've been walking for hours," Calliope said.

The shirt she wore was soaking wet. It was hot. He struggled as well. He wanted to take his jeans off and just soak up the sunshine.

Calliope pushed her hair out of the way. She had it pinned up on top of her head, which he had watched her do as they walked. He figured one of the clips had appeared in her pocket, making her able to do that.

"It is hot," he said.

Calliope spun toward him. "Are you thinking dirty thoughts? Hot thoughts?"

"No," he said. The lie slipped right off his tongue with ease.

"Something is making it hot in here." She sighed.

Jaxson reached out and touched Calliope's forehead. As a wolf, he was able to

withstand hot and cold, but she was a human, and that meant she was built a lot differently from him. Pressing his hand against her forehead, he felt how she was burning up and she looked exhausted.

“Okay, this is not good,” he said. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out some water.

“We’re going to have to ration it,” Calliope said.

“No, this is not about rationing. They will provide food. There is no reason for this to be happening.”

She seemed to be a little unsteady on her feet.

Jaxson didn’t like this. The heat was getting to her, and he knew she didn’t want to be thrown into a lake. Besides, there was a chance they would be attacked by whatever Calliope thought of. He needed to get her cool. The heat was too much, and he didn’t want her to suffer.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine,” he said, reaching for her. Jaxson tried to steady her on her feet.

“It’s fine,” she said, looking far from fine.

And then, he cupped her face, staring into her eyes. They were slightly glazed. Her forehead was covered in perspiration. They were not ready for this, but he also couldn’t handle her being passed out from heat exhaustion, not that he would have a problem carrying her.

This could either go really well, or really bad, and without question, he closed the distance between them and kissed her. At first, it was just the meeting of their lips, joined together, and then that changed. The kiss deepened.

His hands were at her shoulders, hoping to steady her, and then, as if by their own accord, he sunk one into her hair, holding the back of her head.

The other went down toward her hip, and he pulled her in closer.

He heard her soft, subtle moan, and he swallowed it down, not wanting to stop.

Calliope didn't push him away, but the more he kissed her, the more he felt the temperature inside the place start to cool off.

Time passed and he didn't want to pull away, but he had a feeling he needed to. Kissing her one final time, he looked into her face and stopped the kiss. He didn't stop holding her. He needed to have his hands on her body.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Thank you," Calliope said.

"If it gets hotter, I'll keep kissing you."

She laughed. "Do you think that is why they made it so hot?"

"I don't know. How are you feeling?"

"Sticky. Like I need a bath."

And then, as if by magic, they heard it. Calliope frowned, Jaxson took hold of her hand, and they moved around the corner. There was a waterfall, but from where they stood, it did not look too deep.

"You've got to be kidding."

“I guess they work hard to make it as romantic as can be,” he said.

“It looks so good,” Calliope said. “Do you think we should take advantage?”

“Yeah, I do.” He let go of her hand and pushed his jeans right off his body. He kept his boxer briefs on and started to make his way toward the edge of the water.

Before he went any further, he looked back to find Calliope removing her jeans and vest top. The last time they had been this naked, they had been kids. That seemed like a lifetime ago, and maybe part of an alternate universe. It didn’t seem like it was them.

He watched her, unable to look away. Not wanting to look anywhere else but at her. She wore a padded bra and panties.

“You look nice,” he said. The words just kind of blurted out of his mouth. She looked up and then smiled.

“You don’t have to just say it.”

“I’m not just saying it, I mean it.” Now he felt embarrassed. “Uh, so, yeah, that’s what I was thinking.” And then, with her getting closer to him, he stepped beneath the spray of the waterfall. It didn’t take her long to join him.

She was so close and he could smell her. Calliope always smelled like vanilla to him, which was one of his favorite scents. He loved vanilla—vanilla cupcakes, vanilla frosting, vanilla ice cream. If it had vanilla, he was sold.

He couldn’t help but be drawn to her. She looked so beautiful.

Jaxson watched as she tilted her head back and enjoyed the spray of the water. She let

out a moan, and this was different from the one he heard a few short moments ago.

Her lips had been perfect. Kissing her was better than he ever imagined it would be. Every single part of her was perfection.

She opened her eyes, looked over at him, and smiled. “You’re watching me.”

“I can’t look away.”

This made her chuckle. She stepped toward him. “And why not?”

“I have no idea.” He took a step toward her, and Calliope tilted her head back. “But I want to kiss you again.”

He watched as she licked her lips, and it wasn’t fair to keep teasing him.

“Then kiss me,” she said.

He didn’t know what had gotten into her, but he was not about to tell her no. Banding an arm around her waist, he pulled her in close and then took possession of her lips. She let out a brief moan, and he wasn’t done with her yet.

She said he could kiss her, and he intended to take full advantage of that as he slid a hand down to her ass, cupping the flesh, as he finally ravished her mouth in the way he always wanted to.

Calliope was his mate. The elder said so.

This was why he didn’t go to the elder, because he wanted Calliope all to himself.

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Since the waterfall, they hadn't spoken. They didn't have sex, but kissed, and it felt so good. Even now, Calliope wanted to put her fingers to her lips and touch them, just to see if she was thinking clearly.

That kiss had been pretty damn magical. She hadn't wanted it to end.

The hot weather had become bearable, and after a prolonged time beneath the waterfall, getting washed and making out, they had no choice but to move on.

Now, they were building a small fire. There was food that had appeared in their backpacks. Jaxson was the one who built the fire, while she went and gathered more wood and leaves to put on it so they could have a small camp.

She didn't like the fact they were not talking about it, though it wasn't like they needed to talk about anything. So, they made out and had some fun. So what? Only, it wasn't a so-what kind of feeling.

Her lips still tingled and she loved it when he put his hand on her ass, and now all she could think about was making out with him again.

Their silence wasn't boring. It was companionable. It was peaceful. It was easy. This wasn't hard for them. They had done a lot of fun things when they were younger, but they never made out. They never crossed that line between friends.

"Are you hungry?" Jaxson asked.

"Starving."

And they would talk about everything and anything. She couldn't even remember half their conversations, but she was pretty sure as kids they even talked about farting. That was how they were. That was an embarrassing memory.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jaxson asked.

"What?" Would it be easier to play dumb?

"The kiss. The mating. The elder. The Hunt?"

She laughed, but it sounded so forced. "We do have a lot to talk about, don't we?"

"Yeah and no. I mean, I loved that kiss."

"Me too," Calliope said.

"This is what this place is supposed to do. It is meant to strip us of what we think is right when it comes to one another, and make us see how we really are."

"I guess, when it is hot, we know what to do," she said.

He laughed. "I don't know if we were manifesting that heat, or if it was part of this whole thing."

She found some pans that had magically appeared. "I don't know. I don't regret it, though."

"What?" he asked.

"I don't regret the kiss. I'm happy we kissed." She felt her cheeks start to heat.

“I am too.”

She looked toward him. “This is good. This is progress.”

“Come on, Calliope. It’s not like it is going to be hard. We got along once, and we were great together.”

“Yeah, when we were kids, but that is not the case anymore. We’re adults.” She shrugged. “And a lot has happened.”

“That’s true.”

They were silent and Jaxson had already started to cook the food.

“Do you want to be mated to me?” Calliope asked.

He looked up.

“I just figure this is something you and I have to come to terms with. We’re not getting out of here until we realize the same thing.” She pressed her hands together.

“Then you’ve got to answer that question. Are you ready to answer it?” he asked.

She pressed her lips together and it was like they still tingled from the kiss.

“Yeah and no,” Calliope said. “When I think of the boy I used to know, I can’t imagine being mated to anyone else.

For a long time, I thought he was my soulmate.

Then, one day, me and my parents got home from a mini vacation, and it was like you

changed.

You got mean. You no longer liked me, and you hated that I was a human. I don't want to be mated to that guy."

That was as open as she was willing to be at that very moment. It was scary laying her heart out because he could crush it.

"I want to be mated to you," Jaxson said. "It's why I didn't go to the elders. It's why I knew there was a risk we'd end up in here, and it would be a fight to the death, but I want to be mated to you."

"What happened?" Calliope asked.

"You ... stopped being my friend."

This made her frown. "That is not what happened," Calliope said. "I was right there, the whole time. I left, and we made plans to camp and hang out. When I got back, you went and played with other guys, and you told me I was nothing. That I was useless. You hated me."

She watched as he ran a hand down his face.

"You came back from your vacation, and you were wearing your hair down. You had on this yellow summer dress, and you wore makeup."

She didn't know the exact details of what she looked like when she got home, but her mother had awakened something inside her on that mini vacation.

While her dad was at the beach, soaking up the sun, her mother had taken her to a beauty salon.

They got their hair done, nails, makeup.

They went shopping for clothes, and she loved spending time with her mom. She loved doing girly things.

It had been a fun mini vacation. Her mother had even told her she wanted some alone time with her daughter, which was why they hadn't invited Jaxson. Most of the time, they went away together. She would go with Jaxson on his vacations, and he'd come on hers. That was how close they had gotten.

"You stopped being my friend—the girl I camped with—and you started to become Calliope Masters, the girl I wanted to date. The girl I imagined kissing. The girl I wanted to ... mate."

This surprised her.

"And you pushed me away?"

"I didn't know how to handle it," Jaxson said. "You were so different and yet the same, and it was easier to just push you away than admit I didn't know what I was doing."

He looked down at the food.

"Why didn't you say anything when the elder did that?" she asked.

"Because by that time, I had made so many mistakes. So many. I had been cruel to you and said things I didn't mean. I don't give a fuck if you're human or not. You should have known that, Calliope. I loved hanging out with you and your folks. You guys were always fun."

“I know my dad missed you,” she said. “He didn’t mind having me around, but I wasn’t as into cars as you were.”

Her father and Jaxson would spend hours fixing up cars, changing parts. She would listen, but she wasn’t as into it as him.

Her parents didn’t have any other children. From what she knew, there was a complication with her birth, which is what pulled them into the pack in the first place. Her mother nearly died, and if it hadn’t been for Jaxson’s father, and knowing some witches, they would both be dead.

“I missed your dad, but we still found a way to hang out.”

This made her laugh. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“My dad never said anything.”

“I asked him not to.”

“What does this mean?” Calliope asked.

J axson served up their food and handed her the plate, which she took. Her father already knew how he felt about her. They had talked about it many times as they fixed cars.

“I guess we agree that we attempt to mate, and we mend the gaps we caused each other.” He shrugged.

“The Hunt isn’t going away just because we agreed to it, is it?” Calliope asked.

“No. At this stage, they need proof, and that is only going to happen with time.”

She nodded. “So, we talk, we have fun, we build a sense of adventure. We repair the damage we made years ago. Do you think they can hear us or know what we’re going through right now?”

“I have no idea.”

“Your dad is like the alpha, doesn’t he ever talk about any of this?”

“No, and he never talks about other members’ private business.” He ran a hand down his face, then pushed his fork into his sausage and took a bite. “I wish I had taken the time to listen to all those other couples that had returned.”

“I agree.” She sighed.

They ate their food and kept the firepit going. It was getting dark really fast again. A howl in the distance had him turning and looking.

“Do you think it is safe here?” Calliope asked.

“It is as safe as it is going to get.”

Along with their food, a pillow was provided, which he nestled under his head, and she moved closer and snuggled against him. The hot weather had changed, and it was starting to get cold. She shivered just a little.

“I don’t think they are being very fair,” Calliope said.

“I’ve got you.” He put his hand on her exposed arm and rubbed it up and down, trying to generate heat.

“Did we ever camp out in the winter?” she asked. “I’m trying to remember all the times we camped outside, and how we got warm.”

He chuckled. “There was one time, we were ten, and there had been a giant snowstorm. You loved the snow.”

“I still do.”

He smiled. “Anyway, you were determined to camp out, and you ended up with ten blankets, a heater, hat, gloves, scarf, and you were still freezing cold.”

“I think I remember that.” She sighed. “You were toasty warm, even in freezing conditions, which sucked, and I don’t like how that was possible for you.” She pouted. “Oh, well.”

He laughed. “You don’t have to sound so sad about that. Like now, I am toasty warm and providing you with some body heat.”

“Thank you.” She reached up and kissed his cheek, and they both seemed to freeze.

He wrapped his arms around her.

Silence fell between them, and the night moved on. He heard birds, and then nothing. Another howl, followed by stillness. Calliope hadn’t fallen asleep. She was still stiff within his arms.

“What do you think will happen, if we don’t make it out of here alive?” Calliope asked.

“We never return home. We die here, and that is that.”

“Do you think the next couple will find our bodies?”

“I have no idea. No one has ever opted to die here.”

“I get that, I just ... what if something goes wrong? You’re a wolf, I’m a human, and what if I make a mistake? What if I die? I don’t want you to be trapped here.”

He held her tightly. “Calliope, I wouldn’t want to go back if something happened to you here. You’re where I would want to stay.”

He didn’t even want to think of Calliope not making it.

What would be the point in returning home?

She was his mate, there was no point in denying it anymore.

They were bound together. The elders had deemed it so.

He only wished he had tried. In the last three years, he could have done something, said something, so many things, so many times.

It wasn’t like they lived separate lives.

He saw her almost every day. That was the point in living within the pack.

Going a day without seeing her drove him insane. Not that he told anyone how he felt. He would just live with it, but sometimes just being close to her was enough for him.

“Even though I’m human?”

He looked down at her and frowned. “I don’t give a fuck if you’re human or not.”

“But—”

“Don’t,” he said. “I know the bad shit I said, and I didn’t mean any of it.

I was stupid and confused. One moment you were my best friend, and the next, you were this .

.. girl I had feelings for.” It was not a good enough reason, he knew that, but it was the truth, and that scared him more than he wanted to admit.

There was a brief silence. She seemed to snuggle against him a little closer. It was still warm, at least to him. He held her as tightly as possible.

“I wouldn’t either,” she said.

“What?”

To him, she sounded so tired, which was adorable to hear.

“I wouldn’t want to leave without you.”

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The following day the temperature was within a bearable range. Calliope was once again provided with a pair of jeans and a shirt, which magically appeared on her body. They hadn't stayed in the same place, and she had no idea what they needed to do to be removed from The Hunt.

Had they agreed last night they would rather be mated than die? She blew out a breath and Jaxson stopped.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

They already had breakfast and she quickly offered him a smile. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I'm just waiting for the next thing."

He nodded, took hold of her hand, and began to walk her through the forest, and the bushes seemed to be getting thicker.

"What do you think we need to do?" Calliope asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, didn't we ... you know, like last night, turn around and say we would like to be mated? We'd rather do that than die." She pressed her lips together.

Jaxson stopped. "It's not that simple. You know what they expect, right?"

"When they say mating, do they mean like a full mating?"

“I told you this,” he said. “When we got here.”

She groaned. “I know that is what you said but ... come on. Can’t there be a compromise? We’ve already agreed we would work on our mating. Doesn’t that help?”

Calliope wanted to get them both out of here so neither of them died. They had made mistakes as teenagers, and she didn’t want it to affect their future.

He cupped her face, tilting her head back. “I wish it did. But it’s not going to work that way.”

“So, we’ve got to mate?” she asked.

He nodded.

She took another deep breath. “Then why don’t we? Would it be that hard?”

“Are you ready?” he asked. “Like, truly ready for what is to come?”

Was she ready to go all the way with Jaxson? He’d been her best friend and then her enemy, and now he was her mate. They had so much damage control to work through.

“No, I’m not, but you’re meant to be my mate, right? I’m your mate, and we’ve got all this history.”

“I’m not going to force this. We can do this, Calliope. You and me. We’ve done a lot harder stuff than this.”

“I don’t want anything bad to happen.”

“Then it’s simple. Nothing bad is going to happen.” He pressed a kiss to her cheek. It was so soft and sweet. “Now, I think we should get a move on.”

She was about to agree with him, when all of a sudden there was a roar, and the bushes began to shake.

“What is that?” Calliope asked.

“No time to waste, we’ve got to run.” He didn’t let her go, and the thick bushes made it impossible to run, but she did. She found the strength to keep moving, even though she felt afraid. She didn’t stop, nor did she turn around.

Her heart raced, and she had a horrible feeling she was slowing Jaxson down. This is what she hated and why she was tempted to just go ahead, be done with it, and mate him. It would be so much easier than allowing them both to die.

She let out a scream as a bear suddenly appeared. The fear gripped her and Jaxson pulled her around him, and then his stance changed. She realized he had gone into defensive mode.

“Jaxson?”

“It’s fine. This is all part of it.” He let out a howl of his own, and the bear growled right back.

She felt the bear was well over seven foot tall and massive. There was no way it was real. The bear didn’t take Jaxson’s howl as a threat and she gasped as it suddenly charged them.

“Don’t move, Calliope.”

There was no way she could if she even wanted to. The fear was real. Terrifying. He was the one in control. Not her.

She watched, wanting to jump in and protect him, only Jaxson made impact with the bear.

The bear sprung back, but it didn't go far.

It came in, swiping at Jaxson, but didn't make a connection.

It was relentless, and she realized it was aiming for her.

The bear was attempting to get around Jaxson, to get to her. He wouldn't let it.

At one point, the bear's swipe made contact with Jaxson, and she couldn't stand watching it anymore.

As if by magic, leaning up against the tree was a crossbow.

Jaxson had loved crossbows when they were children, and they both spent a lot of time outside doing target practice.

It had been years since she fired one, but it was like riding a bike.

She never forgot, and lifting that crossbow into her arms, she locked, loaded, and then stared down the target.

The bear was coming at Jaxson, and he was moving too fast.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on the bear, and then shot. The first connection landed, and it was enough.

There was no whimper, and the moment she hit the bear, it was like it exploded into nothing. Just glitter and dust, only nothing landed on her.

Jaxson groaned and headed toward her.

“It just ... exploded?” Calliope asked.

“Each element is a test, and they are going to attempt to push us both to the breaking point.”

“But that means the bear didn’t exist, right?”

“Yeah, it does. It’s all part of the magic of The Hunt.”

She looked down at Jaxson. “Then why are you bleeding?”

“They’re magical. We’re not.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you’re a werewolf, you’re a magical, mystical being.”

He laughed and started to remove his shirt. “Just not fast enough.”

“Don’t say stuff like that. You did what you had to do, and it was enough.”

“I didn’t save you.”

“I don’t have a single scar on me, and at least now we have a weapon.

” Calliope looked behind her, only to find the weapon was gone.

“Oh, come on, are you insane? This is not fair. I know I sound like a child, but to put

it frankly, this is not fucking fair!” She let out a scream and stamped her foot.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No, no, fucking hell no, I am not okay! I’m not even close to being okay.”

Just then, Jaxson laughed.

“What? What are you finding so funny?”

“You cursed. It’s rare for you to do that, except when you’re scared or panicking, or you don’t know what to do. You curse. It’s cute. I’ve not heard you curse in a while. It’s nice.”

“You know this isn’t funny, right?”

“I know, but come on, it’s kind of funny. Now, stop being a pain in the ass and help fix me. Hopefully, they don’t have anything against werewolves receiving medical care.”

She went to their backpack, the one that hadn’t disappeared, and sure enough, there was a medical kit. “You’re in luck.”

The stinging of the cuts had long gone. Jaxson peeled back the bandage Calliope had applied and saw they were healing nicely.

“How are you doing?” she asked, moving toward him.

She hadn’t wanted to continue their journey, but he knew after the encounter with the

bear, they were good. Rather than keep moving, they made camp. Calliope had even gone down to the small stream she found and gotten them some water.

More food had appeared in the backpack, and she was cooking it for them. She wouldn't allow him to do a single thing. He was to sit back, relax, and try to heal.

"I'm doing good."

She let out a little tut.

"What? You're upset that I am healing?"

"No, I'm upset that we ended up here in the first place. You shouldn't be getting hurt and we shouldn't be dealing with this." She let out an angry growl. "What would we have done if that bear had killed you?"

"You would have been able to leave here—"

"Stop it. I don't want to hear that kind of crazy talk right now. It's just insane, and I don't like it."

He liked that she cared.

"You know, you looked pretty badass with that crossbow," he said.

Calliope sent him a look.

"What? You did. Did you keep practicing even after you and I fell out?"

"No, I didn't. That is the first time I held a crossbow since our last trip."

Jaxson let out a whistle. “You were always a good shot, but that was just fucking fantastic.”

He saw her smile.

“It was pretty good.”

“Do you ever miss it?” he asked.

“What?”

“Hanging out with me. Doing the whole adventure stuff?”

She didn’t answer right away. She was putting some food onto a plate for him. Thankfully, whoever was in charge of The Hunt had felt they deserved a reward today. He got a nice piece of steak, and Calliope got chicken, as she didn’t like beef.

“Yeah, I do. Today, I mean, all of this is scary as hell, but it is kind of fun. Don’t you think?” she asked. “It’s strange, but it’s like I know this place.”

Jaxson frowned as he looked around. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. I’m a woman.”

This made him laugh, but then he started to think about it. “Wait a minute. We created this place?”

“No, we had nothing to do with The Hunt.”

“No, not The Hunt specifically. The bear. The stream. Even the first day we were here, something was chasing us. Think, Calliope. Think back to when we were kids,

playing out in the yard. We were in a damn forest or jungle. We'd scream at each other what the place would look like."

Calliope's mouth opened. "Holy crap. That summer, when we were like eight years old, it was hot as hell, and we were playing out in your yard, and I imagined the waterfall."

"We created this place," he said.

"What does this mean?"

"Well, if we remember what we thought about, it might help us figure out what is coming next. We did get attacked by a bear, remember, and you hit it with a crossbow."

She pressed her lips together. "We're on our childhood adventure, only this is real."

Jaxson laughed. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Then that means this is different for everyone, right? I mean, this is our imagination manifested."

Which also explained the mermaids, sharks, and sea creatures in the lake, on pause. Calliope rarely got trapped in ... he stopped and looked at her.

"No," Calliope said. "You've thought of something and I really don't like this."

"One of our ... games was quicksand," he said.

She pressed a hand to her face. "Is it wrong to hate us as kids right now?"

“Calliope, you’re the one that gets trapped in quicksand.” And it was up to him to save her. They always did this, by bringing furniture together out in the yard, and Calliope would be beneath a cut-up canopy, and he would be the one trying to save her. It was fun.

Now, he didn’t like this.

“This isn’t good,” she said. “What about the hunter that was chasing us? We didn’t name him and he had no face, but that was one of our games.”

“Then the killer birds,” Jaxson said.

“And let’s not forget the poisonous snakebite.” She ran fingers through her hair. “We’ve got to be wrong, right? I mean, this isn’t possible.”

He took a bite out of his steak and looked at her.

“Unless that is the point. Think about it, we’ve gone back to a time when everything made sense.

We were the best of friends, and nothing could come between us.

We were a solid rock, and we lost each other.

Now, we’re finding each other, and what better way to find one another, and remember who we once were, than for us to have a live action replay of our games? ”

They stared at one another.

“We never mated during our games,” Calliope said.

“We never needed to. We were best friends. The inseparable duo. We were a team.”

“And we’re still a team, and now we’ve got to mate,” Calliope said. She glanced down at her chicken. “I’ve ... never been with anyone.”

This surprised him.

“I didn’t go to prom, because I didn’t want to see you with another girl. So, I stayed home, watched horror movies I hated, and ate ice cream.”

Jaxson couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey, I’m trying here. Opening up and telling you very private stuff.”

“I didn’t go to prom either,” Jaxson said. “There was only one person I ever wanted to go with, and that was you. There was no other girl.” He looked at her. “Until you, I had never kissed another girl.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not. I didn’t want to be with anyone else.”

“I had never kissed another boy either,” Calliope said. “If we’re being honest...”

“I’m a virgin,” Jaxson said. “There were offers. I’m not going to deny it. There were a ton of offers, but I didn’t want any of it. I wanted you. I can admit that now.”

He saw the smile on her face.

“So, we’re both virgins. We’re here to be mated, and we have just figured out that our Hunt is in fact a manifestation of our imagination as children.” She pressed her lips

together. “What does that mean for everyone else?”

“I have no idea, and right now I don’t care. We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

He loved her smile and how it lit up her whole face. She looked so damn happy.

“Well, we managed to fend off a bear, and I guess we better look forward to doing a lot of other stuff.”

He nodded.

“I guess eating and sleeping, as we’re going to need our strength.”

Jaxson couldn’t have agreed more. They did have their work cut out for them. They played and explored that much as kids, though he couldn’t remember if there was a particular order, or if they had taken random days.

Whatever was going on, they were only going to be able to make it out of here together. That was the only way it would work.

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The following day went by without a single problem. No bear, no wolf, no quicksand, no deadly enemy. They just walked.

Calliope started to have her doubts about their assessment of the place. They rarely had days where there was nothing going on. They were always coming up with some amazing adventure.

Just when she was about to have her doubts, it suddenly became abundantly clear.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Calliope said.

In front of them was a bridge, which was missing several steps. Some of them were cracked and hanging down. The rope didn’t look like it was going to hold either of their weights. It was so high up, she could barely see the water below.

“The rickety bridge,” Jaxson said.

This was no joke, and now she hated their childish ideas. Who would agree to allow them to play like this? It wasn’t fun, nor was it exciting. As kids, this was everything she lived for. Right now, it was terrifying.

“We’ve got to get over to the other side,” Calliope said.

She glanced behind and watched as their open forest changed to that of a cliff edge, with no way of going back.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. “There’s no other way than going across this

bridge.”

“Which is exactly how it was when we played, remember?” She glanced over the edge of the cliff and took a step back. “Oh, this is not good. This is so not good.” She couldn’t help but open and close her hands.

She felt that wedge of fear slide down her back.

Jaxson reached for her. “Stop it, okay? We made this game up when we were kids, and remember, this was fun.”

“Damn it, Jaxson. Of course that was fun. We had gotten a bunch of old rotten planks and placed them on top of chairs, or bricks. This is not fun. We didn’t have to deal with a hundred-foot drop that would kill us.

I know you’re a wolf, and it takes a lot to kill you, but I’m not.

Okay, I’m human, and this is...” She put a hand to her chest. “I think I’m having a panic attack. ”

She felt her heart race and before she could say or do anything, Jaxson was there.

She didn’t know what it was about him cupping her face, but the moment he did, it was like she could finally think.

Only, he didn’t just cup her face, he took possession of her lips and kissed her, hard.

This was not a gentle kiss, nor exploratory.

This was an intense-moment-in-time kiss.

It was either sink into the moment, or flail around panicking.

She kissed him back, wrapping her arms around him. Everything was forgotten. The insults over the years, the anger, the hurt. It all faded into nothing.

They couldn't keep kissing, and as he pulled away, he cupped her cheek. "We've got this. You and me, we can do this. Just like we did when we were kids. It's just a bridge, formed from our imagination."

She took a deep breath. "You're right. We can do this. It's easy."

Jaxson took hold of her hand. "Together?"

She tightened her hold around his, and together they started to make their way across the bridge. That first step on, Calliope thought she was going to plunge to her death. They had no choice but to stop holding hands as they grabbed onto the rope.

"It's okay," Jaxson said. "It's going to be okay."

The creaking seemed to echo and was deafening.

"You're right, it's fine." She hoped if she kept telling herself and Jaxson this, she would start believing it.

"One foot in front of the other," Jaxson said.

"We've got this."

"Yes."

They slowly began to make their way across the bridge.

“You know, I don’t recall this being so ... long,” Jaxson said.

She couldn’t help but laugh. “We ran out of chairs and bricks, if you remember. We had to manifest a small bridge.”

Playing back then, when they were kids, they came up with all kinds of games and experiences. It was so surreal that now, as adults, they were actually reliving them.

There was a sudden gust of wind, and they had no choice but to hold on.

Panic gripped her. “We never said it was windy, Jaxson. We never did a rickety bridge when it was windy.”

“I know. I know. This is just part of the challenge. Making it across. We can do this. You and me.”

She wanted to argue with him, but there was no point. No reason.

The wind slowed, and they were able to move. Only, the next step Calliope took ended on a scream as she fell straight through. She tried to grab onto the rope, but it was no use. Jaxson grabbed her wrist. She felt tears spring to her eyes.

“I’ve got you,” he said.

“Please don’t let me die.”

“I’m not going to let you die. You’re right here with me. You and me, remember?”

He heaved her up and helped her onto the step in front of him. She could feel her whole body shaking.

“I will never let you die. I will never allow anything to happen to you. I promise.”

And with that, he kissed her temple. It was the strangest thing, because in that moment, she wanted to tell him she loved him. She didn't even know why she wanted to tell him that, but she kept moving.

As they made it more than three quarters across, she heard the first snap. Glancing behind them, she saw what looked like the bridge was magically snapping.

“Run!”

There was no time to waste. She did as Jaxson ordered and ran as fast as her feet could carry her.

The bridge started to shake as it loosened.

She didn't want to slow Jaxson down, and she saw the ending in sight, but the bridge suddenly gave way, and she tried to hold on.

Once again, Jaxson caught her, this time by her ankle.

She looked down and it was like staring into death. The water didn't look deep enough, and she couldn't help but wonder if there was going to be a giant shark or the kraken coming out to eat her.

“Please tell me your wolf has super strength?” She was not a small woman. Not that her weight had ever bothered her. Sure, there had been peers who would tease her about her weight, but she ignored them.

“I've got you, Calliope.”

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

“The throw-up will only fall to the ground.”

She couldn’t hold it in. As the ground started to disappear, she threw up everything she’d eaten that morning.

Jaxson made it up to the land and dragged her along with him. She was so pleased to feel hard ground that she pressed her face against it, and then kissed it.

“I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Calliope wasn’t sure in that moment if she was telling the ground she loved it, or if she was telling Jaxson. He had stopped her not once but twice from falling to her death.

“Just out of curiosity, was I this much of a moaner when we were kids?” Calliope asked.

She heard Jaxson laugh. “Nah, it was you that always came up with the good games.”

Calliope didn’t know what had happened to her, but it sucked. She missed the old Calliope who just had fun, when she wasn’t sad about losing her friend, or trying to figure out what went wrong. She missed that girl.

They had made camp several feet away from the cliff edge. By several feet, they’d actually traveled for nearly two hours before they were far enough away from it.

“You ever think we might have had too much time on our hands when we were

kids?” Calliope asked.

He couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “I didn’t think that, but now I am starting to have my doubts.”

He sat against a tree. They had already eaten their food. Once again, sausage and eggs. He was getting tired of eating the same kind of food.

Calliope came to him and he opened his legs and patted the ground right in front of him. She smiled but didn’t hesitate, nor come up with an excuse not to sit with him.

“Thanks,” she said.

She sat between his spread thighs, and it felt right, especially as she leaned back. They hadn’t done this in so long. They would often sit out, late at night, staring up at the stars. Sometimes they would even talk about how lame their game had been, and plan to make it even better.

He missed this.

“You know, I don’t think I have any complaints about the rickety bridge. I think it was one of our finer games,” she said.

And for some reason, he couldn’t help but laugh.

The moment he laughed, she started to, and for several minutes, neither of them could do anything but laugh, and it felt great.

He couldn’t help but wrap his arms around her.

Part of him expected her to push him away, but instead she just ran her hand over his.

It had been too long since they had felt this right together.

He didn't know if he was going to be pushing his luck, but he pressed his lips against her neck.

"I missed this," she said.

"I don't think I've ever held you like this."

"No, but I've missed us, working together as a team."

It was like she sunk against him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He felt her tense up, and he didn't have to wait long for her to spin around in his arms. "You're sorry?"

Jaxson reached out, touching her cheek. "Yeah, because I didn't go to the elder, nor did I even try to make this work between us.

I didn't want to tell him he made a mistake.

Elders don't make mistakes, and the truth is, Calliope, I missed you.

When he told us we were destined to be mates and he joined our hands, it was like the world had finally been righted again. I know I don't deserve you."

She pressed a finger against his lips. "I want you to stop."

"But—"

“Shut up,” she said. “We made mistakes. We’re kids, or at least we were kids, and in a way, that is totally acceptable.

” She shrugged. “We can’t change what we did, the only thing we can do now is live with what happened.

We’ve got to survive this, and to do that, we’ve got to learn to forgive one another, and that is exactly what I am doing now.

I’m forgiving you. I’m not going to hold the past against you, but I will warn you.

If the past couple of days are anything to go by, we’re going to start hating our younger selves. ”

He laughed. She looked into his eyes, but then he noticed her gaze dropped toward his lips.

“You want to kiss me,” he said.

“Shut up.” She went to move as if she was going to sit back between his thighs, and he was more than happy for her to do that. Only, he wanted to kiss her. He didn’t want to let this moment slide.

“No, tell me. Lie to my face that you don’t want to kiss me?” he asked.

She sat back on her heels, folded her arms across her chest, and he found her complete stubbornness so cute.

“Fine, I’ll be the one to say it first. I want to kiss you, Calliope. I want to feel those lips on mine.”

She glared at him and he was about to move into position to take charge of kissing her.

Only, she managed to stop him, put a hand against his chest, and then press him up against the tree.

Jaxson didn't put up a fight. What was the point?

The kiss was what he was heading toward, and it was what he wanted more than anything.

She leaned in close. He looked into her brown eyes. He missed being this close to her, and he hated his childish self for not speaking up sooner. He nearly messed up one of the best things in his world. Calliope meant everything to him. He loved her. He'd loved her since they were kids.

Her breath fanned across his face, and this time Calliope pressed her lips to his, and it meant everything.

At first, he put his hands on her arms. She wasn't touching him, and then he placed her hands on his shoulders.

He wanted to feel her body against his. The moment she touched him, he was able to slide his hands up, circle them around her back, and just hold onto her. He didn't want to stop touching her.

The scent of vanilla was heavy in the air, and he felt something else, something that shifted within him. This was his mate. The elders had decided. Calliope was meant to belong to him, and he didn't want to ever give her up.

Sliding one of his hands up and into her hair, he held her in place and kissed her.

Ravishing her lips as he just couldn't stand to not have her.

Jaxson didn't know how it happened, but she ended up laid against him on the ground, making out.

Touching her was everything he had ever wanted.

Kissing her was so damn right. It was like for the past three years, or even longer, a part of him had been missing, and he knew it was his own stupid fault.

All too soon, the kiss was over.

"I think it's time we got some rest," Calliope said.

"Yeah, I think you're right."

And with that, she snuggled against him, and Jaxson couldn't do anything other than watch her sleep.

She was perfect—his woman, his mate—and he would never let her go.

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Something didn't feel right.

Calliope opened her eyes to see the sun moving.

That was so strange—why was the sun moving?

—and then she grunted as she realized her foot was being dragged.

Only, this wasn't delicately being done, she was being yanked, and then she screamed out at whatever was dragging her, finally gripped her ankle, and sent its teeth right into her flesh. The pain was instant.

Within seconds, it felt like the earth was moving, but she didn't get to see what was coming, as she was trying to fight against the beast trying to take her.

One look at it, and she was pretty sure she was looking into the eyes of one of the wolves from the pack.

Only, that couldn't be. No one at the pack was allowed to join.

This was part of their childhood imagination, and that was when it clicked. Jaxson was always destined to be a wolf, while she was always destined to be a human.

During one of the full moons, Jaxson witnessed the whole transformation, and the day after, he came and told her every detail, including that of the wolf in front of her.

The wolf let her go but then attempted to bite her, even going for her face, and she

cried out as its teeth sunk into the flesh of her arm. Okay, this was not a joke but very fucking real.

She didn't have to wait long to find out what that earth-shaking noise was. One moment the wolf was biting her, and the next, Jaxson was standing in front of her, his body seemingly larger than ever before.

He was midway through his transformation, and she had never seen him go full wolf. When they were kids, she had often asked him if he would trust her to see it, and he always said yes. They had stopped being close by the time his wolf came out.

Right before her eyes, she watched as Jaxson transformed into a wolf, with thick, rich, black fur, and there appeared to also be strands of blue streaked through his coat. He looked stunning.

She knew, for some humans, seeing a wolf transform was terrifying, but for Calliope, it was beautiful. Jaxson was so tall, so ... muscular, and so damn cute, even as a wolf.

The wolf that had been attacking her went to strike at Jaxson. Whatever their imagination had been, this thing was no match for Jaxson. There was a battle, but she saw it was pointless. Jaxson was strong. He was the one in control.

And, within a matter of minutes, the wolf let out a whimpered howl, and then, like so many of their foes, disappeared in a cloud of magical dust. Only, what was left behind was nothing more than the pain and blood of the attack.

Jaxson changed back into a human, and as he did so, he was completely naked.

The pain didn't seem to be much of a problem, not when she faced Jaxson and his naked physique. He was amazing. They had never seen each other naked. Usually, if they went swimming, they had on trunks and a bathing suit. This was new.

She couldn't quite focus. This was so wrong. His dick was like ... within touching distance. How creepy did this make her? She was bleeding. Her ankle burned, as did her arm, and she was more interested in her naked mate.

Jaxson chuckled, clicked his fingers, and pointed up at his face. "My eyes are here."

She felt her cheeks start to burn. "This isn't funny."

"I'm not laughing."

"You are totally laughing." The smile on his face was somewhat infectious. "So, once you transform, you're pretty much naked."

"Yep, which is why we strip out of our clothes, however, I don't think you had time for me to do that." He gripped her arm. "How does it feel?"

"Fine."

He looked at her. "When you're not looking, seeing, and thinking about me naked?"

She rolled her eyes. "It hurts, and my ankle does as well."

He lifted up her jeans leg. "Shit. We're going to need to get these cleaned."

"You're right."

She pulled away from him, and then tried to lift herself up, only to scream as her whole body seemed to suddenly go on fire.

Jaxson was there, though, and quickly reached for her, picking her up as if she weighed nothing, then he held her in his arms. Arms that were still naked. Very much

naked.

“I’ve got you,” he said.

“Please don’t drop me.”

He laughed. “You know, you have no trust.”

“I do, I have trust, but I also know I’m not light.”

“And as it happens, I know I can lift a lot of weight.”

She let out a gasp and he laughed.

“You cannot be complaining right now. I can lift you and hold you in my arms without any worry at all. We’ve got to find a lake, or they could actually send us a first aid kit.”

They waited a second and Jaxson spun around with her in his arms, and she hoped a kit would be provided ... but nothing.

It was up to them to start looking for some water.

“Maybe I can walk,” she said, trying to be as helpful as possible.

“Shut up.”

She rolled her eyes and didn’t have a choice as Jaxson began walking her within his arms. Calliope couldn’t help herself from stealing glances in his direction.

He was still naked. She was aware of his cock within touching distance.

She didn't even know why she was thinking this way.

Just that last night, they had enjoyed quite a few passionate kisses, and she knew she loved when he touched her.

When his lips were on hers, it was the best feeling in the world.

"Here we are," Jaxson said.

She glanced past him, and sure enough, she saw the lake, only there appeared to be steam coming from the water.

"Ugh, Jaxson, I don't think this is a good idea," she said.

"I've got to clean your wounds, and we've got to find some way to bind them." He placed her down on the earth, several feet away from the lake.

Calliope couldn't help but look out across the lake, and she had to wonder if there was something inside the water.

"Stop thinking," Jaxson said. "Just ... allow me to take care of you, and stop that other nonsense."

She nodded her head. "You're right. You're right." She pressed her lips together, and then just waited.

Jaxson walked toward the lake, and she held her breath as he looked down at the water. He needed something, and she had no choice but to remove her shirt and toss it over to him. He thanked her and dipped the shirt into the water.

Calliope thought the worst was going to happen, only nothing did. Jaxson wrung out

the water, then came back to her. He tore the shirt up and started to clean her ankle.

Jaxson took care of her.

Calliope shouldn't turn into a wolf, he knew this. That wolf hadn't been real, but part of their imagination. Nothing that was make-believe could set off the transition. It hadn't been a wolf, as they also didn't just blow up into dust either.

Killing wolves was a very messy business, and not one he recommended. Binding her ankle, and then her arm, he saw the bites were incredibly nasty. They didn't look good. This didn't remind him of any of their games, and he told her so.

"It was, remember?" Calliope said. "We only played it once."

Jaxson frowned, because he couldn't remember.

"This game was, 'attacked by a killer wolf.' I got bit, and it was up to you to save me. The only way to save me was to mate me." Calliope looked at him and nibbled her lip. "I got bit, and you had to save me by mating with me."

"And back then, we figured mating was just kissing."

She nodded. "I guess this time it was done backward, right? I mean, we didn't have sex or anything like that."

They were not saying what was a real worry—that Calliope, within their game, nearly died. It was up to him to save her.

He stared at the wounds, which did not look good. This couldn't be happening. Why

had they gone to one of their last games? It had to have been because he could barely remember it.

“This was not one of our favorite games,” she said, confirming his suspicions.

After wrapping up her arm and ankle, he waited, not liking where this might lead.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“I don’t like this. They haven’t sent any bandages either. I don’t know what this means.” He reached out and tucked some of her hair behind her ear.

“It means I got hurt, and we’re going to be fine. I don’t like us being close to this water,” she said. “We don’t know what else could be lurking.”

He smiled. “Well, we better get used to it, because we are not moving until you feel better.” He put a hand on her forehead, and sure enough, she felt fine, but he couldn’t be one hundred percent sure if she wasn’t starting to have a fever.

“You’re worried. Don’t be. We’ve got this. You and I will always have this.”

Jaxson couldn’t argue with her. “I’m going to get some stuff together so we can make camp.”

He went to move away but she grabbed him. “It’s going to be okay. There’s no reason to panic.”

The only problem was, he didn’t believe her. He didn’t know if he was starting to panic, or if she was in fact pale. Either way, Calliope was not looking good. He needed to figure out how to fix her.

Jaxson couldn't even remember the game clearly.

They had been getting older at this point, and it seemed so trivial.

Also, he had started to understand his feelings for her had changed.

She was no longer just his best friend, but a girl he thought about kissing.

A girl he did in fact want to mate with.

Collecting some firewood, he noticed their bags were not replenished this time.

It was up to him to go and find them something to eat. He didn't have a hard time coming up with what he needed. There were fruits around them, and he knew he would be able to grab some fish. Calliope wouldn't appreciate him catching fish though, so it was a fruit diet for the night.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, with the fire set up, and without any warning it went from daylight to night. As if someone clicked a button.

He heard her deep inhale.

"I'm fine. Really," she said.

He had seen the perspiration dotting her brow, and as he moved closer to her, he pressed a hand against her forehead. She was burning up.

"Damn it," he said.

"It's going to be okay, Jaxson. Don't worry about it."

“No, this is not good. That wolf wasn’t even fucking real, and you shouldn’t be burning up like this.” He pulled her into his arms and tried to offer as much comfort as he could.

“I’m fine.”

And he knew that to be a lie.

She was starting to feel weaker in his arms, which he didn’t understand. That wolf hadn’t been real. Even when he was fighting it, and smelling it, there was no wolf. He kissed the top of her head, and she tilted her head back.

“Maybe you should kiss me. That is what you did when I was sick. Remember? You kissed me and declared me as your mate?” she asked.

She was shivering and burning up and he felt this panic rushing through him. This couldn’t be happening.

With her head tilted back, and her looking directly at him, he took a chance and kissed her. And then he kissed her again, not wanting to stop. He wanted to be mated to her. He wanted more than anything to be her whole world. Kissing her was just the beginning.

He felt her tears sting his cheeks.

“I’m dying, aren’t I?” she asked.

“No, hell, no. You’re not going to die. You’re going to live, and you and I, Calliope, are going to get out of here. We’ve got plans.”

“We have?”

“Yeah, to make up for lost time. The two of us, together, you’re going to be my mate, and then you’re going to be my wife. I’ll be your husband, and we’re going to make this work. We’re going to have kids.”

He saw the smile on her face. “Kids?”

“Yeah, kids. We both want a big family, remember? Dozens of kids, that was the plan from the start.”

“I can’t believe you still want lots of kids,” she said, laughing. “I love that. I love that you still want kids.”

“I want children with you. Not with anyone else. Just with you.” He pushed some of the hair off her face.

“That sounds ... perfect.”

He took possession of her lips and kissed her hard. “Please, Calliope. Don’t ... die. Don’t let this be the last day for us. We deserve better than this. We both do. I love you, Calliope. I don’t want you to leave me. Please don’t leave me.”

“I love you,” Calliope said.

“And I love you.”

And with that, he kissed her, and he kept kissing her, and he just hoped and prayed she wouldn’t succumb to the bites. He had wasted too much time. He understood that now.

The Hunt was a cruel game, but now he realized what it did. It made him realize what he was doing, the time he was wasting. They could have been mated by now, even

had a child, and perhaps had dozens of amazing memories. Instead, they fought, they argued, and they ended up here anyway.

Kissing her lips, he wished someone was looking over them, and realized he wasn't going to allow this to happen. He loved her. He would give his life for her.

He would do anything just to have Calliope in his life, alive, breathing. He'd do anything.

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C alliope opened her eyes and stared up at the morning sky.

It was so strange to be looking at the sky, the sunshine.

In the back of her mind, she felt like something should be happening, or she should be panicking.

Then, just as quickly as she woke up, the events of the previous morning came rushing back to her.

Sitting up so suddenly, she didn't realize Jaxson had been wrapped around her. Her arm felt fine, as did her ankle. She quickly pulled the makeshift bandage off her arm and then her leg, and sure enough, it was gone. There was not even a scar.

She had woken Jaxson up in her haste, and the moment he grabbed her arm and her ankle, he looked at her and then laughed. This was cause for celebration. He reached out, cupped her face, and then kissed her. This felt good. This felt real. She couldn't believe how close she had come.

"You're alive," he said.

She chuckled. "Yeah, yeah, I am."

And his kisses were so damn magical.

This was what happened in their game. She got bit by a wolf, and then nearly died. His kisses brought her back to life, and last night Jaxson had held her, kissed her,

loved her. She loved him so damn much, and she had been so afraid this was the end.

Staring into his blue eyes, she knew she was never going to take him for granted.
“This game, it’s ... scary.”

He nodded and then pressed his head against hers. “I don’t want to lose you.”

She didn’t want to get lost.

Going to her knees, she pressed her body against his.

He always smelled like the woods, so masculine and potent, but in every way that was good.

She loved the smell of him. She had missed being this close to him.

This was home. This was where she wanted to be.

Then, she became aware of the fact he was very naked.

“Still no clothes?” she asked.

“None, and they haven’t replaced your top either.”

She glanced down at her chest and saw there was no top. “Do we think this is where they are going to start interfering?” She smiled at him. Jaxson was completely naked, and she was, well, not naked, but had on some clothes.

“I wonder if we’re being missed.”

Calliope tried not to look down at his naked body, but that was proving to be difficult.

She wanted to look at him. She wanted to see him. This was going to be impossible.

“You know, to be a good sport, you could get as naked as me,” he said.

This made her eyes go wide. “You’re asking me to get naked?”

“I’m asking you to get as naked as me. I hope that is not a problem.”

It was only fair, she got that, but she had never been naked in front of anyone. Glancing down at her body, she couldn’t help but feel nervous. “What if you don’t like what you see?” She was so tempted to cover her body, but that would make him aware of how nervous she was.

“That’s not possible,” Jaxson said. “I’m going to like everything I see. I’m going to love every single part of you.”

She lifted her gaze and looked him straight in the eye, and it was like she didn’t even know why she doubted him.

Nodding her head, she got to her feet. She wasn’t even a little unsteady.

She felt fine. Better than fine. Stepping behind a tree, she didn’t even know why she was bothering with modesty.

What was the point? She was going to get naked and Jaxson was already naked.

If he hated her, then they might as well call it quits right now.

Removing her pants, followed by her lingerie, she looked down at her body, and she clenched her hands into fists. She kept telling herself it was going to be okay.

How did they get to this point? Was it her nearly dying last night? Had she even been close to death?

She took a deep breath and felt a little sick, but then something came over her, and she squared her shoulders and stepped out from beyond the tree line.

Jaxson had his back to her, and she nearly freaked out, only she stepped on some kind of magical twig that seemed to echo throughout the forest, alerting him to her presence.

The moment he turned around to look at her, she couldn't help placing her hands over her breasts and pussy. No matter what she did, this was not going to give her enough modesty.

"Calliope?" he asked.

"Uh, okay, I don't know if this is as good an idea as we thought."

"I'm still naked, so The Hunt must think it is a good idea."

"The Hunt is terrible. We nearly died and it's bringing our past ... games to life. No one trusts a child, not with these kinds of things."

Jaxson chuckled. "You're nervous. I get that. But look at me. Even after all we've been through, I'm comfortable being naked around you."

"I thought wolves were supposed to be comfortable around everyone?" she asked.

"We are, but that doesn't mean I am, and the truth is, Calliope, this is the most comfortable I've been in my skin in a very long time, and you're the one that makes me feel this way. No one else."

Okay, that was freaking cute. She couldn't help it. Then, looking across the short distance between them, she was once again captured by his gaze. So shockingly blue. So stunning. She didn't want to look away.

And then, something just swept over her. She didn't quite know what it was, but it was such a force that she had no choice but to lower her hands. All she wanted to do was look at him all day and all night long.

The moment she lowered her hands, Jaxson's gaze traveled down her body. She clenched her hands into fists as she refused to cover herself. His own hands were by his side, and that was when she noticed something was changing. It wasn't even subtle.

Jaxson stared at her, and she saw he was getting aroused. His cock was starting to thicken, and she couldn't help but nibble her lip as she watched. There was no way for her to look away as she was positively mesmerized. Jaxson was aroused by her.

She didn't know who took the first step, only one moment, neither of them was moving, and the next, they were.

They came together in a fiery kiss—one that sent her heart racing.

She didn't want him to stop. The power of that kiss was everything.

This is what they had been missing their whole lives—each other.

Somewhere along the way, they got lost, but now she knew they were finding each other.

This was his dream come true. Calliope in his arms, kissing her, loving her, feeling her naked body pressed against his own. He loved her full tits, how her thighs were nice, thick, and juicy, and her hips were going to be able to take the force of his grip.

Running his hands up her back, capturing her neck, and then sliding down her body, he stroked her and didn't want to let go.

The kiss sent a shockwave of pleasure rushing through his whole body. His cock was not going down. Calliope let out a little gasp, and he broke the kiss.

"That was unexpected," she said.

"You're everything," he said.

She cupped his face and kissed him again.

He slid one of his hands down from the back of her neck, and he couldn't help himself.

He went straight for her curvy ass. Giving the plump flesh a squeeze, he ran his other hand down so he had both cheeks of her ass within his grasp.

He pulled her in close, and his cock was so close, pressing against her stomach.

She arched against him, and he broke the kiss long enough to trail his lips down her body. She moaned.

And he felt his cock already leaking pre-cum, and he felt a need to be inside her, to fill her, to mate her. This was powerful. Calliope awakened that feeling in him, and there was no turning back.

“Please,” she said.

Jaxson didn’t stop as he trailed his lips down her body, and when he got to her tits, they were like a dream come true. He’d been waiting all his life for this very moment, and he wasn’t about to let it pass.

Cupping them within his palms, he massaged them, pushed them together, getting his fill of the beauty of her tits. Then, he took one plump nipple into his mouth and heard her soft, subtle cry. There was no pain coming from her. Just pleasure at what he was doing. He groaned.

Sliding his tongue between the valley of her tits, he moved to the other nipple. Alternating between each breast, he devoted time to each, sucking. Thrashing his tongue back and forth across the hardened peak before taking it into his mouth.

“I want to touch you,” Calliope said.

Jaxson pressed a kiss to each of her nipples, and then he stood. He was within touching distance. All she had to do was reach out, and he’d be in her hands.

She stroked one hand down his body. It felt so damn good to finally have her hands on him.

There had been so many nights he had lain awake, thinking of Calliope.

Even when he said some of the nasty shit he had said to her, or ignored her.

Jaxson didn’t know what was worse—completely ignoring her, as if she meant nothing, or saying nasty shit to her. Both were just as bad.

She got to his stomach and then started to reach lower.

He couldn't help holding his breath. So many nights, he'd wondered what it would be like to have her hands on him.

He wasn't prepared for the moment she wrapped her fingers around his cock.

He reached for her, putting his hands on her shoulders, holding onto her, not wanting to let go.

She was everything, just as he knew she would be.

He'd wasted so much time being so fucking proud. He'd been mean and cruel, and pushed his best friend aside. Only, that wasn't the worst thing he'd done. He nearly lost his mate, and that was incomprehensible. The very thought of losing her didn't compute with his brain.

Staring into her eyes, he ran his hand down her body, stroking across her hip, sliding over her stomach, then straight toward the juncture of her thighs. Neither of them looked away. They both stared into each other's eyes.

Calliope began to touch him, and he touched her pussy. Sliding a finger between her slit, he found her clit. She let out a gasp, and he leaned in close, swallowing it.

He didn't explore her pussy, but stayed focused on her tight bud. Calliope started to work from the tip of his cock, down to the base, then back up again. Up and down, she worked his cock, and he gritted his teeth. This was better than any dream or fantasy. This was the real deal.

They both groaned at the same time, and he heard the sudden hitch in her voice, letting him know she was about to come.

He was close as well. So fucking close. This was ... so perfect.

He never would have guessed their perfect moment together would be standing within The Hunt, fighting for their lives, and in a way their mating, and about to achieve their first orgasm together. Only, this was exactly how it happened.

Jaxson couldn't hold back anymore, and he came, spilling his seed across her stomach. Moments after him, Calliope came, gripping his cock even tighter, holding onto his shoulder as she did so.

He took possession of her mouth and swallowed down her sweet moans. She looked perfect.

Neither of them spoke. He removed his hand from her pussy and wrapped his arms around her. Calliope did the same for him, and they stood there, just holding each other. It was like they were once again getting to know each other.

"I think we need to find a spring or a waterfall," Calliope said.

He pressed his face against her neck, and he chuckled, to which she joined him.

This was good. This was them. They found laughter in everything.

He took hold of her hand, they linked their fingers, and as if by magic, right in front of them, a small spring came to life.

"Holy shit," Jaxson said. It was beautiful. Sunshine came through the trees and seemed to make the small spring glow.

Calliope rested up against him. "This is amazing," she said.

He kissed the top of her head, and together they made their way toward the spring, and Calliope laughed as he made sure to check the temperature first. It was just right.

Not too warm, not too cold. Pulling Calliope into his arms, he never wanted to let her go. She was his mate.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“That we wasted way too much time. I hate this place, but it’s brought me to you. What about you? What are you thinking?”

“That this is perfect.”

He leaned down about to kiss her. Only one moment, Calliope was in his arms, and the next, she had fallen to the ground, and that was when he saw it—a fucking piece of shit mermaid. He growled, reaching for Calliope.

She let out a scream that ended as she was pulled beneath the water, which had suddenly appeared. Jaxson didn’t give himself time to think. He dived beneath the water and took off, seeing Calliope fighting and screaming. There was no way she would be able to breathe for long.

Swimming with all his might, he fought and tried to wrack his brain for this kind of game, only they had never played any game like this. Not a single one where a mermaid fucking attacked Calliope. Sure, she would mention them from time to time as being in the water, but that was it.

Drawing on the strength of his wolf, the power that swept over him was strong. He gained on them, and then he pulled out his claw, reaching for Calliope. She looked panicked, and he saw she was running out of air. This wasn’t good.

He didn’t think, but struck out, slashing the hand that held onto Calliope.

The mermaid hissed, but the damage had been done.

Even beneath the waves, he was able to turn, only his head, into a wolf, and he roared.

The sound seemed to echo beneath the surface, and anything that had been following them took off.

One moment it was there, and the next, it was gone.

Taking Calliope into his hands, he broke the surface and carried her straight toward land. The moment they had gotten out of the water, she took a deep breath.

She collapsed on the ground, but he moved her far from the water's edge. He expected her to be pissed at him, or angry. Only, she wrapped her arms and legs around him as he sat on the ground beside her.

"I've got you," he said. "I've got you."

Running his hands down her back, he pressed his face against her neck, and he knew he wasn't going to let her go.

She shook within his arms, and he looked toward the water. If anything broke that surface, they were fucking dead. He'd kill them.

And right before his eyes, the water disappeared, until all that was left was land.

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They were still naked . Neither of them had opted for clothes, but there was nothing quite like being kidnapped by a fucking mermaid and nearly drowning to put a few things into perspective. One, being naked wasn't a big deal, especially when she was with her mate.

Jaxson had not let go of her hand, and they had started on their journey once again.

They hadn't spoken since she wrapped herself around his body and kind of made a fool of herself.

He wasn't judging, though. Calliope had just needed to hold her mate.

To know he was close, that he was near. He didn't let her drown, or get killed.

"You know, it's driving me crazy, but I cannot remember any of our games having a mermaid taking me prisoner and attempting to drown me," she said.

"I know."

"Does this mean something?" she asked.

He came to a stop. She looked at him, and he seemed as shaken up as she felt.

"I think it does."

"We don't want to know, do we?" she asked.

He ran fingers through his head. “It could mean we’re getting close but not close enough. I mean, I couldn’t stand the thought of losing you. It just isn’t acceptable to me.”

She put a hand on his chest. “Hey, come on, it’s fine.”

“No. It’s not. None of this is fine. This fucking game is not funny. They could have killed both of us.”

“But, we’re both here, and we’re safe.” She went onto her tiptoes and kissed him. “I don’t want you thinking like this. You saved me. I don’t even know where that mermaid was taking me. He freaked me out, and he could have been a little more polite about it, don’t you think?”

She was trying to lighten the mood.

“Calliope, I clawed off his hand.”

She nodded. “You’re not in the mood.”

He pulled her in close, and she smelled his earthy scent. It wasn’t the scent of dirt, just air, the forest, and all things natural. Jaxson had always smelled so good to her.

“It could be manifesting,” Calliope said.

“What?”

“The Hunt. It has taken inspiration from our games. It was a mermaid.”

“We never had an actual mermaid in one of our games.”

“That is true, however, they were mentioned. Maybe it is designed to kind of speed things up a bit.”

“Speed things up?” He shook his head. “Moments before, we were like, touching each other, bringing each other to orgasm, and that is not working fast enough for them?”

She hadn’t anticipated him being quite so annoyed.

“It’s fine.”

“No, none of this is fine, okay? This is all just bullshit. That is exactly what it is. Bullshit.”

She pressed a hand to his chest and then wrapped her arms around him. “I’ve got you.”

He held her tightly, and it was strange but she knew what he needed. Jaxson needed to hold her and just feel her alive and waiting for him.

“Damn it, Calliope, I don’t want anything to happen to you. Nothing can happen to you. I can’t stand the thought of it. You’re my ... everything.”

She felt tears sting her eyes, and she pulled away to smile at him. “I am? I’m your everything?”

“Yeah, you are. I wasn’t sad when the elder told us we were going to be mated. I was relieved. I’d missed you so freaking much. I kept trying to figure out how to bridge that gap between us, and nothing seemed to be working.” He stroked her cheek. “I love you.”

This made her gasp. She knew they had said it before, but they had been under extreme circumstances. “You love me?”

“Yeah, and I’m not going to hide that from you. I’ve loved you since we were kids. I love you now, and I love you still.” And he pressed a kiss to her lips. “I will always love you. You mean everything to me.”

She never thought he would say something like that.

“And I don’t expect you to say anything right now,” he said. “You don’t have to. I behaved so badly, pushing you away. I’m going to earn back your trust, and maybe one day I will earn back your love.”

Calliope wanted to tell him she loved him. She had never stopped. Yes, there had been times over recent years where she kind of hated him a little, because he’d been a giant ass. All of that had changed, though.

Jaxson took her hand, and they started to make their way through the forest, which once again was getting thicker. Something was strange.

“Jaxson?” she asked.

“I feel it too.”

“But this can’t be right, right? I mean, every single time we’ve encountered a life-threatening situation, that was it, until nightfall and the morning. Surely, we get a break, right?”

Only, Jaxson didn’t have to answer, as it was like something reached up out of the earth, wrapped it’s claw around her ankle, and started to pull her down. It wasn’t a monster. This was quicksand.

Panic flooded.

“Calliope!” Jaxson screamed and reached for her hand, but she saw the ground about to give way.

“Jaxson, step away,” she said. “You don’t want to get in here too.” According to the game she remembered, if she wriggled, she got sunk beneath the surface faster. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying not to wriggle or panic, or make any sudden movements.

“Calliope, what the fuck do I do?” he asked.

“You need to find something, like rope, so I can hold onto it, or tie it around me,” she breathed out.

It was getting harder for her to remain still as the panic was consuming her. Jaxson looked around, and then they both must have had the same thought come to mind.

“Backpack!” they both screamed in unison.

She tried to smile, but that fear was a pesky little devil, making it impossible for her to be happy. Tears filled her eyes. This was not how she wanted it to end. Looking at Jaxson, she knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, being mated to him, having his babies.

They used to spend every waking moment together—Christmas, birthdays, all the festive occasions throughout the year.

They hadn’t taken the time. She hadn’t stood, heavily pregnant in their kitchen, baking cookies, waiting for him to get home.

They hadn't sipped hot cocoa while watching it snow.

They'd not made love in the heat of the summer, out in their yard. There was so much they hadn't done.

"I've got it," Jaxson said, pulling out the rope and coming toward her.

The ground was getting larger as it was starting to sink. He tossed the rope toward her. The first one didn't even start to come close. She was sinking down. She had been at knee level, but now she was at hip level. He had to throw the rope four times until she finally caught the end.

Tying it around her body as best she could, Jaxson started to pull, only she was barely moving. It was like the ground was holding her in place. The moment he stopped trying to pull, the ground then pulled her under, until the water was suddenly at waist height.

She tried not to panic, but Jaxson wasn't handling it. He kept trying to pull her out.

"Don't go under, Calliope. Do not go under."

Her neck was right at the surface, and she felt tears spring to her eyes, only she refused to panic. This is where it was going to end for her.

"You know, I would love to one day be making you dinner, and you come home, missing me. You can't wait to see me, and you find me in the kitchen, cooking meatballs and spaghetti, your favorite.

You put your hand on my hip, kiss my neck, and I know what you want.

Only, our kids—two of them to start—scream 'Daddy,' and they want your attention.

”

“Calliope?”

“I’d love for us to have a dozen kids. To have the house not know a moment’s peace, because of how many children we have. We’ll make our parents babysit when we want some time alone, but it won’t be often, because we love being part of a big family.”

“I want that,” Jaxson said.

“I want to spend Christmas and New Year’s with you.

I don’t want another birthday to go by.” She sniffled.

“You know, I sent them anonymously. I’ve been sending you birthday and Christmas cards ever since we had a falling out, and I just couldn’t bring myself to stop.

I love you, Jaxson, and I would love to be mated to you for the rest of our lives. ”

Calliope didn’t know what happened. One moment, she was about to sink beneath the quicksand, with no hope. But instead, she was shot out and landed on her back on the now-hard earth.

She groaned and looked up. Jaxson was on her, wrapping his arms around her, holding her tightly, loving her.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “You had the rope, and I should have been able to pull you out, and it shouldn’t have been able to pull you under. Calliope?”

She cupped his face and stared up into his eyes. “It’s changing. It’s making us face

the facts we've been trying to avoid."

"What?"

"We're destined to be mated, and it is putting us in challenging situations.

Our games were easy. They were child's play.

Talking about our feelings, and knowing what we want, being honest with each other, that is a whole different kind of game.

"She pressed a kiss to his lips. "And I meant everything I said, Jaxson. I love you, and I do want a long future with you."

J axson looked into the fire and then toward Calliope. They had already eaten their food, and it was getting dark. Actually, there was no getting dark about it. It was already dark.

He ran his fingers through his hair, then got to his feet and moved closer.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"The game is getting more intense. It's going to push us in ways we didn't expect." She shrugged. "The only way out of this is for us to become mates, right? No one leaves here, still unmated. All couples are bound together."

He took hold of her hand, locking their fingers together. "I'm happy to wait as long as you are."

She offered him a smile. “You saw what happened today. I don’t think this is going to get any easier, Jaxson. This is going to get very hard.” She sighed. “We both know that. Not once but twice today, I nearly died. Tomorrow, that might be you, and I just ... I can’t stand it.”

“So, what do we do?” Jaxson asked.

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“We need to get out of here, but I don’t think rushing the process is going to help either of us,” she said. She rested her head on his shoulder.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

After she had gotten out of the quicksand, he wouldn’t allow her to walk on the solid ground. He wasn’t going to risk the ground opening up and swallowing her for good, and he had no way of getting to her. That was just not going to do for him.

“I’m fine. Tired, but fine.”

He looked over to her. There was no sadness within her gaze.

“You know, I meant every word I said today,” she said.

“It was so strange, because all I ever wanted to do was tell you how I felt, and for us to regain our closeness again. I’ve missed you so much.

Yet, telling you this stuff seemed like the hardest thing on the planet.

I mean, who just randomly blurts out they’d like a future with someone? ”

“I loved it,” Jaxson said. “The picture you painted of us sounds amazing to me. I’ve thought about it a lot, especially since the elder made his declaration that you and I are destined to be mates. It is what I wanted, but I also knew I had messed up. There was no way you would want to be with me.”

“You’re wrong. I do want to be with you. Always.”

He stared at her, and she looked right at him. At first, he didn’t move. There was no reason to. He just looked at her and knew she was everything he wanted.

And then, he couldn’t hold back another moment. Closing that gap between them, he took possession of her lips and heard her soft moan. It was so soft and gentle. He reached out and cupped that very cheek, kissing her, deepening the kiss with each passing second.

She was stunning, so beautiful, and there was no one else he ever wanted in his life.

Calliope surprised him, because even as they kissed, she moved and started to work her way onto his lap, settling close to his cock.

He wasn’t inside her, but he felt how close she was and pulled back long enough to look at her, then he kissed her again.

Jaxson knew he could keep kissing her for the rest of his life.

Running his hands down her back, he slid one hand up and cupped the back of her neck, with the other he continued to stroke.

She let out a little moan and he swallowed it down.

Trailing his lips down her neck, he lashed his tongue against the delicate column of her neck. He couldn’t resist biting down, not breaking skin but just nipping. She let out a moan, and then Jaxson took her to the ground, rolling her onto her back. Staring down at her, he saw her soft smile.

“Do you have me where you want me?” she asked.

“Always.” And with that, he took her lips once again in a searing kiss.

Then, he started to travel down. This time he didn’t stop.

He went straight toward her tits, cupping the mounds together and lavishing each peak, before sucking them into his mouth.

He couldn’t get enough of them, but he also knew he wanted to taste her.

Down he traveled, going toward her pussy. She spread open her legs, and he stroked from her knees up toward the inside of her thighs. Stroking the soft flesh of her cunt, he spread her lips wide, and then he stared at her sweet pussy. She was wet.

His mouth watered for a taste, and the scent of her was driving him wild.

He couldn’t help it. At first, he pressed his face against her pussy, breathing in her delicious scent, and then he trailed his tongue between her slit.

He went from her swollen clit, down toward her entrance, but he didn’t penetrate.

She was a virgin, as was he, and he wanted their first time to be together.

Jaxson went on instinct. Gliding his tongue back up toward her clit, he started to circle the nub, feeling the change within her as he reached beneath her ass, cupping the soft supple flesh.

He loved everything about Calliope. He loved her body, her mind, her very essence. Her scent drove him crazy, and he loved that giggle she couldn’t seem to contain. There was so much about her he loved, and he couldn’t get enough of it.

Working her clit, he stroked back and forth, working her pussy, and he didn’t have to

wait long.

He was shocked at how quickly she came apart in his arms, his name filling the air as he pushed her over the edge into orgasm.

She cried out. He pressed a single kiss to her clit, and then moved up her body.

“We don’t have to,” he said.

“I want to, Jaxson. I want to feel you,” she said.

She leaned up and pressed a kiss against his chest.

“Please,” she said.

And it was that “please” that completely undid him.

The night the elder declared them mates, it should have been like this. Exploring one another, enjoying the moment. Only, he fucked it up all those years ago when they were kids. Now, he was getting a second chance, and he wasn’t about to squander it.

He moved into position between her spread legs, and he looked up her body. The glow from the fire cast enough light for him to see her. Staring into her eyes, he knew this was not going to be easy. This was going to hurt Calliope. He didn’t want her to feel any pain.

He held his cock, and he didn’t want to hurt her, but he wanted her so damn badly. That need was what took control.

Please, let me take away her pain.

And then, he slammed deep inside her, breaking through the thin wall of her virginity, and staking his claim. There was a catch. The Hunt was a mystical world, and it would seem you got what you asked of it.

Jaxson took Calliope's virginity, and he shared in her pain as well. He felt it, the hurt, the sting, and he wrapped his arms around her, glad he was taking her pain. The thought of hurting her sickened him. He couldn't stand it.

Calliope was his. His mate. His woman. His to protect and love, and he had every intention of living up to that vow. He would take care of her, love her, be with her, show her every kindness he could. She was his whole world.

He felt the moment the pain started to subside. Jaxson didn't move. He didn't want to make a sound for fear of hurting her. Staring into her eyes, he waited, and then he knew when she was ready. There was a slight wriggle to her hips. He held onto her hands, and then pressed them above her head.

"Tell me to stop if it hurts," he said.

"You will know if it hurts."

He nodded. They were building that connection that bound them together as mates. This was how it was supposed to be between them. Mated, together, alive, loving one another.

He began to pull out of her, and he waited as just the tip of him remained, then he pressed forward. There was no pain, just pleasure. Immense pleasure, amazing, mind-shattering pleasure, that took him completely by surprise.

He didn't want to stop, but at the same time he was unable to stop. He was so close, and it was like he had been waiting a lifetime for this moment with Calliope. He

couldn't hold back and when he came, he did so crying out her name.

It happened so fast, but it was magical. Exactly how it was supposed to be.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:54 pm

“Y ou’re staring at me , aren’t you?” Jaxson asked.

Calliope couldn’t help but laugh, because she was. She had woken up a short time ago. Their fire was dead, and the sun was beaming down on them. It was not too hot, nor too cold. Neither of them had clothes on, but they were wrapped together in each other’s arms.

Last night, had come back to her, and she didn’t regret a thing.

“Maybe,” she said.

He opened his eyes and she couldn’t help but giggle.

“Morning,” she said.

“You’re still a morning person?”

“Always. I thought you were.”

“I don’t know. I think I’d rather it be forever night. Have you noticed nothing bad happens at nightfall?”

She nodded and then leaned over and kissed him. “True, but where is the fun in that? We had a lot of fun during the day.”

“Are you not freaked out? You were so close to sinking in quicksand.”

“But I didn’t, and I’m not going to freak out about what might be.”

He reached up and tucked some hair behind her ear. “You’re beautiful.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that, but compliments will certainly get you everywhere,” she said, laughing.

“Everywhere? I like the sound of that.” Calliope let out a gasp, as he suddenly lifted her up and settled her onto his dick. “Now, that is so much better.”

She felt the hard ridge of his cock beneath her. “You know what I was thinking?” she asked.

“I can dream and hope of what you were thinking, but I don’t have a clue.”

She chuckled. “That you and I make up for lost time by enjoying each other rather than leaving camp.”

“Really? That is what you want to do?” he asked.

“Spend the day having sex, exploring one another. We’ve got a long time to make up for, don’t you think?” She lifted up and touched his cock, feeling how hard it was beneath her grip. “Unless there is something else you would rather be doing?”

“No, sex is good. I like the thought of us having a lot of sex, and while we’re working on our mating, no one can stop us. No one can try to kill us, hunt us down, or scare the crap out of us.”

She laughed. “What do you think?”

“I’m ready.”

She didn't know how she had gotten so bold, or even what she was doing. She lined his cock up to her entrance, and staring into his eyes, she started to sink down slowly, taking her time and watching him.

There was no pain, but she didn't expect there to be. Last night, she had known Jaxson had somehow connected with her and felt everything she did. He didn't want her to feel pain, and she loved that about him.

Inch by inch he sunk inside her, and they both cried out together.

They were once again joined. Jaxson held onto her hips, and they rocked together, finding a pace in time, working in unison.

They both moaned, and he seemed to swell even harder within her.

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip and moaned his name. It felt so good.

He reached up and began to tease and play with her tits. He worked her nipples at the same time. Then, he let her breasts go and went to her hips, holding onto her, and driving inside her. They both gasped.

"This is perfect, Calliope," he said.

She loved the way her name rolled off his tongue. It was so sensual.

I just love everything about him, and that is not going to change. I love Jaxson, I always have, and I always will.

This was no great revelation to her. What was revealing was just how good this was between them.

They rolled over, and he drove inside her.

“Touch yourself, Calliope. I want to feel us come together.”

She looked at him, and even as her cheeks heated, she reached between her thighs and started to stroke her clit. She sunk her teeth into her lip, trying to contain her moans, but it was impossible.

One touch sent her higher. She felt him, she felt them, and it was deeper than just sex. This was a mating. This was driving one another higher and higher together, and then they both at once seemed to hit that peak and came together.

She felt the hard swell of his cock as he pulsed within her, at the same time her release came, taking her by surprise as well. They both cried out.

It was magical, but Jaxson didn't mark her. She saw his teeth elongate, but they didn't scare her.

“You didn't mark me,” she said.

He lifted his head and tucked some more of her hair behind her ear. “You ... didn't ask me to. Until you tell me you're ready, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to mark you.”

“But we're supposed to be mates, Jaxson. This is what is supposed to happen.”

“Just because it is, doesn't mean it has to.”

“But...”

She didn't get the chance to tell him she wanted to.

Something grabbed him. Calliope didn't see what or who it was.

One moment he was inside her, and the next, he was taken from her.

He screamed her name, and she got to her feet.

That pull just kept drawing her closer. The only problem was, one moment he was within touching distance, and the next moment he was gone.

Calliope stood alone in the forest, shocked. Something had taken Jaxson from her.

None of this Hunt made any sense. He couldn't have gone far, because they were not allowed to be without touching distance. Those were the rules, right?

She felt that panic, that fear.

"Jaxson!" she screamed his name.

This couldn't be happening. After all this time, they had finally found each other and she was about to tell him she wanted him to mate with her, she wanted to have everything, and something had taken him.

She stood in that forest and looked around.

Did they expect her to panic, to freak out, to cry?

She didn't. There was a new kind of anger settling within her.

One that was burning. She was done with this bullshit game.

Jaxson was never kidnapped in any of their games.

But, in their games there was an enemy pack that stole him away.

That had to be it, and it was up to her to save him.

She was pissed off.

Rushing back to camp, she saw the clothes lying there along with the crossbow, which she hadn't seen, from the bear. There was also a key. This made her frown. She picked up the key, and the moment she did, it was like a magical door opened, and that was when she saw her home, right up ahead.

She didn't have to continue with the mating. There was an exit, but she didn't take a step toward it. There was no way she was going home without her mate.

Putting the clothes on, she picked up the crossbow and pocketed the key. It was time to go hunting.

Jaxson didn't like this. He counted at least ten wolves, and it was like they were magically multiplying in front of his very eyes.

In their childish game, Calliope came to save him. But she was neither a wolf nor a strong human. She was just a woman, a human woman, his mate.

He didn't know how this game was playing out. They were far from Calliope, he knew that, as her scent had gotten weaker.

The wolves didn't talk to him, they just morphed from faceless people into wolves. No one talked, but they did howl.

He should have mated Calliope when he had the chance, but he wanted her to make that choice.

This was not about what he wanted. He had already been the monster in their tale, the bully.

He had pushed her aside, rather than admit he had developed feelings for her.

He was the asshole, not Calliope, and now there was a chance he might never make it right for either of them.

He watched as the wolves lifted their heads as one and sniffed the air. Jaxson couldn't smell anything.

He attempted to scream out to Calliope, to tell her it was a trap, only no noise came out. He was screaming and making words, but there was no fucking sound. What the hell was this?

Was The Hunt trying to kill Calliope? He didn't get it. She was human. She didn't stand a chance against all these wolves. It was doomed to fail.

He needed to get out of the ropes. The more he wriggled and tried to break free, the tighter they got. He had to get to Calliope. She had to know this was a trap.

And then, like in a horror movie, he smelled her seconds before he saw her. She was dressed in a pair of jeans, a shirt, and she held the crossbow in front of her. She looked magnificent.

"You took my mate," she said.

That was all she said, and then she fired that crossbow. The first wolf she hit turned

to dust. In the shock, the wolves didn't move, and then they started to work together.

She fired a second time, and it made connection with a second wolf. He didn't know how she was able to reload it, but she kept firing, even as the wolves set to attack. He had no choice but to watch as they rushed at her.

There were explosions of dust, and he felt sick to his stomach. He continued to fight the tight confines of the rope, but it was getting tighter.

"Get the fuck off me," Calliope said.

He watched as she was taken down, and as they went to scratch at her, Jaxson channeled that connection they had. If he could feel her pain, he was going to allow her to feel his strength.

She snarled, growled, and the wolf landed on top of her. He watched as she gripped its throat and tore it out. No blood. Just dust.

He focused on Calliope, and for every attack, he had a counterattack.

He had to protect her, save her, and make sure she made it out alive.

Jaxson was so focused, it took him a second to realize that together they had ended the pack.

There was no wolf lurking, nothing. He didn't even have that funny feeling he'd been getting.

It was over.

The ropes suddenly disappeared and Calliope rushed to him and sank into his arms.

“It’s over,” she said. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

“No, no, they weren’t real.”

“I felt you,” she said, and laughed. “I felt you inside me, helping me, guiding me to do what was right.” She cupped his face.

“I never want to go through that again. I never want to see you get pulled away from me like that. It’s not going to happen again.

We’re mates, Jaxson. You and me, like it always was.

I want you to mark me. I want to be yours.

No more waiting for the right moment and no more fighting this.

We could have lost each other multiple times down here.

I’m done fighting this with you.” She pressed a kiss to his lips.

“I love you. I want to be with you. In everything.”

They were magical words.

“I love you too.”

She kissed him.

He took possession of her lips. The kiss deepened, and then he had no choice but to break the kiss, and he trailed his lips down toward her neck. She let out a gasp.

His teeth elongated. “My mate,” he said.

“My mate.”

“Forever.”

“Forever.”

“And for all eternity.”

“And for all eternity.”

He sunk his teeth against her neck, branding her with his essence, marking her as his. She wrapped her arms around him, and there was no pain. When it came to a marking, there was never any pain.

That connection had awakened fully, now he was able to feel her, sense her, and he knew her feelings were true.

All too soon, there was a sudden flash. He pulled away from her neck and then held onto her, as The Hunt had served its purpose.

They were pulled out of this world and he felt the real world.

The scent of home, the forest, and then the round of applause that happened as the dust seemed to settle. They were back home.

He was dressed in a pair of pajama pants, and she was in her own pajamas as well. Exactly as they had been the night they would have been taken.

They were surrounded by the pack. He spotted their parents together, and they rushed

forward. They were pulled apart by their parents hugging him. He didn't want to let Calliope go.

"Well done, son," his father said.

He looked at his dad, and the truth was, he was a little pissed. That was fucking scary. On multiple occasions he had nearly lost his woman, his mate. He didn't find this to be a celebrating matter.

They had pulled Calliope from his arms, and he nodded at his dad. He looked through the crowd and there was Calliope. The mark on her throat was still raw.

There were so many people, and with everything they had been through, he didn't want to deal with any of them. He didn't know how long he and Calliope were alone in The Hunt, but he knew he didn't want to be parted from her right now.

"Enough," he said, but he wasn't quiet. He was loud enough for them all to hear, and for silence to fall.

He pushed past his dad, through the crowd, and then took Calliope's hand.

"You have no idea what we just went through. Yes, Calliope and I are now mates. We found each other, but you have no idea what happened to get us to this point. We're back, and I am glad we are back, but you have to give us some fucking space."
"

"He's right," Calliope said. "It's ... not been great."

Jaxson expected his father to argue with him, but no one did.

He took Calliope away from the crowd and to his apartment.

There were times he still slept at his parents' place, but for the most part, he lived on his own.

He didn't think she would want to go to the place where they had played their childish games.

Once inside his apartment, he didn't let her go. He continued to hold her hand, even when he moved them both toward the shower, in their clothes.

"The shower," she said.

"I ... I just want to be with you, and I had a feeling you'd want to get clean before we go to bed, and I mean to sleep. It would be nice to just fall asleep and not worry about where we're going to wake up. You know?"

"Yeah, I know." She touched his cheek.

He saw the tears in her eyes. "Don't cry."

"I was so scared. I was just about to tell you I wanted to be mated to you, and then you were snatched away from me, by nothing. You were gone and I couldn't sense you, and I panicked. I don't want to feel that way again. I love you, Jaxson, and I don't regret what we had to do."

"I love you too," he said.

Under the spray of the shower, he held onto her, loving her, kissing her, and he was not going to let her go. Not now, not ever.

They were mates, through and through.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:54 pm

Jaxson woke up first , and he did so with a gasp. He quickly checked to make sure they were still in his apartment and not sucked back into The Hunt.

They were safe.

Calliope was still in his bed, and she was sound asleep.

He looked down at her, and then reached over and kissed her head.

She didn't move. They hadn't made love last night.

They showered, ate some food, and went to bed.

Easing out from beneath the covers, he slid toward the shower, took another one.

There was a lot he was no longer going to take for granted.

The shower, freedom, his apartment, and not being attacked every single day.

After his shower, he changed into a pair of jeans, slid on a shirt, and made his way into the kitchen. He had just put the coffeepot on when there was a knock at his door. Jaxson knew it was his father even before he answered.

"Morning," his father said.

"Morning."

For several seconds, neither of them said a word. Jaxson didn't know what to say.

"Can I come in?"

He stepped away from the door, made his way back into the kitchen, and his father followed.

"You were angry last night."

"Yeah, I was. I know The Hunt is serious, but I thought it was meant to bring people closer, not bring their childhood games into the mix and making them fucking real."

"Is that what it did for you?"

"Yeah, it did."

"Son, The Hunt is different for everyone. You could have petitioned to the elder and had it removed or changed. You were aware of the risks when you and Calliope didn't take it seriously."

"I knew Calliope was my mate. I knew we were meant to be together. I just didn't expect it to be so real."

"You and Calliope have known each other your whole lives. It is rare for people, mated couples, who have known each other as long as you two, to go into The Hunt. Normally, in your situation, it is an easy mating. No stress, no worries, nothing. Your history is what guided The Hunt."

He looked toward the bedroom. "She was nearly killed, more than once. We nearly lost each other, and I can't bear that."

“And yet, you found each other. Even with all the impossible tasks, you made it work.”

He nodded. “She fought for me, Dad. Against a pack of wolves. We were talking about the marking and the mating, and I was snatched from her. She could have left me. I know that. She could have gone.”

“But she didn’t.”

“Armed with just a crossbow and a bad attitude.” He laughed. “And she came for me.”

“That’s love, son.”

“I know it is, but I don’t deserve her, Dad. I pushed her away when we were kids, and not for a good reason. I was freaked out because my best friend suddenly became a girl I liked.” He shook his head. “I don’t deserve her.”

“Yeah, you do.”

Jaxson turned to see Calliope there, wearing his sweatpants and an oversized shirt.

“Hello, Mr. Crease,” she said.

“Good morning, Calliope. Thank you for saving my son.”

“Always,” Calliope said. “You do deserve me, Jaxson. I love you and you love me, and yeah, The Hunt sucked, but we got to experience something not many people do. We got to live our past and present together. I know there is no one else I would have done that with. No one I would have trusted or fought for, other than you. There is no one else.” She went to him.

“You do deserve me. We deserve each other and I love you.”

Jaxson tucked some of her hair behind her ear. “You’re not mad at me?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But I didn’t go to the elder. I didn’t put a stop to this.”

“And you know what, The Hunt sucked, but it brought us together. We were never going to make this work unless we were forced into it. I love you, Jaxson. I don’t regret what happened, and I hope in time you don’t either.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

His father put his hands up. “Don’t mind me. It is so good to see the two of you finally working this out. It was always sad to see the two of you not working this out.”

Jaxson looked toward his father. “Dad, there is something I would like you to do.”

“What is it, son?”

“I’d like you to organize a wedding, by the end of the week.”

“Jaxson, come on, we don’t need to do that.”

“You have mated to me. You’re my mate, and there is nothing that is going to change that. But you’re human, and as per your traditions, I think it is only fair I become your husband, as you become my wife.” He looked toward his dad.

“Your mother and Calliope’s are already organizing it. They are waiting for you back at your parents’ place, with the wedding dresses. I will give you two some time

alone.”

His father left and Calliope turned toward him.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said.

“Why not? I know for a fact you would love a wedding. Even when we were kids, and you were elbows-deep in mud, you still wanted to get married and have the pretty wedding. Even if it wasn’t for you, but for your parents.

” He cupped her face. “And I am going to make sure you get everything you’ve ever dreamed of. ”

“I love you,” she said.

“And I love you.”

There was no time to waste. He was going to take every moment with her as the gift it was.

By the end of the week , everything had moved so fast, but Calliope wasn’t afraid. She had moved in with Jaxson. The whole pack had taken a moment to congratulate them. The whole town was invited to their wedding.

Jaxson’s father was going to preside over the wedding. Her mother was happy, and her father had a smile on his face.

“Are you all right, Pumpkin?” he asked.

She wore a pretty wedding dress. Thick straps that hugged her boobs, but then flowed out, looking so magical.

Her hair had been curled, with some of it pinned back, and stray curls spiraled around her face.

There were little flowers in her hair, and a few trinkets that had been made with little wolves on them.

Some of the pack had asked them about their time in The Hunt, and they were the first couple to not give any details away.

Their time was private. It was part of their past and their present.

It was a moment in time, and there was no point in telling others what happened. The Hunt was different for everyone.

“Yeah, Dad, I’m all right.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to try and steal you away? I could be a distraction.”

She laughed. “No, I don’t think so. Jaxson and I have been through so much. I don’t want to leave him.”

“I hated it,” her father said. “I knew it was coming, but we’re not allowed to intervene or stop it from happening.

All we can do is wait, hope, and for me and your mother that was all we had to go on.

Jaxson’s parents did try to help us come to terms with what was happening, but knowing our baby girl was in harm’s way was a lot to take in. ”

“Dad, it was fine. Jaxson is a good man. He’s the only person I’ve ever loved. We both know this.”

“I know, but I wanted you to know there is a choice. There is always a choice. This Hunt thing, it sounds like that choice was taken right out of your hands, and I can’t stand that.”

She went to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“Going to The Hunt did take it out of our hands, but not by force. The elder gave us time. Even when Jaxson and I were kids, we gravitated toward each other. Becoming teenagers is what changed for us. I can’t really describe it.

It made me realize how much I missed him.

We grew closer and it took away all the bad stuff that was getting in the way.

I love Jaxson, and I know, deep down, he loves me.

” She smiled. “I can feel his love for me, and Dad, it’s special. Really, really special.”

“You promise me?”

“Promise. You don’t ever have to worry about how Jaxson and I feel about one another. It’s real, and has been for a long time.”

“If you’re happy, then I am happy.”

“I’m happy, and he is even going through with a wedding ceremony. I mean, come on, he doesn’t have to, and he is. I’m going to be his wife, his mate, and that is magical.”

And with that, she kissed her father on the cheek, and it was time to go and see her future husband.

She sensed Jaxson's nervousness, but he didn't need to be. This is what they both wanted.

Calliope had never told him this, but there had been a few moments when they were kids, where she had known, deep in her core, she was going to marry him. Obviously, that had changed over the years, but now it was back.

She linked her arm with her dad's and now it was time to make her way toward her man, her mate, her lover, her husband, her everything.

The moment she stood at the end of the aisle and looked toward Jaxson, she knew in her heart of hearts that this was everything she had ever wanted.

Jaxson was hers, just as she was his.

True mates.

Sample Chapter

My father wants me dead.

Anastasia Evanoff stood at the party, holding a glass of wine, not daring to drink it, trying not to look in the direction of her husband.

Everyone was giving her a wide berth, and this had been the same since they were married.

Nothing changed. She didn't know why Bogdan brought her here. No one could stand her.

Prior to getting married, she'd been a Rinaldi.

Her father had been looking for a way to get rid of her for years.

Now, at the age of twenty-one, she was married and knew she would be lucky to survive to twenty-two.

She imagined the only reason she made it to her current age was the fact that it was her birthday on the day of the wedding ceremony.

She didn't know what business her father had with Bogdan Evanoff that would result in her marrying him.

First, her father was part of the Italian mafia, and Bogdan was part of the Bratva.

Her late mother had told her to never get involved with her father's business, and so far she'd been able to steer clear of everything.

Maybe it was because she and her mother for the longest time had lived apart from her father.

Anastasia didn't know what had brought her parents together, but she had a rough idea what separated them—her .

Her mother, Evelyn, had a difficult pregnancy, and after she gave birth to Anastasia, she nearly died.

It resulted in Evelyn losing her ability to have children.

There would be no son and no heir for her father, Dante.

So, rather than continue to love his wife, he moved her out to the country, saw her sparingly, and from all accounts, replaced her with his favorite mistress.

For eighteen years Anastasia grew up without her father, but she had the love and devotion of her mother.

They wanted for nothing. All the while, she knew her father had another woman, and he also had children with that woman—several sons, and a couple of daughters.

After Evelyn passed away, Dante married his mistress, securing his heirs and his position within the family he worked for.

Anastasia was moved out of her country home, and most of her possessions were given to her sisters or sold.

She had a much smaller room at their townhome, and she was considered a vulture. Her so-called brothers couldn't stand her, nor could her sisters. She didn't conform or comply.

When her brothers attempted to attack her, she had never been more grateful to her mother for her insistence on the self-defense classes she'd been forced to attend. Fighting was not something she liked, however, she was good at it.

Gustov, the man her mother got to train her, would not allow her to leave his lessons without learning something.

Then, of course, he would attack her to make sure she had picked up whatever she needed from the lessons.

It had been three years since she saw Gustov.

She missed him. He attended her mother's funeral.

Much to her father's annoyance, her mother had been loved by most of the family, including the boss man himself, Piero.

None of her mother's popularity had stopped her father. After a week, it was like she didn't exist. So, when her brothers started to hurt her, she put them in their place, as she did her sisters.

She tried to steer clear of any conversation at parties, but these people had been friends with her mother, and some she recognized. They tried to bring her out of her shell, but it was all for nothing. Her father had other plans for her.

Just because she tried to be invisible at parties didn't mean she wasn't aware of the tumultuous relationship between the Italian mafia and the Bratva. Especially the

Galkin Bratva. The very one her husband worked for.

She didn't know the exact details, just the rumor that Bogdan was the boss's right-hand man. Only, he was like the executioner within the Bratva. It was his job to hunt and kill. Bogdan Evanoff had a reputation that terrified her.

Their marriage was a business negotiation.

She didn't know the specifics, but she had already lost her virginity to her husband on their wedding night.

A ceremony her father had insisted upon.

In the morning, the vultures had circled.

She had a horrible feeling her father wanted her dead on her wedding night.

Did he believe she hadn't been a virgin? She would think so from his reaction.

As it happened, she loved her mother and spent as much time with her as possible.

She knew, in some weird way, Evelyn had loved Dante.

There were times she caught her mother crying, and there was no way of ignoring it.

Her mother was so sad at losing the love of Dante Rinaldi.

She had poured all that love into her daughter.

Anastasia became the woman she was today because of her mother.

Glancing around the room at the very formal party, she saw the men dressed in suits, although most of them looked way too big to fit into a suit.

The Bratva were all trained. She knew there were men within the family that could fight and kill. Like her father, Bogdan had soldiers, and rarely got his hands dirty. There were others that hunted.

Glancing at her husband, she had a feeling they didn't need all the soldiers stationed at every one of his homes. He took her everywhere with him. She had a feeling it was because he didn't trust her. Either way, she had never been so ... observed in all her life.

Growing up with her mother, and during the last three years, she'd been able to do her own thing, within reason.

Now, she was at the mercy of her husband.

They were moved all the time. From a townhome, to a luxury apartment, to a hotel, and then to a country home.

Bogdan had a lot of businesses. She'd been to many different restaurants, nightclubs, casinos, events, parties.

They'd been married three months, and apart from their wedding night, he hadn't touched her. They shared a bed but rarely spoke to one another.

Bogdan gave her single-word instructions.

"Come."

"Go."

“Leave.”

“Stay.”

She said nothing.

“Dinner.”

“Breakfast.”

“Move.”

She didn't know if he was even able to form a sentence. Actually, she saw he was able to form many sentences, just not toward her. She was on her own. And so, with her single glass of wine, which she wouldn't drink, as she hated all forms of alcohol, she would simply stand there.

Some people would talk in what she assumed was Russian. She wasn't fluent in any language. Her mother had tried to teach her Italian and even Spanish, French, but it was not something she had a knack for. So, after many frustrated lessons, her mother decided to stop.

Anastasia was thankful her mother tried. Right now, she had a sudden interest in learning Russian. She had to find a bookstore, locate the language book, and attempt to teach herself.

She had nothing, no money, and if she even tried to run, she had a feeling she would be killed. This was no way to live, but there was nothing she could do.

At that moment, she couldn't help but look at her husband.

To many, he was nothing more than a savage beast, a monster, someone who was going to kill her.

But Anastasia, though she would never admit it, found him .

.. attractive. He was older than her, thirty-nine, she believed him to be.

Short, blond hair, which she rarely saw him touch.

Unlike her father and brothers, he rarely ran his fingers through his hair.

She suddenly realized it must be a nervous act or something.

Bogdan was never nervous. He was always in control, just as he was now.

She held onto her glass tightly, as he'd chosen that exact moment to look at her. Now she felt the nerves rising. He scared and exhilarated her. She didn't know if he was going to kill her, or if he was biding his time.

Anastasia knew nothing. Her father would often call her thick and stupid. They were hurtful words, and she knew they were not true. She knew a great many things.

She had grown up away from all this bullshit. Her mother had given her a fantastic life, and she missed her mother.

Pulling her gaze away from her husband, she stepped away, suddenly needing some air.

Bogdan watched his wife disappear outside, and he knew without a shadow of a

doubt she just needed a break.

His wife was the most loyal person at the party.

She was never going to betray him. She never spoke to anyone, and he had a thorough check of her background.

Her name may be Rinaldi, but she was nothing like her father or her brothers, or those manipulating bitches.

He knew all about Dante's failed first marriage. How he had dismissed his wife because she'd been incapable of having children. From what he knew and saw, Anastasia's mother had been one of the most beautiful women in the family. She'd given birth to a very beautiful daughter.

Bogdan finished up his conversation and left. He hated parties. He'd never been the kind of man for small talk, but he wanted to see how his wife handled this new life of hers. Making his way out to the gardens, he kept to the shadows, a place he was used to.

Anastasia was standing alone, staring up at the sky, which was clear, and all of the stars were out.

Her long, black hair had a nice curl to it, and tonight she had left it down.

The length was long, thick, and luscious.

He remembered how it looked spread out across his pillows as he thrust deep inside her pussy.

He wondered if Anastasia knew what her father had said.

“If my daughter is not a virgin, you have my permission to kill her instantly. Take your pleasure, and end her life.”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:54 pm

Bogdan was no fool. Dante wanted his daughter dead, and even though he didn't want this marriage, he found the woman before him intriguing. Her mother had taken her away from the family. She was not warped or manipulated.

In the mornings, she sat on the sofa, eating a bowl of cereal, laughing at cartoons. She cooked and cleaned when given the chance. He rarely gave her time alone. He always moved her around, never wanting her to get too comfortable. And yet, she never made any kind of waves.

It had been three months since he married her. There was no chance of her being pregnant, as he knew when her cycle hit. She didn't show the pain, but he knew.

Her father, Dante, constantly reminded him that if his daughter stepped out of line, he had the man's permission to end her life. It had been a long time since he'd met someone who wanted him to kill a family member so badly.

Bogdan, being the curious man he was, did some digging. While Anastasia was alive, her mother's inheritance belonged to her. Anastasia was a very wealthy woman. He wondered if she even knew it.

Her father wanted her dead for multiple reasons. Bogdan was no fool. Killing Anastasia would also create war between his Bratva and Dante's family. It had taken too long to broker peace.

He liked killing. Lived for it. He was an expert in ending a man's life. But he was not going to bring blood to the Galkin Bratva.

He also happened to enjoy watching his wife. She was different. Even now, did she have any idea that he followed her out here? She made no complaints during the past three months. He barely spoke a word to her. She rarely said anything back to him. She stayed quiet. The perfect little wife.

“I miss you, Mom,” she said.

Bogdan heard her. He also heard the snuffle. Was his wife crying?

He stepped out of the shadows just as Anastasia spun toward him, and she let out a gasp.

“Mr. Evanoff,” she said. “You scared me.”

“Bogdan.”

She had dropped her gaze and this time, she looked up. “Huh?”

“We’re married. You don’t have to call me Mister anything.” He moved in closer. “Unless, of course, you would like to call me Sir?”

He could handle Sir spilling from her lips.

She frowned and he couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m sorry. I just needed some air.”

He moved toward the wall that overlooked the gardens. “It’s a glorious night.” This was the most either of them had spoken.

Bogdan hadn’t quite prepared for their first conversation to be at a party. He saw the pain in Anastasia’s eyes. She missed her mother. He’d just heard her say those exact

words. And he didn't, for some odd reason, want her hurting.

"Most summer nights are."

He waited to see what she would do. Would she step back inside to the safety of the party, or come and stand by him? Bogdan was used to women being attracted to him and fearing him.

Anastasia surprised him, as she came to stand beside him. She was not too close, nor was she far away.

"It reminds me of many summer nights I spent with my mom," she said.

Bogdan didn't say anything and heard her chuckle.

"We'd pull out a tent, and we'd have a whole picnic at night, and then we'd sometimes sleep on the ground.

Especially if it was warm. Of course, we often woke up, and it was freezing.

"There was that chuckle again. "I think at one point a couple of slugs or even a snail crawled over us." She wrinkled her nose.

"Mom always made sure we got into the tent after that. Sleeping out in the open, although fun, was a little gross."

She turned toward him with a smile.

This woman was not meant for their world. By living with her mother away from the bullshit, she hadn't developed a coldness. From his notes on Evelyn, she had been the same as well.

Her mother hadn't wanted to risk her children. Evelyn had two sisters and three brothers. But all five of her siblings had been killed, along with her parents. Anastasia was the only one left. It was why she was destined to inherit a small fortune—one he had a feeling Dante wanted.

"Sorry," Anastasia said.

"I have never been still long enough for slugs or snails to crawl over me."

He turned toward Anastasia, and she had the most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen.

In all his thirty-nine years, he had seen a lot of death and evil.

He'd stared many different people in the eye, and not once had he seen someone with so much kindness, so much love.

There was nothing tainting her gaze. She was open. Anastasia was a rare gem.

When her father had approached him with marriage, as had Galkin, he wanted to decline. He was not a Brigadier. He was a killer. Admittedly, he was Galkin's lead man, and that made him even bigger than any Brigadier, but that was beside the point. He had no intention of marrying.

He had told Galkin no. Galkin told him to meet with her first, and then decide. Anastasia was just ... different. He was now married.

The ceremony of the sheets had been interesting. Dante had assumed his daughter was no virgin, and yet she had been exactly that. Bogdan had never been a woman's first, until Anastasia. He'd not taken her since that night.

Although he attempted to be gentle, he had wanted to be done with it so she would no

longer have to deal with the pain. He'd been rough, fast, and then her blood and his semen had spilled onto the sheets. Now, as he looked at her, he felt the longing that had started that night.

"Well, maybe you need to camp outside, in the open. It is an eye-opening experience." She laughed. "I'm sorry. Please don't do that. My mom had to try and take them off my body."

"Them?"

"Yeah, there was like two or three. It was gross. Let's not talk about it, since it doesn't exactly give you any kind of positivity about camping out in the open."

"Your mother sounds nice," he said.

"She was nice."

"And you miss her?"

"You heard that?"

"Yes."

Anastasia took a deep breath and then glanced back toward the house. "I bet she would know how to handle these parties."

"You're doing great."

"I stand around and I know people don't like me. Why do you keep bringing me?"

He lifted up. He was taller than her, but Anastasia tilted her head back, looking up at him. Her head came to his chest. Not too much taller.

“You’re my wife and your place is right by my side.”

“I’m an outsider, Bogdan,” she said, repeating his name slowly. “We both know I’m not really supposed to be here.”

He closed the distance between them, not that there was much. “And where are you supposed to be?” he asked.

She hesitated and then tilted her head to the side. “Doesn’t my dad want you to kill me?”

End of sample chapter