



The Wolf Who Kept A Secret (Cry Wolf #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Secrets never stay buried for long

Struggling to move on...

All Kelly Lopez wanted was to finish her final exams, not to be turned into a werewolf and locked away in a research facility. Now that she's free, the trauma lingers. If she can't reclaim her life, her captors will have won.

A bond worth fighting for...

Jacob Armstrong never thought he'd settle down, but Kelly feels different—like she could be his mate. He doesn't care about Pack politics or expectations. He just wants them to heal. But when Kelly secretly tries to return to school, Jacob wonders if she's planning a future without him.

Love on the edge...

With the Pack pushing for answers and old wounds pulling them apart, Jacob and Kelly must find the strength to trust each other before it's too late. Because if they can't overcome their demons together, they might lose each other forever.

For fans of steamy werewolf romance, fated mates, and possessive heroes. Packed with forced proximity, feral instincts, and some family drama. No cheating, but there's plenty of cursing.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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KELLY

My living room felt smaller than before. The scent of stale air and rotten fruit greeted me, but all I could smell was the bleach solution from the research facility. This place used to be my sanctuary, my safe haven. Now it stood as a graveyard of memories: Jacob storming out after the argument, the knock on the door when I thought he'd returned, and two men pushing inside my apartment before a tranquilizer needle ripped my world to shreds.

Cold sweat beaded my forehead, and I wrapped my arms around my stomach as nausea crept up my throat. I couldn't afford to freeze. If those men came back, I wouldn't be here. We needed to pack my bags and leave.

Weeks had passed since I'd last been home, if I could even call it that anymore. In that time, my life had changed irrevocably. I had changed. The wild beast within had reshaped me into a near stranger.

Locked away like an animal, I'd been almost feral. I was a werewolf. Survival had been my only goal. After a while, I doubted anyone would ever find Jacob and me. Then that man with short black hair and military precision in his every movement had appeared. He'd freed us. But the gunshot...

The woman's screams still haunted me.

If we had stayed to help, could we have saved him?

Jacob's strong arms encircled me from behind, grounding me with his warm embrace. "Hey. You okay?"

"Hey yourself." I leaned against his hard chest, inhaling his natural musk. He was safe. Familiar. "Hanging in there." A lie, but I was trying.

"Let's not stay here longer than we have to, babe," he said. His hands slid over my arms in slow, soothing strokes. "It's been an intense night, and I smell your fear. Grab your stuff. We'll crash at my place."

I closed my eyes, savoring his touch, but it didn't stop the fresh onslaught of awful memories. Running away wouldn't erase them. They would always be close behind. But waiting here for the past to catch up? That was worse.

"Yeah." I exhaled, forcing myself to move. "You're right. I'll pack an overnight bag." My textbooks and notecards still laid on my bed where we'd sat during our study session. My phone remained plugged in on my nightstand all this time. The last remnants of a life that didn't exist anymore. I ran a shaky hand over the cover of my Physics book.

How would life have turned out if I hadn't been so pissed at Jacob? If we'd had sex instead of me protecting my virtue, maybe none of this would've happened. I might've still been human. "Hopefully, the school won't be jerks about us missing our finals."

Did that really matter? A couple of hours ago, we'd escaped a high-security facility run by mad scientists and their morally bankrupt mercenaries.

Jacob snorted. "School will have to understand. But that's not our focus right now." He sighed, his breath warm against my temple. A few strands of hair tickled my face. "Once we've got our heads on straight, we'll deal with the school shit. Okay, babe?"

He might be right, but what if the university refused to let me come back? What if my hard work was all for nothing? Life would become even harder. No one wanted a college dropout. Would my future crash and burn?

I swallowed hard, emotions bubbling up in my gut. “Fine.”

“Kelly, don’t pull away.” He turned me to face him, his brows creased in concern. “My mom has connections at the university. They’ll be lenient. We missed the exams due to some seriously fucked-up circumstances. There’s no way we could’ve been on campus. We’ll figure it out. My mom can talk to the school on your behalf, too, or at least pass on the proper information to your parents.”

If only he knew about my parents...

Jacob was lucky to have a mom who must’ve been worried sick while we were locked up. Mine hadn’t even noticed I was gone. The last time we’d spoken was our final argument the day I left for college.

“I hope you’re right,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his waist.

His steady heartbeat thumped against my cheek as he held me close. “I’m here, babe. I’m here.” He ran his hand over my back. “We’ll figure this out. Together. The school can’t hold this against us.”

I wanted to believe him. Where did he find so much conviction?

“Guess I’ll gather my things.” Pushing away, I scooped up my books and tucked them into my backpack along with my notes. I wasn’t sure why I bothered. How was I supposed to remember College Algebra or Physics after being locked in a cage like a lab experiment? But if something happened to my place, I didn’t want to lose them forever, especially when I didn’t know how soon I’d return.

“Babe, I can smell your pain.” Jacob rested his hands on my shoulders and guided me onto the bed. “Take it easy. Just breathe. I’ll help you pack, then we can leave.” We sat together, and he draped an arm around my shoulders.

“I know... I’m sorry. It’s just?—”

His finger brushed my lips. “No apologies. Not to me or anyone else. What they did to us was wrong. No one should go through that. If you need anything, you tell me. Promise?” His touch slid to my jawline, gentle yet firm.

“I-I will, I promise.” I leaned my face against his palm, looking into his emerald green eyes. “Same goes for you. That experience was hard on both of us.”

“You’re kind.” He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I might take you up on that.”

“Good.” I leaned my head against his shoulder, enjoying his presence, but we couldn’t stay long. “If you could grab the purple travel bag from the top shelf of my closet, I’ll get my toiletries and quickly change clothes.” The sweatpants and oversized t-shirt needed to go. At least it wasn’t a hospital gown anymore. Jacob wore matching sweats and a Winter Forest shirt and flip-flops we’d bought from a gas station. Somehow, Jacob had the foresight to steal money from a dead mercenary. Touristy clothes were better than nothing. “Like you said, the sooner we’re out of here, the better. They know where I live.”

“Right.” A soft growl rumbled in his chest, and the bed creaked as he stood. His shoulders were tense as he moved. Maybe I’d give him a massage when we got to his place. I owed him at least that much.

After grabbing a pair of shorts, a t-shirt, and undergarments, I walked to the bathroom for my toiletries and to switch clothes. My reflection in the mirror stopped me cold. The girl staring back looked like a total stranger. My dark brown hair was a tangled

mess that refused to be tamed. Dark circles lined my bloodshot eyes from exhaustion. Worst of all, my face was gaunt from weeks of malnutrition. Would I ever feel like myself again?

I dropped my gaze to the make-up bag and shoved my toiletries inside, disgusted by my appearance. At least the change of clothes boosted my mood, even if I'd have loved to take a shower.

Back in the main room of my studio apartment, Jacob tucked a few pairs of socks into the travel bag. As I approached, he lifted a pair of lacy panties and a thong from my drawer. His expression shifted from curiosity to something darker. After a moment, he cocked his head to the side, then turned to face me. Desire darkened his eyes, and he shoved the panties back into the drawer and closed it, as if I'd caught him doing something naughty.

"Hi."

"Hey." My big bad wolf sounded nervous for the first time. Did he think I'd scold him for digging through my underwear drawer? He'd seen my panties before. In fact, I distinctly remembered him ripping them off like they were nothing. "I was just helping you pack."

A smile spread over my lips before I could stop it. "Mhm. Find anything you liked in there?"

"They're nice." He rubbed the back of his neck with a sheepish grin on his lips.

I set my toiletries inside the overnight bag before crossing the space between us. With our bodies close enough to feel each other's warmth, I pulled open the drawer again. "Want to pick some out?" Thankfully, I stored my non-sexy panties elsewhere in the dresser, along with a secret stash of chocolate.

Jacob lifted an eyebrow. His gaze slid from me to the lingerie and back. "Of course." Did he think this was a trap? "I found a few pairs that were... beautiful. When you're ready, I'd love to take them off of you too." His lips quirked. "No rush, though." He slid his fingers through my hair, tilting my head back. Our lips met in a slow, teasing kiss.

"Maybe that's the point... you taking them off, I mean." I could get used to having Jacob in my life. I wanted to get used to this. "Maybe don't rip them off next time, handsome? Admittedly, it was pretty sexy." I bit my lower lip and slid my gaze to his chest. "But my clothes budget is limited, especially with the new semester coming up. You know... books, tuition, and supplies."

"Hmm... I can't make any promises." He cupped my chin, drawing my attention back to his face. His mischievous grin grew wider. "Don't worry. I will replace any panties I shred. Even if I don't, I'm happy to buy you more."

My jaw dropped open. Jacob buying me new panties wasn't exactly offensive. But were we ready for this? It seemed like such an intimate gift. What are you thinking, girl? You two are mates. You've had sex and survived hell together... I shook the thought away, but it was true.

"Jacob, that's..." The words stuck on my tongue, and I drew in a deep breath. "You don't have to do that. But you're so sweet." I pulled away to continue packing all the clothes I could shove into the bag.

"I wouldn't offer if I didn't mean it." His tone had a subtle bite, and he crammed fistfuls of lingerie into the bag without another glance.

I blinked. Had I upset him? "I appreciate your offer. Honestly."

Part of me loved how our relationship had been at the research facility. We'd been

inseparable. The scientists had known that too. We were rarely apart unless they needed to conduct their invasive tests. And our carnal lovemaking had been steamy hot, even when those clinical creeps were making their cold observations. Our bodies had burned for each other, and no one could've ruined that.

But what would happen now that we were back in the real world? Our studies and the Pack needed to be dealt with, and...

How much did I know about Jacob? The All-American frat guy facade I knew had disappeared. He was a werewolf. Would our relationship last?

I swallowed hard at that thought. Our personal lives had been off-limits at the facility. The chance of someone listening in had always been too high. The less the scientists knew about us, and those in our lives, the better.

Get out of your head, Kelly.

The bed groaned under Jacob's weight, snapping me from my thoughts. His shoulders slumped forward as if a heaviness wore him down. He ran his hands through his hair, then held his head.

I reached out to touch his broad back but stopped myself. "Are you okay?" I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets.

Jacob let out a quiet sigh and lifted his gaze to meet mine, but he nodded. "Tired, I guess. You ready to go?" Our compatible vibes that had kept me going at the research facility felt strained. How could I help if he wouldn't let me in? "We can grab dinner on the way to my place." He zipped up my bag as I slipped on a pair of tennis shoes.

Nothing else needed to be done here, aside from pitching whatever stinky mess had expired in my refrigerator. While I was ready, leaving my home with Jacob made me

nervous.

What if we aren't as good for one another as we think?

"Um, yeah. I'm almost ready. I should clean up my fridge and take out the trash, so the place isn't swarming with bugs and rodents when I come back." If I come back... No, I couldn't think like that. I forced a smile onto my face.

Everything was going to be okay. I had to keep telling myself that.

With a nod, Jacob gave his own unconvincing smile before climbing to his feet. "Good idea. Let's get this done. The people responsible for our capture might still be out there." He lowered his gaze, and his lips tightened into a thin line. "I should've been here to protect you." His voice cracked, barely above a whisper. "I don't know how to forgive myself for that. Neither of us would've gone through hell these past few weeks if I'd stayed." His solemn eyes lifted to meet mine. "I'll do what I can to make it up to you. I promise, babe."

My heart sank in my chest, and tears welled in my eyes. I crossed the small space between us with superhuman speed. The conviction in his words twisted a knife in my gut. How could I have second-guessed him? I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my damp cheek against his muscular chest. "Please. Don't think like that. You tried to rescue me—and almost did! I'll always remember that, Jacob. Besides, who knows what would've happened to the other imprisoned shapeshifters? The scientists could've held them forever... or worse."

Jacob held me close. "You're more of an optimist than I imagined. Yes, it's good the others were found. No one should have experienced what we did. Knowing some were there much longer than us is gut-wrenchingly sad. How many people died during the testing? We'll likely never know." He brushed a gentle kiss against my forehead.

My mouth opened, then closed. I hadn't considered that before, and I didn't want to now. The awful experiments had consumed my focus and prayers for our survival.

The savage beast who had clawed my back and turned me into this still haunted my thoughts. I remembered hearing the shot from the other room. Had that person been killed? Mixed emotions swirled in my stomach. If it hadn't been for them, I might be dead. Humans were useless to the scientists.

"Maybe I am an optimist. Maybe not. But I'm glad we're free." I pushed onto my tiptoes and brushed my lips against his. Heat coiled through me, the ache for his touch stronger than ever. I wanted to lose myself in him, to forget everything except how he made me feel alive and loved.

His hand cradled the back of my neck as he deepened the kiss. The sensual caress of his lips ignited something desperate inside me. Each heartbeat sent a new pulse of longing through my veins.

I circled my arms around his neck, drowning in the sweet taste of his lips.

Jacob released his grip on my hair and pulled away as if it pained him. "Babe, we can't." He sighed, then brushed his thumb over my cheek. "We're playing with fire. Both of us are exhausted. Staying isn't a good idea."

Heavy footsteps thumped in the hallway, followed by low voices. My pulse spiked. Every muscle in my body tensed, and I glanced toward the second-floor window. If it was them—if they'd come back for me—I had seconds to act.

Jacob stiffened beside me. "Kelly?" He said my name in a sharp, protective whisper. His voice barely broke through my racing thoughts.

My body coiled, ready to run, even if landing on the pavement below might break

bones. Then I caught the voice. My neighbor. The one who loved blasting heavy metal music at all hours. His friend's laugh echoed down the hall.

I exhaled, my panic subsiding, but my heartbeat didn't slow.

Jacob's hand found mine, and our fingers laced together. "You thought they came back." It wasn't a question. He knew. Of course he did.

Would I ever stop expecting an attack? The question clung to me like a shadow.

Spending the night might erase some of the terrible memories that stained my apartment. But that idea was so stupid right now. "Okay," I said, glancing up at him. "I'll empty the fridge."

Jacob squeezed my hand again. "I'll help."

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JACOB

Electronic music played softly, blending with our breathing in Kelly's car. In the passenger seat, she bobbed her head. Her eyes kept drifting closed before she'd jolt upright again. Finally, her head drooped down at an awkward angle, slumping toward the window.

My vision blurred. Not here. Not again.

The world around me bled away. Kelly wasn't just asleep beside me. She was unconscious in my car as I fought to drive us to safety. Drugs burned hot through my veins. My limbs grew heavier, my grip on the wheel slipping. The screeching tires in my mind overpowered the radio. My breathing came out in harsh pants as helplessness clawed at my throat.

I clenched the steering wheel hard, and it groaned in protest. Never again. She'd be safe from now on.

Stop it. Control yourself.

Wounds from the research facility still tormented me. Leaving behind the Pack members who had helped us escape was hard, but my beast had taken over. All I could think about was freedom and protecting Kelly. Consequences be damned.

Those twisted scientists—who saw shifters as nothing more than test subjects for

their super soldiers—had been my biggest concern. Our first attempt at fleeing had ended in blood, pain, and more time in that damn cage. I'd rather die than go back.

Revisiting Kelly's apartment almost broke me. The mistakes we made there had changed everything. But I couldn't blame Kelly. Entangling myself with a human on a full moon had been foolish, but she was no ordinary woman. She was my mate.

Being home wore her down. The pain in her aura was palpable, and it killed me to see it. Her breathing finally evened out, and I turned the music down another notch. I'd give anything to cover Kelly in bubble wrap and shield her from any more suffering.

She let out a soft snore, then snorted before rubbing her cheek. The cute gesture pulled me from my thoughts. My knuckles ached as I released my grip on the wheel, forcing in a deep breath.

We're going to be okay. No one is behind us. We're safe.

As far as I could tell, at least.

My gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. The leopard print dice served as another reminder. This was different. We were in Kelly's modest smokey mauve sedan. The mercenaries had wrecked my black sports car before it disappeared.

It didn't matter. Cars were replaceable. Lives weren't.

My stomach grumbled as we passed another fast-food restaurant, a reminder of how long it'd been since we'd last eaten a nourishing meal. The small snack at Kelly's apartment before we left hadn't been enough, not when the scientists had kept us weakened. They'd known what they were doing. Starved shifters had a harder time fighting back. We were easier to control.

The burger joint's drive-thru was empty. I pulled in and ordered six double cheeseburgers, two large fries, and drinks. My kitchen wouldn't have any decent food, and I was too exhausted to cook. Once we got home, I needed to eat, then collapse into bed. Each passing second, the weight of exhaustion pressed heavier on my shoulders.

By the time the food was in my hands, Kelly stirred, blinking blearily. The scent of hot beef, toasted buns, sugary drinks, and salty fries filled the car. My stomach clenched in response.

"Here, babe." I handed her the bag of food.

"W-what's going on?" Her voice was thick with sleep as she rubbed her eyes. She sucked in a breath as she eyed the bag, and her belly rumbled with hunger.

"Got us some burgers. I hope you don't mind what I picked." Maybe I should've woken her first, but too late now.

She peeked inside the bag, moving a few items. "Thanks. I'm sure I'll like it. This looks like a lot of food, though." She closed the bag and leaned back in her seat.

"It's been a while since we've eaten enough. Our kind needs a lot of protein." I glanced at her after we stopped at a red light. "It might take time to get used to this new life in the real world. But I'm here. Every step of the way, babe."

Her lips parted, and she glanced at the bag again. "Thank you for being here. I mean it." She started to say more, but shook her head. "I can't wait to eat."

The light turned green, and I eased forward. "You and me both. It won't be long before we reach my place."

I rested my hand on her knee, comforted by how her presence calmed my wolf. It could have been the mate bond, or simply her.

Through the windshield, the nearly full moon bathed the world in a silver glow. Tomorrow marked one month since Kelly's abduction. It was also the day when shifters, particularly werewolves, lost control... when the full moon drove us mad with lust.

Heat licked up my spine, curling around my nerves like a swirling inferno. As my muscles tensed, my skin felt too tight and constricting. The lunar cycle wasn't at its peak yet, but it already had its claws in me, twisting every thought toward Kelly. My wolf knew she was mine, and we craved her.

"Good. I wouldn't want to dig into these fries without you." She pulled one from the bag and popped it into her mouth. A soft moan escaped her lips, and the bag crinkled under her tightened grip. Her stomach growled louder, awakened by the first bite.

Focus on the road. Not on the way she's licking salt from her gorgeous lips.

"Don't tease me," I muttered, voice rough and gravelly. "I might steal that bag from you." The words were playful, but the hunger beneath them ran deeper than food.

She lifted an eyebrow at me. "Who says you could take it from me?" Her sauciness was unexpected, but it reminded me of the woman I'd studied with. The woman I'd fallen head over heels for.

My wolf rumbled, pleased with the challenge.

"Hmm... You might be quick," I said, "but I'm stronger, babe." I flexed my grip on the wheel, knuckles turning white. "This is my neighborhood up here." I took a deep breath and regretted it. Beyond the food, Kelly's arousal punched me in the gut, sharp

and undeniable.

Her gaze drifted from my hands to my face. She shifted back in her seat, her breath catching in her throat. “J-Jacob... Are you okay?”

My vision sharpened, and I knew my beast peeked through my eyes, changing my normally green irises to wolf amber. She still wasn’t used to this side of me. Of us. But I couldn’t blame her. She’d only been a werewolf for a month in a place where I couldn’t teach her about this new life. Those damned scientists would have used that knowledge against us.

I glanced away, hating the flicker of uncertainty on her face. “I’m fine. But you should know, the full moon is tomorrow.”

“Um, okay.” Her voice trembled. “Why is that important?”

“Well...” I cleared my throat. Damn, why did I have to go there? “The days around the full moon are when our wolves take over. The desire to mate becomes overwhelmingly powerful, and we’ll need to shift before the full moon reaches its zenith. If you ignore it too long, the wolf can take that decision away from you.” I glanced over to gauge her reaction. “We don’t have to be intimate tonight. I’d understand.”

She pursed her lips. Her fingers toyed with a loose thread on her jean shorts. “Oh.” I smelled her emotions before I saw them... Fear, worry, and something warm and aching. My wolf growled in approval, but I ignored it. I needed her to tell me what she wanted. Instead, she hunched her shoulders and slid lower in the passenger seat. “I... Um.” Her nervous energy wafted from her like prey hiding from a predator. “Okay.”

What the fuck?

She wanted to say more. I felt it. But something held her back. Where had I gone wrong?

The gated community ahead of us was in one of the nicer areas of town. My parents' business empire provided me with a comfortable upbringing, but wealth didn't always make life easier. I punched in the gate code and waited as it opened before I drove toward my building.

"Um..." Kelly hesitated, then let out a breath. "We were almost intimate back at my apartment, though? But..." She licked her lips, making me want to kiss her again. "If you don't want to, I can wait..." Her scent told me everything I needed to know. She wanted me, even if things between us were awkward.

"That's not what I meant, babe. I want you." Each word rumbled in my chest. "I just don't want to push you into doing something that might not be your choice. Not when the full moon's pull can cloud everything else. But fuck, Kelly." I blew out a breath. "I need you. Every part of me aches to claim you, and I don't trust my beast to listen if you change your mind."

The second the words left my mouth, regret hit me hard. Why hadn't I just agreed with her? My desire to protect her kept screwing things up.

"Jacob..." She worried her lower lip. "Please, I want this. I want you. But I'm scared." She held up her hand before I could speak. "Not of you. It's just... I'm terrified of how much I crave your body." Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. She ran a hand through her hair, sinking lower in her seat.

Fuck. I hate this.

She'd been through enough. I didn't want to add to her burdens. We were trying to rebuild our lives. Neither of us should feel rushed.

“We should talk this out, babe. Just... Maybe after we eat.” My voice sounded foreign to my own ears, thick with emotions I couldn’t put into words.

This wasn’t me. Around humans, I was the easygoing All-American frat guy who always had a smirk. But right now? I wanted to eat, shift, and curl up for a week in wolf form. But I didn’t have that luxury. I had to take care of Kelly. Life had become so much more complicated than I ever imagined.

“Okay. I...” Defeat clung to Kelly’s scent, a quiet resignation that made me uneasy. The emotional weight from her side of the car was oppressive, but I did my best to shove it aside.

I pulled into a parking spot on the side of my building. The top story had floor-to-ceiling windows. My own personal retreat overlooked Winter Forest and the woods beyond. Hunger gnawed at my stomach, but a faint vibration from the trunk stole my attention.

Kelly glanced at me before turning toward the backseat, but she remained quiet. Who the hell was calling at this time of night? It had to be her phone since mine was long gone. At least my condo still had a landline at my mother’s insistence. Maybe I’d thank her for that.

Silence stretched between us, so I climbed out of the car. We met at the trunk. She balanced the bag of fast food and two drinks. Why was she back here?

I grabbed her travel bag and backpack. This night had been going fine. Freedom from the research facility, having proper food again... When had it all gone so wrong? No matter what I did, I kept fucking up.

We headed inside, and I went straight to the stairwell. After being locked in a cage for a month, I refused to climb inside a small metal box. Besides, I needed to burn off

some frustration. Behind me, Kelly panted as she struggled to keep up. I slowed my pace, guilt pawing at me.

By the time we reached the fifth floor, my pulse had steadied, but my nerves were still raw. The modern, crisp interior of the building had drawn me in when I moved here. It contrasted sharply with my parents' traditional, oak-heavy mansion. Maybe that was why I liked this place.

I pulled out my key and unlocked the door. Kelly's steps slowed behind me. She swept her gaze across the small hall, taking everything in. The top floor once held three apartments, but a previous owner had converted it into one unit. No noisy neighbors. No one close enough to overhear anything they shouldn't.

Now it was my sanctuary.

Kelly inhaled like she wanted to say something, but remained quiet. I pushed open the door before stepping inside. The main entryway led into the large open-concept living room and kitchen. I set her bags next to the oversized sectional couch with a dull thud. It felt damned good to be home.

When the door didn't close behind me, I turned.

She stood in the doorway. Her eyes widened as she scanned the expansive condo. Ice clattered in the sodas she still held.

I lifted an eyebrow, not sure what that expression meant. "What's wrong, babe?"

She sucked in a shaky breath and lowered her gaze to the food in her hands. Her shoulders hunched forward. "I'm..." She hesitated, acting like a submissive wolf on the verge of tucking tail and bolting. "Don't worry about it. You said we should talk after eating, so let's eat the burgers before they get cold."

My jaw clenched. I hated she was shutting down like this. That hadn't been my intention. I'd wanted us to talk about the intimacy werewolves needed on each full moon once we fueled our bodies. However, I'd stuck my foot in my mouth, and I was dealing with the consequences.

"Sure." I nodded toward her bags. "Your stuff's here. This place has three extra bedrooms if you want one." The words felt like lead on my tongue, but I couldn't take them back now. I needed her in my bed, but I couldn't risk pushing her too far.

She hesitated, the fast-food bag crinkling under her grip. Her lips parted in surprise, but she shook her head. Instead, her gaze remained fixed on the floor. She still wouldn't look at me.

I blew out a breath and turned away, running a hand through my hair. We were free. We should've been okay. But I couldn't shake the feeling we'd left something behind in that cage. Something neither of us knew how to fix.

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KELLY

Each word Jacob said hurt worse than the last. Tears burned the back of my throat, but I refused to let them fall. He'd done enough damage.

As a werewolf, I doubted I could hide my pain from him, not when he scented emotions better than I could read them. All I saw in Jacob was frustration and anger, but maybe he was better at masking his feelings.

I locked the front door behind me, taking a deep breath to steady myself before walking toward him. My focus remained fixed on the food in my hands, setting the bag and sodas on the breakfast bar. Was this his only dining space? There had to be a kitchen table somewhere. This place was too big not to have a dining room. But the only noticeable seating was two barstools tucked together. Much closer than I wanted to be with him right now.

We ate our cheeseburgers and fries in silence. I kept waiting for him to say something, anything, but neither of us relented. Fine with me. Not really. I loathed the tension simmering between us.

When we finished, I glanced around his place. Condo? Pretty sure he'd meant to say he lived in a freaking penthouse. His home was massive and much bigger than I'd expected. My cheeks burned with embarrassment. Why had I taken him to my shitty apartment? I wished I could escape to one of his extra bedrooms. Why had he even asked me that? Why shouldn't I sleep in his bed?

For weeks, we'd been trapped in a cage together. He'd helped me through the most painful experience of my life. If he hadn't found me, I wouldn't have made it out. Would I even know how to sleep without him beside me?

His wolf had curled against me every night. The warm fur against my cheek helped when I struggled to breathe past my fear. Was that gone now that we were free?

If Jacob wanted to sleep apart, I wouldn't stand in his way.

The vibration of my phone snapped me from my thoughts, and I slid off the barstool, grateful for the distraction. When I pulled it from my backpack, I checked the caller ID to see a familiar number on the screen. Emma? Oh god. She was my only friend aside from Jacob.

"Who is it, Kelly?" His words sounded tight and exhausted, and when I glanced back, he was watching me.

"I have to take this. Be back soon."

I hurried deeper into the apartment and ducked into a room, shutting the door behind me. A bathroom. Great... whoops. Too late to switch now. I turned on the faucet, hoping the noise might help drown out my conversation. Who knew what Emma might say? I hoped nothing too crazy since I was at my limit, if not past it. Should I even answer this? My thumb hovered over decline. Your mental health is more important. But I couldn't do this to her.

"Hey, Emma."

"Kelly! Oh my god! Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for weeks!"

The panic in her voice hit like a gut punch. I hadn't thought of her once this past month. But it wasn't like I'd had much time. Or maybe I'd had too much time to reflect. Still, guilt settled on my chest like a boulder.

"I'm so sorry. I..." How was I supposed to explain that mad scientists trying to create super soldiers out of shapeshifters had mistakenly kidnapped me? Or that I was one of those shifters now? No, I couldn't tell her any of that.

I leaned against the bathroom counter and stared up at the bright white ceiling, wishing I'd listened to my instinct and not answered. "I don't know how to explain what happened. It's... complicated."

"You missed final exams!" Emma nearly shrieked. "I tried talking to campus security. Bastards. I was—and still am—really worried. Kelly, this isn't like you. Talk to me. Please!"

I pulled the phone from my ear and lowered the volume. A headache throbbed behind my eyes, and her shouting wasn't helping. A quick glance at my call log made my chest tighten. There were almost a hundred missed calls and even more unread texts. Several unknown numbers, possibly from the university or spam, were also there. "Please, calm down."

"Calm down?! Kelly Anita Lopez?—"

"Listen, it's late." I sighed, pressing my fingers against my temple. "I've had a really long day. Can I call you back tomorrow after I've slept? It'll be easier for me."

"Easier...? I..." A long exhale came through the line. I wasn't making this better, but what else could I say?

Should I just tell her? This conversation drained my remaining energy, but maybe I

should just say it. Ugh. “I was taken. It was impossible to attend my finals. Just... don’t tell anyone. I need to talk with the university and?—”

“Taken?! Oh my god, Kelly! What the hell?! You vanished, and no one knew anything. I thought you were dead .”

A sharp breath hissed through my teeth. Shit. Argh! This whole thing was spiraling out of control. My fingers tightened around the phone, and it creaked in warning. “Emma, please. I?—”

“No! You don’t just ‘please’ your way out of this. Tell me you’ve spoken with the police! Who took you? How the hell did you get away?” The rustling of papers and jingle of car keys over the line sent my pulse racing.

Oh no... No, no, no!

“Emma?” My voice rose, panic flooding my veins. “What are you doing?”

“I’m coming to your place.” Confidence radiated from her voice. She was headstrong at the worst of times. “You shouldn’t be alone after being abducted. It’s not safe.”

My heart pounded in my chest. Why had I opened my mouth? I glanced at the door. The walls felt like they were closing in. This was bad. “I’m... not alone. And I’m not at my place right now?”

Stop it, Kelly! Don’t say more.

“Why was that a question?” Emma bit out the words. “Who are you with? You should’ve called me sooner.” Keys clattered in the little metal dish beside her front door. “Talk to me, Kelly. Answer my questions.”

“I’m with Jacob.” Emma knew I hung out with him. We were all in the same English class. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d come to that conclusion on her own. “We...” Keep it vague. No details. “I reached out to him? I should’ve come to you. Sorry, but I only just got back to safety... and I’m exhausted.”

Emma let out another huff. “At least you’re with someone, I guess. You had a crush on Jacob before. Is there a reason you went to him with this? You were so skittish around him before.”

I gritted my teeth, wishing she’d save the questions for later. But she wasn’t wrong. The old me would never have run to Jacob first. She would’ve overthought every word and glance from him.

I should’ve thought this through before blurting out who I was with. “Things are different now. I studied with him the night of my abduction. And... I don’t know.” What could I say to make her understand? Probably nothing. “We opened up to one another. He might have feelings for me too. So, we’re hanging out until I get things figured out with school and work. I hope you and I can get together soon, though.” All of that was largely true.

“Jacob Armstrong has feelings for you? Wow. Didn’t see that coming.” She remained quiet for a few moments. Only her breathing told me she was still there. “Maybe you made the right call. I’ve always believed love overcomes the toughest odds. I’m not saying you two love each other. Just that it can help a person through dark times. But we need to meet up. I have to see you with my own eyes.” Her words brightened a little. The sadness lingered, but at least she didn’t hate my guts. I’d been afraid she would.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” Although I wasn’t so sure about Jacob’s feelings. But I needed to stay positive, even if I wanted to lie in bed with a book and forget everything else. Venting about my feelings would be a mistake. Some memories

needed to be locked away, not shared with her. “Thank you, Emma. Your words mean a lot. I’ll text you tomorrow?”

“Okay, I’ll look for your text.” Emma muffled a yawn, but my heightened senses easily picked up the sound. “If I don’t hear from you, I’m calling Jacob and making him dish. I have his phone number, too, you know.” She paused. “Now that I think about it... I haven’t heard from him lately. I tried calling him before my Physics exam, but he never answered. Maybe he’s been busy. I’m sure he’s in high demand.”

“Huh, that’s weird.” Listening to her ramble made me nervous. Would she make the connection? Guess she didn’t realize Jacob hadn’t taken his finals either. No way did I want to tell her his side of the story. Who knew what Jacob and his mom might say to the college? If Emma talked with someone about his absence being connected to mine, I’d freak the hell out. “Talk to you later, Emma. Good night.”

“Night!” She stifled another yawn. “Get some sleep, and I’m glad you’re home! Remind me to give you my spring semester schedule. When you register for your classes, you can try to join the ones I’m in.”

“Great, will do.” I ended the call.

Planning my next semester courses usually excited me, but I couldn’t think about that right now. What if the college didn’t believe me? They might think I was making all this up. I could fail my fall classes and lose my scholarships. They were the one thing keeping me afloat. Money was tight. How would I continue my studies without them?

My pulse still hammered away in my ears as I turned off the faucet. The longer I stayed in the bathroom, the more obvious it became that I didn’t want to face Jacob. No, I just needed space to breathe and get myself under control.

A slow, rolling nausea crept through me before slamming into my belly. I barely

made it to the toilet. My legs buckled, sending me to my knees on the cool marble floor. The once-delicious burgers and fries betrayed me, racing back up my throat. My stomach purged itself of every ounce of food and drink I'd consumed in the past few hours.

The doorknob turned, and from the corner of my eye, I spotted Jacob standing there with concern etched on his face. "Are you okay?" The gentleness in his voice made my stomach clench, and I jerked back around to puke again.

This time, I noticed some blood in the vomit. Despite the scientists' hopes, this couldn't be pregnancy-related. My birth control shot lasted for three months, and I got it in early December.

What the hell? Had the scientists been lacing our awful food with poison?

As I flushed the toilet to hide it, Jacob disappeared from sight. Guess that answered his question.

How embarrassing and scary.

I wanted to bury my face in the toilet... or maybe under a pillow, even a rock. Anything to hide my mortification would work.

Within seconds, I heard the faucet run nearby. A warm hand swept my hair back as I heaved, sparing my locks from the onslaught a little too late. His other hand moved in slow, soothing circles against my back.

"I brought a washcloth when you're ready for it, babe."

Jacob's kindness tugged at my heartstrings. He hadn't left to avoid the mess but to help me. His breathing was steady, but something about it felt measured, as if he was

fighting the urge to say or do more to help.

Be nice to him. He's not out to get you.

Tears welled in my eyes. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and press my cheek against his chest. But I felt disgusting. My stomach finally settled enough for me to lean back. I closed the lid and flushed the toilet again. Ugh. The lingering scent of vomit clung to the air, and I grimaced. The fact Jacob stayed unfazed made his presence more meaningful.

"Thank you," I whispered, accepting the washcloth. I flashed him a watery smile, then wiped off my face. "I'll clean up before I take a shower. Just tell me where the disinfectant wipes or cleaning products are."

Jacob crouched beside me. He tilted my chin up, forcing me to meet his gaze. His thumb brushed along my jaw. "Don't worry about it. Take your shower and relax, babe. You don't have to clean anything." His gaze flicked to my lips. "It's not important. You are."

Relief eased some of the tension in my shoulders. "Thanks."

"Are you okay?" His knee brushed against mine. He was so close, his presence overwhelming. Heat radiated from his skin, and his muscles coiled like he was holding back. But why?

I pressed a shaky hand against my stomach, trying to will the nausea away. "Um..." It had to be stress or the greasy food. Or the fact my entire life had been turned upside down. But the blood...? That's a problem for future me. "Probably just nerves?" My voice trembled. "We just escaped a crazy research facility. It's still hard to believe we're free. I'm afraid I'll wake up in that cage and discover this was a dream." My fingers tightened around the washcloth, and I shrugged a shoulder. "I don't know."

“It’ll take time for our wounds to heal.” Jacob’s hand skimmed my back, heat bleeding into my skin. “You’re shaking.” His nostrils flared as he drew in a breath. He ran his hand along my arm, then paused. “You feel cold, and your scent...” He tilted his head to the side. “It’s changed.” He placed his hands on his thighs, his knuckles turning white. “What’s wrong?”

I blinked in confusion. “What do you mean?” Did he notice the blood?

“Not sure.” He inhaled again, as if trying to place this mysterious scent. Something unreadable flickered across his face before he shut it down. “You just... smell different. Could be the stress. Your body’s working overtime.” His jaw clenched, but he exhaled through his nose like he was letting it go. For now.

Forcing a laugh, I waved a hand toward the toilet. “Baby, I did just puke my guts out.”

“Let me help you up.” With a frown, he slid his arm under mine, pulling me to my feet. “I’ll grab a towel for your shower. If you’re hungry, I can order a pizza or get something lighter for you?”

My legs wobbled as I leaned against the bathroom counter. The thought of eating something else made my belly churn again. “No, thank you. No more food right now.”

“Makes sense.” He glanced down at the toilet, then back at me. “Let me know if you change your mind. My offer stands.”

“I will.” But food was the last thing I wanted. “Thank you.”

“No problem, babe. Enjoy your shower.”

Jacob lingered a second longer than necessary. His muscles tensed like he was fighting the urge to stay. He curled his fingers into fists at his sides, then shifted slightly like he wanted to step forward. Instead, he ran a hand through his hair before he walked out.

The familiar pull of desire for him was strong, even though I knew the full moon played a role. Should I invite him to shower with me? Both of us needed one after our escape.

His words from the car echoed in my ears. I want you. Things would be okay. I had to believe that.

When he failed to return with a towel, I peeked under the sink. The scent of bleach from the disinfectant wipes stung my nose as I cleaned the bathroom. He'd told me not to worry about it, but I couldn't leave things like this, even if the wipes' scent made me retch.

After I finished cleaning the toilet, I turned on the shower. Hot water cascaded over my naked body as I stepped beneath the spray. Steam curled around me in a warm embrace.

I poured shampoo into my palm and scrubbed at my scalp, letting the lather drip down my shoulders. Leaning my forehead against the cool tile, I let out a shaky breath. The heat should've melted the tension from my body, but it didn't.

Water rained down my arms and back, rinsing away the soap. No matter how much I scrubbed, I still felt raw. Like something lurked beneath the surface of my skin. The beast was always there, and it scared me. When would I have Jacob's confidence with that side of myself?

Exhaustion settled deep into my bones. Everything we'd been through frayed my

nerves. That was all this was... stress. Too much fear. Too little rest. It had to be.

Lifting my face to the water's spray, I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the thoughts away. Maybe after some sleep, I'd feel normal again.

Or so I hoped.

JACOB

The scent of Kelly's vomit clung to my nostrils, but I'd smelled worse. Cleaning up after everything we'd been through wasn't important. We had four other bathrooms to use. The sound of rummaging and the sharp stench of bleach told me she'd gone ahead with it anyway. I couldn't blame her.

Knowing she was in the shower made me wish I was with her. The sensuality of holding her close and feeling her small hands on my chest would be heaven. Now it felt like we were miles apart.

I'd tried not to listen to her conversation with Emma, but my wolf's heightened senses had perked up. The running faucet had done little to muffle their words.

Kelly had told Emma about her abduction. What was she thinking? My jaw clenched. If Emma went to the authorities, it would bring scrutiny none of us needed, especially the Pack. It had enough to deal with, like handling the crazy scientists. Emma meant well, but she was in over her head. She'd already gone to campus security. What was stopping her from taking this further?

My mother needed to know what was happening before this shit spiraled out of control. She could help smooth things over with the college, maybe even head off a police report. But the Pack couldn't control everything. And what about Kelly? She'd agreed to focus on healing instead of rushing back to school. Had she meant that?

I leaned against the wall next to the bathroom door. Hovering wouldn't help. She didn't need me here stalking her, but I hated feeling useless. And right now, that feeling overwhelmed me.

With nowhere else to direct my energy, I wandered into the kitchen. I'd already tossed our trash and wiped down the counter earlier. Checking the fridge gave me something to do. Nothing seemed to be expired or needed to be tossed, but my fridge was bare. Guess I should figure out some groceries.

Rosalind, the cleaner my parents employed, must've taken care of the place while I was gone. If she came tomorrow as usual, that could be a problem. She might see Kelly—or her things—and she'd tell my mother. If word got back to my mother, there'd be no keeping this quiet. I wasn't ready for the questions that would bring. Fuck. I needed to figure out what to do.

Placing my palms on the granite counter, I splayed my fingers wide. What else could I do to keep myself busy?

The shower shut off, and the silence piqued my interest.

Were we ready to talk about what happened? Should I ask her to sleep in my bed? After spending so many nights curled up together in the cage, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to sleep alone. Being trapped at the research facility was hell, but it had brought us closer together. That meant something.

The bathroom door's hinges squeaked. "Jacob?" Kelly's voice drew my attention, and I stepped out of the kitchen. She peeked out with wet, dripping hair. "There aren't any towels in here? Could you get me one, please?"

Shit. I knew I'd forgotten something. That was why I'd left the bathroom in the first place. My muddled thoughts had distracted me.

“Sorry I didn’t grab you one sooner, babe. I don’t use that bathroom much, so I don’t keep towels in there.” I headed for the main bathroom’s linen closet. Few towels in here too, but I didn’t need much. With a cleaner handling most chores, I kept things simple.

“Thank you.” Kelly raised her voice as if I wouldn’t hear her. She still hadn’t adjusted to what we were.

Before I introduced her to the Pack, she needed to learn more about werewolves. For her own safety, if nothing else. She wasn’t alone in this. I’d teach her what most wolves learned as cubs.

When I returned, she stood behind the cracked bathroom door. Despite being mostly hidden, the curve of her breast caught my attention. My gaze dipped lower, taking in the glistening beads of water trailing over her skin. She must’ve noticed since her breath hitched. Fuck, I needed to stop looking.

“I have the towel.” The scent of her arousal punched me in the nose. My wolf wanted us to push inside, set her on the counter, and claim her as ours. I needed to feel her tight core clenched around my cock... I needed her .

“Oh... Um...” Her voice cracked, but there was no fear or discomfort. Only hesitation. She chewed her lower lip in that sexy way that made me want to kiss her.

I held out the towel, fighting every instinct to touch her. “Here you go.” Her perky breasts heaved, demanding I take those dusky pink buds into my mouth and slide my tongue over them.

Walk away. Take a cold shower. But my feet remained rooted in place.

“Thanks.” She reached out, her fingers brushing mine as she took it, then moved

behind the door to dry off.

I shouldn't have looked. But the foggy mirror caught just enough of her bare shoulders, the rivulets of water cascading down her spine. Damn it. Don't watch her, perv.

"We should talk soon." The words came out in a gravelly rumble. Calm down. "Also... if you want to come to bed with me, I'd..." What was I even saying? Regardless, we needed to get things sorted out. The sooner the better.

Kelly licked her lower lip. "Right, yes. That's a good idea." She paused, tilting her head slightly. "Y-your bed? You want me to stay there tonight? Or... just to talk?" She ran the towel over her arms, her chest, her legs. My teeth ground together, and I shoved my hands into my pockets. I wanted to be the one drying her off. After a moment, she wrapped it around herself.

I should've given her space. But I couldn't stop myself. I nudged the door open, needing her. "Be with me." I circled her damp shoulders, pulling her close. "Do you want that?"

"Of course I do. Very much." She rested her head against my chest, her arms looping around my waist. Having her in my embrace soothed my restless beast.

"Okay, I'll grab your bags and show you around." I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Whatever happens tonight... I want you to know it's your choice. We'll move at your pace."

Kelly frowned, lines creasing her forehead. "W-what? We're not rushing anything. This isn't our first time. We've been intimate before, a few times actually."

"I know."

She was right. Our first time was unforgettable.

The beasts within us were desperate to mate under the full moon's power. Kelly had been driven mad with need. We'd given in to our desires while the scientists watched us like guinea pigs behind the one-way mirror. Once Kelly noticed them, it had shaken her. But I'd brought her back to me and only me.

Those bastards hadn't deserved our attention. They didn't matter then, and they sure as hell didn't matter now. We were free. Together.

On our way through the living room, I grabbed her bags. We reached the hall leading to the large main bedroom.

"Are you worried I'm going to freak out during sex? I won't, I promise," Kelly said. Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. "I can't wait until we're driven to the edge, though. What I felt before..." She wrapped her arms around herself. "Before we made love that night... I just... That was scary. Does it feel so intense every month? I know barely anything about what—who—I am." She glanced down the hallway at the row of doors.

"No, it won't be that way." I reached for her hand, threading my fingers through hers. "You can smell my desire for you. I know you can." I drew in a breath before continuing, careful with my words. "What happened last month... It only happens like that when you fight it. If you're intimate with someone, the beast doesn't take over like that." I squeezed her hand. "It's going to be okay, babe. I'll make sure you're well taken care of." A slow smile curved my lips before I could stop it. "Your body might ache for a couple of days after we're done."

She giggled, a pretty pink blush spreading over her cheeks. I guided her toward my bedroom. "I'm looking forward to that. Maybe we'll have to warm up to that level of activity." She tilted her head as she eyed my bed. "Perhaps, tonight?"

Blood rushed to my cock, making me hard. I wanted to strip away the towel and lay her down. “Maybe we will.” My thumb brushed the back of her hand. Thoughts of making love to her swirled in my mind. I leaned against the door frame, trying to focus on what she’d said before. “Listen, I know this is new to you. I will help you. The full moon’s influence happens every month. Twice if there’s a blue moon. Those are really powerful.” I raked my gaze over her. “You’ll get used to it after a while. I used to plan for the moons before—” The second the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Kelly probably didn’t want to hear about my sex life before her.

Her lips parted, but after a beat of silence, she closed her mouth. “Oh... okay. Um... Thank you.” A wave of awkwardness rolled off her, hitting my nose. Shit. Why was she embarrassed when I was the one making an ass of myself?

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. That’s all in the past now.”

Her gaze lifted to mine, and she licked her lips. “In the past? So... you won’t be sleeping with other people now? I don’t know how any of this works.”

“Hell no, there’s only you now.” I cocked my head, confused by these questions. “We’re mates, Kelly. I wouldn’t want anyone else. You are the one I desire.” No one else even came close.

A weight seemed to lift from her shoulders, and her face lit up with a bright smile. “Okay. I’m glad. That’s how I feel about you as well, Jacob.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth, then glanced down at her towel. Her fingers toyed with the edge, pausing just long enough to steal my breath. “Take me.” The words were soft but certain.

Before I could respond, she let the towel slip, baring herself to me. Her gaze slid up my body before locking onto mine. The hunger in her beautiful brown eyes set me on fire.

My pulse raced as I set her bags down. In a few strides, I closed the distance between us. This moment felt like heaven after the shit we'd been through. I brushed my lips over hers, tracing my tongue along the seam before deepening the kiss. My hand slid over her breast, palm grazing her hardened nipple.

Then Kelly froze. Her hands pushed against my chest, and she leaned back, eyes wide. "Wait, I haven't brushed my teeth after?"

"Don't care."

The scent of her arousal overpowered everything else. Her breath didn't matter. All I could think about was being inside her. I laid her back on the bed, settling between her thighs. Her core glistened with desire, and a growl rumbled in my chest.

Her fingers clenched the blankets. Each of her breaths came out in short pants as I trailed kisses from her neck, over her collarbone, down her stomach. She watched me the whole way on the journey to her thighs. Her breath hitched in anticipation.

My tongue flicked out, tasting her sweetness. Feeling the press of her thighs against my head was like an aphrodisiac all on its own. One of my hands slid up to her breast while the other caressed her waist. All the while, I nuzzled deeper, my nose brushing her clit as I lapped at her entrance.

Being home and having her in the warmth of my bed made me believe—for just a moment—that everything would be okay. We were safe again.

For now.

But the Pack would come sniffing around sooner than later. And when they found out about Kelly, everything would change. They'd want answers.

KELLY

As Jacob's lips and teeth caressed their way down my body, I fisted my hands into the plush comforter. His touch turned me into a quivering puddle of lust, and I wanted so, so much more. A moan slipped from my throat as he nuzzled my wet folds with his nose. I threaded my fingers into his blond hair, cradling his head as he nipped me.

"Yes..." The brush of his tongue over the seam of my core had me whimpering and tilting my hips in eagerness. "Oh yes, Jacob!"

He slid his hand up my torso to squeeze my breast and brush his thumb over my hardened nipple. His green gaze remained fixed on mine, watching my every reaction for signs of pleasure or apprehension. He sank his tongue between my folds, sliding it over my clit before sucking on it.

"Mmm... Babe... That feels so good." My fingers tightened around his hair, and I tugged at it before realizing what I was doing. His eyes flashed wolf amber. "Don't stop." Did my big bad wolf enjoy getting his hair pulled, or should I stop?

The words—and hair pulling—seemed to urge Jacob onward. He pressed a finger into my pussy as his tongue flicked over my clit in swift strokes. My body accommodated him, but when he added the second digit, the slight stretch sent a shiver racing up my spine.

I cried out and tilted my head back, writhing against his mouth and hand. Making love to Jacob nourished me—body and soul. Feeling the depths of his emotions made a broken piece of me feel whole again.

Mates. We're mates.

My wolf brushed against the inside of my chest, agreeing with the sentiment, even if I wasn't sure I grasped the ramifications of that word. But Jacob said I'd learn about what being a werewolf meant, and I believed him.

The thought was shattered as he picked up the pace, rocking his curved fingers into me harder. A trickle of sweat beaded on my forehead, and my toes curled as ecstasy barreled down upon me. "Oh... oh yes... Jacob!" I screamed my pleasure, not caring what his neighbors thought. My thighs pressed against the sides of his head, unsure if I could take more delicious torment, and a hot growl trickled from his lips, intensifying the sensations with the vibrations on my clit.

For a moment, I wondered if I was hurting him—or if I'd done something wrong, but the hungry way his beast watched me through those glowing amber eyes told me my fears were lies. Still, I loosened my hold on his hair and stretched my fingers, feeling the tension in my joints fade.

Despite the first orgasm, Jacob didn't relent. His fingers kept thrusting into me, and his tongue swirled over my clit like his life depended on it. Something about this intimate moment together felt different. In the past, when we'd been in the research facility, he was hot and had a dominant edge, but right now, he was almost feral. It made me wonder how much he'd been holding back.

I fisted my hand in the back of his shirt and tugged him toward me. While I loved the feeling of his mouth and fingers, I needed his cock. He let out a muffled curse as he jerked forward, nearly face-planting on to my stomach. The touristy Winter Forest,

NC shirt ripped in my hands, and I grimaced. Guess I didn't know my strength now that I was a werewolf.

"Whoops, sorry about that," I said, feeling my cheeks warm with embarrassment. "Please take me, babe. I need you inside me." The words came out as horny mews, but they must've hit their mark. Another low rumble sounded in his chest as he crawled up my body to kneel between my spread, pleasure-damp thighs.

"It served its purpose." Jacob stared down at me with a stark intensity in his eyes, and I felt my mouth go dry. He ripped the shirt away with one tug and tossed it aside. "Don't worry about it." His voice maintained that low, gravelly sound. Jacob's beast still lingered just below the surface of his skin. "I said it before, Kelly... Don't apologize to me."

"Sorry. Err... I mean, okay." I ran my hands over his muscular chest. It didn't matter how many times I saw him shirtless, I doubted I'd ever get used to this marvelous sight. Each muscle wasn't there for show. He was powerful. Seeing him fight for me in his wolf and human forms when the mercenaries came for us... God, I'm so glad he found me.

"Good girl." His lips descended on mine, and I tasted the salty sweetness of myself on his tongue. He kissed with passion and vigor, like a thirsty man desperate for water.

My fingers trailed over his belly button before toying with the hem of his sweatpants. They were from the research facility and still had that scent of bleach and chemicals. I was pretty sure they'd be tossed out like mine were when I changed at my apartment. It gave me a mischievous idea and a way of ridding them from Jacob's life. Hmm... I placed my hands near his hips along the hem, then jerked outward. The pants ripped at the seams, allowing my naked body to feel Jacob's hard cock against my thigh.

He leaned back from the kiss to raise an eyebrow at me. His lips pursed as his gaze swept my features like he was trying to figure me out.

“Not sorry,” I said with a playful grin. “Seemed like you needed some help. So I figured?—”

His lips captured mine again, cutting off my words, but he ripped the pants the rest of the way off. Again, cleaning up my half-done job, but I’d tried. He kicked the pants aside, then nudged my legs wider with his knee and positioned himself at my entrance.

Then he jerked back to stare at me with those wild wolf amber eyes. “Shit. We haven’t been using protection.” His gaze swept from mine to my stomach. His erection softened. “And those scientists said?—”

I pressed a finger against his lips, not wanting to remember their words right now. “I get a birth control shot to help with period stuff.” My other hand wrapped around his length, stroking him. “I didn’t say anything when we were there because I was afraid they’d mess with my hormones and undo it somehow.” I gave a sheepish smile. “Guess I should’ve said something before now, though.”

“I think I almost had a heart attack.” He looked ready to collapse on me in relief. “But smart move, babe.”

My thumb caressed over his cheek, marveling at the scrape of his stubble. “Don’t even think of dying on me, baby. You’re...” How could I put into words what I felt for him? Should I? “You’re too hot.” His cock twitched in my hand as I stroked it back to full attention.

“Oh?” A knowing smirk tugged at his lips. “Is that so?” His gaze drifted between us. “You’re sexy too.” The tension melted like butter on a hot pan, and he bent his head

to kiss and nip at my shoulder before shifting up to my neck.

I guided him to my slit, needing him inside me more than ever. The slow press of his cock inching in caused me to moan. I wrapped my arms around his back, digging my fingers into his broad shoulders as he kept up the slow and steady pace. My core stretched around him. Fuck, he was so big, but he treated me with such care despite the fierce beast he battled within. I had my own that was desperate for more of Jacob.

Fully seated, he propped himself up on his elbow to look down at me, but remained in place. “You feel amazing. So tight and wet.” His eyes glowed wolf amber as he watched me. It was fucking hot.

“You too. You’re... whoa.” I wiggled against him, but he kept my pelvis pinned to the soft mattress with his hips. “More. Give me more. I’m not a human.” I pushed against his chest, and he stumbled, nearly dislodging from my pussy. That stumble allowed me to flip him onto his back and climb on top before he regained his composure. Either that or he allowed me to be on top.

“Whoa? Mmm... Yes, I’m aware, babe.” The lazy quirk of his lips told me both options could be possible. I’d surprised him, and he was letting me ride him. He ran his hands over my sides. Goosebumps broke out over my skin as he cupped my breasts. “They’re so beautiful.” His thumbs brushed over my hardened nipples, causing my pussy to squeeze his hard length.

I planted my hands on his chest and rocked my hips teasingly. Two could play this game. “Is that so?” My teeth tugged at my lower lip as I watched him. With each thrust of him in my core, my wolf howled for more. We needed to show him how much he meant to us. She scrabbled against my body with her claws, as if trying to dig her way out to greet Jacob. One moment, my vision was normal, and the next I saw the dark circles under Jacob’s eyes and the stubble on his jaw. I blinked, surprised by the beast taking control of my sight.

Jacob's gaze lifted from my breasts to my face, and that sexy smirk grew even wider. Damn, he always knew how to take my breath away. "Looks like your wolf is just as happy to be with me as you are." He brushed a hand along my cheek, then slid it down to rest over my heart. The caress of fur gliding beneath my skin, responding to his beast, was so vivid it felt almost real, and I jumped with a yelp, causing him to slide out of me.

"Wow, I felt... But that can't be?—"

"It's real, or at least, the sensation is." He looked at his hand before placing it against my chest once more. "I feel your wolf. Can you feel mine?" After meeting his gaze, I pressed my palm to Jacob's pecs to test this theory.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Could it be I wasn't as receptive to this as Jacob? I had no idea what I was doing. My lack of knowledge would get me in trouble one of these days. "No, I don't—" As soon as the words left my lips, Jacob's skin seemed to expand, and his beast brushed against his skin to rub against me. I bit back a scream. "Whoa! That's... wild."

"I'll show you wild, babe."

Before I could ask what he meant, I was on my back, staring up at him. His cock pressed inside my pussy again, and I dug my nails into his shoulders. "Yes!" My legs wrapped around his waist as he thrust hard in, then pulled almost fully out before slamming forward again. "More!"

He kissed and licked along my neck, but did as I asked, taking me harder and faster. The way he rotated his hips hit all the tantalizing spots inside me. His skill in bed fascinated me to no end. He was my first, but I didn't think I should tell him that. Would he feel weird about that admission?

My legs tightened around his waist as the flames of lust licked its way over my body. “Shit... I’m close, babe.” I dug my nails into his back harder, feeling a soft rumbling from his chest as he nipped my neck. I tilted my head to the side, letting him have full access to my throat. The scrape of his teeth had my body crumbling under his touch. My core clenched tight around him, and I cried out as I writhed with pleasure, convulsing and moaning.

He kept driving his cock into me, dragging out my orgasm, as he bit my neck harder. I screamed again as toe-curling desire drove me over the edge once more. My brain didn’t have time to contemplate if this was a new climax or if I was riding out the second one. All I knew was the pressure of his teeth on my skin did things for me.

With a low groan, he finally stilled within me. His cock twitched as he emptied himself.

My fingers ached when I released my grip on his shoulders, only to notice a slickness along Jacob’s skin. I pulled my hands into view to see blood trailing down my fingers. Horror quickly replaced my confusion. “Shit, I’m sorry... You should’ve told me I was hurting you.”

Jacob glanced at my hands, then shrugged a broad shoulder. “It added to the moment.” He took one hand and licked the blood from each finger before doing the same to the other. His gaze dipped to my neck where he’d bitten me, and he brushed his thumb over it. Now that we were out of the romantic haze, it stung, but it’d felt so right in the moment. “Looks like I got carried away too.” He ran a hand through his hair, then slumped off me to lie on his back. We laid there for a few moments, staring up at his bedroom’s bright white ceiling.

My eyes drifted closed as the last of the adrenaline finally drained from my body. Sleep tugged at me, heavy and insistent. When the bed jostled, I forced my lids open to see Jacob getting up.

He turned, as if sensing I was watching him. “Get some rest, babe. I’m going to take a shower, unless you want to join me?” His lips curled into a smirk.

My eyes drifted shut as I contemplated his offer. It wouldn’t hurt to clean up again. Did I have the strength to keep myself upright in the shower? Not at all. “Maybe next time, handsome.” I yawned and dragged myself beneath the blankets.

The soft padding of Jacob’s footsteps and the quiet creak of the door told me he’d headed into the en suite bathroom. I cracked open an eye to see light pouring in from under the door opposite the bed before the shower started running.

A sleepy haze dragged me under, but my wolf kept one ear open for the sound of Jacob’s return. We wanted to protect our mate and make sure he was okay. But try as we might, exhaustion won.

* * *

A loud knock at Jacob’s front door jolted me upright in bed. My heart pounded, and my breath caught in my throat. I whipped my head toward the bathroom when the door opened. Jacob stepped out with a towel slung low around his hips. Relief washed over me. However, the knock came again, harder this time.

Who is that? Should we be concerned?

My phone had vibrated a few more times after I’d spoken to Emma, but this couldn’t be her, right? Even so, did I need to know why she knew where Jacob lived? A nagging thought crept in. Had she been one of the women he’d ‘planned’ his full moons with? They did study together. Was tutoring just an excuse to get laid?

No, that was ridiculous. Jacob hadn’t given me a reason to think that. If I couldn’t trust a guy, I wouldn’t be with him. Besides, he’d told me that part of his life was

over. We were mates now. That mattered more.

The knocking persisted. Jacob's eyes flicked to mine before sliding toward the bedroom door. He pressed a finger to his lips. "Stay in here. I'll see who it is. Don't come out. I don't want you to get hurt... or for anyone to know you're here."

That last part threw me. Why didn't he want anyone to know I was here? Could werewolves be visiting this late? Shouldn't I be meeting the Pack, or did he think they'd try to hurt me? A shiver ran down my spine, but I nodded. Jacob knew this world better than I did. If he said to stay put, I would.

It only sucked that this was happening so soon after our intimate moment together.

Jacob yanked open a drawer and pulled on a pair of gym shorts that grazed his knees. His gaze lingered on me for a few heartbeats, tangled up in the blankets, before he strode out.

As soon as he left, I scrambled out of bed, grabbing my travel bag and heading for the en suite bathroom. It felt safer with another barrier between me and whoever was at the front door. Should I worry about protecting myself? I twisted the lock, my heart still hammering.

Every thought fled my brain as I eyed the luxurious bathroom. A massive clawfoot tub overlooked the forest behind the property, and a rainfall shower with multiple heads seemed designed for group showers. My lips curled back in a snarl at the thought of Jacob sharing this space with someone else, but now wasn't the time to go down that road.

We were supposed to be safe here. My pulse spiked, and I sat on the toilet to clean up from our lovemaking.

Oh no...

Was Jacob safe checking the door by himself? What if someone took him? He was my boyfriend. I might even love him. If something happened, I wouldn't even know where to look. How would I rescue him on my own? God, I didn't even know how to contact other werewolves. My chest ached, and a loneliness came crashing down around me.

Pull yourself together, Kelly. Stop this. Deep breaths...

Closing my eyes, I inhaled, trying to calm my racing heart. With each long exhale, it appeared to work slowly. I tuned my senses outward, searching for any sign of Jacob to hear what was happening. My heart still hammered in my ears.

I clawed through the travel bag, then yanked on a pair of panties before slipping on shorts and a tank top. If Jacob needed me, I wasn't about to flash our intruder. Edging closer to the bathroom door, I placed my ear against it, straining to hear any word of Jacob's conversation.

I pressed my ear harder against the door, forcing my breath to steady. And just like that, I heard his distant footsteps, followed by a quiet sigh, and another knock on the door.

A deep voice rumbled. "Jacob, open up. I can smell you." This had to be another werewolf.

My hand hovered over the doorknob. If something went wrong and this turned into a fight, I wasn't staying in here. I wasn't the strongest werewolf ever, but if this person was dangerous, I'd do whatever it took. Jacob had protected me. He deserved the same. He might've told me to stay put, but I wouldn't stand here and do nothing.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm

6

JACOB

The knock was a surprise. I hadn't expected company at this late hour. The Pack knew I was safe, but would they come to my place, especially without calling? Oh, whoops. The mercenaries likely destroyed my cell phone.

This person had to be from the Pack.

I glanced around the living room and kitchen, making sure no visible sign of Kelly existed, aside from her scent. At least I'd showered a moment ago, or they would've smelled her on me.

I was keeping Kelly from the Pack for her own safety. If they discovered her before I spoke to the Council, they would put her to death. They had rules—strict, unforgiving ones. I wasn't about to risk her life. Her introduction needed a finesse I lacked right now, especially when my Alpha forbade the creation of new werewolves. A rogue werewolf hadn't made her. This was the scientists' fault. She was a victim of their damn experiments.

Besides, she wasn't ready to face the Pack. Hell, I knew I wasn't. I should've called them or my family with the landline phone while Kelly was showering, but building up the courage was damn near impossible. Even the thought of leaving the condo felt like a risk.

What if someone was still out there looking for us? My gut clenched with fear, but I

pushed it down. Later, when I was alone, I'd hit my home gym and release those emotions. Now wasn't the time.

Near the front door, I drew in a deep breath. Before I even looked through the peephole, I knew who stood outside.

Shane. My older brother.

I had so many questions, but this wasn't the best time for any of them. What if he sniffed out Kelly's presence? I raked a hand through my hair, debating my options, but he knocked again, hard.

"Open up, Jacob. It's late, and I know you're in there. I can smell you." Shane sounded like his usual irritable self.

That familiar grumpiness put me at ease, and I opened the door before leaning against the door frame, arms crossed. "Hey, I'm home. What are you doing here?" I enjoyed seeing my brother, even if we weren't close. While I didn't want to seem like an ass, I wasn't about to invite him inside.

Shane's assessing gaze swept over me, his scowl deepening. He raised an eyebrow. "What am I doing here? What do you think? You took off before anyone could talk to you. You just fucking vanished." He shook his head, anger clear in the tight set of his jaw. "What the hell, dude? We came for you, and..." His eyes flicked past me, scanning the living room and kitchen like he was looking for something—or someone. "I swung by earlier, but you weren't here." He took a step forward, intending to force his way in, but I didn't budge. "Let's have this discussion inside instead of me standing out here."

I glanced over his shoulder at the private hallway behind him. "Why? No one will overhear us." As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. I shouldn't have bailed,

but my instincts had taken over. My focus had been on getting Kelly to safety, not on sticking around for a reunion.

Shane's frustration shifted into something else—displeasure, then his expression became unreadable. I regretted acting like a jerk. He had been instrumental in the Pack learning about my abduction. I owed my brother my life. Being a dick to him wasn't the right move.

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose as a dull ache started forming behind my eyes. "Listen, I'm sorry. After being locked in a cage for the last month, I'm exhausted and pissed off. I need time to process what happened. I've been through hell, okay? That's all. I need some alone time."

Sympathy flickered through Shane's eyes, and a scent of embarrassment wafted from him. Why would he feel embarrassed? He'd saved my life.

"You don't have to apologize, Jacob." He lowered his gaze to the tiled floor. "It makes sense. Hell, I probably would've done the same. It's just..." He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Mom and Dad are worried about you. Dad figures you need space, but after everything, I, uh..." His voice cracked slightly before he cleared his throat. "I wanted to check on you. See if you're okay."

"Didn't know you cared, bro. I'm..." I shook my head, struggling to find the right words. "I'm just glad to be out of there."

Seeing Shane this impacted by my safety surprised me. I'd figured he would help me with the mercenaries and inform the Pack, but maybe our distant relationship would patch itself. Maybe I'd finally have a good relationship with my older brother.

"Of course I care, dude." But that hitch in his voice was back again. A human might

not have noticed it, but I did. “So, I guess I should warn you. Mom’s caught up in Pack meetings about what happened. She said she’ll be coming by at some point—or calling, depending on her schedule.” He rolled his eyes, then handed over a new cell phone that looked almost identical to my old one. “The Pack’s tech guy transferred your old contacts. They found your phone broken and your car totaled at that lab. The car’s at Pack headquarters. If you need a ride, let me know, and I can take you over to grab your stuff.”

“Damn... Thanks.” I stared down at the phone in my hand, struggling to comprehend the support my family was offering. At least I’d be able to text Rosalind not to clean tomorrow before I went to bed. Dad even understood my need for distance. But more than solitude, I needed time alone to be with Kelly. Shit. Did I deserve their compassion?

Tucking the phone into my back pocket, I met Shane’s gaze. “Thanks for this... and for coming by. I appreciate you seeking the Pack’s help in bringing me home.” I pulled him into a bro hug, and every muscle in his body stiffened. Was it something I’d said or the hug? We rarely offered affection, but this was different. I needed to show my gratitude for him after he’d helped save my life.

“No problem, Jacob. I’ll let you get some sleep. Like I said, if you need a ride to Pack HQ, I’ll drive you over.” He ducked under my arm and turned, but he glanced back at me. His lips pressed into a thin line. “Speaking of, Jared will go on trial in a couple of days. You’re expected to be there. Pack traditions, you know.” Without another word, he jogged off to the stairwell. The door slammed shut behind him, sharp and final.

My hands curled into fists. Fuck. I had so many questions. What had Jared done to need a trial? Regardless, I didn’t love the idea of going back to the Pack so soon. Besides, I couldn’t just leave Kelly to fend for herself. She deserved my protection. Who’d look after her if I was busy with the Pack?

Something about Shane's visit didn't feel right, but I couldn't put my finger on what was wrong. The way he'd tensed up and seemed almost apologetic felt odd. Maybe I should reach out to Mom, or perhaps Chad. But I didn't want to bother Mom with all of her meetings, even if I needed to talk with her. Besides, that asshole was one of my best friends. He might know what was up with Shane.

Shane was acting weird. More than usual. But hell, what happened couldn't have been easy for him. I shook off the thought. Now wasn't the time to overthink this.

A soft touch brushed my arm, and I whirled on Kelly. My fist stopped an inch from her face. Her eyes widened like large, round dinner plates. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, making my hand shake as I lowered it. I'd been so consumed by my thoughts that I hadn't heard her approach.

"J-Jacob? Are you okay?"

I blinked, shoving my trembling hands into my pockets. "Sorry, I'm fine."

Her gaze trailed over me, as if she wasn't sure what to believe. "You're sure?" She tugged at the hem of her shirt and tilted her head to the side.

Shit. No, I wasn't okay, but she didn't need to be worried about me. How could I explain this? If I lied, she might sense it. But if she'd listened in, she'd already know I was hiding shit from her.

"What's up? There's a lot on my head right now." My attention dipped to Kelly's outfit. She wore a tank top that clung to her curves while her toned legs stretched from a pair of short shorts. My mouth went dry as the memory of being between her thighs and tasting her core hit me hard.

Now wasn't the time for those thoughts.

Concern creased her forehead, and her lips pursed. “I asked who that was?” She raked her gaze over me, then hugged herself as if cold.

“That was my brother, Shane. I... wasn’t expecting him.” I rolled my neck to ease the tension.

“Your brother? I didn’t know you had one.” Her gaze slid to the floor before she looked me in the eye again. “I guess I don’t know a lot about you other than you’re great at math and science, you’re a werewolf, and you saved my life. Small things like that.” A smile ghosted over her lips.

She wasn’t wrong. We’d shared classes at university and talked sometimes, but we knew little about one another. That needed to change.

“You’re not missing much. He’s the elder child and a pain in the ass.” I smirked, even if the humor didn’t reach my eyes. “Do you have any siblings?”

The small smile on her lips slipped, but she recovered fast. “No, I was an only child. Guess I was... spared the headache.” Her nostrils flared as she glanced over my shoulder. “Are both of you werewolves?”

“My whole family is wolves.” Talking about them stressed me out, but if I wanted her trust, I had to let her in. “We’re all part of the same Pack. You’ll get to meet them when you’re ready.” Hopefully, at least.

Her brows knitted together, and she shifted in my hold. “Oh, cool. Wow... I guess I didn’t realize it ran in families like that. Not with getting...” She clawed the air with her nails, her frown deepening.

“Being scratched or bitten isn’t an uncommon way of becoming a werewolf, but it’s both.”

Kelly pursed her lips. “Right... That makes sense. So, uh, I’ll just... meet your family when I’m ready?” She fidgeted with the hem of her tank top again. “That sounds... overwhelming. What if they don’t like me?” She laughed sheepishly and shrugged her shoulders.

“Don’t worry about that, babe.” I wrapped an arm around Kelly’s shoulders and pulled her against me. “They’ll like you. I know it.” If they didn’t, they’d have me to contend with. My lips brushed the top of her head, and I enjoyed the citrusy scent of her hair. “I’d like to learn more about you too. What if we talk tomorrow after getting some rest?” I leaned back to look down at her face.

“I’d like that. A lot.” She wrapped her arms around my waist, just staying close to me. “Not that I’m interesting or anything.” The quick beating of her heart and the soft scent of her worry filled my senses. “Mmm... I am pretty tired. You wore me out earlier.”

“You’re intriguing to me, whether you agree or not.” I scooped her into my arms, carrying her to my bedroom. She snuggled against my chest, her fingers trailing patterns over my skin.

Keeping her away from the Pack would only hurt her in the long run, but I needed to talk with Mom. As a member of the Pack’s Council, she’d know how to handle this. I didn’t know what I’d do with myself if my Alpha executed Kelly. My feelings for her ran deeper than I’d ever believed possible. My own parents had a marriage of convenience rather than love and true mating. I’d figured that would be my future too. None of the female werewolves had satisfied me the way Kelly did.

My wolf growled low in my chest, sensing my unease. Only Kelly’s warmth kept me grounded. If I just knew how to open up to her about all of this. How could I tell her that the very people who rescued us might also decide she needed to die?

KELLY

My university inbox overflowed with messages I had to sift through from my professors, campus security, and classmates. The overwhelming response surprised me. People at school knew I'd existed, even though no one talked to me? This was so wild.

The soft pillows on Jacob's bed cradled my head as I leaned back against them, pulling the blanket higher on my naked chest. Being safe and comfortable in Jacob's home felt surreal. My body still ached from the pleasure I'd experienced with Jacob last night. It had been our first time in a bed... and with privacy too.

Where is he?

The sound of pans clattering and the mouthwatering aroma of sizzling bacon pulled me away from my phone. He was cooking me breakfast? Wow. My heart melted. I should've gotten up to help him, but I'd been scrolling through my email.

Why am I even bothering?

Jacob didn't want us to rush back into studying. We needed to ground ourselves in this new reality. Jumping from human to monster to guinea pig to rescued werewolf hadn't happened overnight. Neither would figuring out my place in the world again.

But was I rushing things? College shaped part of my identity and tied into who I used

to be... Who I am. I needed to be true to myself, even if it wasn't easy.

Do I contact the university?

I chewed my lower lip. Would they believe me if I told them what happened? Did I want to explain it to them? The cops could get involved. I wasn't certain I could trust them. If the scientists had connections with the military, I couldn't rule out other government agencies. I might end up in another research facility.

God, I do not want that.

No. I needed to relax and focus on healing, just like I told Jacob. Everything else would fall into place eventually.

The way Jacob had made love to me last night still took my breath away. Feeling his body inside mine was beautiful, and I didn't want to shake the trust between us. I wanted moments like that every night for the rest of my life.

Still, if I spoke with the university, at least they'd know I hadn't abandoned my studies. I tried to come up with a message, but the words eluded me. Jacob and I should talk about this soon. He might know what to say, but that meant bringing this up. Things needed to be good between us.

My indecision frustrated me.

But I had to do what felt right. Secrets would only rip us apart. Maybe once we spent more time getting to know each other, I'd tell him how much my education meant to me. He didn't know I was estranged from my family. If he understood what college meant to my future, he might change his mind.

Tossing my phone aside, I stared up at the ceiling. A headache throbbed behind my

eyes. If only I knew how I fit into Jacob's world, especially when I was struggling with how to be me.

Ugh. I don't need this stress.

Why did things feel harder here than they did at the lab? Shouldn't it have been the opposite? Perhaps fate was still trying to screw me over. Wouldn't surprise me after the mercenaries' freaky case of mistaken identity with the leopard shifter.

Whatever. Now wasn't the time to contemplate fate and other spiritual matters.

I tapped out a quick message to Winter Forest University's Office of the Dean of Students. I hoped they'd get back to me. Maybe I could take my make-up final exams soon and register for the upcoming semester. It wouldn't be easy to get back on track with my studies, but it was worth the effort.

This time, I set the phone on the nightstand. Each chime and vibration stirred up panic.

Emma would be after me to talk today. Before I dealt with her or checked more emails, I just wanted to relax in Jacob's cozy bed and try to clear my mind. This bed was heaven compared to the cot—or worse, the stained, putrid mattress on the concrete floor. Those bastards would never take me again. I'd fight tooth and claw before they put me in those conditions a third time.

The scent of eggs and bacon made my belly growl with desperation. My body craved food, especially after I'd purged my stomach last night. It sucked, but I hoped that wouldn't happen again with me being less stressed.

Let's fix this hunger business.

Before I could toss the blankets aside, footsteps padded closer to the cracked bedroom door. Should I pretend to be asleep? The scent of delicious food stole away any other thoughts. I sat upright, pulling the blankets up to cover myself.

“Knock, knock. I hope you’re hungry.” Jacob entered the room, carrying a tray of food. A pair of faded blue jeans hung low on his hips, and a well-worn black shirt hugged the sculpted line of his chest and arms. He looked divine. “Did I wake you? I was trying to be stealthy with cooking. Groceries were delivered this morning to stock up the fridge.” He set the tray near the foot of the bed, then bent to kiss my forehead.

“No, you didn’t.” I smiled. “And I’m kinda starving.”

If I had my way, I’d push the tray aside, pull him into bed, and take him inside me again. But that would have to wait... at least until we’d eaten breakfast. The tray held two plates of eggs, bacon, toast, and mixed fruit along with juice and coffee. A breakfast of champions.

Part of me wondered if I’d be able to eat all of this, but I wasn’t human anymore. I’d never imagined I could eat three double cheeseburgers like I did last night, but I’d managed... until they came back to haunt me.

“Good thing I made plenty then. Hope you enjoy my modest offerings.” His lips quirked, as if he knew how immodest he was being.

“Consider me pleasantly surprised! I haven’t had breakfast in bed before. You’re so sweet. Thank you.” The gesture warmed my heart. “Maybe I’ll return the favor tomorrow.”

“You will, huh?” A small smirk tugged at his lips. “I might enjoy that. But you’ve never had breakfast in bed?” He stole a piece of bacon from my plate, and I smacked

his hand.

“Hey! Eat your own bacon!” I giggled, unable to help myself. If he wanted to play like that... I stabbed a bite of his eggs and plopped it into my mouth before he could protest. God, these were so good. I let out a small moan before I could stop myself.

His eyes widened, his gaze on my lips. “Really?” He glared at me in mock disbelief. “I should’ve expected that assault on my plate, but now I don’t feel bad about eating your bacon.” He leaned forward, this time placing a kiss on my lips. “You didn’t answer my question.” His breath on my chin made me shiver.

To think yesterday began with a cold-water assault as the mercenaries sprayed us awake before tranquilizing us for the scientists’ experiments. They’d rambled on about some scientific breakthrough, but my brain had shut down, unwilling to process any of it. It’d been easier to float in a hazy numbness.

This morning was so much better.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have stolen my bacon first.” I smirked, but it didn’t matter. Both plates had heaps of food, and if I was still hungry, he’d probably happily cook more. “And no, my parents didn’t believe food should ever enter a bedroom.” And well, I’d never had a serious boyfriend before Jacob.

Jacob sipped his coffee. “The look of surprise on your face was worth it.” His gaze slid over me, lingering on my breasts before meeting my eyes again. “Hmm... You don’t have to worry about those kinds of rules here.” He shrugged. “Not that I want a messy bed, but sometimes you’ve got to live a little.” Silence stretched between us for a few moments. “I didn’t want to wake you this morning. You needed your rest, and you looked so peaceful for the first time since I’ve woken up beside you. That’s not saying much, but...” He set his cup down on the tray.

His words made sense. Each night in the research facility, I'd had terrible nightmares. Last night I hadn't woken up in a cold sweat. The nightmares persisted but were less intense.

I chewed another bite of eggs, trying not to dwell on what we'd been through. "Thanks. Guess I was exhausted after everything." I smiled at him. "It was surprisingly hard to fall asleep in a comfortable bed after those nights on that terrible mattress." I'd tossed and turned for a while after the interruption from his brother, watching Jacob sleep beside me. It felt like a dream that might crash down around me.

Jacob grabbed another piece of bacon from his plate. "You're welcome, babe. It was different sleeping in my own bed. Best feeling in the world, actually. Maybe once things settle down, we can swing by your place, and you can experience it too. If you want, that is."

The thought of sleeping in my bed was nice. But did I want that? Not really. I was happy here with Jacob, but he might not want me to stay forever. "Sounds great. Sometime later, when things are safe. Plus, I need to get those memories out of my head, you know?"

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Of course. You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like, babe."

His words soothed the worry in my heart. I never wanted him to think I was an inconvenience. "Thanks, Jacob." My phone vibrated on the nightstand. The impulse to check the notification had me on the verge of reaching for it. But it didn't matter right now. What mattered was breakfast with my handsome mate.

"No problem. It's better if you hang out here. I want to be sure you're protected if those assholes are still searching for us." He placed his hand on my knee. "Maybe we

can make some new memories when you're ready? Or you could find a new apartment?"

My brows drew together, and I pursed my lips. "Hmm... New memories could help. I'll think about it." A new apartment would take more money than I could spare. Sadly, it might be for the best. Those monsters knew where I lived. Once they regrouped, they could come after me again.

"You're in no rush." Jacob glanced at the now empty plates. "Let me clean this up, and I'll be back." He lifted the tray with our dirty dishes. His bare feet padded over the tile floor as he retreated to the kitchen.

Drawing in a deep breath, I leaned back in bed. I should get dressed. Jacob and I said we'd learn more about one another this morning, and while I didn't love the thought of telling him about my messed-up family life, I wanted to connect more with him.

However, the message I'd received during breakfast toyed with my thoughts, and I grabbed my phone. It probably wasn't important, but I might as well look while I had privacy. School matters should remain private for now. We had differing opinions we needed to work out first.

My eyes widened as I saw a reply from the Office of the Dean of Students. The message said the dean would like to meet with me about what had happened so my studies could resume.

A lump formed in my throat. The email both excited and scared me. Should I tell Jacob? Or should I wait until this was all figured out? I didn't want to hurt him, and he might not be okay with this.

Deep breaths.

I wanted my life back. But could I have that and Jacob?

8

KELLY

I tugged on the shorts and tank top I'd worn last night after my shower. It'd be weird to chat with Jacob about my rough upbringing while naked. Besides, I wanted us both to feel comfortable while we got to know one another.

After that delicious breakfast we'd shared, I wanted to learn more about his likes so I could give him some happy surprises too. My phone chimed, and I froze, wondering if it could be the dean's office already. But no, that sounded like a text message.

I picked up my phone to see Emma's name on the screen and sighed. Ugh. Really?

Dishes clattered in the kitchen. Jacob really was cleaning up. Maybe he was giving me space. I hadn't imagined him caring all that much about messes from how he'd reacted to me puking. Then again, this place was immaculate.

But having space felt odd after being with him and the staff at the research lab constantly. Granted, Jacob's presence in the quiet condo eased any anxiety threatening to build in me. If I'd been alone in my apartment, I might have been growling at every slight sound by now.

My phone vibrated a couple more times. Seriously? I looked at my messages.

Emma

Kelly! Where are you?

Send me a text!

Don't disappear on me again.

Crap. I should've texted her already since I was worried she'd go back to campus security... or worse, the police. No, that was an excuse. I'd been too busy trying to hide from everyone and hoping I wasn't destroying the few relationships I'd cultivated.

Okay. She was my friend. Texting her would be fine.

Kelly

Hey, I'm here! Don't go calling campus security again. Lol

Slept in late and then got caught up with a few things. Sorry.

After a deep breath, I tapped out a reply to the dean's secretary and confirmed the appointment time. How would I get there without cluing Jacob in on everything? No idea. What if he found out and stopped me? If he felt betrayed by the meeting, I wouldn't blame him.

Emma's text notification popped up while I wrote the email. She was on a tear, but I knew this was because she cared.

Emma

We need to get together and talk.

Where should we meet? Downtown?

Kelly

It's kinda difficult right now. Transportation and stuff with being at Jacob's.

What a stupid lie. In fact, Jacob needed to worry about transportation, not me. But if I told Emma the truth, she'd insist on us getting together as soon as possible. Part of me wanted that, but I needed space. Hell, she might suggest picking me up from Jacob's... or hanging out here! That would be super awkward.

Emma

I have a car. I can pick you up.

Don't shut me out.

Kelly

I appreciate that, but I have a couple of things I have to do.

I'll text you later!

What a lame excuse. I hated saying it. Could Emma see through my lies? If so, I hoped she wouldn't call me on them. Seeing Emma's name followed by three dancing dots to show she was typing made my pulse kick up a notch. Nope, no more of that. Too stressful. I put my phone on silent and plugged it in on the nightstand.

Last night's nausea came back with a vengeance, and I placed my hand over my stomach, focusing on taking calming breaths. Everything would be fine. Just don't panic.

The pep talk didn't help. I shook my head, wishing Emma had more chill. Couldn't she see how hard life was for me now? Why did she have to push so hard? Because she cared.

A knock on the bedroom door had me whirling to face it. I yipped. My heart thudded against my chest, feeling like it'd explode. But it was Jacob. Of course it was. I guess I hadn't heard him finishing up in the kitchen with how hard I'd been focusing on Emma.

"Everything okay?" His nostrils flared as he looked me over. "You smell upset, and your phone was quite active." He crossed his arms over his broad chest and leaned his shoulder against the door frame. "Let me guess... Emma?"

I released a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "Yeah, it was her. She wants to get together, but it just feels too soon." I sat on the bed, still trying to calm my frazzled nerves. Should I tell him about my mistake last night? He might want to wring my neck, but at least we'd be on the same page. "I might've messed up."

His eyebrow rose, and his expression went impassive. Any sign of playful or concerned Jacob disappeared. "What do you mean?"

That didn't help my anxiety, so I fixed my gaze on the floor at my feet. "During last night's phone call with her, I mentioned I was..." I rubbed a hand over my face. "I confessed to being abducted. She wouldn't get off my case, and I didn't want to hang up on her." Hair fell into my face, and I blew it aside. "She'd already spoken with campus security. Seems like she's afraid I'll disappear again. I hope she won't run back to the authorities. I'm so sorry for screwing up."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Jacob's jean-clad legs come into view. He sat beside me and placed his hand on my back. "I know about the phone call." Concern tinged his voice, even as he remained very calm. "I tried not to listen in, but my

wolf's senses were heightened." His hand moved over my back in smooth circles. "I'll talk with my mom about campus security, but you need to meet with Emma. Get her to calm down. I can be there to keep an eye on you."

I glanced over at him, surprised by his response. For a moment, I wasn't sure how his mother would help our situation, but looking at his fancy bedroom, it seemed obvious. His family's wealth held power. The thought sent another wave of nausea roiling in my gut, and my shoulders hunched forward. "You listened? But I... The water was running." Jacob was probably being too optimistic when he'd said his family would like me. I was nothing like them. "Why didn't you say something sooner?" This could've explained why he was tense in the bathroom. At least he didn't hate me.

"You were standing near the door." He tilted his head. "I didn't hear every word, but Emma kept yelling." He tugged me against his side. "I didn't want to stress you out. You were already dealing with a lot and feeling ill... and then, well... so much happened last night." His lips brushed the top of my head. "After you text her back, let's chill in the living room. We could get to know each other better, or watch a movie. Whatever you want to do."

I wrapped an arm around his waist and buried my face in his shoulder. That made sense. Life got in the way. "She was hurting my ears," I said, a small smile on my lips. "I'll have to figure out how to control my heightened senses, especially when I'm stressed. It's hard to focus when I'm in panic mode, and the world just won't lower the volume."

He sighed. "It takes practice and learning to work with your beast. Sometimes even experienced shifters struggle with their instincts and control." The stubble on his cheek caught on my hair, and he leaned back a little to swipe it away from his face. "We'll work on that together."

My initial reaction was surprise. Even those used to this life struggled occasionally? But I'd seen Jacob tremble with rage, his eyes flashing wolf amber before he regained control. The mercenaries knew how to bring out the worst in someone.

"Oh, okay." I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "I'll text her, then we can relax. My brain needs a break." I glanced up at him. "Can I pick the movie?" While we should get to know one another, this conversation was taking a lot out of me. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned Emma, but at least we had a plan now.

"Of course, babe. Anything you want." His lips curved in a smirk. "We can alternate. You pick a movie first, then I'll pick one." He winked at me. "Keep that in mind. I don't want to declare a movie war here."

"Oh? Is that right?" I grabbed my phone to text Emma. "Those sound like some big feelings. You don't even know what my favorite movie genres are." Action and adventure were usually my cup of tea. Thrillers and fast cars? Sign me up. But maybe I'd learn to love romcoms if that's what Jacob thought I'd choose.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. His biceps flexed, his pecs tightening enough to draw my attention. "The best defense is a good offense, right? But maybe I was too harsh. You're right. What type of movies do you like?"

God, this man knows exactly how sexy he is. "You'll see, handsome." I stuck out my tongue at him. Perhaps it was childish, but he deserved it.

His gaze darkened as it dipped to take in my tongue. "I suppose I will." He dropped his hands to his knees, those sinful arms flexing again. It felt like the room's temperature increased by ten degrees. He was making it harder for me to keep control and not toss him back and lave my tongue over his muscular body.

"Mmm..." I crossed my legs, squeezing my damp thighs together. The full moon was

today, but I knew the lunar cycle couldn't shoulder all the blame for my lust. Jacob's body was incredible enough to take all the credit. "Do you have popcorn?" Getting him out of here would give me a better chance of concentrating on Emma.

"We ate breakfast not long ago." He glanced down at my legs, and his nostrils flared. "You sure you're interested in watching a movie? Seems like you want something else now."

"Well, if you were naked, I might not have the strength to contain myself. It could be too tempting for me." Where was this banter coming from? I was—or used to be—a sweet girl raised not to even consider having sex before marriage. Or at least within a long-term relationship. Now I couldn't keep my hands off Jacob. It was like a burning, insatiable need. My hunger was insatiable. "What if I took advantage of you?"

Down, girl!

"Really?" He lifted an eyebrow at me. "I'd love to see you try. In fact, maybe I'll get naked right now." He unbuttoned his jeans, then slid his zipper down. His cock tented his boxers.

My mouth went dry, and I licked my lips. "You're not making it easy for me to text Emma." The phone felt meaningless with his chiseled body right there. "God, you're incorrigible!" It took all my strength to turn my back on him. The laughter in my voice didn't help him take me more seriously, but I didn't care.

"I'll show you just how naughty I can be." His fingers slid up the back of my tank top to ghost over my skin. "But I'll let you focus."

Uh huh. With his hand on me, it'd be a struggle. Soon enough, our bodies would connect, and I'd writhe in his arms. That idea was so much better than watching a

movie. Blowing off steam in the arms of my mate sounded perfect.

I opened the messenger app to see Emma's latest response.

Emma

If you're ghosting me for Jacob, be honest. I won't waste my time.

Okay. Good luck, Kelly.

Her words hit like a bucket of cold water, and the phone slipped from my fingers, landing on my thigh. Tears burned the back of my throat.

Oh shit... What had I done?

JACOB

A soft thump drew my attention. I leaned forward to see Kelly's phone lying face down in her lap. Her fingers were frozen in mid-air like she'd just let it slip.

"Kelly?" The scent of sorrow hit me like a tidal wave, suffocating and thick, killing my erection in an instant. "Babe, what happened?"

She didn't say anything or move. Had she even heard me?

A creeping unease settled in into my chest. I suddenly hated that her back was to me. Fuck. I needed to see her face, to know what the hell had just happened. "Kelly?"

Her silence stretched too long. The weight of her choking emotions roused my beast. When she still didn't respond, I reached for her phone to set it aside.

She jerked as if threatened. Her slender fingers snapped around my wrist in a tight grip. "W-what are you doing?" The panic in her voice stopped me cold.

Play things cool.

Something had freaked her out, and she needed time to process it.

"Just moving it to the nightstand." My fingers relaxed around her phone. It slid back between her crossed legs, showing that I wasn't taking it from her. "Tell me what

happened.”

Her nails dug into my forearm, and I suppressed a groan. Damn, that’ll leave a bruise. Not that it’d last long.

“Emma. She told me...” Her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. She released my wrist to wrap her arms around her middle, as if holding herself together. “I screwed up our friendship. I don’t think there’s any going back.”

My jaw clenched. “Don’t say that.” What the hell was Emma thinking? I could call her. Fix this nonsense. Maybe she needed someone to spell out how wrong she was. Would that cause her to dig her heels in harder? I didn’t want to cause a greater rift between the women. But what if it helped? “Emma isn’t the type to hold a grudge, babe.” I wanted to pull Kelly against my chest and let her cry it out, but with how upset she was, I was afraid of startling her again. “What did she say?”

“I...” She glanced over her shoulder. Tears streaked her cheeks. Her lips moved like she wanted to speak, but the words wouldn’t come. After a moment, she handed over the phone, hand trembling. “I should’ve known this would happen.” The pain in her eyes spoke of a hurt deeper and older than what I figured Emma alone could cause. It felt systemic.

Don’t read into it.

But I wanted to wrap my arms around her and kiss those salty tears away. Who did this to her? Violence wasn’t always the answer, but it seemed like a good idea now. Once I learned more about her past, I’d hunt the assholes down.

I glanced at the screen, scanning the latest messages. They were hurtful and jealous. I couldn’t believe Emma had sent them. Kelly went through hell, and her so-called best friend chose this moment to lash out? Yes, Emma had been worried for over a month.

She had every right to be. But this wasn't the path she should've taken.

"She's wrong." I released a soft sigh. "You don't deserve this." The words came out in a low rumble. "She isn't thinking." I placed a gentle hand on Kelly's shoulder, brushing my thumb over her soft skin. "If you want me to handle this?—"

"No!" She wrenched free, twisting toward me. "That's not why I mentioned this. Don't you dare." Anger flashed in her wolf amber gaze. Her beast lurked just beneath the surface, barely leashed. If she didn't regain control, she'd lose it.

"Okay, I won't." Not immediately, at least. But if Emma wanted to pass her next science class, she needed to rethink her choices. "Promise." My expression remained neutral, but my thoughts raced, building a plan to help her.

Kelly needed to get better with her emotions before I introduced her to the Pack's Council—or took her anywhere public. What if she got cut off in traffic? Would she lose it? Snap at some random asshole? She was strong and needed to get a handle on it before someone pushed her too far.

Her nostrils flared as she studied me. Her face tightened, confusion narrowing her eyes. "You're lying. I don't know how I know this, but I do."

I tilted my head to the side. Good girl. She was learning. Maybe my job as her mentor would be easier than I'd thought. If only she hadn't used her instincts against me.

Her lips lifted, baring those perfect white teeth. "Don't lie to me."

My jaw clenched, but I schooled my expression. "Scent changes tell wolves a lot. You caught the shift in my physiology when I said that. And no, I will not press Emma on this immediately." I held her gaze, letting my words sink in. "But if she wants to act this way, I'll give her a choice. Last we spoke, she was struggling with

College Algebra. That class was hard for her. If she wants my help passing future courses, she needs to be reasonable with you.”

Her mouth fell open. “Jacob! Don’t tell me you’re serious.” The look of betrayal on her face surprised me. “She’s allowed to break off our friendship. It’s not like I’ve been a great person to her.”

“Come on. You can’t believe that shit.” I reached for her, but she leapt from the bed like I’d burned her. “Why are you defending her?” My teeth ground together. I was on Kelly’s side. Why the fuck were we fighting? Was this a werewolf thing or a woman struggle? Either way, I didn’t understand.

“Because! I don’t want you to weaponize your help. It’s a shitty thing to do.” She shook her head, anger hot in her gaze. “I can’t do this with you right now.” She walked past, determined to put more distance between us. What the hell? We weren’t done here. I grabbed her around the waist, not wanting her to walk away. Her elbow slammed backward, connecting with my temple hard.

“Fuck!” The impact sent me sprawling onto my back, my head exploding with pain. It wasn’t just a hit but a brutal, full-force blow. My skull pounded like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. A burst of white stars clouded my vision, and my ears rang with a tinny, sharp whine.

I rolled to my side, groaning as my fingers dug into my temples. Each pulse of pain sent a fresh wave of nausea straight to my gut. The world tilted, my body sluggish and uncooperative. Don’t puke. Do not puke.

“Jacob?” The bed sank behind me. The way it rocked my body didn’t help my stomach. “Oh, shit.” Her trembling fingers grazed my arm. “I’m so sorry.”

She hadn’t meant to hurt me, and I’d been stupid trying to wrangle a flighty cub. Still,

the agony in my skull fogged my brain. The ringing in my ears wouldn't stop, and my vision was a mess.

A soft growl rumbled from my throat as my wolf pushed up, scrambling to take over. Kelly's fingers froze against my arm, and I caught her sharp gasp. Shit. She'd heard that. I swallowed, shoving the beast back down. "It's fine," I mumbled against the comforter. "Don't worry about it."

"What can I do? I... I'm so sorry." The tang of salt filled my nose, cutting through my pain. She was crying. "I'll be right back." The bed jostled again as she jumped up. Her sniffles hurt my heart.

"Kelly..." I squeezed my eyes shut, struggling to keep the bacon and eggs in my gut. But her feet slapped the floor on her way to the kitchen. A moment later, the freezer opened, followed by a brief shuffle, and then it slammed shut.

My head throbbed in protest, a fresh stab of pain shooting through my eyeballs. "Geez, Kelly." I groaned, pressing my forehead against the mattress. "Have mercy."

"Sorry!" She nearly yelled the word.

I shielded my exposed ear as I pressed against my temple. For fuck's sake. "Close the blinds," I mumbled the command. The faintest whir of machinery filled the room as the blackout shades obeyed. The room darkened, easing some of the agony slicing through my brain. Better. Curling into a ball, I tried to maintain control, even as guilt gnawed at my ribs.

"Huh? I didn't catch that." Cabinets opened and closed, as if she were looking for something else. Maybe a towel? Here she was falling apart while I was writhing in pain.

Damn it. I tried to push through the pain. I couldn't handle her crying. Besides, I'd suffered worse injuries than this. I needed to fix this.

When I forced myself to sit upright, the stars flooded my eyes with a vengeance. My head spun as my arm wobbled beneath me. Fuck, I can't... Yes, I could but not yet.

Footsteps padded back in, then hesitated. "What the hell? The windows... Did you do that?" Her voice sharpened, scolding me. "Hey, what are you doing? Lay down." Kelly gripped my shoulders, firm but careful, guiding me back to the mattress. It made me feel like a cub again, and I wasn't sure I liked this. "I have an ice pack for you." The crackle of plastic near my ear came a second before the cool cloth touched my skin.

I hissed at the stinging sensation. "Shit, that's freezing." Her gentle touch over my back soothed my wolf. His agitation subsided, and he rumbled in contentment at our mate's caress. But I kept one hand over my face, struggling to exist with my splitting headache.

"Sorry, I know it is. It'll help, I promise." The tension in her words twisted a knife in my gut.

Wait a minute. Something was wrong here. I cracked open an eye, raising my gaze to meet hers... and regretted my decision.

That same deep, conditioned pain I'd seen earlier was back. The look she'd worn when Emma cut her off. But this time, it wasn't about Emma. She directed it at me.

The air between us changed, charged like the calm before lightning struck. My wolf stilled, ears pricked for the incoming danger. The look in her eyes was the quiet devastation you didn't come back from.

She thought I'd leave her.

Ah, fuck.

10

KELLY

What had I done? That startled, bloodshot look he gave me was like he'd seen straight through to my deepest fear.

When he lowered his head back to the mattress, his hand slid over his face again. My big bad wolf reeked of pain. Why were my werewolf instincts locked into all of this right now? I'd struggled to decode his emotions before. Was this what Jacob sensed when he read my feelings? Knowing his emotions was helpful, but it made me miserable.

I'd caused this.

I looked toward the blackout curtains covering the windows, searching for some kind of switch to lower the shades. How had he closed them? Maybe I could ask him later since they were a mystery. Helplessness threatened to swallow me. If only I could make this right again.

Focus on what you can control.

My gaze lowered to Jacob. I drew in a deep breath before releasing it. His wolf pressed against my hand as I ran it over his back in soothing circles. The sensation freaked me out despite having felt it before. Maybe I'd watched too many movies where aliens popped out of someone's skin, but I needed to bear it. The last thing I wanted was to chase Jacob away with any perceived reluctance to touch him.

I flicked my gaze to the waistband of his jeans, still open and hanging low on his hips from when he'd shown off his impressive bulge. We'd been heartbeats away from getting naughty, only for me to almost crush his skull.

"Baby, let me see your head."

His knuckles were white from how hard he held the ice pack against his temple. Part of me pondered how sturdy it had to be not to burst open. My gaze drifted to his wrist, noticing the fading red marks where I'd grabbed him. Why would he want a mate who abused him like this? No one would.

He groaned, his shoulders stiffening, as if his body resisted the very idea of being vulnerable with me. "Give me a minute." When he dragged his hand away, a bruised knot the size of a golf ball had already formed on his temple.

I jerked back like he'd slapped me. My hand covered my mouth to hold back the soft whine building in my throat. God. I couldn't believe I'd caused that. Jacob always seemed impervious to violence. The mercenaries had beaten both of us when we'd fought back, but this... I'd done this.

My fingers trembled as I caressed his jawline. "I'm so sorry. Seriously. I?—"

"What did I tell you before?" He returned the ice pack to his temple, but his other hand dropped away from his face. His words took me aback.

I tried to think about everything he'd ever said to me, but my brain emptied itself of any pertinent information. "W-what? I don't know?" I leaned back, tucking my legs beneath me, but he rolled onto his back, leveling his gaze at me. A shiver chased down my spine.

The eye next to his temple where I'd struck him wasn't just bloodshot. It looked

angry, laced with broken blood vessels. “Don’t apologize.”

My gaze slid back to the closed windows. “Uh, that’s not the same?—”

Before I could finish my sentence, a heavy force knocked me flat. Air rushed from my lungs as I blinked up at Jacob, his body pressing me into the mattress. My heart thudded against my chest.

Oh, wow... He was faster than I’d realized.

The ice pack lay discarded beside us as he stared into my eyes. A flicker of something—perhaps dizziness—crossed his face before he shook it off. “I don’t know who hurt you, but I’m not them.” His voice came through gritted teeth. “And I won’t leave you.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was angry with me, but his freaky, bloodshot eyes showed care and concern. And his words... Tears slid from my eyes, and I balled my fists into the comforter. I sucked in a breath, scenting the musk of his cologne. What did I even say to that? “But why?”

A low, trickling growl rumbled in his chest. He looked ready to snap back with a reply, but then a muscle in his jaw twitched. His gaze flicked down to my lips for a heartbeat before he crushed his mouth to mine.

I stiffened for half a second, then everything in me broke apart. My arms wrapped around his neck, and I hooked a leg around his waist, holding him to me... desperate to keep him here forever. My tongue slid over his, then I nipped his lower lip.

His teeth grazed my tongue with a soft huff. He angled his head to deepen the kiss, exploring my mouth as if memorizing me with his. The scent emanating from him shifted from concern to arousal.

My body relaxed at the intoxicating aroma, and I tangled my fingers in his hair, remembering the possessive way he'd reacted when I tugged on it. But I didn't trust myself not to hurt him again, especially with how awful his bruised temple and bloodshot eyes looked. It still stunned me that I did something so awful to him.

A soft rumble drew me back to the present, and I looked up to see him propped on his elbows, staring at me. "You smell like regret. And I need you to explain your messed-up question. Why would you say that?" His gaze hardened, even as his thumb brushed over my lower lip before caressing my cheek. "Talk to me."

I ran my fingers through his hair, trying to think of the right words. "It's... Um..." I couldn't think with him this close, but he deserved answers. "People have hurt me. My parents... friends. It's hard not to believe I'm the problem." Meeting his hot gaze from inches away unsettled me, so I watched the muscle twitching in his cheek.

"That's bullshit." He tilted my chin up, forcing me to look into his wolf amber eyes. "You're not the problem. They are... were. Every one of them." His fingers tightened on my chin before he loosened his grip, as if concentrating on not hurting me.

My breath hitched. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by his eye color, but it made sense with the tension coiled in his body. "You don't know that. Maybe I'm not a great person." I wanted to be angry and argue with him. It felt safer, but more tears welled in my eyes. "My parents weren't out there hoping I'd come back from that research lab. Emma was the only one, and look at how I treated her. I pushed away a caring friend. It's my fault. How can?—"

"You deserve so much better than what you've had in life. But I know you, baby. You're better than you think." He trailed his hand from my jaw to my hair, cradling my head and petting me with such tenderness that it almost broke me. "Should you have pushed Emma away?" He shrugged a broad shoulder. "Debatable. We've been through hell over the past month. It hasn't been a good time for someone to butt into

our lives. That includes Emma and the Pack. People might want to help, but they can do that when we're ready for it. Emma's feelings getting hurt because you said not now is a her problem, not a you problem."

A soft whine built in my throat. I wanted to believe him, but it was so hard. Maybe he was right about this one issue, but all the others? He wasn't there, and I wasn't about to trauma dump my life's history on him. My knuckles wanted to tighten in his hair, so I ran my hand down to bunch in his t-shirt instead. Tearing his shirt would be better than ripping out his blond hair. "But you don't know me as well as you think you do."

He blinked at me, confusion darkening his amber eyes. "What does that mean? You gonna tell me you kick puppies for fun?" A smirk twisted the corner of his lips.

"What?!" My jaw dropped, and I tugged at his shirt. "N-no! I'd never." I squirmed beneath him, trying to break free, but the movement pressed his thick erection against my hips, and I ground against his cock instinctively. Jerk. "Before you... I was a virgin."

The bed jerked, and I froze.

When the world stopped spinning, Jacob was standing with his back against the curtained window. A swath of his shirt was still in my fist. "Wait. You what now?" He swayed on his feet like a feather could knock him over.

Oh no... Here it is. The moment Jacob kicked me out of his condo and his life. Why did I have to go there? Why did I need to tell him the truth? "I was a?—"

"Heard you. I..." The blood drained from his face, and he pressed a hand to his stomach. "Hold that thought." Before I could respond, he darted toward the en suite bathroom. Not two seconds later, I heard retching.

“Jacob? Are you okay?” I rushed to the doorway just in time to see his torso heave as he puked. Oh, fuck. What had I done? I shouldn’t have rubbed my insecurities in his face. Did it even matter what my sexual status was before our first time? He hadn’t brought it up, so maybe I shouldn’t have either.

Watching him groan with his face in the toilet hurt my heart. Should I try to comfort him? Would he want me to? I didn’t know what to do. I opened a closet, relieved to find towels, and grabbed a washcloth for him. This all felt familiar, but with our roles reversed, and it unnerved me. Was this how Jacob felt last night?

Hush, brain. You’re not helping!

He lifted his head, eyeing me from his periphery. After a moment, he closed the lid and flushed. Instead of moving, he remained where he was, like he didn’t trust himself to leave that spot. “Why...” His voice sounded rough and crackly, and it took him a moment to clear it. “Why didn’t you tell me?” He took the wet washcloth I handed him. “It’s no wonder you resisted having sex while we were studying. I’m such an asshole.”

“I...” Leaning my hip against the bathroom counter, I chewed my lower lip, hating that he blamed himself. “Because I didn’t want you to be weirded out and view me as a conquest, then decide to leave.” It sounded stupid with what I knew about Jacob now. “I grew up with the whole ‘no sex before marriage’ spiel. I tried to follow that, or at least, I had a personal caveat of waiting for a long-term relationship after being estranged from my parents. You and me... We were, uh, neither.”

He looked at me like I’d grown a second head. “We’re mates. That’s long term, babe.” His hand braced the lid, and he pushed to his feet. His bicep flexed, as if he were pushing himself up carefully. “Werewolves don’t follow antiquated versions of right and wrong. You’re mine.” He stepped forward, but he wobbled on his feet.

“Baby!” I rushed forward and wrapped an arm around his waist, supporting his weight. “You’re not about to fall over on me, not with all this marble. Your noggin will be more scrambled than those eggs you cooked me this morning. Let’s get you back to bed.”

He wheezed out a laugh, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “No food talk. Geez...” When we stopped at his side of the bed, I helped him strip down to his boxers and get under the covers. “Come here. This conversation isn’t over yet.”

I sighed, wishing it had never started, but I sat beside him. My palm rubbed over his chest in slow, soothing strokes. “Do you need a doctor? Who should I call?”

“No, I’ll be fine. I just need some rest, and don’t change the subject.” His gaze slid over me, and he placed a warm hand on mine. “I will never leave you. No matter what happens.”

I wrinkled my nose, not liking how easily he saw through me. “Okay.” All I could do was try to believe him. After all, he’d risked his life to save mine, going into that research facility even after I’d rejected his advances. We’d been friends and study partners, nothing more, even though I’d had a big crush on him. Who wouldn’t with how sexy he was? “I trust you.”

“Also, if you think the fact you’re... that you were ... a virgin makes me want you less... Well, babe, you don’t know me at all.” His lips quirked in that sly way. “It makes me that much crazier knowing no one else has touched you. I’m the only one who gets to give you soul-searing pleasure.”

Huh. This manly gloating wasn’t what I’d expected from him, but it kinda turned me on. Maybe I had underestimated my handsome wolf. I pressed my face against his chest, hiding my smile. “Guess I know that now.” All the stress I’d felt melted away as we curled up together.

JACOB

The buzzing of a cell phone interrupted my sleep. My head throbbed. What the hell? At first, I thought the vibrations were coming from Kelly's phone, but no, the sound was coming from my nightstand.

My sleepy mate groaned as she wrapped her arm and leg around my torso, burying her face into my side like that would stop the noise. The soft growling that rumbled in her chest tugged at my heart. I'd hit the jackpot with her, no matter what she thought.

I leaned over to grab my phone, my vision swimming from the effort. The name on the screen made me freeze. Chad Fitzroy. Fuck.

This call wouldn't be fun. I almost fumbled the device, but recovered just in time. Last thing I wanted was to drop the phone on Kelly's head. I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then tried to ease out of her hold. That only made her cling tighter. Her knee pressed into my stomach at just the right angle, and I grimaced, feeling the urge to relieve myself wake up along with my brain.

This was going to be a struggle. I slipped the phone beneath my pillow. "Babe, I need to get up."

That soft growl was back. For a moment, I wondered if she was awake, but when I checked her expression, she definitely seemed to be asleep.

Well, only one way to find out...

“I might want to claim you and mark my territory, babe.” I weaved my fingers into her hair. “But I didn’t know you were into getting peed on.”

She snorted and stretched lazily, her knee nearly nailing me in the junk. “What did you just say?” Her body tipped toward the edge of the bed, and she yelped, her fingers digging into the blankets.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and scooped her over my body to her side of the bed. I let the momentum roll me on top of her, my weight pressing her into the mattress again. “Mmm... Just that you were clinging so hard while you slept that I might not make it to the bathroom.” My lips brushed her cheek. “Rest up. I won’t be long.”

The phone fell silent, but I knew Chad’s return call was inevitable. He was persistent, like a wolf chasing down a rabbit.

Kelly captured my face with her hands. “Maybe brush your teeth while you’re in there. I want more kisses.” Her thumbs brushed over my cheekbones, and she worried at her lower lip while her gaze lingered on my mouth.

“Promise.” I leaned my face into her touch, but her hands drifted to my hair like she contemplated not letting go. “I need to grab some water, too, so don’t wait for me. It might take a moment for me to return to bed.” I slumped to my side and drew the covers up almost to her chin. “Sleep tight.”

“Okay.” She yawned and rolled to her side, drawing the comforter tighter around her. “If you need me, yell.”

“I will.”

I sat up slowly, and the pounding in my head worsened. Bracing myself against the nightstand, I rubbed the knot on my temple. My head still felt like someone had used it as a punching bag, but resting had lessened my nausea. I eased myself to my feet, doing my best to maintain control over my body.

My wolf hated the weakness we were showing, but it wasn't like I'd asked for this. Neither of us had.

When I turned, Kelly's eyelids were fighting to stay open, but within moments, she drifted back to sleep. I snatched the phone from under the pillow, then headed for the bathroom. I didn't trust my balance enough to slide into my shorts.

After finding some relief and washing my hands, I fulfilled my promise to Kelly by brushing my teeth. I'd felt gross after emptying my stomach earlier, so this was a start. When I had a chance, I wanted a shower. Better yet, maybe I could share one with Kelly.

My gaze dipped to the phone again, paranoia creeping in. Chad was going to call again. I needed to get on this before he disturbed Kelly's rest.

I crept into the bedroom, thanking my lucky stars when Kelly didn't stir. Her soft snores drifted through the room, and the relaxed expression on her face made me happy. Part of me wanted to stay here and watch her, but I couldn't.

I silently shut the bedroom door behind me, grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and then headed to my study beyond the kitchen beside the home gym. It'd give me privacy to figure out what Chad wanted. After taking a few sips of water, I reclined on the sofa and dialed his number.

The Alpha's son had been my friend since we were pups. After Shane's visit, I needed to see what was going on. If I didn't answer, Chad might swing by to

investigate, especially since my brother knew I was home. I doubted Chad would be as polite as Shane if I didn't invite him inside. Besides, Kelly's scent permeated my place by now. He'd smell her.

It only took one ring for Chad to answer. "Jacob." That didn't bode well. Guess he was getting ready to call back soon.

"Hey," I said.

"I'm glad you called. You home now? I looked for you at the facility last night. Picked up your scent in the woods, but you didn't stick around to visit Pack headquarters."

Something in Chad's tone made me wonder if he knew more than he was letting on. In fact, I'd bet a fair share of my inheritance he did, but questioning him might lead to topics I didn't want to talk about.

"I'm sorry I missed you. I couldn't hang out there. Not after being locked up for a month." I leaned my head against the back of the sofa, holding a breath I wanted to release. My mind kept returning to prowling the small cage, doing my best to protect Kelly and failing. Stop it. "But yeah, I'm home now. What's going on?"

Chad cleared his throat. Did that mean something more ominous than I wanted it to? "I get that, but you should've let someone know. It's not safe now. The people who did this to you and the others are still out there. The Pack is on high alert. Besides, man, if you went rogue after being set free... You know what happens. They would have put you down." He sighed. "I don't want that to happen. We've known each other for a long time. You're my friend."

My shoulders slumped forward, and I rested my head in my hand. This felt worse coming from Chad than my own brother. Perhaps Chad's stark sincerity made me feel

valued, not like a screw-up.

“You’re right. Sorry for taking off. I wasn’t thinking straight. I just wanted to go home and relax without being swept up in Pack politics and telling everyone what I’ve been through before processing it myself.” That was true.

It was a matter of time before the Pack Council requested my presence. My brother had said Mom would get in touch, and I could almost guarantee she’d be asking for that. I needed to reach out. The Pack needed to know about Kelly and the research the soldier who freed us had found and encouraged us to keep.

“Don’t worry about it. You sound okay, if not tired. I won’t come over and drag you back here. How did you get home?” he asked.

“Took a taxi. I lifted a wallet on the way out of the facility... Figured they owed us.” I hesitated, then added, “...me.” Once Kelly and I were far enough away, we’d found a convenience store where we’d gotten some clothes and used the store’s phone. Considering the looks from the cabbie and store clerk, I was surprised they didn’t detain us and call the police. “I’m glad to have that vote of confidence from you, Chad. I am tired and happy to be home. How are things with the Pack?”

“Ah, I see.” His curiosity rumbled through the line. Had I slipped? Was he about to call me out? But then he let out a sharp sigh. Chad kept his cool better than most wolves I knew. “A lot has happened. Things are changing within the Pack. We nearly lost my father a few days before Christmas. Some mercenaries shot him with a silver bullet. We kept it quiet so no one would challenge him while he was weak. Jared, that asshole, reached out to two witches and met them at their magic shop. One of them created a remedy, but the witch used wolfsbane. A plant that’s poisonous to us. I tracked her down and discovered she hadn’t known the kind of man she was making it for. She might’ve killed my dad if we hadn’t caught on so quickly. In the end, she crafted a potion to counteract it.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Our Alpha had almost died? Aaron Fitzroy had been someone I'd looked up to since I was a pup. He'd always been kind. No words came to me.

"Are you serious?" I finally managed, a rush of questions flooding my thoughts. "A witch did that? Why didn't Jared tell her specifically what he needed? Did he do any research before speaking with her? Did the woman get what was coming to her?"

Chad chuckled. What was so funny? He'd almost lost his dad. "The witch is an interesting topic. A thorn in my paw, but she's been useful. If it weren't for her, my father would be dead. And if she hadn't meddled in the Pack's affairs, you and the others might still be locked up. She's been warned, but no harm will come to her. She's an accepted nuisance. As for Jared, he's been stripped of his rank and will go on trial tomorrow."

"Hold up." My brows knitted together, and I rubbed my sore temple. This conversation was making my headache worse. "Shane mentioned Jared's trial when he stopped by last night, but he ran off before I could ask him about it. What's going on? Seems like this is about more than the potion. Didn't he spew objectionable shit about... something involving humans?"

"Yes." A frustrated grunt came over the line, and I could tell Chad didn't want to get into this. "He wanted my father dead because he believes we should force humans to become werewolves since our numbers have dwindled. My father has been vehemently against that for a long time."

"Fuck that." I'd seen firsthand the consequences of someone being forced into a life they didn't ask for. Maybe I should mention Kelly, but I didn't want to go there yet.

"I agree. Jared never enjoyed being second-in-command, but he was too weak to challenge my father properly. The coward deserves what's coming."

Damn. My time imprisoned with Kelly had caused me to miss far more than I'd imagined. "Wait, you said the witch helped find me? I thought the call to my brother had prompted my rescue?" That didn't make sense.

Chad went quiet again. That was like a neon sign for him. "Calling your brother was helpful. We..." More silence stretched over the line, as if he didn't want to say whatever was on his mind.

"Spit it out, man. What happened? Something strange is going on with my brother. I just want to know what it is." Rubbing my forehead, I stared up at the ceiling of my study. I hoped Kelly wouldn't wake up and wonder where I was. And if she listened in... would she judge me if I learned something bad about my brother?

"Okay. Just... You didn't hear this from me." That was never a good sign. "Your brother didn't bother listening to your voicemail for a while. The Pack only learned about it earlier this week. If he'd listened to your message and told someone about it, we might've found you a lot sooner. I'm sorry, Jacob."

My chest ached at the thought of my brother's negligence. Brothers should be there for one another. I trusted that asshole with Kelly's and my life. "Who knows about this?"

"The entire Pack. We held a meeting and played the voicemail. Our newest member is in the military. We believed he could assist us in finding you. He's the witch's boyfriend. He really helped, but he was severely injured. Shot in the chest. From what I saw this morning, he should be okay."

I ground my teeth, feeling the pressure in my skull shoot through the roof. Everyone knew about my brother's betrayal. Everyone. And that soldier... The memory sent a chill down my spine. He'd rescued me and Kelly. The three of us had escaped toward the abandoned gas station, then the gunshot. The woman's scream. We'd left them...

Oh god. What the hell had I done? I'd left him to die because I'd wanted to get out of there. Because I'd needed to protect Kelly.

"Jacob?" Chad's voice rose. "Hey, are you okay? I know this must be a lot to take in, but I can grab dinner and swing by. We can eat and talk this over more." His keys jingled over the line, and panic surged through my veins.

If Chad came here, things would get worse. Pull yourself together. It was painful, but Kelly needed me. Still, how could Shane betray me like that? I'd trusted him. "Sorry. I just... I'm at a loss for words. How can I even react to all of that? And Shane—" I ran a hand through my hair. "Thanks for the offer, but no. I need to process this and get my head on straight before tomorrow. I appreciate your honesty." My friend came through when my brother had tried to look like a hero. Now I knew where the embarrassment came from. The fucking jerk.

"No problem. Don't do anything crazy. You're going through a lot. Try to let it go." Even as Chad said it, I could tell he wasn't pleased. He wouldn't accept this lying down if he were in my shoes. "Besides, you're home. That's what matters."

How had he dealt with Jared and discovering the witch's involvement in his father being poisoned? Had Chad let it go and not done anything crazy? Then again, that was on a different level than this.

I shook my head, trying to push the negative thoughts aside. They were noxious to my mind. Right now, I needed to remain present—both to keep myself from going off the deep end with the emotions from being trapped in the lab, but also to remain available for Kelly. She needed me, and I needed her.

"I'll try." Chad was right. I was home. But no matter what I did, I couldn't shove down my feelings. "He came here, Chad. That asshole pretended everything was fine between us. That everything should be fine. He gave me this cell phone, offered to

take me to the Pack's HQ to pick up the stuff from my car. I sensed something weird from him. At the time, I wasn't sure what it was, but I do now. I can't believe this."

Chad let out a sigh. "When I heard, it didn't surprise me. He's always been irresponsible. Maybe he's never grown out of it. I wish you hadn't gone through what you did, and that I'd reached out to you myself. All I know is you've got the Pack's support. We're behind you, and we're glad you're home. My father wanted me to tell you hello." He drew in a breath, hesitation thick in the pause that followed. "He also said to let you know you'll need to go before the Council. You don't want to be involved in Pack politics right now, I get it. You sadly must face this. Besides, it's just telling the Council you're okay more than anything. That you won't fall off the deep end and go rogue."

Chad did his best to make it more palatable, but it didn't help much. It still meant going before everyone and explaining what happened with the tests... and, most importantly, the reason I was at the laboratory in the first place. I needed to tell them about Kelly. What would they think of her? Would she be killed because those assholes had changed her into one of us?

I glanced toward the study's door. "That's all, huh? I doubt it. My mom is on the Pack Council, Chad. I might not have as much firsthand experience with Pack business as you, but I know why the Pack operates like it does. It's not as simple as them checking if I'm crazy or not." I squeezed my eyes shut. "Thanks for catching me up on what's been happening. Tell your dad I said hi back. I'm glad he's doing all right." I ended the call without waiting for a reply. This was terrible, but I had no desire to be persuaded into meeting with the Pack Council sooner than later.

I stared up at the ceiling again, a heaviness weighing on my chest. So much had happened during my confinement. I couldn't hide from my Pack forever, and I didn't want to. But was now the right time?

Maybe talking with my mother about what Shane had done was the best way for me to move forward. I might be able to put off going before the Council by speaking with her. She held considerable sway with them. She might even convince the others to give me time. I could also give her the research the scientists had gathered on us. That might help get the Council off my back. With them appeased, I could spend more time with Kelly and figure out what was next for us.

I set my new phone beside me on the sofa, exhaustion pulling at my limbs. After everything that had happened, I yearned to lie down and sleep for days. But that wouldn't help. I couldn't run from my responsibilities forever.

The study door opened, and I lifted my head to look at Kelly. I wasn't up for more arguing. In fact, I wanted to sleep away my problems, even if that was the last thing I should do.

"Is everything okay?" Her soft voice melted my heart, and I wanted to wrap my arms around her and just breathe in her scent. Maybe she could soothe the aching pain in my chest that my brother had created.

"I don't know, baby." I patted the sofa beside me, needing her comfort.

KELLY

The defeated look on Jacob's face made my heart hurt for him. Ugh. I'd heard him thanking whoever was on the phone, so why did he look this hurt? I hated that we'd fought earlier, and while his injuries were healing, how could I forgive myself for the pain I'd caused? He didn't need that kind of drama in his life.

"Actually, it's..." He sucked in a breath and placed his head in his hands, massaging his temples. "No, I'm not okay. I won't lie and say I am." He ran his hands through his hair. "When we escaped the first time, the mercenaries drugged me to near unconsciousness. I drove us from that abandoned gas station, but it was a struggle to keep the car on the road. I thought burning myself with the car's cigarette lighter might snap me out, but I didn't trust my coordination. Instead, I called my brother for help."

The last thing I remembered from that night was Jacob collapsing on me and struggling to breathe under his weight. All I knew was that I'd tried to fight the men, but they'd heavily drugged me. The memories were painful, and I chewed on my lower lip, trying to force them out of my head.

"What happened?" I stalked to the couch and tucked my legs beneath me. My hand slid over his muscular back, trying to ease some of his tension.

"I pulled to the side of the road so I could use my phone without crashing the car as I dialed his number. I reached his voicemail, so I left a message. But..." He glanced

my way before staring down at the plush rug. “Apparently, he didn’t bother checking his voicemail until earlier this week. The entire Pack heard the message. They played it during a meeting. And...” He tugged at his hair, his voice breaking. “The man who rescued us from the cage? He was a new member. Shot in the chest.” A look of abject horror washed over his face when he turned to me. “I wish we’d gone back to check on him.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth, unable to believe my ears. The memory tore through my thoughts, and I was back there, sneaking through the forested area with the man who had helped us.

My heart pounded in my chest. I couldn’t believe we’d been rescued from the research facility and had successfully—at least so far—escaped. Then again, I didn’t want to let myself dream that Jacob and I could leave here and be safe. Not after last time. We’d been on our way to safety when the mercenaries found us and dragged us back to captivity.

The gas station’s parking lot wasn’t safe. That much was certain. A woman with red hair had her face shoved into the gravel, and the man who’d found us took off in her direction. Part of me wanted to stay and help the two of them, but my primal side wanted to flee. To make the escape we’d failed to achieve before and save ourselves.

Jacob and I held hands as we ran, trying to gain as much ground between us and the research facility as possible.

A gunshot rang out in the night. The woman cried out the name “Ethan!” in alarm.

I froze in my tracks, feeling Jacob almost wrench my arm from its socket. I glanced over my shoulder, not that I could see them. “Should we do something?” My voice trembled. We needed to make sure everyone was okay. Faintly, the sound of other werewolves running through the trees and gravel crunching beneath their feet in the

parking lot caught my ears.

“We need to get ourselves to safety. The others will help him.” He didn’t look happy about leaving them, but I let him lead me away.

Jacob’s hands on my shoulders brought me back to the present.

I shook my head, guilt gnawing at my gut. What had we done? I slumped back against the sofa. If we’d stayed, we could have helped. Maybe I should have pushed Jacob on the subject, but the thought of being recaptured and put through more tests... I never wanted to suffer through that torture again.

“I...” Words stuck in my throat. The rest of what he’d said finally penetrated my muddled thoughts. “W-wait... what? Your brother only told your Pack about the message you left him earlier this week?” Fear and disgust warred inside my belly. I couldn’t imagine how Jacob must feel.

I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his chest. We needed to be there for one another. I buried my head against his chest, letting his musky scent ground me.

“It shocked me too. It hurts so badly. Other stuff happened as well. Things I should’ve been there to help with. My friend’s dad, our Alpha... he nearly died.” He rested his chin on top of my head. “Still, I can’t believe my brother didn’t care enough to check. When he came by last night, he acted like everything was okay. I sensed something was off, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. Now... I don’t know how to feel about him.” He hugged me close, his hand wandering over my back. Those caresses made me want to curl up even tighter to him, listen to his heartbeat, and just breathe.

I bit my lower lip, not sure what I should say. This wasn’t a competition of whose family sucked more, but he needed to know he wasn’t alone in his pain.

“I’m so sorry, Jacob. I don’t know what I’d do if I were in your shoes. To have a family member do that...” Part of me wondered what his relationship with his brother had been like before this. My family had made life difficult for me growing up. The second time they’d thrown out or burned everything I owned because I didn’t live up to their expectations, I knew something had to change. I saved my money so I could move across the country to attend Winter Forest University. Their creative writing program was well-regarded, which sparked my interest in the school. Writing had always been my escape, even when my family tried to crush every part of me that didn’t fit their mold. Studying it felt like a minor rebellion. “I know what it’s like to be hurt by people who should care for you. It’s hard.”

I rubbed my cheek against his chest. “We haven’t really talked about our lives and family, but... There’s a reason I’m not close to my family. They never supported me. Always put me down. Made me feel like an embarrassment. I tried so hard to please them, to be the perfect daughter. I never felt like I wasn’t a burden. During my sophomore year of high school, I’d had enough. I researched colleges, saved money, and made plans to come here.”

Jacob held me close, his breath caressing my ear. Just his warmth and presence gave me the strength to continue.

“That’s why I moved here on my own. I broke things off with them to have a life that wasn’t under their control. Where I didn’t have to feel less than. I could just be me.” Now felt like a good time to confess. “That’s why what I’ve built... My college experience, my apartment... They mean so much to me. They’re something I made possible. No one else.” I glanced up at him. “That’s why those things are important to me. But this differs from what you’re going through, obviously.” Crap, maybe I’m going too far. “But yeah, I want you to know you’re not alone.”

“Thanks, babe.” His hand continued to stroke my back. “I did not know. I hate you had to deal with that, but I’m glad you told me.” He exhaled slowly. “It makes me

feel... I don't know. Like I understand a bit of what it's like. Like I'm not the only one trying to figure out how to deal with family bullshit."

A shiver raced down my spine. "It's fine, I guess. I don't keep in touch with my family. But thanks. Their loss, right?"

"Hell yeah. I'm lucky to have you, babe. And hey, you're not alone anymore, okay? I'm right here. School and your place are important. We'll take care of that together." He tilted my chin up. Those words meant a lot. He cared. But I had to look after my own finances. I couldn't—or wouldn't—expect him to pay for what I needed. That wasn't me. I provided for myself. Always had.

His phone buzzed on the sofa, signaling a text message.

I met his gaze, wondering if he would pick up again. Instead, he pressed a kiss to my lips. The sensation of warmth burned through me, vanquishing the icy darkness within until I felt like I was on top of the world. I wanted nothing more than to finish what we'd started earlier.

He pulled me closer, and I deepened the kiss, stroking my tongue over his lips before dipping inside his mouth. Climbing out of bed this morning had been hard. But I wanted to return there in Jacob's arms.

I trailed my hand down his chest toward the hem of his boxers, wanting to feel him inside me. Maybe the full moon heightened my lust, but I cared so much for Jacob too. Regardless, I slipped my fingers beneath the waistband.

His hand circled my wrist, and I looked up at him, hoping I wasn't stepping out of line. We'd gone from talking about terrible family crap to making out. It was a little weird.

“Are you okay with this?” I asked.

The easy quirk of his lips relaxed me a little. “Are you?”

His smile was infectious, and I grinned back. “Of course I am. What do you think I’m doing?” I brushed another kiss to his lips, then trailed my mouth to the edge of his before moving lower to his jaw, his neck, his shoulder...

A low groan escaped him, his grip tightening on my waist. “Kelly, that feels incredible.” His hands didn’t stay still for long. One traced a slow path up my back, the other slipping to cup my face as he tilted my chin up. His pupils were blown wide, his breathing heavy. “You drive me insane, you know that?” His thumb slid over my lower lip, slow and deliberate. “You’re stronger than I could’ve imagined.”

“Yeah?” My voice came out in a whisper. “You’re just saying that because I ripped your clothes off and gave you a concussion, huh?”

“Maybe.” He smirked, but there was something raw in his expression. “Doesn’t hurt that I now know some of what you’ve been through, what it took to get you here... You’re fucking amazing.” His lips brushed against mine, softer this time. “And you light my body on fire.”

Desire and need poured from his words, and it stoked the flames within me.

“Take me, baby.” I straddled his lap, savoring the surprise in his emerald green eyes. “Let’s spend the rest of the night in one another’s arms.” The saucy words felt like they should’ve come from someone else. I’d never been this bold and brazen, but he changed that. I sucked in a breath as Jacob gripped my butt and squeezed it in his massive hands.

“Your wish is my command.” He brushed his lips against mine. “But we’ll need an

intermission to shift. Our beasts need their chance at freedom too.”

The thought of letting my beast roam free worried me, but Jacob had helped me through it last time. Hopefully, it would go better now. Before I could ruminate on the topic more, Jacob rolled to his feet with me in his arms. The sudden move ripped a yelp from my throat.

I tightened my grip on his shoulders and waist. “What are you doing?”

“Unless you want me to tear your clothes off, we need to change positions a little.” His eyebrow lifted like it was an obvious answer, but I wondered if he’d noticed my mind swerving into unsexy territory.

“Oh, that’s all?” I wiggled in his arms, feeling his thick cock pressed against my core. A mischievous idea came to mind. “Let me down then.”

His gaze scanned my face. “Of course.” He hesitated before relenting. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing at all, baby. Just making sure you don’t need to buy me new clothes.” I winked at him, then tugged my tank top off. It dropped to the floor beside us.

“Mhm...” His warm hands immediately cupped my bare breasts, drawing my nipples into tight peaks between his fingers. “You’re so beautiful, Kelly.” The way he pinched and rolled them had my inner walls fluttering. He knew what my body craved.

KELLY

I placed my hands over his, moaning as I traced my fingers over his knuckles. If I didn't take control soon, I'd melt into his touch like butter. And I wanted to explore his body more now that we weren't under scientist supervision. My gaze dipped to where his dick strained against his boxers. Leaning closer, I nipped at his collarbone, then kissed a trail down to flick my tongue over each of his nipples.

His grip tightened on my breasts, and a low growl rumbled beneath my lips.

The vibrations felt funky on my lips, and I giggled. I glanced up at him to see a dark intensity in his now wolfish eyes, even as my kisses and licks continued down his chest. My fingers grazed the hem of his boxers, and I sank to my knees.

"Babe..." His chest heaved with effort while his hands hung limply at his sides. "You have no idea what you're doing to me. How you're making me feel."

I trailed my fingertips over Jacob's underwear along his hard cock, enjoying the way he twitched under my touch. "Mmm... I think I'm making you feel great." I whispered conspiratorially to Jacob's bulge. "Isn't that right?" His dick twitched again, and I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Jacob let out a shaky breath. "Okay, I think you're having too much fun down there." He leaned down and placed his hands on my sides to guide me to my feet. "Come on up, babe."

But I ducked out of his grip, letting myself drop onto my bum. “Nah uh. Not so fast.” Tasting him was something I needed.

With another sigh, he stood up straight. His hands clenched and unclenched like he wasn't sure what to do with them, and he shifted his weight a little. He seemed more nervous than me.

My brows knitted together, wondering what was causing this nervousness, but I climbed to my knees once more. I dipped my fingers beneath the hem of his boxers, then slid them off. His long cock bounced free as his underwear hit the rug with a soft thud.

“Kelly...” The way he growled my name sent a shiver up my spine.

My gaze met his, and I leaned closer, my breath ghosting over his length. I curled my fingers around his shaft, marveling at how velvety soft his skin felt. The bead of pre-cum on his tip leaked downward, and I flicked my tongue over him, catching the salty, sweet drop. My hand pumped his dick in slow strokes.

His whole body shuddered, and he carded his hand into my hair. That reaction made me feel powerful, and I wanted to draw out even more of those soft groans. “You’re such a tease, babe.”

I’d never done this before, but seeing him this excited made me want to. “You don’t seem to mind.” I slid my tongue along the underside of his cock and continued over his crown. The scent of his musky arousal filled my nostrils, and I loved it. I drew his tip into my mouth, and his hand tightened on my hair. The tugging sensation turned me on, dampening my thighs. Now I understood why he might’ve enjoyed it so much.

I bobbed my head over him as I continued to stroke the part that didn’t fit. His

glowing wolf amber eyes watched me, but he didn't try to thrust into my mouth. Did he not trust himself? I knew he wouldn't hurt me. A soft whimper escaped my throat, and the vibration jerked his hips forward. I gagged, then pressed on, taking more of his dick between my lips. As I withdrew, my tongue danced along the underside of him, and I hollowed my cheeks to increase the suction on his tip.

“Fuck. If you don't stop, I'm going to come.”

His cock left my mouth with a soft pop . My lips curved in a wicked grin. “Challenge accepted.”

Jacob's eyes widened, and he gripped my hair with both hands, as if trying to hold me back. “Wait, that wasn't?—”

I took him back into my mouth, sucking and stroking my hand over his shaft. My other hand moved from his hip to caress his balls. His breath hitched, and I wondered if I'd hurt him. But he tossed his head back and closed his eyes, as if enjoying it. The way his cock twitched and his grip tightened led me to believe he was nearing release.

“Stop, I'm close.” He glanced down at me, seeing the mirth in my gaze, and rolled his eyes. “Babe... I'll take control if you?—”

My tongue flicked over his tip again, drawing out another low groan. One moment, I was on my knees in front of him, and the next, I was being hauled to my feet by my upper arm. The sudden movement caught me off-guard, and a surprised yelp erupted from my throat. I stumbled into Jacob's chest, my palms landing on his pecs.

His hands steadied me, but soon they moved over my body. They felt like heaven on my skin. He trailed one hand down my torso toward the shorts I wore, and I bit my lip in anticipation, more than ready for them to be gone. Instead, his long fingers dipped

beneath the hem of my shorts, caressing me through my panties.

I let out a frustrated moan and tilted my hips against his fingers, trying to gain more friction. “Come on. Please.”

Jacob’s grin was wolfish, but I wasn’t afraid. He wouldn’t hurt me. Something he’d more than proven. He withdrew his fingers, then unfastened the button of my denim shorts before removing them and my panties. His gaze dropped to drink me in. The slightest bit of nervousness gnawed at me with being so exposed before him, but that feeling was short-lived as his mouth connected with mine.

I had the faintest notion of him walking me backward until a hard surface bumped my ass. He leaned forward, and the clattering of items falling to the floor startled me. He laid me on his desk. When we broke apart, my gaze drifted to the floor. An assortment of pens, paper, and a few electronics littered the floor. “What a mess.”

“That’s not the only mess I plan on making.” His hands gripped my thighs, spreading them open for him. He slipped his finger into me, and my hips lifted a little. “So wet and receptive. You enjoyed sucking me, didn’t you?”

“Mhm...” I bit my lower lip as a moan rumbled in my throat. My breath hitched as he dipped his head. I gripped the edge of his desk, aching to feel his mouth on me. When he circled his tongue over my clit, I arched my back, unable to stop myself. “Jacob, oh... Mmm. That feels so good.”

The slow, delicious rhythm he used made me wish his cock was there and not just his finger, and when he crooked his finger, finding that special spot inside me, I grabbed his hair. Desire grew within me, and my breath came out quicker. Having his mouth on me was amazing, but I wanted more. When he added a second finger, the slow stretch took my breath away.

“Jacob, I need you.” I wanted our bodies to be connected and moving together, to share pleasure with one another. My fingers tightened in his hair, and I gave it a gentle tug.

His low, rumbling growl sent a shiver chasing up my spine, and he flashed those wolf amber eyes my way. Those long fingers rocked into me harder and faster, bumping that sensitive spot that made my toes curl with pleasure. Almost reluctantly, he swiped his tongue over me a few more times before kissing his way up my torso.

I spread my legs wider in anticipation. My core ached to have him fill me. I loosened my grip on his hair a little as he nipped a path up my chest toward my mouth. He pressed a gentle kiss against my lips, and I tasted myself on his tongue. My teeth bit into his lower lip before I explored his mouth.

The tip of his cock pressed against my entrance, and I arched my hips against him. I wanted this so much. His tongue swept over mine, deepening the kiss, as he slid inside of me, joining our bodies together inch by delicious inch.

“Are you okay?” he murmured against my mouth.

“Better than okay.” I brushed my lips over his. “Are you?”

“Of course I am. I’m with you.” He pressed his forehead against mine, easing himself the rest of the way inside of me. He exhibited an almost absurd amount of care. I was a werewolf, too, not a human anymore. The chances of him hurting me were slim.

The laboratory had shown me how much harder I was now. My healing speed was faster, and I was so much stronger.

Still, Jacob treated me with the utmost care, like I was fragile. He truly cared. That meant so much to me. Although, now wasn’t the best time for him to show that

tenderness when I craved him. I could handle him. We'd proven that before.

When fully seated, he remained still as he nuzzled my neck. I squirmed against him, wanting to feel him move. He withdrew until he was almost all the way out before thrusting back inside. The slow strokes were almost torturous, but they felt so good.

I moaned as I lifted my hips, pushing back against him. My hands moved from his hair to his shoulders. I bit my nails into his skin, and something sparked within him because the leisurely pace picked up. The harder I dug my nails in, the quicker he thrust.

I eased up a little, not wanting to hurt him again. But the way he made me feel was incredible. His hips continued rocking at a steady pace, shaking the sturdy desk beneath me. My moans filled the study along with the rattling of items in the desk's drawers and our skin slapping together.

"Jacob!"

More kisses caressed my neck, but the moment I said his name, he lifted his head to stare at me with that wolfish gaze. A smirk crept across his lips, and he brushed his knuckles across my cheek. "Your eyes are beautiful that color."

His words startled me. What did he mean? My eyes have always been brown... But then I realized that my vision was crisp, sharp... and different. The golden specks in his irises were more vivid than before. Instantly, I recognized it as my wolf, and a rumbling purr built in my chest. I wrapped my legs around his waist, holding him close.

"You're beautiful," I murmured. My voice came out husky with desire. "Handsome."

His pace picked up. He covered my mouth with his kisses, and I closed my eyes,

meeting each thrust with my own. The intensity of this moment had me melting in his arms.

My core tightened around him, the ache inside me desperate and hungry. Our kiss intensified, and I clawed at his back, feeling like the world was shifting on its axis. Bliss swept through me like a tidal wave, dragging me under, making me cling to the only real person in my world right then. Jacob.

Moans erupted from my throat, but Jacob's mouth muffled them. The hard thrusts didn't cease. Instead, he rolled his hips, working me through the first orgasm, only to launch me into blissful heights a second time. Sometimes, it felt like this man knew my body better than I did.

Jacob's low groans caused my inner walls to flutter, and the firm muscles of his back bunched under my hold. His thrusts became jerkier and less controlled until he spilled his seed inside me. We laid there panting for a few moments, not wanting to move.

"I'm glad you have a comfortable bed," I said. "After we're done shifting, I might need a nap. That was so good. I'm not looking forward to walking through the woods soon." It was true. If I had it my way, we'd cuddle until our stomachs demanded food.

"Hmm... Maybe that's what I'm going for, babe. Keeping you captive in my bed. Once we've shifted, I'll make love to you as much as I can." He chuckled, but it sounded tired. "Granted, if I did that, I might not be able to walk either. We might find ourselves stuck in bed, having to starve together." He eased out of me. "At least we're warmed up."

The wicked twinkle in his eyes stirred more desire between my legs. A desire that only subsided a little. My body still craved his touch. But how much of what I felt was the full moon's power, and how much was the sheer volume of my lust for him?

Did that matter?

No. I knew how I felt about him. I needed to trust this special relationship we had, and that meant I had to tell him about my meeting with the university...

But I couldn't do that yet and ruin this amazing evening.

* * *

My body still ached from our lovemaking as the full moon lit our way through the forest behind Jacob's condo. The chilly night air caressed my skin, raising goosebumps. Something about being so close to all the people living in his gated community made me nervous. "You're sure this is safe? No one will stumble upon two wolves here?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't put you in harm's way, babe." His nostrils flared, as if making sure no one was nearby. "This is a nature preserve, and this section doesn't have hiking trails. I'll keep an eye out for danger." He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. "You should've brought a jacket. You're cold."

"But I'll have a coat pretty soon, right?" A smirk tugged at my lips, and I rose onto my tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips. "Maybe we could race? I hear a stream not too far away."

"A race?" His eyebrow lifted. "That sounds like fun. Perhaps I should be a gentleman and give you a head start." He ripped his shirt over his head and tossed it onto a boulder, then his hands went to his shorts. They joined the shirt, and apparently, he hadn't put his boxers back on. He must have forgotten them in his study. His cock thickened under my gaze, and I licked my lips, heat pooling low in my belly as I remembered the way he'd tasted. "Going to keep ogling me, or are we racing soon?"

My gaze jumped to his face, and heat spread up my chest to my cheeks. “Oh, right.” I turned around and stripped out of my tank top, panties, and shorts, putting them with Jacob’s clothes. For some reason, I felt awkward being naked in front of him now. Perhaps the lack of imminent intimacy was the cause. This was more utilitarian, for shifting... Something I wasn’t eager to do. “So, I guess this is it.” I turned to face him, my nails biting into my palms.

Don’t freak out. You’ve got this.

But the pep talk didn’t help one bit. My fingers curled tighter.

“Babe, how are you so self-conscious after we made love earlier?” He crossed the space between us, then pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Is it the shifting?”

“Yeah, I’m... worried.”

He took my hands in his. “You’re going to do great. I’m here with you.” We knelt together with him guiding my hands to the ground. “Remember last time? Surrounded by concrete walls and iron bars? It’ll be easier this time with us in nature. Feel the dirt beneath your fingers and let the wolf come forward.”

I ground my teeth, digging my fingers into the dead leaves and dirt. My wolf lingered just out of reach, like a barrier held her back. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to share my body with her, but a foreboding sensation pressed inward, stealing my strength. My heartbeat pounded, fast and uneven.

Just do it!

Something skittered across my calf. I barely swallowed a yelp, my heart skipping a beat. Fuck this. While I wasn’t a complete city girl, I didn’t like the idea of creepy crawlies climbing on me.

Focus.

But I couldn't. My ears pricked at the sound of owls hooting deeper in the forest, the distant footsteps of something—maybe a deer—just out of sight. No, no, no...

"I can't do this. Sorry." I started to stand, but Jacob held me in place.

"What's wrong? I can help you."

JACOB

While I knew this might not be easy for Kelly, I hadn't expected this much resistance from her. She looked on the verge of jumping out of her skin. Every soft sound or caress of the wind had her on edge. Perhaps I could've let her shift in my home gym, but I thought being in nature would help. Instead, it was doing the opposite.

"Look at me, babe. I'm here with you." I lifted her chin, forcing her to look at me. "Talk to me."

Those wolf amber eyes of hers were wide with fear, almost feral. "It's... I just don't know if this is a great idea." Her gaze darted past my shoulder when another owl hooted.

"Are you afraid? I won't let anything happen to you. We're safe here." My wolf howled its frustration at Kelly's fear. We were more than capable of protecting our mate. Why didn't she believe in us? Each minute that passed had the beast scrambling to stretch its legs and roam.

"Yeah. I just... I'm not comfortable in nature like you."

I swiped a hand over my face, feeling my agitation rise. Part of me contemplated shifting, but if I did, I worried my wolf might take control and dominate her like last time. The last thing I needed was to add to her anxiety. "It takes time. I'm right here. Just put your hands on the ground and focus on your wolf."

Once she was in position again, I ran my hand over her back in soothing strokes. The sting of power radiating from her told me she was trying, but she remained in human form for several seconds. At last, her spine bowed, and she let out a pained cry as bones broke and reshaped while her muscles lengthened. Her cries transformed into a long, mournful howl.

The sound hurt my heart. I withdrew a little, scooting back to give her space. White fur rippled over her wolf's body while her face contorted into a muzzle. The urge to bury my fingers in it was tempting, but I wanted to keep my hand in one piece. Still, she needed help from someone more capable and patient than me. She needed the Pack. I couldn't keep her to myself, not if it risked her safety or sanity like this.

After another minute, her shift completed, and she sank into a long downward dog stretch. Her fluid motions continued as she stretched her hind legs, then she glanced at me and tilted her head to the side. It seemed like she was confused. Her ears swiveled like satellites, tracking distant sounds.

I reached out my hand to pet her, but she jerked her head in the stream's direction. Was she asking me to race still? Before I could ask, she took off running through the trees.

"Cheater." But I chuckled. It wouldn't take long for me to shift and catch up. I knew my limits. I'd win this round.

Pressing my hands to the forest floor, I braced as my beast surged through me, tearing at my insides. The pain of him stretching outward and crunching through my human form to break and reshape me almost shattered my focus on listening for Kelly, but my resistance was non-existent to him. We'd worked through enough that I knew I could give in and let him loose... most of the time at least.

After a few moments to stretch out the soreness, I took off after her, careful to remain

quiet. Up ahead, Kelly was barreling through the brush, spooking small animals all around us in her fervor to win. My longer legs and powerful muscles ate up the ground in her wake, but I wanted her to think she could win. I'd stalk just long enough.

The tinkling stream lay up ahead, and I circled around, putting on a burst of speed to leap out at her from the side. When she neared it and could almost taste her victory, I barreled into her, sending us both flying.

A vicious snarl ripped from her throat and pointed fangs clamped down on my shoulder.

Shit. Not play... Instinct.

My wolf let out a rumbling growl. With a sharp twist of my body, I wrenched free, throwing her from me. She yelped as her body skidded across the leaves. Did I hurt her? The thought of shifting back to human form and apologizing hovered in my thoughts.

But she rolled to her feet, coming up fast on all fours. Her hackles stood up, tail stiff. Her slight frame shook with aggression. I'd messed up bad.

I crouched, lowering my head. It wasn't exactly a sign of submission, but an apology. Would she understand? That I wasn't sure of. Please know I didn't mean it.

Kelly's wolf stood straighter, her head held high in an almost dominant pose. My mind churned through possible meanings of what she was trying to say, but I couldn't be sure. All I saw for certain was the flicker of lingering confusion in her eyes. Then she lunged.

My muscles tensed, ready to defend myself. If I had to, I could?—

A warm, wet tongue swiped over the end of my muzzle, tickling my nose.

The playful gesture froze me in my tracks. What the...?

And then she let out a playful yip before she dashed toward the trees, tail swishing in a playful wag as she ran. With a backward glance, her bark finally shook me from my thoughts.

Oh, I see how it is. It's on, babe. My chest rumbled in a purr as I sprang after her. She could run, but I'd find her. Always.

And if she thought we were getting any sleep tonight, she was in for a rude awakening.

15

KELLY

Sex with Jacob last night had been breathtaking. The full moon bathed his bedroom in silver light, making everything feel magical. My body still ached deliciously from how thoroughly he'd claimed me. A little distracting, but I didn't mind. Every sore muscle was a reminder of him.

This morning, I had my meeting with the Dean of Students.

Jacob needed to know about it. But after the incredible night we'd spent together, the last thing I wanted was to ruin our morning with another argument.

So, I lied.

I told him I had plans with Emma. It wasn't a complete lie since I wanted to fix things with her. Just... not right now. First, I needed to fix my own life.

While Jacob had been a little surprised, he didn't question it. All morning, something had distracted him. He'd paid little attention when I mentioned my "plans." Part of me wasn't sure what to make of that. Was last night not as special for him? But regardless of what was occupying his mind, I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Still, guilt gnawed at me. Lying to Jacob felt wrong. But what choice did I have? He might have a better idea of why university was important to me, but I needed my life

to move forward.

I needed this appointment to go well.

Yesterday's conversation with Jacob had only reinforced my desire to hold on to everything I'd worked so hard for. I refused to let our kidnappers win. Those scientists had enough of me. I wouldn't remain a prisoner in their cage.

But as I drove toward campus, I couldn't stop looking over my shoulder. Was I being followed? Would I feel this way for the rest of my life?

They probably didn't know where Jacob lived. The chances of them finding me there were slim. Or at least I hoped so.

My hands trembled as I pulled open the doors to Jones Hall.

Students and faculty walked past, going about their business around me, but I couldn't relax. It felt silly to believe someone was out to get me, but it had happened before. I didn't want my freedom stolen again, whether that meant living in a cage or holing up in Jacob's apartment. I had to get myself together and focus.

Taking a deep breath, I walked into the dean's office.

The secretary flashed a smile at me as I stepped up to the desk. "Do you have an appointment with Dr. Butler?" she asked.

"I do. I'm a little early. My name is Kelly Lopez." Butterflies fluttered within my stomach, and I tugged at the edges of my skirt. The nervous smile I gave her didn't meet my eyes. Ugh. I struggled to relate to people. Might've explained why I had so few friends.

“Oh, perfect. I see the appointment right here, Ms. Lopez.” She lifted her gaze, and her warm, calming smile never wavered. “If you’ll take a seat, Dr. Butler will be with you soon.” The phone rang on her desk, and she turned her attention to it.

Great. See? Nothing to worry about.

If only I believed myself. But all I needed to do was talk with Dr. Butler. We’d touch on what had happened without me revealing all the details, and I’d aim to secure make-up finals and enroll in my spring semester classes. It’d go great.

I hugged my purse to my chest. The small waiting room consisted of four chairs in a corner with a table that contained a stack of outdated school magazines. I could’ve grabbed one or scrolled through my phone. But my brain wouldn’t focus on anything except what might happen in that office. I rehearsed what I was going to say, as if repeating it in my head would keep me from screwing this up.

The door opened to the dean’s office, and a tall, stocky man in his fifties with grey-streaked brown hair and a trimmed beard and mustache stepped out of the office. He headed for the secretary’s desk, murmured about being ready for his next appointment, and picked up a small stack of papers from the printer stationed behind her before heading in my direction.

“Miss Lopez? I’m Dr. Paul Butler. If you’d join me in my office, we’ll discuss what’s going on and figure out how to get you back on track.”

The pleasant smile on his face calmed my nerves, but the vibes he projected rankled my wolf. The hair on the back of my neck stood up like I might not want to hear what he had to say. But I was probably reading into things, or maybe my nerves were getting the better of me. And yet, the suffocating feeling in my chest tightened its hold.

I needed to ask Jacob about this later. This felt similar to moments when I'd known something was 'off' with him, but I'd thought those instances were my gut instinct of knowing him. Could this be my beast warning me about Dr. Butler?

"Thank you," I said, following him. I paused next to a chair facing his desk. "I appreciate you meeting with me about this. It's an uncomfortable topic. I want you to know I wouldn't have missed school, especially final exams if I'd been able to make it. My studies are very important to me."

"Let me stop you right there." He closed his office door. Once in his chair, he motioned for me to continue. "Start from the beginning. Tell me what happened."

Taking a seat, I drew in a deep breath, then released it. "Okay." I could do this. All I needed to do was remain calm and keep to the facts I'd plotted out in my head. Hopefully, he wouldn't contact the police or campus security. "It started on December 17th. I was studying at my apartment with a friend. He left, and two men forced their way inside my home. I was abducted and taken somewhere, and..." My fingers bit into my denim skirt as I tugged it lower, focusing on my breathing. Memories threatened to come rushing back. "I managed to free myself the day before yesterday." Tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked them back. "I'd like the chance to take make-up finals."

Dr. Butler raised a skeptical eyebrow at me. "I see." His gaze skimmed my face, neck, and arms, as if searching for signs of an assault. "That's quite a story." He scribbled something on a notepad in front of him.

Damn it!

As a werewolf, I healed faster than the average gal. Most of the injuries I'd sustained at the research lab had been mental rather than physical... At least, after getting clawed—or bitten?—by the beast who made me what I was. I wrapped my arms

around my middle section, feeling awkward for even being here now. “It’s not a story. It actually happened.”

“Where did these men take you? Have you spoken with the police about this? Perhaps you’ve filed a report?” He rested a hand on his desk phone, a cool, questioning look in his eyes. “As for the make-up finals, your story sounds improbable. I’d need more proof before I could possibly approve that.”

My breathing grew heavier, and I bit my lower lip. This couldn’t be happening. Fear clawed at my gut. Why had the emails sounded so sympathetic if he just wanted to interrogate me? What was I doing? I kicked myself for not telling Jacob about my idiotic decision to come here. He would’ve talked me out of it. He’d tried to, but here I was.

I lowered my gaze toward the desk, focusing on his brown and gold nameplate.

Deep breaths. Just stay calm.

“I... don’t remember where they took me exactly. The escape happened fast. I couldn’t focus on anything but running. And no, I didn’t talk with the police. I don’t want to talk with them, either.” Anger flooded my senses, causing my vision to bleed red. “I just want my life back!” I slammed my fists against the arms of the chair, then squeezed my eyes shut. “Sorry.” The meek word slipped out.

“There’s no need to apologize, Miss Lopez. I’m sure what you may have experienced was traumatic.” The previous condescension in his tone twisted into a cool formality. “Perhaps you should reconsider your stance on speaking with the police. Therapy might help you work through what is bothering you. As for the final exams, I’m afraid that won’t be possible at this time. But if you’d like, I can connect you with the university’s mental health services?” He turned to his computer and typed for a few moments before focusing on me again.

My jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.” I tilted my head, trying to process his words. “But if I get proof, I can take the make-up exams, right?” Then again, how the heck would I prove anything? The scar on my back from the monster who’d changed me looked several years old. Grrr... The more time I spent in Dr. Butler’s office, the more helpless this all felt. “And w-what about my spring classes?” I cleared my throat, trying to prevent it from cracking again, but it didn’t help much.

Dizziness rocked my world, as if the globe were spinning without me. My hands trembled in my lap, and I clutched my purse again. How had things come to this? I needed my life back.

A raw, wild, and uncontrollable force scrabbled at my chest, expanding out toward the surface of my skin. Wait. This normally happened before I became a wolf. A sharp agony burned my fingertips. Then riiip and pop . My gaze shot down to find my pointy claws had pierced a hole through my purse. The scent of lavender filled my nostrils as a smooth, wet substance coated my fingers. Oh no... My lotion.

Shit. Deep breaths. Don’t stop breathing.

I shoved my aching fingers deeper into the holes, curling the razor-sharp claws out of sight. If Dr. Butler noticed as he flicked through his printed pages, the bored expression he leveled at me didn’t say much.

If I didn’t regain control, I might have to call Jacob, but... what would he say if he knew the truth? I’d broken his trust.

“Correct. If you can provide legitimate proof of your incident, you may complete your make-up exams. As for your spring semester, classes have begun already. You will need to be quick to register for them.” He lifted his shoulders in a mild shrug. “I’m sorry for not having better news, Miss Lopez. If that’s all, stop by Miss Denise’s desk. She’ll have the mental health services form.” He walked over to the door of his

office, opened it, and stepped aside. “Good day.”

That was it then... My mind whirled with all the words I wanted to say, but they remained stuck in my throat.

When I felt like my feet would hold me, I stood, pressing my purse to my roiling stomach, and turned to face him. “Thank you for your time, Dr. Butler.” I forced a neutral smile, even if being pleasant was so hard, but I couldn’t be an asshole. That wasn’t me. It might’ve made this meeting more palatable, but demanding a different outcome wouldn’t change anything, aside from me being escorted away by campus security when I ripped him a new one.

“Absolutely, Miss Lopez. Take care of yourself.”

The press of fur against the inner wall of my chest nearly doubled me over as I clutched my chest. What the hell? Goosebumps broke out over my arms and legs, and fear slithered down my spine. This wasn’t good. My claws were still out, even if they almost looked like odd acrylic nails.

“T-thanks.” I scooted past Dr. Butler.

His face twisted into a concerned expression. He held out his arm to stop me, but I ducked from his grip. “Wait, Miss Lopez, is everything okay?” He strode after me, but I jogged past the secretary’s desk.

I couldn’t do this...

“Ms. Lopez? Wait.” The secretary’s kind voice called out. “The form?”

Just keep going. I couldn’t stop to interact with them, not when my wolf was ripping me apart from the inside.

The hallway buzzed with activity. Students mingled around me, talking about their new professors and their holiday breaks. Their voices were loud. Almost like everyone was shouting, but I couldn't focus on any one conversation. A frustrated growl escaped my lips before I could contain it. At that moment, silence descended upon my immediate vicinity. Whereas before they paid me no mind, now everyone was watching me with those hushed tones.

My vision picked up on so many details I'd never seen before, until it felt like the walls were closing in around me. I strode past, needing to gain distance from the dean's office. Drawing in a shaky breath, the scents swirling around choked me. So many perfumes, colognes, deodorants, and other odors assaulted my nostrils. It made me gag.

Then, that stinging uneasy feeling washed over me again. Like I was being followed.

Someone was watching me. I could feel it.

I glanced over my shoulder, but all of their faces blurred together. Only when I realized I was crying did my disoriented vision make sense.

Coming here had been a mistake, a huge mistake.

Emotions clogged my throat, and I walked faster, hitting the front door to Jones Hall. When the fresh air hit my face, I almost ran. Nausea sickened my stomach, but I pushed on faster across the parking lot toward my car, not caring how strange I looked. It wasn't like I'd be coming back soon.

I was screwed. So, so screwed.

Right now, I needed to bury my face in Jacob's chest and pretend like none of this had ever happened. That we'd be going to class tomorrow like everyone else and all

was right with the world. But that wasn't my reality anymore.

Tears streaked my cheeks, and I slumped against my smokey mauve sedan. The woman's reflection in the window looked foreign, and I didn't recognize her one bit. But when my gaze slid to my eyes, they widened when I realized their color.

Oh, God. Wolf amber. I unlocked the car and slumped into the driver's seat, squeezing my eyes shut. My long claws hit the automatic door lock, and I secured the car.

Deep breaths... Really, really deep breaths.

Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed my phone. I needed Jacob, but my hands trembled as my thumb hovered over his phone number. No, I couldn't call. I needed to get the fuck out of here. Besides, he'd want an explanation...

This evening, I needed to woman up and tell him what I'd done face-to-face. Talking over the phone would be a copout, and I didn't think he'd want to hear it like this. I needed time to process what happened and figure out what to say since I had no idea.

My wolf's sharp vision dulled back to my normal human senses, and a hint of relief washed over me. However, none of that stopped the feeling of being watched. I needed to get out of here. If I didn't, I might run into whoever was out there...

I scanned the parking lot around me, but people walked about the campus living their lives. No one seemed to have me in their sights.

Maybe Dr. Butler was right. Did I need mental health help after what I'd been through? Was my mind playing tricks on me, or did I have a stalker?

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:55 pm

16

JACOB

I sat on the curb, waiting for Brax to pick me up. My gaze drifted to the text from Chad again. Tension radiated through my shoulders.

Chad

Need to talk in person. See you at the trial.

He'd sent the message before I spent the entire night making love to Kelly. The memory of us frolicking in the woods brought a smile to my lips.

At least the text hadn't been urgent. I could've been in big trouble since I hadn't bothered to check it until this morning, even if the damn thing set off an avalanche of 'what ifs' in my head. I just hoped Kelly knew I wasn't trying to push her away by being distant. That was the last thing I wanted with things going so well.

The rattle of a beat-up pickup truck pulled me back to the present, and I shoved the phone in my hoodie's pocket.

A barrel-chested farmer wearing a cowboy hat and a wide grin rolled to a stop. Brax leaned over the bench to shove open the passenger door. "Hop on in, buddy. Long time no see."

"Thanks. Good to see you, man." As I stepped closer, the scent of body odor—among

other things—hit my nose, and my eyes watered. I hopped in, biting back a grimace. “Appreciate the ride.”

“Any time. Lower your window if you’d like. The air conditioning’s been strugglin’ the past few weeks.” He cranked up the country music, then we set off at a slow and steady speed.

We’d be there early, so there was no rush. But Brax never seemed to be in a hurry. He lived life at his own pace, and I admired that about him. Still, I rolled the window down for fresh air.

While I’d love to hide away from the world with Kelly, I needed to attend this Pack meeting. Jared Grant was finally being called to stand trial for his treasonous acts against our Alpha. About damn time too. Knowing our Alpha could have died ripped me to shreds.

The Pack knew I didn’t have a ride right now, so showing up in Kelly’s car would’ve been a mistake. Not that it was an option with her out seeing Emma. Besides, Shane’s blasé approach to telling the Pack about my voicemail only strengthened my resolve to hitch a ride with Brax to the Southeastern Pack’s opulent mansion. Spending time with my brother would’ve ended in a big argument.

My jaw clenched, and I balled my hands into fists in the hoodie’s pocket.

Another point for Brax was he didn’t live far away, and he wasn’t one for small talk. While I’d showered, I probably smelled like Kelly after the passionate night we’d shared. After riding with Brax, what remained of my scent likely didn’t matter. His truck had an odor of its own. One I was grateful to escape with my nose intact.

We headed inside the Pack’s headquarters and through the labyrinthine halls toward the auditorium. My thoughts drifted back to Kelly. Her spending time with Emma

after yesterday surprised me, but it made me happy. They needed to work things out. Still, I hated not being there to look after her. She was likely fine on her own. Probably.

A surge of protectiveness raced through me. If something happened to her, I didn't know what I'd do. Kelly meant the world to me, which was why I couldn't keep her locked away. If I did, I'd be no different from the men who had imprisoned us.

With a nod to Brax, I took a seat toward the back of the room while he headed off to sit with his mate. My hood was up, an attempt to blend in with the shadows, even if the other wolves could see or smell me. If they caught my scent, they didn't react. Maybe they didn't care.

None of that mattered, though. We were all here to see that traitorous son-of-a-bitch Jared get what was coming to him. If given half a chance, he would've killed our Alpha and taken his place.

Shane slid onto a chair beside a few wolves in their early twenties, including some college-aged ladies. Alayna leaned toward him, whispering something in his ear before giggling. He stretched his arm behind her, all sly as hell. Anyone could see what was happening.

I rolled my eyes. It didn't surprise me those two had something going on. She'd been my occasional lay during the full moon, but she never stirred up anything more than lust in me or my wolf. Sex with her had just fulfilled a need. Nothing more.

I wondered if the feeling was mutual. Alayna never hid her ambitious nature, and I knew she wanted a top spot within the Pack. Might be why she'd kept trying to insert herself into my life... and now my brother's.

When Mom eventually retired from the Pack Council, one of us would take her place.

She could choose her successor since this Pack didn't rely on archaic traditions like birthrights. The Council understood having someone with common sense to lead them was better, not just whoever was born first.

Leaning back in my seat, I returned my attention to the stage.

To the right, a door that led to the mansion's dungeons opened. The Pack's enforcer dragged Jared into view. Jared was gaunt, and his legs refused to hold him upright. Sturdy chains hung from his wrists, connected to a metal belt at his waist. Garrick was a beast of a man with massive shoulders and golden eyes. He radiated enough menace to send hushed whispers through the crowd. Garrick was barely human, but terrifying as hell.

Jared collapsed to his knees before the crowd. His head remained bowed, but it wasn't guilt I saw, just pure exhaustion.

Chad stood beside them, posture stiff with near-military rigidity. When his gaze flicked to Jared, he curled his lips back in a silent snarl before refocusing on the crowd. He scanned the auditorium, then his eyes paused on me. His shoulders sagged briefly, and a twinkle flashed in his eyes. Once he continued his assessment, he was back to being a confident asshole. The strength he showed was admirable. Better than what I'd be capable of doing in his position. He was one of the toughest guys I knew.

Aaron Fitzroy strode onto the stage in a business suit, as if we were at a board meeting instead of about to convict someone of treason.

My breath hitched. I hoped he wouldn't notice me or call attention to my presence, but I didn't need to worry.

The Alpha's gaze locked on Jared, and he cracked his knuckles, looking ready to unleash his visible rage on the most obvious target. Jared winced at the sound and

tried to lean away, but Aaron Fitzroy grabbed him by the back of his shirt. He whispered something in his ear that made Jared's face go ghostly white.

If I could've been a fly on the wall up there... But no, I didn't aspire to be involved in Pack politics.

Part of me questioned why he hadn't gone to trial before now, but the Pack likely had its hands full while I was locked up. I had no right to judge them. Besides, Jared's supporters didn't make things easy. Either way, he'd never been a nice guy, but he'd been powerful. That sheer strength got him promoted so fast to second-in-command, even above Chad.

Aaron Fitzroy released him, letting Jared crash back to the stage. Then he looked out at the crowd, glancing at the front row where the Pack Council and other key figures sat. My mother and father were among them. Next to my father, the Pack's mediator, Lukas Raines watched the display. Calm, professional, and impossible to read as usual.

"Thank you all for coming this afternoon. The Southeastern Pack is still on high alert. Keep track of your peers while we make sure those who abducted our fellow Pack members are no longer an issue." His gaze narrowed on Shane, who now slumped in his chair like a petulant child. "Be vigilant. We will advise everyone when we know more about this issue." His lips twisted like he'd bitten into a sour lime as he stared at Jared once more. "Let's begin. The Pack Council has come to an agreement on Jared Grant's punishment. As the former second-in-command of this Pack, he is hereby convicted of treason against his Alpha after he tried to have me poisoned through the services of a witch."

Chad's lips thinned. He didn't seem pleased at the witch being mentioned. Interesting. But he reverted to a neutral, almost bored stare as he stood watch over the proceedings.

“Does anyone have anything to say in Jared’s favor?” the Alpha asked.

Anyone still siding with Jared should’ve had some shred of self-preservation and kept silent, but a small group a few rows ahead of me shouted curses. “Bring Jared back to lead! The man’s innocent! Look at this cruel treatment!” The commotion drew everyone’s attention in the auditorium, even Aaron Fitzroy.

The sharp sting of our Alpha’s power washed over the crowd, and silence dropped like a boulder. He crossed the stage and stopped before the group. “Say that again. I think my enforcer should hear it.” He lifted an eyebrow in challenge.

Garrick let out a low rumbling snarl, but he didn’t move away from Jared. Just narrowed his eyes at the disgruntled wolves. A few of them shook their heads while a woman clamped a hand over her mate’s mouth as he mumbled uselessly.

“Well then,” the Alpha said, turning back to the crowd, “We will put Jared to death by duel as customs dictate. The battle will be honorable. The challenger is?”

“I’ll do it,” Chad said, interrupting his father for the first time. At least, the first time I’d ever seen it happen. More muted murmurs rose from the crowd.

Aaron Fitzroy’s eyes widened briefly, then he turned to face his son. “You will challenge him?” He hesitated, as if trying to give Chad an out. Tension rippled between them like an invisible tug-of-war game. Had their relationship hit a rocky patch? I’d never seen them this way before.

But Chad didn’t respond. He kept his head held high, unafraid of facing a powerful werewolf in a duel. I didn’t doubt he could win. Chad was strong. But why risk himself like this? I hated his decision.

“It’s agreed upon then. Chad Fitzroy challenges the traitorous Jared Grant in a fight

to the death. Whoever wins will retain the position of second-in-command.” He turned his gaze to the audience. “The fight will happen in the clearing behind the mansion. We will send the date and time to the whole Pack shortly.” His attention snapped to Shane. “Please be sure to read your messages. Your attendance is required.”

Inwardly, I groaned. Great. Another Pack gathering that would keep me from Kelly. Until she officially joined, I needed to keep my distance. Getting involved with anyone else right now was more than I could handle.

The Alpha’s gaze landed on me. His stare said wait . As much as I respected Aaron Fitzroy, I didn’t think so. I needed to get home. If I stuck around to chat, others might decide to pile on. They might make me socialize, or worse, talk me into standing before the Pack Council for their damn debrief.

The thought of explaining what I’d been through made my heart race. No. I couldn’t. Not yet. My jaw tightened, and I crossed my arms over my chest.

They’d wanted me here. Fine. I’d made an appearance. And while I was trying to re-integrate into Pack life, I wasn’t ready to face the Council. Not until I contacted Kelly and made sure she got home safe.

What would they do if they knew about her? If she died because I mentioned her to the Council... I wouldn’t survive that. But keeping her from them wasn’t right either.

Maybe if Emma was with her—if both ladies were safe at my place—I’d feel strong enough to face the Council. They could watch out for one another. Especially since no one even knew if the men who’d gone after Kelly were still out there.

The thought of her being taken again was too much. Too raw.

Those bastards had seen us as their project's prize specimens. Their future. They believed she'd produce their next line of super soldiers. Their explanations went above my head. While I excelled at science, what they said might as well have been Greek.

I lowered my gaze in respect, then glanced at Shane. He was still dividing his attention between Alayna and the spectacle on stage, but when I lingered on him, he frowned at me.

No, I couldn't be around him.

Shane stood as if he was about to come talk, but I bolted to my feet and headed straight for the exit. It didn't matter if I had to jog home. I wanted to avoid that bastard after what he'd done. I didn't care if we were blood.

"Meeting adjourned." Aaron Fitzroy's voice boomed from the auditorium at my back.

I kept my pace brisk, hurrying through the halls toward the mansion's front door, doing everything I could to stay ahead of them. I didn't dare glance over my shoulder. Just lengthened my stride and ran into the woods.

No. No fucking way. I couldn't deal right now.

Running away wasn't getting me home to Kelly, which I yearned for, but first, I needed to take care of one thing.

And that thing was staying the hell away from my brother and my Alpha.

JACOB

I kept running through the forest until my legs burned and my lungs threatened to burst from my chest. Pain stung my face and arms as the branches lashed me. As a werewolf, I had stamina for days, which was useful in the bedroom and beyond. But even I had limits.

Sweat dripped from my brow and soaked my hoodie. The crisp winter breeze did little to help me cool down, and I leaned back against a tree. My chest heaved as I sucked in big gulps of air to calm my rattled nerves and racing pulse. None of the breaths felt enough, like I was drowning.

My ears strained to pick up on any noises in my surroundings, but I couldn't hear anyone coming, so I relaxed a little more. If any wolves had chased me, they would need to be determined to pull that off. Dedication to a chase had never been Shane's forte. The chance of him searching for me was pretty damn slim.

I pushed the hood off, then shoved my fingers through my sweat-dampened hair. When I returned home, I needed a shower.

My thoughts swept toward one topic I'd run from. The Pack Council's summons was important, and I knew I had to go. But how would I stand up to their scrutiny?

More than ever, I felt almost fragile.

With my mother being a councilmember, maybe she would be lenient and ask for my presence before them to be delayed until I could deal with life better. After all, I was a stable Pack member. I'd attended the trial today as asked.

Was I going rogue? No.

But Chad's words came back to me. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility for someone who'd been in my position to go there. Fuck . I wasn't helping my case by running away from the Pack either. Twice.

I needed to reach out to my mother. She'd be able to help me climb out of the mess I'd made. She'd been in the audience, so she most likely knew I'd attended the trial, especially after the way I'd run off. Would she want to help me out?

The crunch of leaves beneath approaching feet wrenched a snarl from my lips, but when I turned, I froze and the sound died in my throat.

Chad paused mid-step, hands raised in a placating gesture. "Hey, it's just me." He stalked a little closer, but kept several paces between us.

I stood up straighter, jamming my fists into the hoodie pocket like I could hide my nerves. Whatever he wanted to say, I doubted I'd want to hear. All I'd wanted was to be left alone with my thoughts, calm down enough to get my shit together, and figure out a way to get home.

"I didn't think you'd come, but it's good to see you." He slowly lowered his arms, letting them hang loosely at his sides.

Those weren't the first words I'd expected from him, but it eased the tension radiating through my shoulders and down my spine.

“I had to keep up with my Pack obligations and be here for the trial.” Although that seemed more like a verdict. “After what Jared tried to do to your dad, he deserves everything that’s coming to him.” I looked beyond him to the lush forest that hid the mansion. We were miles away. His presence made little sense. “What are you doing here?”

Chad sat across from me on a fallen tree trunk, stretching his long legs before him and crossing them at the ankles. “You looked like you could use a friend back there.”

“That’s all? It wasn’t because of your dad or my brother asking you to make sure I’m not a threat to myself or others?” I lifted an eyebrow, not bothering to look convinced. I doubted my brother would even care. He’d probably want someone else to find me for him because he couldn’t be fucked to do it himself. He’d proven that. Not bothering to see where I was, not giving a shit about my message for help.

“Shane hasn’t spoken to me since the meeting earlier this week. My father... Well, things aren’t great between us right now. He did want me to check on you, but I didn’t come all the way out here for him. As I said, you looked like you needed someone to talk to.” He glanced up toward the trees’ canopies in thought. “You’re not the first wolf—or shifter—I’ve spoken to who was impacted by what happened at the research facility. Do you remember Colin Fraser?”

“Colin? Yeah, I remember him. It’s been a while, though. Didn’t he go back to Scotland several months ago?” I tried to remember the last time I’d talked with him. He stopped showing up at Pack meetings out of the blue, but he’d been a pretty new transfer to the Pack. I hadn’t thought a lot about it. Could’ve been that he missed home. It wasn’t my place to intrude.

Chad’s thoughtful expression turned grim, and he shook his head. “No, and yes. Right now, he’s in Scotland, but that’s not where he’s been all this time. He’ll be coming back when he’s ready.” He blew out a steadying breath. “What I’m trying to

say is, he was locked in the research facility too. He was there for months before we realized. His sister, a wereleopard, had been around. She tried to find and rescue him. With our current policies toward ‘others,’ no one had listened to her. Hell, maybe it’s time to make some changes.”

What the fuck? I wiped a hand over my face, unable to believe what I was hearing. To think Colin had been locked up there for months? My stomach soured, and nausea brought bile to the back of my throat. I’d only been locked up with Kelly for one month, and I knew how fractured I felt. “Damn. How’s he holding up?”

“It’s hard to say.” Chad lowered his gaze from the trees to meet mine, and I looked away. “It’s been tough on him, for sure. He’s going to be visiting his family and his old Pack. We could use him over here to make sure those involved in this are no longer a problem, but I hope they’ll keep him in line over in Scotland. He seemed like he was teetering on the edge.” He shrugged his shoulder as I glanced back.

And they still let Colin leave? Just cut him loose and hoped for the best? My chest tightened. Damn. What would they do with me if I cracked too?

“Ah, I see.” I wasn’t in charge of making those decisions, thankfully. I only hoped they knew what they were doing with letting him go—for Colin’s own safety. But his former Pack and family would help him far better than the assistance he might get over here. “That’s rough.”

“It is. I wouldn’t want to experience what you’ve been through. I feel for those who did.” His gaze raked over me assessingly, then he rolled his neck, as if trying to dispel the tension there. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine. Just needed time to collect my thoughts.” I grimaced, aware that my words weren’t entirely true. Lying to a werewolf, especially one as strong as Chad, wasn’t smart. “I’m not ready to be part of things again. Look, I came to the trial and will

attend the fight, but to interact with people again?" I shook my head. "Especially the Pack Council and your father, who is sure to mention the meeting." A nearby tree stump caught my attention, and I perched on it, letting my aching legs rest. "I definitely don't want to talk with my brother, not after learning about..." I hung my head, staring at the stump's thick roots. "I'm just not ready for this." The cool wind cut through the trees, and I hugged myself tighter.

"It's okay to not be ready. You need that time and space, but you can't run from the Pack Council or my father forever. As much as I'd love to help you, I doubt speaking for you will change anything, especially with how precarious things are between me and my father." A low growl of frustration rumbled in his throat. "The witch came before the Council because of me. She tricked me into letting her help by offering me a cup of tea laced with one of her potions. I didn't think she'd do something like that, but I should've known."

I lifted an eyebrow at that. That explained a few things. "No kidding? Why have you been protecting the witch then? If she tricked you into something like that?" Not that I could complain since I had plenty to thank her for. If it wasn't for her and the new, severely injured wolf, Kelly and I likely wouldn't be free right now.

"No, I'm not kidding." Chad's expression remained impassive. "And I haven't been protecting her. She's a pain in the ass, but she means well." He grimaced, as if it hurt to say those words. "Besides, she helped the Pack out... twice, when we couldn't do anything. If it wasn't for her, my father would've died—yes, even though she initially caused it—but I still blame Jared. He knew what he was doing, especially when he threatened the witch to make a potion with a large amount of wolfsbane in it."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "When I came to her, she quickly saw the error of her ways." A smirk slid across his lips. "I might've helped her out there, but she didn't seem malicious. After that, she helped those who were captured. She placed herself in harm's way to do so, endangering her life and my own, but her magic came through

for us. She succeeded when we weren't able to. That's something, isn't it?"

He knew better than I did about all of that, so I couldn't dispute his words. If the witch had heeded the Pack's warning, Kelly and I might still be in the research lab—no thanks to my brother. How could I suggest punishing her? No way. "I see your point. She's done good things for the Pack—for us—I mean, me." The slip happened before I could catch myself.

"Hmm..." Chad tilted his head slightly. "Us? I suppose, but I'm sure you're not talking about me when you say that." Something flashed through his eyes, and I wondered what he knew. "There's someone else you're talking about."

Shit.

I stared into the trees over Chad's shoulder. The chance of another wolf coming out of the forest and overhearing us was slim. We'd hear or scent an intruder before they came too close, but I didn't want to have this conversation right now. Not with the Pack's current second-in-command and Alpha's son. I'd much rather go home and check on Kelly, but I couldn't put this off any longer. Someone had to know.

"Fine. This stays between us, but I met someone special."

Chad released a slow sigh and tilted his head back to stare at the tree canopy again. "I figured as much. This special someone is at your home, is she? Where did you meet her? Is that why you ran off the other night?" The look of exasperation on his face sucked. He was someone you wanted in your corner. To have disappointed him...?

Fucking hell.

"She should be there. She went to see a friend this morning." I ran my hands through my hair, cradling my head. How much should I say? But I was already this deep. I

might as well come clean. “We met at university. That’s why I took off. I needed to keep her safe, to let her recover before trying to bring her into Pack life. She barely knows anything about this world. Many of us were born this way. We’ve had years to come to terms. Keeping who we are and what we’re capable of a secret was important at the research facility. The scientists couldn’t learn more about our kind than necessary.”

Silence stretched between us, and I shifted on the stump. My wolf howled at me to run, fight, protect... That wouldn’t help me now, though.

Chad stretched his legs once more before his now wolf amber gaze met mine. “You thought the Pack would turn their backs on her? Do you hear yourself?”

“What?” But his words made me grimace. He more than anyone should know what Pack politics called for. “Maybe it wasn’t the right decision from the Pack’s point of view, but I want Kelly to be safe and comfortable. Besides, the Alpha hasn’t wanted more new wolves?—”

Chad crossed the distance between us in the blink of an eye. “No one will hurt her, I promise. My father decreed no more werewolves could be made, but the scientists put her through circumstances beyond that rule.” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “She’ll live and will be just fine.” He squeezed my shoulder a little before his hand fell away. “You went through hell. Both of you. I’m sure my father will understand. Or at least he should come around.”

That didn’t quite ease my concerns, but I hoped he was right for both our sakes. If not, I didn’t know what I’d do. We’d need to flee, but I wasn’t sure where we could go. Aaron Fitzroy had many contacts among the world’s Packs. We’d be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives. Kelly’s desire to continue her studies—let alone live out her dreams—would be postponed indefinitely.

“I know that look on your face, Jacob. Try not to worry. You’ve been through a lot. How about I drive you home?” Chad nodded in the mansion’s direction where his car was parked. Maybe he was right.

“Thanks. I appreciate it. Both the drive home and the talk. If you can,” I said with a groan, “just don’t tell anyone about Kelly yet. I want to put it out there. It might seem like I was hiding her away for nefarious reasons, but I’ve been worried how our Alpha will take the news. I don’t want anything to happen to her.” Hell, I hoped the Pack didn’t turn their back on us when they learned the truth.

Chad opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself. The grimace on his lips said he wasn’t happy, but he nodded. “If the topic comes up, it’s my duty to the Pack and my father to tell him what’s going on. But...” A muscle in his jaw ticked, and he turned to begin the long walk. “I won’t say anything yet. However, if you don’t meet with the Pack Council and tell them—or at least make my father aware of Kelly—then I’ll have to give a report. You have two days, man. That’s all I can give you.”

“I’ll do it. Promise. I don’t want to put you in a bad spot.” I glanced away from Chad, not comfortable with how this was going. Then again, he was far more understanding than I’d first thought. At least that was something.

“Let’s get you back to your condo. I’m sure you’d like to check on your woman.”

18

KELLY

After feeling like I was being stalked, I'd driven around for a bit, even hitting a drive-thru coffee shop to make sure no one was still following me. Was it the mercenaries? Were they waiting for the right time to pounce? I hadn't been sure if I should return to Jacob's condo, but my car's gas light forced my hand. If I stopped for gas, I'd be a sitting duck. Plus, I didn't have the cash to keep driving.

By the time I got inside, I was running on fumes—physically, emotionally, maybe spiritually. A shiver chased down my spine.

Some days, I wondered if I'd ever be the same again.

I pressed my palms into my forehead as I rocked on the edge of Jacob's bed. Violent memories burst through my mind like exploding fireworks: claws, needles, guns. A sob escaped my throat, and I fell backward on the mattress.

When would the pain of what I went through stop? Would it?

Am I broken?

Grrr...

If I gave into those thoughts, I'd never recover from their torture. If I wanted to move on with my life, I needed to stay strong. Taking a few shaky breaths made the panic

lessen, even if it didn't go away. I lifted my right hand and watched it shake before my eyes.

For the first time in years, I felt like I had something—or more precisely, someone—to live for. But I also warred with this black hole of crippling emotion threatening to swallow me whole. I couldn't allow that to happen. We were free... So why didn't I feel free?

Keys jingled outside of Jacob's condo. He was home already? Shoot! What was I supposed to say about my haunted emotions? Would he sense them? Most likely! I darted upright and glanced at the bedroom door.

Get yourself together, Kelly. Breathe. Deep breaths.

I snuck into the en suite bathroom to scrub my face. The last thing I needed was him realizing the depths of my pain. If I didn't control myself, he might learn what I'd been up to earlier, or suspect it once he saw how anxious I was.

We'd been through hell together. Losing him now? That would destroy me.

At the research facility, I'd been brave. Showing weakness in front of those men hadn't been an option, but now I felt more helpless than ever. That sounded crazy since I wasn't human anymore.

My world had opened up to almost unbearable levels of sensation. The cage had been cold and sterile in all senses: sights, sounds, smells, touch... Now those were more powerful than ever. It overwhelmed me. How could I function like this, let alone fully live?

Jacob's place was quiet. He'd most likely soundproofed the apartment, but the rest of the world... The university had been so loud. All the people crowding the halls and

their scents made me feel almost claustrophobic. Would I always feel this way?

Standing before the mirror, I grimaced at the woman watching me. My hair stuck out in all directions, and the shadows under my eyes looked like bruises. Had I looked like this during my appointment earlier? Was that why Dr. Butler had dismissed me so readily? It didn't matter. I could fix my appearance. Jacob didn't have to see me in this shape.

"Kelly, I'm home," Jacob said from the other room. His keys clinked as they hit a hard surface, most likely the breakfast bar.

My pulse raced until anxiety clawed at my throat, thick and hard to swallow. I yearned to be the normal girl he'd fallen for, but as more time passed, the more I questioned whether that was possible anymore.

"Welcome home," I called out, my voice cracking a little. I cleared my throat, remembering too late that he didn't need me to shout. "In the bathroom. I'll be out soon."

"All right." He sounded closer now. Was he coming this way? "How did it go with Emma?"

My mind reeled, and I blinked at the bathroom door. What was he talking about? With Emma...? "Oh, uh..." My stupor broke, and I quietly locked the door. As I searched for the right words, I began brushing out the tangles in my long brown hair. He might know I was lying to him regardless of what I said. "Good?"

"You sure, babe? That doesn't sound very convincing." Suspicion warred with confusion, but concern finally won out in his voice. The doorknob rattled. "Is everything okay?"

Oh, crap.

I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I'd given a stronger answer. Maybe a quick excuse could smooth away his worries, but I doubted it. The fear and anxiousness swirling through me prevented any words from escaping my mouth. Even if I wanted to spin a fantastical tale about a girls' day out with Emma, I was drawing a blank.

"No, not really. I'll be okay, though." That was true, I hoped. With half of my hair somewhat tamed, I set the brush on the bathroom counter.

Jacob's slow breathing came through the door, and I could imagine him standing there with his forehead pressed against it. "What's wrong? Did she say something horrible again?"

"No." Would she if we'd actually met up? No idea. I still hadn't responded to her awful text. She'd been so concerned about me, and yet I kept pushing her away. Who would want a terrible friend like that?

"Open the door. Please, babe." The doorknob shook a little harder this time.

I licked my dry lips and took a step back. The door wasn't a barrier for him. He could break it down with ease if he wanted to.

Pull yourself together. Stop doing this.

I grabbed the brush, raking it through the rest of my hair. The mirror still showed horrible dark circles under my eyes, and I searched my make-up bag to find concealer to cover it up. Just as I picked up the small bottle, the doorknob crunched, and the door swung open. The tube fell from my hands, clattering into the sink.

Jacob's formidable body filled the doorway, and I backpedaled until my legs bumped

against the massive garden tub, likely big enough for his werewolf form. My throat closed. I clung to the tub's edge to stay upright.

Concern etched lines into Jacob's face, and his brows knitted together. He held up his hands, as if trying to signal he wasn't a threat. "Kelly? Are you okay? You're worrying me."

Just his scent and the press of his presence made the room feel smaller. Too much.

The sharp tang of his sweat and musk hit me like a wall, and I closed my eyes, trying to force words past the tightness in my throat. Everything flooded me at once: the smell of soaps, Jacob's scent, the faint trace of cleaning products from the maid's last visit.

"C-can't." My body trembled, knees buckling under the weight of it all.

Before my butt hit the tiled floor, Jacob scooped me into his arms. He sat with me cradled in his lap, his back against the garden tub. His kind eyes drifted over me like I was the most precious being in the world. He ran his hand through my hair in slow, steady strokes. "What's going on? You can talk to me."

"Senses. They're all too much." My voice came out small. I leaned my head against Jacob's chest, pressing my face against the muscular expanse. It wasn't the whole truth, but it was a big part.

Jacob stiffened. For a second, I wondered if the intimacy of our position bothered him. Maybe I shouldn't have pressed so close...

"Your senses are overwhelming you?" He held me closer, cheek resting against the top of my head. I heard every beat of his heart, every breath, every uttered syllable. "Damn, babe. I should've taught you how to manage this, but I've been so focused on

everything else. I learned this shit as a kid, and yet, I haven't looked out for you." He rubbed his stubbled cheek against my hair. "I'm so sorry, Kelly."

I lifted my gaze from the safety of his embrace, only to notice my vision had changed. It was sharper, clearer. My wolf peeked out. It had to be her. The feeling of his breath against my lips pulled me closer, but now wasn't the time for that. Not when I felt so out of control. "You can teach me now."

Jacob studied me, not at all fazed by my wolfish eyes. If our roles were reversed, I might've flinched. Instead, he reached up, brushing his fingers along my cheek. His lips brushed against mine in a soft kiss.

"Yes, I can." He inhaled deeply, as if drawing my scent into his lungs. "First, feel the weight of your wolf. Then imagine you're pressing her down, like you're holding a heavy door shut from the inside. Keep pushing until you've regained control. When your senses become too much, it usually means your beast is right beneath the surface." His hand slid down my back to my waist, the heat of his touch searing through me.

Good to know my sense of touch was also super intense.

I shut my eyes, searching for her. Like he'd said, she prowled close to the surface of my skin, pacing like a caged beast. I shoved at her presence, trying to force her back, but she refused to surrender. In fact, pushing made her angrier. She charged me, stealing hard won ground.

"I can't." I grabbed my thighs, pressing my nails into my legs. "She doesn't want to. She's pissed." Claws burst through my fingertips, and a scream ripped from my throat. Blood oozed from my legs where the claws had torn through skin and muscle.

Stop it!

Jacob moved his hands to my cheeks. “Open your eyes, babe. I can help you through this, but I need to see your eyes.”

The inner war within me felt hopeless. My wolf was so much stronger. How could I ever be a match for her power? If I opened my eyes, I might lose this battle. She could seize control. No, I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to hurt Jacob. Besides, how could he help with this?

My back snapped as bones fractured in my spine. A whimper rasped from my lips, and I felt so helpless.

“Do it now .”

The authority in his voice overwhelmed me, making it hard to disobey. The drifting thought that I shouldn’t open my eyes vanished. Before I knew what was happening, I looked up to see his glowing wolf amber eyes. My jaw dropped. The sheer power radiating from him made it hard to breathe. My nose twitched from the scent of his minty mouthwash. His face was mere inches from mine. Everything closed in tighter.

“Back down, wolf.” The commanding tone in Jacob’s voice sent shivers through my body. His hot palms spread over my body almost possessively.

“Make me.”

In my mind’s eye, I could feel his wolf brushing against me through his skin. My beast tucked her tail, but she bared her fangs at him in defiance—until I realized I was doing that too. I pushed against Jacob’s chest, trying to get space between us so I wouldn’t hurt him, but my claws sliced into his skin. The metallic scent of blood hit my nose, and a hunger unlike anything I’d experienced before howled through me.

My eyes widened, and I licked my lips. My gaze locked on the ripped fabric of his

shirt where blood bloomed across his chest. Before I could stop myself, I bent my head and licked his jagged scratches.

It didn't last.

Air whooshed around me, and I smacked the bathroom floor with a thud.

Jacob knelt over me, straddling my waist. I bared my bloody teeth at him. One of his large hands cupped my chin while the other pinned my wrists above my head. "Kelly, fight your beast. Don't give up. Don't become a rogue wolf."

My hips bucked and writhed. A sinister sweetness crept in, whispering dark promises as I watched streaks of blood trail down his torso. But the pleading tone in his voice startled me from my violent thoughts.

What was a rogue wolf? It didn't sound good.

Tears slid from my eyes, and I forced myself to breathe. I focused on his scent while I shoved my wolf down hard.

This time, she relented and ran off to that cave deep inside me where she slept, waiting for her next chance to come out and play. The claws burned as they slid back into my fingers. I bit back another whimper. Every muscle in my body went slack, leaving me a shaking mess. The battle had drained me far more than I expected.

"I'm so sorry, Jacob."

The scent of coppery blood lingered in the air, but instead of smelling delicious, it made me nauseous. I'd hurt him and licked his wounds. I wanted to do something, to help the wounds I'd caused, but his grip on my wrists kept me in place. Even the thought of struggling from his hold felt tiring, so I remained where I was.

Jacob's brows drew together. Confusion flickered in his eyes. "Sorry for what, babe?"

"I hurt you." My voice cracked. I tried to turn my head, but he held my chin, gently but firm. Instead, I looked away, but he just leaned into view again.

"Your claws hurt, but I've suffered worse injuries. I know you weren't in control." He bent his head to rest his forehead against mine, his hand slipping to my clavicle. "Let's get you to bed. I'll fix something for dinner, but you should rest. You don't look well." He kissed me before scooping me into his arms as he stood.

"Thank you for bringing me back from... the fight with my wolf." I rested my head against his chest, more exhausted than hungry, but my stomach growled anyway, reminding me of how intense the hunger had been when the bathroom smelled like his blood. Nausea churned in my belly, but I took a few deep breaths. The last thing I wanted was to puke on him. "Wait, my legs. I don't want to bleed on your sheets." When I looked down, the former holes in my thighs were angry red scars caked with drying blood.

"I'll grab a washcloth, but looks like you're healing nicely. The bedding can be washed." He laid me on the bed and draped a plush, cozy blanket over me. "You're welcome, babe. I'm always here for you. You're my mate."

He disappeared into the bathroom. When he returned, he sat on the bed, then rubbed the warm, wet cloth over my hands and legs, cleaning my wounds. "Babe?" His gaze drifted to mine.

"Yeah, baby?" I chewed my lower lip, pressing my thighs together at his closeness.

A slow smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "What was that word you're not supposed to say?"

I blinked, not sure what he was getting at. “Um... sorry?”

“That’s the one. I’ll nudge you when dinner is ready.”

“Wait, but I—” The complaint vanished beneath the tender press of his lips. The kiss lingered for a few moments until my body was relaxed and pliant. Every ounce of tension drifted away. “Mmm...”

“Much better. Now get some rest.” He walked out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Within seconds, my eyelids grew heavy, and nightmares plagued me over what had happened at the university.

JACOB

I glanced over at the closed bedroom door where Kelly slept. My forehead rested against the frame, and I listened to her occasional whimpers that spoke of bad dreams. Part of me wanted to go wake her, but she needed to regain her strength after almost losing control. I wouldn't take this rest from her.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I headed into the kitchen. While I wasn't sure if I was ready to learn more about Shane's betrayal—and Chad was a reliable source—I needed to hear my mother's input. That would be the absolute truth. Although, it'd suck to know he'd done it. However, I wasn't sure how I was going to look him in the eyes anymore, let alone attend Pack functions with him there. Our near meeting during Jared's verdict had sent me to the brink. I wouldn't have held it together if we'd spoken.

Releasing a breath, I knew what I had to do. I had to call Mom. Not only that, but I could ask her to delay the Pack Council meeting, at least for a short time. That might be for the best. With Kelly's beast about to consume her tonight and her being overwhelmed by her senses, I needed to help her. Should I tell Mom about Kelly?

Ugh. Not yet.

Besides, I couldn't let her meet them unprepared. The thought of either the Pack or someone else hurting her set my teeth on edge, but I shook those thoughts. Madness lay that way.

As I dialed my mother's phone number, I walked to the other end of the condo, ducking into a guest room where I threw myself backward on the bed. The phone rang four times before my mother's voice came over the line.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom. It's Jacob. I was wondering if you had a moment to talk."

"Jacob! Of course, I have time for you. I've missed you, dear." The warmth in her voice soothed the tension in my shoulders. "Shane said you needed some space, so I've hoped you would reach out to me, especially after this afternoon." She paused. "Is everything okay?"

Ever since I was little, she'd had a sixth sense when something troubled me. For the longest time, I'd wondered if her werewolf side helped her notice, but maybe I underestimated the saying about a mother's intuition. How in the world could I answer her truthfully?

"If I'm honest, Mom, then no. It's actually not." I didn't know how to continue, so I stared at the ceiling, trying to gather my thoughts.

"Jacob, talk to me. Do you want me to come over? We could chat in person."

But silence squeezed my throat like a noose. My jaw clenched. I needed to grow some balls and open up to her. Hell, it'd been a while since we'd even talked. Hearing her voice made me happy. I just had to share what was bothering me.

"Okay, I'll spill. You don't need to come over. I'm... I'll..." I blew out a breath. "It's about Shane. I overheard a rumor at Pack HQ that he wasn't proactive about my voicemail. He didn't let anyone know until earlier this week?" The pain of bringing this subject up was intense. I didn't want to think about my brother's hurtful actions

and yet I needed to get this off of my chest. My mother would tell me the truth.

“I was hoping we’d talk before anyone else let you know. I’m sorry you found out that way.” Behind my mother’s diplomatic words was something familiar, something wild and angry. “In other words, yes. What you heard was true. Your brother doesn’t have good standing within the Pack—much less in my heart right now. If we’d known, our trackers might’ve rescued you and the others captured sooner. That would’ve been much better. I’m sorry you went through that, dear. I truly am.”

The sting of her words tugged at my chest. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything since she was going through all of this too. To be caught in between her two sons had to be terrible. And yet, knowing Chad told me the truth made me feel horrible and low.

“Don’t worry about it, Mom. You shouldn’t feel sorry. It wasn’t you.” I wiped a hand over my face, wishing I could punch someone or something. “Anyway, it wasn’t as if I gave you much chance to get in touch with me. I…” My nails scraped over the stubble on my cheek. “What I experienced was awful. Nothing I’d wish on my worst enemy. I just needed time to recover from it all.”

“You don’t need to explain, honey. If you want to talk, I’m here. You don’t have to go through this alone. Even if you don’t feel comfortable speaking to me about this, there are others in the Pack who can lend an ear. Others went through it as well. You’re not alone.” Her voice sounded tired, but genuinely supportive. “I know it might be asking a lot, but I need to speak with you about something. The Pack Council wishes to meet regarding what you’ve been through.”

“Mom, I don’t think I’m ready to talk with the Council. I need time to process everything. Explaining this to someone else right now? I don’t think that’s a good idea.” My eye twitched as tension built behind my eyes. “Can you please delay it? I’ll gladly talk with them, just not now. If it was any other time or regarding any other

situation..." I hoped she'd be forgiving, but I needed to stand up for myself.

"I'm sorry, Jacob, but this is important. It's not my place, but I suppose I could speak with Aaron." She stifled a yawn. "I'll chat with him once we disconnect from the call and let you know what he says. You're not in any trouble, and the discussion won't take much time. We're speaking with all the wolves—and a few other shifters—who were at the research facility, dear. Are you sure you can't spare an hour? It's important for us to know what the scientists learned about our kind. It could help us protect our people against future attacks."

I moved my hand to my chest and shook my head. Her words made me feel selfish about not wanting to meet. She was right, but she made it sound so easy. I could shed light on their practices, especially with the information Kelly and I had taken from the lab. But still... Was it a good idea? Maybe but not yet.

I'd grown up as her mini-shadow, watching her carry out her duties as a councilmember. An hour might turn into five with hard-hitting questions that felt more like an interrogation than a conversation. While I admired my Alpha, and he'd been good to me growing up, he was in charge of a large Pack of wolves. He had to keep the order, even if it meant hurting feelings or being ruthless sometimes.

"Mom, I'm sure. I'd prefer more time to recover before standing before the Council."

"Hmm... I suppose, but I hope you'll still visit the Pack again soon. I'm eager to introduce you to the woman who will be your mate." Any hint of tiredness in her voice evaporated, and she sounded genuinely happy. "Isn't this splendid? You'll finally have a woman to care for you. She might be a source of comfort in this difficult time."

Something in her voice set me on edge. I wasn't sure I liked it. Was there something else Chad hadn't told me? I hoped not, but anything was possible.

My heart sank, and I sat up to look at the guest bedroom door, making sure I was still alone. “What are you talking about, Mom? I’m not... I don’t need...” What could I say? Not interested in a relationship? I was. But the only woman I wanted was Kelly. She was the light of my life.

“You haven’t settled down yet, honey, and it’s about time you did. You know how important it is for a wolf to have a mate. Sometimes, one isn’t available, and you need to search for a female wolf who will keep you happy. Once you begin to feel better, you’ll be able to start a new life together with a woman who was born a werewolf. Just like what your father and I have.”

While she sounded pleased about that, I knew what their marriage was like, and that wasn’t something I wanted. They worked together at the family business, but my mother held the power in their relationship. She was on the Pack’s Council and spoke more about her role to me than she did with my father. It didn’t help that Dad took one business trip after another.

The notion of a loveless marriage away from Kelly angered me.

“I’m still in college. Shouldn’t you be matchmaking Shane first? He’s older.” I hated bringing him up, but it was true.

“I doubt your brother is ready for a relationship, even if he wanted one. You’re different. You have a big heart, and you deserve to have someone in your life who will cherish you.” Her words carried such conviction. “And you can continue with your studies while courting your mate.”

I hated her answer. My grip tightened around the phone, making the case groan. I had my mate. No one could ever compare to Kelly, and I wanted to nurture what we had instead of complying with my mother’s desires.

Should I let the proverbial cat out of the bag and tell her the truth? It would be better to let someone else know about Kelly than just Chad.

While I should talk with the Pack Council—or our Alpha about her—I didn't feel comfortable with that. With how Kelly had acted earlier, I knew she needed the Pack, but I also knew she'd need to keep control of herself if she had any hope of remaining alive. I needed to fill the gaps of her knowledge more before she wound up in a tight spot.

"I don't know, Mom."

"Is there a reason you're not interested in finding someone? Have you already found the woman for you, perhaps?"

That same knowing tone in her voice had me trembling. Fuck! My jaw clenched, and I tried to think of what to say. Yes! I'm with the perfect mate! But my lips wouldn't move. The words died on my tongue.

"Jacob? I think you may know more than you're saying. Talk with me about what's bothering you. If you do, I may be able to help you, dear."

Now I knew something was up. Should I tell her I needed to go? It'd be a good idea, but I couldn't just ditch the ones who loved me. A small amount of truth was the better path here. "I have, Mom, but I don't want to get into this with you right now. Let's talk later." I kneaded my fingers into the stiff muscles at the back of my neck.

"Wait, you should know you can talk with me. The Pack knows about your woman, but Aaron wishes to speak with you before anyone else presses you on the subject. I understand you're in a difficult position right now. During your voicemail, you spoke to a woman you called babe. Do you wish to tell me more about her? I had hoped you would mate a born female wolf. Is that not true?"

Dread curled in my gut. They'd known all along? I couldn't believe it. This made it more imperative for me to talk with the Council—or even come clean to my mom. Aaron Fitzroy had shown some sympathy—at least I hoped—by wanting to talk to me directly. Was that a good thing? I didn't know how to take it.

“Kelly's a girl I attend university with.” I recounted what had happened that night. “Finally, I tracked the men who took her to the research facility.” The dull headache became a stabbing feeling behind my eyes. “While I should've contacted the Pack, I didn't think Kelly had enough time to wait for the wolves to mobilize. I thought I could rescue her myself. That was a mistake. However, they...” My voice cracked, memories drifting back of seeing her feral and bleeding on that dirty floor.

I cleared my throat. “They made her one of us. I don't know how, but I believe they provoked one of our captured members to change her. We haven't talked about it, but she whimpers about it in her sleep sometimes.” This conversation made me want to go curl up in bed and hold Kelly.

“We consummated our relationship that night. Kelly was almost feral under the full moon's influence.” I squeezed my eyes shut, hating this trip down memory lane. “They experimented on us, and I felt so helpless. We tried to run away and almost escaped. I called Shane, but it was no use...” My throat tightened with unshed tears. “I wasn't strong enough to protect her.”

“Oh, honey, I'm so sorry.” She sniffled and blew her nose like she was crying. She cared. I should've known. “You did your best for Kelly. Why don't you bring her with you? The Pack can get to know her. It'll be good for you both. She can learn about us in a better environment.”

“I don't know. What about the Alpha's decree of putting newly created wolves to death?” I'd heard Chad's take on this, but my mom was on the Council. If one of them lied, I'd know. “How will I know she's safe?” The line went silent except for

her soft sniffles. “Mom?”

“I can’t speak to that, but I believe Aaron wouldn’t kill an innocent wolf.” She cleared her throat. “Not long ago, Jared changed a new wolf by force. Aaron agreed to let him live.”

“Let me guess. This new wolf is in the military?”

“You’ve heard of Ethan then. From Chad, I presume?” The distaste in her voice at Chad’s name was curious. Was that because of the witch tricking him? Apparently, he wasn’t in favor with many people these days. But he was my friend. He’d been there for me in the Pack’s forest and more.

“Yeah.”

“Just know we’re not out to hurt you, dear.” Her tone crisped back to an official councilmember instead of the doting mom. “You’re cared for among the Pack. Believe me. We don’t seek to steal your happiness or claim an innocent’s life.”

While I wanted to trust her, I didn’t feel comfortable with the direction this conversation was going. “Talk to you later, Mom. I’ve got to fix dinner.”

“Jacob, I don’t want to argue with you, especially after what you experienced. I hope you’ll see the Pack’s perspective on this. It would be for the best. You’ve faced more than anyone should have to. I will contact Aaron, but think on this more. You need to take responsibility for your future and the woman you care for. Both of you should be on a better path than the one you’re on now. It might be hard to build up the strength needed to stand before the Council, but you can overcome outstanding odds. You nearly rescued Kelly from the research facility on your own. That proves how capable you are.” She sighed. “If you need to talk, I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll keep that in mind. See you later.” I hung up the phone, not wanting to continue the conversation. Dealing with her councilmember side was annoying despite her supportiveness.

I tucked my phone away, regretting I hadn’t asked how she was doing. But this relationship stuff was too much on top of everything else. I padded into the kitchen to check the fridge. My energy levels dipped lower by the minute. The thought of heading to my bedroom and curling up beside Kelly was alluring. But if I went in there, she’d know something was up. How could I explain the conversation with my mother to her?

I didn’t want to.

Pizza, it is. I kicked back on the couch and ordered two large pizzas before letting my eyes rest. It might not be a home-cooked meal like I’d hoped, but it was better than nothing.

Time slipped by as I waited. While I’d love to nap, my brain refused to shut off after talking with Mom, so I listened to the soft sounds of Kelly’s snores until the doorbell finally rang.

The pizzas had arrived.

I cracked open the bedroom door to see Kelly curled up in a ball beneath the blankets where I’d left her. My breath caught at how beautiful, if not vulnerable, she looked. The heartstrings in my chest pulled tight as I stood there, and the overwhelming desire to crawl into bed with her and cradle her in my arms nearly broke me.

All this time, I’d wanted nothing more than to protect her, but what if I was only making things worse for her? For both of us?

My Pack knew about Kelly, but did they know what she meant to me?

I needed to act before someone else chose my life's direction. A renewed sense of purpose thrummed through my veins. As much as I wanted to keep us both locked away from the world, that wasn't the answer. The only way through this was to face things head-on, even if it meant being uncomfortable as hell.

I tapped on the doorframe. "Babe? It's time to eat."

Kelly rubbed her eyes and stretched. The shadows beneath them saddened me, but I doubted I looked much better. "Already?" The blankets pooled in her lap as she sat blinking at the alarm clock. "I guess I slept longer than I'd thought." She looked at me, then dropped her gaze. That small gesture sparked a flicker of concern. Was she hiding something? I made a note to circle back later. Now wasn't the time to press for answers.

"I ordered pizza. I checked the kitchen, but I'm kind of tired after..." I shrugged a shoulder. "Earlier."

Her head dipped, and her lower lip quivered. "I'm sorry."

I crossed the room in a few long strides. Hearing those words from her—again—broke my heart. "No, Kelly. You don't need to apologize." I sat beside her on the bed and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, drawing her close. "Do you understand?"

"I..." She rested her head against my chest and nodded. "Okay."

We sat there in silence while I stroked her back. The pizza could wait. If it got cold, we could nuke it, but Kelly needed this time. And I wanted to be there for her.

I finally broke the silence, knowing I needed to. If she wasn't up to talking, that was fine, but she had to know I was here for her. "You know you can tell me what's on your mind."

Her body, which had started to relax in my arms, went rigid. "I... I know. Thank you."

"No problem." The tension unsettled me, but I wasn't without my own secrets. Should I tell her what my mother had said? The Pack knew about her? Should she know I'd feared for her safety? That wouldn't help her current state of mind. If anything, it'd just make things worse. I only wanted to make things better for her.

Unfortunately, the first step to doing that was going to be speaking with my Alpha and getting all of this straightened out. While I didn't want to stand before the Pack Council yet, I couldn't put Aaron Fitzroy off any longer.

20

KELLY

The greasy meat lover's pizza rumbled in my stomach as I rested my head on Jacob's lap. An action movie played on the screen. Brainless entertainment while he petted my hair. I spent the first part of the film ruminating and sneaking glances at his face, but the more he caressed my head, the sleepier I became despite the impressive sound system playing out the booming explosions and screeching car chases.

When I woke up, sunlight filtered through the windows. I was in my panties on Jacob's bed. Where was that incessant buzzing coming from? A heavy fog blanketed my brain, and I wanted nothing more than to fall back asleep. The alert part of my brain wouldn't rest until we figured out what was going on.

Jacob walked into the bedroom, wearing a pair of jeans that hung low on his hips, giving me a delicious view of his chiseled abs and the deep V-cut muscles framing them. My inner wolf growled with a desire to drag him into bed with me until I spotted the pale claw marks marring his tan skin.

Ugh. If only I could've stopped myself from hurting him...

"You going to answer your phone, babe? Whoever it is has called three times."

Right, my phone. I rubbed my eyes, trying to remember where I'd put it, but my wolfish senses guided my feet toward the dresser by the bed. My stomach sank when I saw who was calling... Emma.

“Hello?”

“It’s about time you answered. You really trying to ghost me again, Kelly?”

“Uh, hold on a moment.” My gaze darted to Jacob. Shit, shit, shit! While my hearing was sensitive, I could only bet Jacob’s was even more powerful. If Emma mentioned this was the first time we’d talked since that awful night, then I’d have a lot of explaining to do. With what happened yesterday, I didn’t want to jump into that now.

“Hold on? Seriously?” She huffed, but didn’t hang up. “Fine.”

I placed my hand over the speaker and bit my lower lip. “Can I have a minute to talk with Emma? Please?”

Jacob glanced between me and the phone. “I made breakfast. Don’t take too long.” Something like suspicion sparked in his eyes, but he shrugged. The ripple of muscles from that simple action almost made me moan, and I squeezed my thighs together.

Why was it everything he did turned me on? Wait, the full moon. That had to be it. No, it’s not. That was two days ago. Something about Jacob was seriously attractive, and I wanted him so badly, even if I was screwing things up by withholding the truth from him.

“Thank you.”

He walked out of the room, but he didn’t close the door behind him. Was he trying to make it easier to listen in? That didn’t sound like him. Regardless, I closed the door, then went to the bathroom, shutting that door behind me too. Just to be on the safe side.

“I’m back. Listen, I’m sorry about... everything really.” I thought about expanding,

but if Jacob could hear me, being vague was better. “I’m glad you called.”

“Is everything okay?” Emma’s voice held traces of doubt. “Are you still at Jacob’s?”

I leaned my head against the bathroom wall, wishing I could have a break from people with their accurate trust issues. I wasn’t even fully awake yet. “Yes, things are fine, and I am still with Jacob.”

“Is he around? Is that why you’re being cagey? He’s not being terrible to you, is he?” She rushed on before I could respond. “I’ll beat the shit out of him if he is. You know that, right?” With a huff, she continued, “Let’s get together. I want to see you in person and chat about how you’re doing. Seriously. Pushing me away is not okay.”

The phone fell from my hand and clattered on the bathroom floor. She still wanted to hang out after I’d distanced myself? I hadn’t expected this.

“Kelly? Hello?” Her voice cut through my thoughts, and I bent to pick up the phone.

“Um, I dropped my phone. Sorry.” I sat on the edge of the tub. “First of all, he’s been amazing. It’s not him.” In fact, it was all me. I was on the verge of destroying something very special. Jacob could learn I was keeping secrets from him, and I didn’t know if our relationship would survive a betrayal like that. “And that works. I can meet up. I’ll just need to tell him I’m going out. When and where?”

“Great!” Emma let out a relieved sigh. “What about the new cafe over on Main Street near the New Age shop? We talked about going over there before... you know.” Her voice became quieter and sadder, and she cleared her throat. “Or we could hang at my place?—”

“No, that’s a fantastic idea. I’d love to visit the cafe. Like you said, it’s something we’ve wanted to do, so let’s do it!”

What if I was followed again? But it might've been a coincidence at the university. I couldn't let the men who'd kidnapped me and those scientists ruin my life. I needed to feel free again. Visiting places with my friend felt like the best step toward that hope. "I'll send you a text once I've told him I'm going out."

"Awesome! I'll see you soon."

Even though our conversation had started on awkward footing, this felt right. Like it was meant to be. I smiled as I went to the living room.

Jacob lay on the couch, remote in hand, the TV fading to black. "Ready for breakfast?" His gaze slid over me from head to toe. "What happened with the call? Is Emma okay?"

"Yeah, she's fine. We're going to hang out." I glanced over at the kitchen where the delicious scent of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and fruit delighted my nose. My stomach rumbled, and I couldn't believe how hungry I was. Before all this, I'd never dreamed of eating so much food in one sitting... but now? I was starving. Maybe I was regaining my strength after the pitiful meals during our captivity. "After breakfast, of course."

"You two are getting together? Why?" He pushed up from the couch, and the rippling of his muscles was entirely distracting. Huh. Could explain why he hadn't put his shirt on yet. Most likely not, but who cooks bacon shirtless?

"Uh... Why wouldn't we? She's my friend..."

"Didn't you two meet up yesterday? Not sure if I feel comfortable with you going out. I have somewhere to be today, so I can't go with you."

I blinked at him, unable to believe my ears. Did he think I was so helpless and unable

to go out on my own? “Why would I need you to babysit me while I’m with Emma? She’s not going to hurt me or—” The words died on my lips as my gaze dipped to the scars on his chest. I turned away, stalking toward the breakfast bar. Of course, it wasn’t Emma worrying him. It was me. Would I be able to control myself? What was I doing?

Jacob’s footsteps padded after me, and he spun me around to face him. “Don’t worry about that. This was my fault.” He placed my hand over the wounds. “I haven’t taught you what you needed to know.” He cupped my chin, lifting my gaze to meet his. “I know you wouldn’t hurt me on purpose, and you won’t hurt Emma either. Keep your emotions in check. That’s the most important thing you can do as a wolf.”

I nodded, but keeping my emotions controlled was easier said than done, especially with everything going on right now. “It’s not your fault. There hasn’t been a lot of time. I swear I’ll do my best to remain in control.” I rose up on tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Thank you for understanding.”

He rested his hands on my hips and held me close. “Of course. Call if you need me. Promise?” He leaned back enough to look me in the eye. The concern there bothered me, but maybe he was too worried. However, I wished I could read him better.

“I promise.” I lingered in his arms for a few moments before finally pulling back.

We ate a delicious breakfast together in his kitchen. I still couldn’t believe Jacob had made all this food. Knowing he wanted to cook for me was so sweet. Sweet, thoughtful, and shirtless. He was trying so hard. Once we finished eating, I kissed him again. “I’ll see you later.”

“See you later, babe. Be safe.” He shoved his hands into his pockets, watching me hop onto the elevator from his front door.

* * *

The drive to the cafe on Main Street was quiet. Most of the businesses were opening or already open. Still, the sleepy downtown didn't have many people around at the moment. The scent of baked goods from the cafe drew my attention as I passed the New Age shop. Part of me considered going inside. The shop might have something on how to deal with being a werewolf. Even as I thought about it, I laughed under my breath.

Yeah, right. I wasn't normal anymore. Who said the people inside the store would even know about the supernatural? It wasn't every day that someone claimed to be a werewolf. Telling another person might lead to more crazy science research. I couldn't be a lab rat again.

Still, something about the place called to me. Like I needed to go inside, even if I was just killing time waiting for Emma. But if she didn't find me at the cafe, would she think I'd blown her off?

No, I had my phone with me. She'd likely text when she arrived. The only excuse I had was my deep-seated intimidation. My parents had frowned upon anything out of the ordinary when I was growing up. They'd hate me if they knew what I'd become. Not that it mattered. I was still the same person I'd always been. And they never cared for her either. I refused to sit back and take their foul treatment, though. I was stronger than that.

Drawing in a deep breath, I headed for Eternally Magick's door. Inwardly, I braced myself before I reached for the handle. The sign on the door said 'Closed.' Odd. The shop's posted hours said it should have been open. I shrugged. At least, I wouldn't have to worry about feeling awkward inside the shop while trying to look for answers about my new life.

I turned from the door to see a redheaded woman hurrying in my direction. Did I know her from somewhere?

“Just a minute! I’m a little late opening up,” the redhead said. “It’s been a rough couple of days.”

Hold on. No way.

My thoughts flashed back to the woman’s cry from the other night. Hearing that heart-wrenching sound and knowing someone could’ve died still hurt. No, I couldn’t stick around here. I had to get away.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything. No words came out. I took a few steps from the door. “I’m so sorry.”

The woman frowned as she walked closer. “Thanks, I think.” Her forehead scrunched, causing a crease between her brows. “Uh, is everything okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Her gaze swept our surroundings, as if trying to find the cause for my current state. Then again, she kept giving me a strange look too. What was up with that?

She likely didn’t know she was the reason I felt on edge. Ugh.

“Nothing,” I blurted, my muscles tightening. “I’m okay. I?—”

“You’ve got this wild energy about you,” she murmured, more to herself than me. “Like I’m in the calm before a storm.” Drawing in a steadying breath, she unlocked the store’s door. “Come on inside. No need to feel weird about browsing the shop. Is that what you’re worried about? Please let me know if I can help you with anything. I’d be happy to assist.” She stepped inside and held the door for me. “It’s safe.”

My nose twitched. Her tone felt off. Was she scared? If this was the same woman from the other night, then I could see why she might be. Hell, I was afraid too.

I glanced over my shoulder, checking the cafe for signs of Emma. Now was my chance to escape, but I was curious about my current condition. Maybe I could learn more about the man we'd left to die. The man who'd rescued Jacob and me from our prison, only to be shot by those who wanted to keep us captive... "I-I'm meeting a friend at the cafe. Sorry."

The redhead rubbed her bloodshot eyes. Faint bruises and a few scrapes marred her skin from having her face shoved into the gravel at that gas station. "Oh... Maybe swing by after?" She shook her head and forced a smile. "Sorry. I just... Have a nice lunch."

"Sure. I'll come back later." What was I doing? Why didn't I leave when I had the chance? But I knew why. My wolf could sense her inner turmoil. No one deserved to face that kind of pain alone, especially when she seemed to reach out to me. Or was I just imagining that?

No, my extraordinary senses confirmed it.

The redhead's face brightened a little, and it made me happy. Like I'd done something right for once. See? I can socialize.

"Great. I look forward to it. My name's Mia. What's yours?"

"I'm Kelly." I smiled back. The distinct click of heels on the sidewalk drew my attention, but I kept my gaze on Mia. "Me too. I've never been to a shop like this. I'm curious to see what you have."

"Oh, it's awesome. We have something for everyone, and I'm not just saying that."

She tilted her head with pursed lips, as if running through a list in her mind. “I’ll give you the full rundown when you return.”

I glanced away to see Emma sauntering toward us. She wore a pretty dress with a pair of high-heeled black boots that stretched to her knees. Emma waved at me with excitement, but her smile slipped at seeing me chat with Mia.

“Hey. Who’s this?” Emma asked, pausing beside me. Her gaze flicked between us with a hint of confusion, like she wasn’t sure where she fit in.

If I’d known Mia would be here, I might’ve suggested Emma and I meet up somewhere else. However, I couldn’t have known. But that didn’t matter. I’d agreed to hang out with my friend. I could talk with Mia after lunch, so I waved goodbye before turning to leave.

Emma walked with me. “So, who was that?” She frowned before peeking over her shoulder at the storefront behind us.

I blew out a breath, not knowing how to explain who Mia was. I couldn’t tell Emma the truth. Oh, just a woman Jacob and I left to die... along with her boyfriend. The thought alone made me cringe. “She runs the New Age shop, I guess. I thought about heading in there while I was waiting for you. I didn’t know how much longer you’d be, so... Might as well kill some time, huh?”

“Oh right. You should’ve told me. We can stop by the shop after we grab a coffee and talk.” Emma hooked her arm through mine, and we walked to the cafe.

Was that a great idea? Not sure.

With Emma around, I wouldn’t be able to browse the store in search of answers. And how would I learn about what happened to Mia and her boyfriend? My pulse

quickened, and the urge to break free from Emma's grasp leapt to life within me. Suddenly, this all felt like too much. Maybe I couldn't handle being out in public.

The second the doors opened, the bakery scents punched me in the nose. All sorts of breads, spreads, and blends of coffee. A wave of nausea shuddered through me, and I placed my hand on the door frame to steady myself.

Oh god. Please... Calm down. Shallow breaths...

"I'll find us a table." My voice was a faint whisper, even to my own ears. I cleared my throat. "Mango iced tea and a chocolate chip cookie. I'll send you my portion of the bill via app." I turned to leave, but Emma tightened her grip on my arm.

"Are you okay, Kelly? You look pale." Her eyebrows drew together like she didn't know what to do. "The table's a good idea. Let's find one together." She guided me to one on the patio. "There you go. Fresh air might help."

I worried my lower lip, trying to remain in control. She was right about the fresh air. Many scents still existed out here, but the cool breeze took away their overwhelming power. However, the din of conversation around us grew to an ever-increasing volume. I could feel my control slipping farther away from me.

No, no, no...

If I didn't regain my composure, my wolf could go on a rampage. The last time that happened, I'd clawed Jacob. Someone might be seriously hurt, and I was already drawing a lot of unwanted attention.

I peeked beneath my long hair to find an escape in case I should run. The fence separating the patio from Main Street was only waist high. I could jump it, especially since I knew how powerful my legs were these days.

But I leaned back in the chair, doing my best to box breathe through this turmoil. Still, the stress of being amongst a crowd kept my feet ready to move at a moment's notice.

"Thanks." I looked at Emma seated beside me. "And I'm so sorry about pushing you away. I just—" A man laughed loudly behind me, and I nearly jumped from my chair. When I realized he was dining with his spouse and their young child, who held up a crayon-smeared coloring book, I resettled. "Sorry." My gaze cut to Emma before I lowered it to the cafe's menu. "It's just been difficult the past few days... or well, month? You're the only one... I mean, other than Jacob... who cares about what happened." I gulped. "Thank you."

"Kelly..." Her hand rested over mine on top of the menu. "Of course I care. You're my bestie—whether you like it or not." She smirked and rolled her eyes. Relief flooded through me, and I finally relaxed. "Maybe we should've gone to my place. I could've brought snacks from the cafe. You look like you're ready to bolt."

"Yeah, I guess that would've been smart. I'm not used to crowds and feeling boxed in..." When a waiter walked behind me, I instinctively leaned away from him. "But I'm kinda getting used to this. It's okay." I forced a smile onto my face.

Emma nodded, squeezing my hand. "If you want to go somewhere else, we can do that. And seriously? You think I'd let you pay for your own shit after what happened? Geez. I'm the one who should apologize for going off on you. You were hurting, and I was too worried about my own pain. So I'm sorry too."

"What?" My head jerked up, but her expression was serious. "No, really? I..." So many emotions bubbled up within me in rapid succession—surprise, concern, skepticism, and awe. My beast brushed against my chest in silent warning, and I ran my sweaty palm over my jean-clad leg. "It's okay. I'm just glad we're hanging out again."

“Me too.” Emma beamed. “You sit tight. I’ll be back with our order.” She stood there for a moment, then glanced around as if making sure I’d be fine while she was inside. “Text if you need me.”

“Okay.” I waved. Inwardly, I felt my wolf stretching upward, threatening to take over.

Stay calm, Kelly... Deep breaths. Remember what Jacob said.

If I didn’t, my world could come crashing down around me, and I refused to have that happen. Not again. I didn’t want to spend my life caged. Whether that was by crazy scientists or simply being kept at home because I couldn’t handle this new life as a werewolf.

I just wanted to live again. Was that asking too much?

JACOB

Returning to Pack HQ after the verdict wasn't something I looked forward to, but I needed to do it. Kelly was out with Emma again, even if I questioned that decision. While I wished she had stayed home, maybe fixing things with Emma would help her regain some confidence. I missed the happy girl I'd first fallen for. Seeing her so shaken made me wonder if she'd ever be okay again.

Her beast was dangerously strong at the moment. Heightened emotions and lack of solid training didn't help. I could only hope what I taught her last night would be enough.

The blame was on me. All of it. But if anything happened to Emma while they were out? I'd never forgive myself. Moving forward, I had to make things better for Kelly, not worse. She needed to feel safe in her own skin.

I glanced over at Brax, who'd agreed to drive me again. I appreciated it, but damn, I wanted a new car. The odor from Brax's truck wasn't as potent this time, but not only did I miss driving, I craved the freedom of coming and going on my own time. That lingering unease from finding out the Pack knew about Kelly refused to disappear. I needed to speak with my Alpha.

No wonder Chad pushed me to go before the Council. He must've known everyone already knew. Damn it. Why didn't he just tell me? It felt like betrayal except... maybe he was trying to keep me calm. That tracked. I hadn't been the most stable,

and he'd admitted he was worried I'd go rogue.

"Thanks for the ride, man. I owe you."

"Nah, Jacob. Glad to help. If you need somethin', just holler, okay?" He shrugged. "You're awful lucky to be here. I was worried you might be gone forever." He squinted at the road as we rolled up to a stop sign. "Actually, I've got somethin' on my mind. Probably not my place, but... Everyone heard that voicemail you left your brother. And..." He cleared his throat before glancing in his rearview mirror. "No, never mind. Apologies."

Brax rarely shied away from hard topics. Of course, he wasn't a gossip either, which made this worse. If he brought something up, it mattered.

"What's on your mind, Brax?" My pulse picked up, but I pushed the beast down. What the hell had I said in that message? Everything from our escape blurred together. My body fought tooth and nail with the drugs, but I was barely conscious. I lost.

He rubbed the back of his neck. His scent soured with anxiety before he eased back onto the gas. "It's not my place," he muttered, "but you were with someone. You used an affectionate name for 'em. Did you... find someone there?"

I leaned my head against the headrest, breathing in the country air from the open window. The rural roads slid by. Everyone knew. If I lied, someone would call me on it. "Yeah." I crossed my arms over my chest. "I was with a girl."

From the corner of my eye, I saw his brows furrow. "Is... Is she okay? Did she make it out alive?"

My heart sank a little. Did he think whoever I'd been with had died? It wouldn't have

been a wild assumption, not with the hell I'd gone through. Trees stretched along the side of the road with wood fences dotted between them. "She's alive. 'Okay' feels pretty relative after what we experienced."

"I'm real sorry, man. Not my place to bring it up." He drummed his thumbs against the truck's steering wheel. "Just... you didn't say anything about her before. You've got a lot on your plate, but don't forget there's folks who give a damn about you."

The tension in the car was thick enough to slice with a claw, and I felt like an ass for letting things become awkward.

"I know, and it's fine." I blew out a breath. "That night... It's a blur. They drugged me while I was trying to escape with her. I could barely function. Dialing Shane's number was a feat." No use hiding this. It'd come out eventually. Brax wouldn't tell. I trusted him. "Kelly was unconscious. I tried to protect her, but even keeping my eyes open was nearly impossible." I rubbed my damp palms over my jeans, the weight of the memory still heavy.

Brax was silent for a moment. "I'm sure you did what you could, Jacob. Hell, if anybody could claw their way outta there, it'd be you."

Thankfully—or maybe not—we pulled into the Pack's long-ass driveway. My stomach twisted with nerves. Everyone knew what I was hiding. How was I supposed to walk in there and act normal?

"I appreciate that. Thanks for the ride."

I jumped out before the truck came to a full stop, not wanting him to see the emotions nipping at my heels. Weakness wasn't a luxury I could afford around here.

As I reached the steps, the mansion door swung open. A platinum blonde woman

stepped outside, freezing me in my tracks.

Alayna.

Her pale grey eyes widened when she saw me, and a smile brightened her entire face. “Jacob! I saw you at the trial. You left before I could say hi. I’m glad you’re okay. I was worried when I learned you were...” She tilted her head, searching for the right word. “Taken?”

I remained at the foot of the stone steps leading up to the mansion. Even with Alayna standing tall at the fourth and top step, our heights were almost even. I instinctively straightened to face whatever she was going to throw at me. “I’m fine. Thanks.” My gaze slid past her toward the door, wondering how many pleasantries she wanted. This needed to be quick. I had shit to do. Bet she’d heard the voicemail too. Fuck. I shoved my hands into my jacket pockets and balled them into fists, trying to look bored.

Her smile wavered, and she arched a manicured eyebrow. “Are you sure? You don’t seem fine.”

“I need to talk with our Alpha. I don’t have time for?”

The door creaked open behind her. Zack and Jill, two mated Pack members in their mid-thirties, stepped onto the porch. The moment they saw us, their conversation stopped. Zack shot me a grin, then glanced at his mate. “Look who it is, honey. Pretty soon you two will experience the bliss of mated life too. Congratulations! You both deserve happiness.”

“Congrats,” Jill said, leaning into Zack’s side, as if to prove how content they were.

What the hell?

Alayna winced. Her back was to them, so they couldn't see it, but her eyes flicked to mine in warning. She'd known. That meant my mother had already talked to her about this... before saying a damn word to me. Something in my face must've changed because she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, then mouthed, "Sorry."

My mother wanted me mated to Alayna? So that's what all the mate talk had been about. I shouldn't have been surprised. She'd always wanted me with a born wolf, but the thought of waking up next to Alayna for the rest of my life soured my stomach. Something about her set me on edge and seeing her cuddled up with my brother at the verdict hadn't helped.

I'd wondered if the two of them had something going on but never cared enough to ask. It hadn't mattered. What Alayna and I had was functional, not special.

Zack wrapped an arm around Jill, pulling her closer. "Have you two picked a date yet? I mean, it must be pretty sudden with what you went through, Jacob, but having someone like Alayna in your life to care for you will get you past this trauma you faced, you know?"

Wisps of rage coiled tight within me. My beast rose up, peeking through my eyes, and my lips curled back in a silent snarl. I shifted my gaze from Alayna and locked it on Zack, unleashing the full weight of my fury. "No." The hot sting of my power swept out like a wave.

Zack kept smiling ignorantly, glancing between Jill and Alayna, but Jill tugged at his sleeve, her body already wanting to retreat. She sensed the danger, even if he didn't.

"You know, honey," Jill said, her voice unsteady. The tang of her fear coated my tongue. "We might've interrupted an important conversation. Let's go home. It's been a long day."

Zack frowned at her in confusion until he caught my wolfish gaze. His jaw dropped, and he instantly looked away. “You’re right, dear. Sorry for the disturbance.” He cleared his throat, then gave me a wide berth, ushering Jill along like a man who just realized I might lose it at a moment’s notice and attack.

For all the Pack knew, that could be true.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my palms into my forehead. Did everyone think this pairing was a done deal? The thought infuriated me. My mother would get an earful the next time we talked.

“This isn’t happening.” I opened my eyes and motioned between us. “I will not be your mate. There’s nothing between us anymore.”

Alayna crossed her arms beneath her petite breasts and stuck out her lower lip. “I don’t think that’s up to you.” Her voice went sugary sweet and smug. “Besides, what else do you need in a mate besides hot sex? You don’t have many options. Unless you have a thing for MILFs I don’t know about... or your sweetheart isn’t from around here.” She scoffed, rolling her eyes. “There’s humans, but... Ugh.” Her words dripped with disdain. “Who would want to mate with one of them ?”

I couldn’t listen to this. If I didn’t get away from her, I’d really lose my cool. My control wasn’t at its best, but blowing up at another wolf in front of the Pack’s door might be the final nail in my coffin. “I’m not talking to you about this.” I pushed past her and reached for the door handle, only for her to grab my wrist.

Alayna was strong, but I was stronger. With a twist, I could’ve broken her hold, but I’d always prided myself on not hurting women.

“Get over whatever this is, Jacob.” Her voice went cold, calculating. “You’re not the same man you were before that lab. And that’s not a compliment.” She huffed. “If

you've got a problem with our relationship, take it up with your mother. She came to me before you were captured, I'll have you know. I'm still willing to mate with you, even if you're acting like... this ."

Fucking hell.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll leave me alone." My jaw clenched so hard a muscle ticked in my cheek. "Get your hand off me, Alayna."

She was doing everything she could to provoke me. And if I wasn't careful, I'd give her exactly what she wanted. We'd fought before. It never ended well. She did what she wanted and didn't care how her actions affected others. Another reason I didn't want her in my life.

"Is that a threat, Jacob? Then act on it, lover boy. Or is this a tantrum 'cause you didn't get your dick wet in that little cage of yours? Oh, you poor little pup. Boo-fucking-hoo."

Rage boiled in my veins. My vision bled red.

Instinct overwhelmed all common sense. I grabbed both of her wrists and shoved her against the door, pinning her hands by her shoulders. "You're looking less and less attractive by the second. If I didn't want you before, I sure as hell don't now." My voice was a low growl, hardly human.

Her eyes widened, then she let out a sharp laugh. "Oh, really?" The faint scent of her arousal hit me. "You've got an interesting way of showing it, especially with the Pack watching us." She arched her back until her breasts brushed my chest.

My fingers bit into her wrists, drawing a gasp from her. Pretty sure I'd leave bruises. Then I pushed off her... hard. The thought of being caught in that position, especially

after she'd twisted it into something seductive, made my stomach churn.

I glanced over to see several wolves quietly watching from the driveway. My heightened emotions must've blocked out their presence. Usually, I was better than this. That just proved I couldn't be near Alayna. She tested my limits, and I couldn't afford to lose my composure.

Chad pushed through the crowd, raising an eyebrow at me like he wasn't sure what he'd witnessed. "Show's over. Move along." The wolves lingered, then slowly meandered on their way. I was damn grateful Chad dealt with the onlookers. "Everything okay?" he asked, waiting on the third step.

Alayna shot him a syrupy sweet smile. "Of course it is. Jacob's just processing the fact we'll be mated. I think being locked up in the research facility sparked something wild within him." She giggled like it was all a big joke.

The flicker of surprise in Chad's eyes told me he hadn't known. His gaze cut to mine, and he frowned. "I see."

I clenched my fists at my sides, trying not to lose it again. Alayna was pushing her luck. Hard.

Shane appeared from the dispersing crowd, frowning as he looked around at the aftermath. He stopped a few feet from Chad. "What's going on, guys?" He looked between me and Alayna. His gaze lingered on her, the faint scent of his arousal in the air, before he turned to Chad.

The urge to punch Shane warred with my desire to escape into the Pack's mansion. Doing that might not win me any favors, and I needed to fix this shit. Time to see the Council.

I shoved past Alayna before she could block me again and walked inside.

22

KELLY

After Emma left to grab us drinks and snacks, I meditated on Jacob's words. Push down the wolf in a firm, steady way like closing a heavy door. She needed to know I was the boss here, and I needed to relax. Losing control in a cafe full of people wasn't the vibe.

The fact I'd hurt Jacob crushed me. But life would be so much worse if I hurt a human. What if I created another monster? My mind flashed to the lab. The rumbling growls echoed behind me before agony exploded through my back.

Shit! No, no, no...

Thinking about that night wasn't helping.

I took a few more steady breaths and focused on shoving down my wolf. Slowly, my senses dialed back to a more human level. I could do this. I was doing it.

The hardest part of my discussion with Emma was over. Once we finished talking, I'd see how I felt. Maybe I'd check out Eternally Magick in case the shop had any information on dealing with my new furry side.

"Here you go." Emma set down a tray with two massive chocolate chip cookies, a mango iced tea, and a cappuccino. She sat beside me again. "You still feeling okay? We can always bounce if it's too much."

I took a sip of iced tea, searching for the right words. “Yeah, I’m good. It’s just... I haven’t been out much since everything happened. Being in public feels... intense?” It wasn’t the perfect word, but I didn’t know how to explain it. Hell, did I know how I was feeling?

Besides, I couldn’t tell her I was a werewolf. She didn’t need to be dragged into that craziness. The fewer people who knew what I was, the better.

Emma wrapped her hands around her cup. “I can’t even imagine.” Her gaze flicked to mine. “If you ever want to talk about what happened, I’m here. Are you safe now?”

“Thanks.” My lips tightened into a thin line, and I glanced at the people sitting nearby. “Yeah, it’s fine now.” My pulse sped up. If she pushed for more answers on that topic, I might be jumping the fence after all.

“No pressure.” She sipped her coffee, watching me over the rim. “So, how are things at Jacob’s? You sounded nervous on the phone. Is he actually treating you well?”

I rubbed my forehead, chasing away a headache. Of course she’d ask that again. “Seriously. Everything’s great with him. He’s helped a lot in ways I can’t really explain. We care about one another. I might love him.” Actually, I knew it was true, but would Emma understand? She couldn’t know we’d been locked up together. I didn’t want to deal with her inquisitive nature, and that was part of Jacob’s story too. I wouldn’t reveal something that could impact him. Better to stay vague. “As for how I’m doing, I can’t say I’m great, but I’m trying?”

“Trying is good. Better than many of us could ask for.” Her nose scrunched as she stared off into the distance. “Is that why you haven’t gotten in touch? You feel more comfortable opening up to him? I?—”

“No!” I placed my hand over hers. “You’re my friend, Emma. If I’m honest, I haven’t

wanted to talk to anyone. Communication hasn't been perfect with Jacob either." I chewed my lower lip. "Um, I visited the Dean of Students without telling him." It hurt to admit. "He thinks I should recover, but I need to do my studies. That meeting didn't go well."

"Is Jacob mad at you? If you need someplace to stay?—"

"Emma, please." I sighed. "He still doesn't know. I should be truthful about my needs. It's just—" I looked away. "I don't feel like I'm good at being human right now." Shit. Too close to the truth. My gaze lifted to hers. "Socially, I mean."

With a nod, she placed her other hand over mine. "You've been through a lot, girl. Be patient with yourself. Anyone would feel less social in your shoes." Her eyes softened, expression heavy with concern. "So, uh, what happened with the dean?"

I squeezed her hand, needing that comfort. This subject was hard for me. Maybe talking it over with her would help me practice for the conversation I needed to have with Jacob.

"Dr. Butler was an asshole." I shook my head. "Err... Well, he didn't believe me. Said he needs proof. The story probably sounds fantastical, but?—"

"What? Are you kidding me?" Anger darkened her pale face into a deep pink blush. "What a jerk! Maybe it sounded a little out there, but you're not the type to just make up stories. What about my reports to campus security?" My heart skipped a beat, remembering she'd contacted them. "And you didn't answer your phone. What are you going to do? I know how your parents are... There has to be someone else you can talk to. Someone who will actually listen."

Uh oh... I was tiptoeing a fine line now. Emma might speak up on my behalf if she thought I'd been wronged, which was amazing, but I didn't need more attention on

me.

“First, I’m going to admit what I did to Jacob. After that, I?—”

“Think about your future here. You think you love him, I get it. But is talking to him about what you did more important than trying to get back into school?” Emma cocked an eyebrow.

“It is important. I shouldn’t have kept it from him, and yeah, I’ll do what it takes to get back into college. But I’m not living with that guilt. Besides, he said his mother might talk with the dean. My parents don’t know or care, so having an actual parent step in might help.” Why did I even bring that up? Jacob might not even want to help now.

“Have you tried—” She shook her head. “No, it’s wrong of me to suggest contacting your folks. I know they were awful to you.” She leaned over and wrapped an arm around me. “I’m sorry, and you’re right. If he found out, it could cause a rift, and you two are such a cute couple. I trust you know what you’re doing.”

The warmth of Emma’s hug was nice. I released a breath. She understood, even if she flaunted a rather judgy demeanor. Her home life was nothing like mine. No one deserved a shitty upbringing. “Thanks. I appreciate it. Not that I know what you mean about the cute couple thing. Jacob is hot and all, but—” I grinned. “It almost feels like a fairy tale being with him. I’ll let you know how it goes with school. And don’t forget to text me your classes for when,” or maybe if with my luck, “I’m able to enroll.”

She pulled out a sheet of paper from her purse. “One step ahead of you, bestie. I figured we’d talk about them when we had coffee. I’m glad we could chat. You know I’m always here for you, right?”

“I do. You have no idea how much I appreciate your support.” Emotions tightened my throat as I looked over her courses, feeling a sting of regret we weren’t already taking them together. I hoped we would be soon.

“You’d do the same for me.” She took the last sip of her cappuccino. “Did you want to visit that shop? We could go together, then I can walk you to your car?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I’ll head back to Jacob’s and rest before he gets home from his errands. At least I feel more prepared to talk with him now.” Heading back to Jacob’s immediately was a lie, but she wouldn’t understand that I needed to learn more about what I was and chat with Mia.

“You’re sure? We could pop in for a few moments.” But a look of relief crossed her face.

“It’s fine, I promise. There’s always next time. We’ll probably come back here, right?” The drinks were great, the cookies magical, and from what I smelled, the food seemed good too.

“That’s right. Let’s go.”

It didn’t take long to reach my car near the bookstore just past Eternally Magick. Emma had parked farther down Main Street, so I sat in my car and waited. When her car passed, I held my phone to my ear and gave her a quick wave, pretending to be too busy to leave yet. She smiled and kept driving. Perfect.

When the coast was clear, I went to the door of Eternally Magick and stopped outside. My nose twitched, and the feeling of being watched was back. Could it be my imagination? I glanced at the window reflections for shadows lurking behind me. Nothing.

People strolled by like they didn't have a care in the world. I envied them, but maybe I'd feel safe in my own skin again one day.

I stepped inside the shop, a bell chiming over my head. The dark, regal colors and wood made it feel very medieval or Renaissance era in here. I liked the décor, then the wall of herbal fragrance hit my nostrils, ripping a sneeze from me. The scents were overwhelming, and I nearly pinched my nose. But that might've looked weird. Breathing in this place was so much effort.

"Oh, hey! You're back." Mia popped around a shelf with a couple of candles in her hands. "I almost wondered if I'd scared you off."

"What? No, not at all. My friend and I had a lot to catch up on, so..." I followed her to the shelf with candles she'd been working on. Maybe I shouldn't pry, but I was curious about what happened the night we'd escaped. "Um, you said things have been rough recently... I'm sorry."

"I, uh..." She rearranged the candles again as if keeping busy helped. "Yes, it has been. My boyfriend nearly... I'm sorry. I can't." She cleared her throat. "Were you looking for something or just browsing? Want me to show you around?" She waved at the displays. "The candles are buy one, get one half off. We've also got cute dragon and black cat statues. Crystals, jewelry, and some books."

Relief flowed through me, but the pain radiating from her hurt like hell. I shouldn't have pushed. Not when she was struggling. But I needed to find something about my wolf problem and get the hell out of here. My nose would thank me too.

"I shouldn't have said anything. Sorry." I felt like a huge jerk. "Just looking around mostly. I've never been in here. I'll take a peek at the books. Thanks." Witchcraft, tarot, and astral projection dominated the content. Nothing screamed Werewolf 101. Didn't seem like I'd find anything useful here. But I'd given it a shot. Part of me

wanted to leave, but I felt obligated to buy something. My wallet disliked that decision, but I'd figure it out.

"Those candles look great." I stopped beside her again. "The pine forest one, please." My wolf liked that one best. Not so sickeningly potent like the others.

Mia took one to the cash register. When I approached, her gaze drifted toward the door like she was expecting someone, then it slid back to me. "Thanks for stopping in. I hope you'll come back. Maybe next time I'll be in better spirits."

I smiled as I paid her. "No worries. I'm sure I'll be back. I hope life gets better soon."

With my bag in hand, I left. The second I stepped outside, I regretted it. Adrenaline flooded my system before I even knew why. Every nerve in my body screamed. Whatever suspicion I'd felt before stepping into the store was worse now.

I jogged to my car, but strong arms wrapped around my waist, trapping my arms at my sides. Before I could scream, I was shoved into the backseat of a moving car. It sped off before the door closed, and a broad-shouldered man pressed me into the seat. His eyes shone like gold. The glimmer of his sharp, canine-like teeth flashed in the sunlight.

Oh no. No, no, please! Not again... and not by people Jacob thinks are dangerous.

23

JACOB

O f course Shane couldn't let me walk away. My brother tore past me, halting my progress. I stopped with a sigh and crossed my arms.

“Hold on. I want to talk with you. Where are you going?” He glanced over my shoulder, but I could already smell Chad and Alayna behind me. “We need to chat in private. Jacob?”

“I'm busy, Shane. What do you want?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You sure you want me to spell it out here?” Something in his tone said I should hear him out, even if I'd rather not.

I curled my lips in disgust and turned back to Chad, completely ignoring Alayna. “I'll find you later.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me, then glanced between us like he wasn't sure we'd be fine. At my nod, he placed his hand on Alayna's shoulder. “Let's go. I'm sure you can find something better to do than snoop around the Armstrong brothers.”

A snarl trickled from her lips, but she let out a startled whimper when Chad's power washed over us in a scalding wave. Showing teeth to the Pack's second-in-command and Alpha's son? Not smart. He wasn't someone you messed with.

Once they were gone, I frowned at Shane. We ducked into one of the mansion's sitting rooms. I hated being confronted by him here, but it seemed like I didn't have much choice.

Leaning against the wall near the door, I crossed my arms again. He stood toward the center of the room beside two leather sofas facing an enormous marble fireplace.

"You going to talk?"

"Sure." He perched on the arm of a couch and stared me down like he was trying to provoke me. "You've got a chick at your place. Our Alpha didn't want anyone to speak up before he could talk with you. Your fragile state of mind and all that. But the voicemail is proof she exists, bro." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "And I smelled her on you. I followed her the morning of the trial. If you think you're keeping her locked up, you're wrong."

My heart slammed against my ribs. He'd followed her?

"I'm not locking her up. She visited a friend. What does any of this matter to you?" I didn't like what he was implying. If this was his play, then we were done. "If you've got a point, make it. Because right now, you're just pissing me off."

"A point?" He scoffed. "How's this? Unless your girl toy was meeting her 'friend' in the dean's office at Winter Forest University, then you don't know what she's doing. Must've been pretty intense in there since her eyes were amber when she came out. Looked like she was about to lose her shit. So, why haven't you brought her before the Pack? You hiding her from us?"

My jaw ached from grinding my teeth, and I squeezed my hands into fists at my sides. My body vibrated with rage. It'd be so easy to send Shane's teeth clattering to the floor. I didn't want to believe Kelly went behind my back, but Shane's report

confirmed how rattled she'd been. She'd nearly gone rogue and lost control completely. For a moment, she had.

Why? Because she couldn't listen to wisdom. I'd been looking after her, trying to protect her, and she betrayed me like this. I knew she wanted to return to school, but she put herself and others in danger.

"No, I told Mom about her. I just needed time."

He rolled his eyes. "Fucking momma's boy."

I let out a low rumbling growl and flipped him off. Knowing my brother was aware of this didn't staunch the rage and hurt flaring in me. If he told others, it could damage my reputation. I'd been harboring an unknown werewolf. I doubted my mother's influence as a councilmember would help me. Not that it'd bother my brother. He didn't seem to care whether I lived or died.

Fuck. So that's why they wanted to hang out today and why Kelly was desperate to get rid of me this morning before they talked. Was Emma in on this? Did she know about Kelly's plans to go back right away? Then again, I doubted Emma knew the complete story about why it wasn't a good idea. She didn't know Kelly was a werewolf who lacked self-control.

I needed to talk with Kelly about this. Should I confront her? My gaze met my brother's again. No, I couldn't let it go and hope things worked out. We needed to work through this. "Who have you told?"

He shrugged, running his fingers along the leather arm's divots. "Just you so far, bro. Unless you want me to loop in our Alpha? I bet he'd be interested." He lifted a cocky eyebrow at me.

That stupid look had me crossing the room in a few long strides, the urge to punch him so strong. Only when I was a foot away did I stop, keeping my hands at my sides. The growing desire to clock him warred with my rational side. “If you tell anyone, you’ll regret it. That’s a fact. Understand?”

Shane met my gaze. His lips parted, and he lowered his eyes in submission. “I do. Fucking idiot. I don’t know why, but Alayna likes you. You’re going to break her heart being with some chick you found at the research lab. You don’t deserve someone like Alayna. She’s special.”

Seriously? She was ‘special,’ all right. But the trace of sincerity in his voice made me pause. He had feelings for her. That was new. No one ever seemed to stick. He was always chasing new tail.

“Then why don’t you tell her how special she is?” I stretched my fingers, trying to ease the tension in my knuckles.

“What?!” The muscles in his jaw ticked, but he met my gaze again. Curiosity softened his anger. “She wouldn’t take that well. No. I can’t. What if she—?” He shook his head. “Come on. I’d make myself a laughingstock. More than I already am, you know. Thanks very much.” He slumped onto the sofa and dragged his hands through his hair.

“What are you talking about? She’d have to be blind not to notice how much you like her. Hell, I’ve seen the looks you give her.” I stalked toward the opposite couch and dropped onto it. “She’ll smell your honesty. She’s a werewolf, just like us. Why are you so worried?”

Shane jerked to his feet and started pacing in front of the fireplace. “Are you serious?” He shot me a look. “I want to tell her. But what about Mom? She might think I’m poaching your girl.” A low growl rumbled in his chest, and he smacked a

pillow from the sofa. “After the voicemail incident, she’s been furious with me. Not that you probably feel any different. I know, okay? I screwed up big time. Should’ve checked the fucking message. But how was I supposed to know you were in trouble?”

I opened my mouth, but he kept talking.

“It’s not like we’ve been close. I figured it was more school bullshit or something. Look at you, bro. You’re doing something with your life that you want to do. Engineering major with big goals. You don’t want to be dragged into our parents’ business, and you’re smart enough to do your thing. What do I have going for me?” He grabbed the pillow from the floor and chucked it at the sofa. It bounced and hit the wall. He spun to face me. “Nothing, that’s what. I’m stuck, man.”

The fiery anger I’d felt toward him faded. He envied me? I hadn’t imagined that in my wildest dreams. He’d always acted so cocky and sure of himself, like he was better than me. “You have plenty going for you. You’re getting an MBA?—”

“Sure, an MBA that Dad forced me into at his alma mater. He refused to pay for my college if I didn’t go that path. When I told him I didn’t need college, he backhanded me and said I better not complain again.” He touched his cheek as if reliving the moment, then turned his wolf amber eyes on me. “This isn’t my dream. None of this is what I want.”

My jaw dropped, and I struggled to form a response. Dad did that to him? They didn’t get along on a good day, but I almost couldn’t process what he’d said. Dad’s actions were inexcusable. “Did you tell Mom?”

He rolled his eyes. “She’s always busy with Pack business or her job. You really think she’d care?” There was a tinge of hope in his voice that hurt my heart.

“Yeah, I think she would. She’s always supported me, and I don’t think she’d want

you to feel stuck doing something you hate.” I crossed the distance between us, then placed a hand on his shoulder. “Do what makes you happy, man. Don’t stay stuck in something that’ll drain the life from you.”

He blew out a calming breath. “All right. I’ll... I don’t know. Maybe you could talk to her first? She cares about your opinion more. Hell, she’s trying to hook you up. She’s never tried that for me.” He gave me a sheepish grin. “You’re her precious baby.”

I grimaced, wishing he hadn’t said that. It wasn’t true. A lot of times, I wondered if Mom was training me to take her place on the Council. Besides, she’d wanted me to be with Alayna. That wasn’t what I wanted at all. However, she knew about Kelly now and hadn’t mentioned the arranged relationship. I hated that, but Alayna said my mother had approached her before shit went down with the mercenaries. Maybe what happened today was a misunderstanding.

I sure hoped so.

Hell, I wasn’t getting a free ride through life either. But I didn’t think Shane wanted to hear my side, so I’d keep my mouth shut. “Sure, I’ll talk to her. In the meantime, tell Alayna how you feel. And don’t mention the university to anyone, okay? I was going to talk with the Alpha about my girlfriend, but now I think I should head home and talk with her first.”

Did our relationship mean as much to Kelly as it did to me? I hoped she would tell me the truth. And if Alayna was determined to be my mate, I needed Shane to lure her away.

Shane nodded. “Good luck, bro. Guess we both have tough conversations ahead.”

I patted him on the shoulder, then pulled away. “Guess so.” The walk from the Pack’s

mansion felt heavy. What I was going to do now might either break my heart or bring about more understanding between me and Kelly.

However, I wasn't hopeful things were going to go well.

KELLY

My breath came in shallow gasps, each one harder than the last as the man with golden eyes crushed me against the backseat. My chest and hip ached from his massive weight. The smell of leather and sweat mixed with a wild forest scent making my stomach churn. Werewolves. He didn't need to speak for me to feel the threat looming above.

"W-what do you want?" I shoved at his chest, but it was like pushing on a brick wall. "Please... Let me go. Please?—"

Golden Eyes curled his lips, looking feral with those sharp canines on display. A deep, rumbling growl reverberated through his chest. I could feel the vibrations against my sternum. Was he capable of words, or was he all beast?

"Not so fast, lady," the driver said, glancing over his shoulder. "You're an unknown. We can't have unknowns wandering through our territory. A pretty young thing like you might not mean us harm. But you could bring about our destruction. Why didn't you ask permission to be within the Pack's land?"

My jaw dropped, and I stared at the driver. Permission? What the hell did he mean? Jacob hadn't warned me about these rules. I wasn't fully part of his world. How was I supposed to know this? I didn't know what to say.

I chewed on my lower lip, desperate to stay silent. If I told them about Jacob, what

would they do? Would they hurt him? If they thought I was his, he might be their next target. My heart pounded in my chest, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to keep the fear from overtaking me. But it bubbled up like a foreboding pressure that couldn't be stopped.

The driver sighed. "Don't go quiet on us now, young one. Make her talk, Garrick."

I opened my mouth to respond. Did I want to see what this beast of a man would do? Hell no. However, the words refused to come out.

Garrick grabbed me by the chin, forcing me to meet his cold, golden gaze. "Answer the question." His gravelly voice rumbled, as if unused to human speech. Or was that just my imagination running wild in the face of this situation? "You will go before our Alpha and face judgement."

"The more you cooperate, the more mercy you'll receive," the driver said, his tone chilling. Somehow, I didn't believe him. "Do you understand?"

"Please, I... I don't know what crime you think I've committed." A shiver chased through me and unshed tears tightened my throat. Maybe the truth would set me free. "I'm new to all of this. Please. I don't know what's going?—"

Garrick's grip slid down, squeezing my throat and choking off my words. "Goddamn it." He snarled, his breath surprisingly minty. It clashed with the menace he exuded. "Jared has a copycat, Ron. This one will be terminated."

Terminated?! No! Not when I have so much to live for.

"Shit." Ron glanced back at us. "Something needs to be done about his followers. They'll put us at risk. This can't stand, not after everything we've been through."

My eyes widened, and I fought against Garrick's grip. What the hell was going on? The suffering I'd been through at the research facility with Jacob wasn't punishment enough, apparently.

Breathing became impossible now. My vision darkened at the edges, and my beast surged to the surface of my skin. A wave of panic washed over me. Pain lanced through my hands as sharp claws erupted from my fingertips. My heart hammered in my chest, drowning out everything else, and for a moment, it felt like my body was no longer my own. A memory flashed through me of losing control in Jacob's bathroom, of hurting him. No, this wasn't the same. I had too much to fight for... Jacob. Emma.

My life couldn't be at its end.

My claws sliced deep into Garrick's wrist and chest, hot blood coating my fingers. His sharp gasp was the only sound I registered. I didn't care if I was outmatched. My beast and I weren't going down without a fight. If we worked together, we might have a distant chance at survival.

Garrick's lip curled again, a low snarl rising from his chest. The deadly sound froze me in place. He stared at me like I was a puzzle he didn't quite understand, then cocked back his free arm. Before I could react, his fist slammed into my face with a sickening crack.

The world tilted violently, and everything went black.

* * *

My head throbbed as I woke up in a dimly lit room, shadows pooling in every corner. My tongue swiped over my split lip, and I regretted messing with it. The stench of mildew, blood, and stale sweat mingled with the acrid scent of urine and

something worse. The smell clung to the air, thick and suffocating, twisting my stomach into knots. This place was meant for suffering. I stifled my soft whimper with the back of my hand pressed to my mouth.

The room's only light shone over what looked like a horror-movie dentist chair, complete with thick metal shackles to hold its victim. Soft, rhythmic drips drew my gaze to a small pool of blood spreading out from the chair.

A gasp caught in my throat, and I could've kicked myself for making the sound. My back pressed against the cold iron bars of the cage. The space was just big enough for me to stand or sit, but nothing more. A bird cage—small, restrictive, awful. My pulse kicked up a notch, and the ache in my chest grew. The weight of helplessness crashed down on me.

A deep, throaty chuckle reverberated through the stillness. "You're awake? Good girl." Garrick walked out of the shadows. He had been scary in the car, but now, at his full height? God, he was downright monstrous. Those golden eyes glowed with curiosity as he stepped closer to the bars surrounding me.

I shivered, feeling my throat tighten. I'd never wanted to be in this position again, and now the werewolves were my captors. Weren't we the same? Didn't wolves look after one another? All of this confused me. Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I wouldn't show this asshole any weakness. Not now, not ever. He would not see how much he rattled me, even if my fear choked me.

Not that it mattered when he could easily smell it. The stinging energy radiating from him told me he was powerful. If Jacob could scent my emotions, I'd bet anything that Garrick could too.

But I wouldn't break. Not for him.

“Afraid to talk? Any pleas for help?” He crouched a foot away from the cage, holding my gaze. His golden eyes shone in the darkness, and he tilted his head to the side in a wolfish manner. “Just as well. You’ll face the Pack Council soon. Then you’ll die by my hand.” He clicked his tongue and glanced down at his bandaged wrist. “A pity with your fiery spirit. New female blood around here would’ve been nice.” He shrugged those massive shoulders. “Some want to grow our numbers. We can’t have that.” He reached a hand through the bars toward me. “You’re nothing but a victim of circumstance.”

I shrank back from his touch. My vision blurred before it sharpened, turning red as my beast shot to the surface. The sudden ache in my fingers and gums told me I was changing. My claws and fangs fought to break through. Pain ignited within me like fire, and before I could stop it, a vicious growl rumbled deep in my chest. Don’t touch. Stay the hell away from us. We weren’t supposed to be here. We needed to be at Jacob’s, where we were safe and loved. The bond to my beast felt raw, powerful, and too real in this moment. My body was no longer just mine. It belonged to both of us.

Garrick stopped inches away from my face, his posture towering over me. He studied me with a mix of intrigue and something darker, almost calculating. “You’re new? Is that true?” He withdrew his hand, as if he couldn’t be certain he’d keep all of his fingers. Once out of the cage, he rested his bandaged arm on his knee, a slight wince crossing his face. His brows furrowed, but something resembling approval flickered in his eyes. “Huh. You’re a fighter. Good girl.”

“I shouldn’t be here.” The words came out slurred with the sharp points of my fangs biting into my lips. I straightened, determined to show him strength if that’s what made him back off. Maybe if I showed him how capable I was, he’d go away—or at least, he might not hurt me again like those scientists had. But deep down, I was still the scarred girl trying to outrun her past. Before long, my confidence sank like a boulder to the depths of the ocean.

I wondered if Jacob had noticed my absence yet. Would he think I'd just taken off? Maybe he'd believe the mercenaries had stolen me away again... dragging me into another nightmare. The thought—and the stench surrounding us—made me queasy. I couldn't shake the image of him frantically wondering where I'd gone. Would he even think to look for me here?

Wherever here was...

My purse, phone, and everything else were gone. I don't remember hearing them hit the sidewalk, but they could've fallen when I was shoved into the car. Who knew what happened after I was punched? I licked my lower lip, wincing when I brushed the wound.

The beast within roared. Its overwhelming presence matched my growing anger. We shouldn't be treated like this, especially when we'd been finally free to roam, free from fear. We belonged out there, not locked in a cage like some animal. The wolf wanted to rip through the bars, tear into this Garrick monster, and make him regret ever crossing our path. But I held back... for now.

"You shouldn't be here? Why's that?" He leaned forward again, his golden eyes narrowing as he inhaled. "You're no different from any other human who has been bitten or scratched by a werewolf." He raked his gaze over me. "So, what makes you special?" The muttered question was more to himself than me. "That scent..." Garrick's nostrils flared, his expression sharpening. "It's familiar. Hmm... Where have I?—"

I gulped, unsure what to do. He knew my smell...? Or was he talking about Jacob's? I opened my mouth to say I was mated. But would it help my current circumstances? Jacob never mentioned telling the Pack about me. They might not even care.

My chin lifted as I met his gaze, doing my best to appear strong. All I wanted was to

curl into a ball and cry until my tear ducts ran dry. I had almost beaten my enemies and was close to a better life. Maybe I wasn't meant to be happy. My life had always been a one-way street to sorrow before I came to Winter Forest University. Meeting Emma and Jacob changed that.

The path before me now promised death and suffering instead of freedom and love. With my fangs bared, I crossed my arms under my breasts. They'd said I would be terminated, but that didn't mean I should make it easy for them. I wouldn't give them more ammo to use against me. No matter how much I wanted to break down, I wouldn't fold.

My only regret was lying to Jacob. If I'd told him the truth about using Emma as an excuse to visit the university, I could've died with a clean conscience. I wished we'd had more happy times together. If I'd done what we'd agreed on, none of this would've happened. School didn't really matter when I faced death and losing a life with the man I loved.

Because yes, I loved Jacob.

I only wished I could've told him. Now, he might never know.

25

JACOB

The second I walked through the front door, I knew Kelly wasn't at my condo. This didn't feel right. She'd promised she wouldn't be gone for long. The girls were supposed to grab a drink at the coffee shop on Main Street, then Kelly would return home.

"Babe?" I called, stalking through the living room to the main bedroom. My ears perked for any slight sound, but the silence was deafening. "Kelly, are you here?"

My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out the low hum of the fridge in the distance. Was I overreacting? Were they caught up in conversation? They had plenty to talk about, especially since they didn't meet the other day like Kelly had led me to believe.

I wished I knew what was going on.

I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and called her. No answer. I dialed her number again. Nothing. After the third try, my wolf's hackles were on the rise. Something was wrong. Was she hurt, or had she lied to me again?

Relax, Jacob. Don't act like a jealous jerk.

But where the hell was she? Each unanswered ring felt like a hammer to my skull. What if I couldn't find her this time? I didn't even know where to begin looking.

While I was still upset with her for visiting the Dean of Students without talking to me, most of that frustration melted away as my fear for her safety skyrocketed. Minutes ticked by on the wall clock as I paced the living room with my phone in hand, ready to answer on the first ring.

I was angry, frightened, and helpless all at once. I'd never felt more out of control. Not with anything. The thought of losing her—or worse, her falling into the scientists' hands again—left a deep ache in my chest. Who else would have her? A niggling sense told me to not forget the Pack, but I pushed that thought away.

Minutes became almost an hour. I couldn't handle this anymore. Maybe Emma had her phone's sound on. Enough time had passed, and I was starting not to care if I looked like the overprotective boyfriend or not. My worry had reached its boiling point.

“Oh, hey, Jacob. It's good to hear from you. I tried calling you during finals week, but I didn't?—”

“Sorry, Emma. I was pretty slammed.” Finesse? Who had time for that? “Are you still with Kelly?” My voice cracked, betraying the fear I'd tried to suppress. The words felt clumsy and desperate. I should've approached the conversation more subtly, but my heart couldn't take it right now. I needed to know where she was. Losing her wasn't an option.

“Huh? She's not at your place?” Emma's casual tone made my stomach knot tighter. “No, we parted ways almost two hours ago.”

“What?” I felt the blood drain from my face as the words sunk in. She'd been gone for hours. Hours. My hand balled into a fist, and the urge to punch a wall grew with each passing second. “You're sure?”

“Yeah. Maybe there’s a logical—” Her words cut off in a groan. “I wonder if she’s trying to work up her courage to tell you something. Normally I wouldn’t go there with this, but she’s pretty nervous you’ll be upset.”

Could this be just a guilty conscience regarding the dean’s meeting? Was she at her apartment? If so, I was almost certain she’d answer her damn phone.

I plopped down on my couch and leaned my head back, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “Whatever she’s nervous about doesn’t matter. Right now, I just want to know where she is and that she’s safe. Do you have any idea where she could be?”

Emma sighed. “The last time I saw her, she was in her car.” Silence blanketed the line for a few heartbeats. “Oh no! What if she’s been in an accident? Should we call hospitals? I’ll do it. I’ll let you know if I hear anything. Call if you hear from her.”

Before I could reply, she hung up. This wasn’t good. Unless the worst had happened, Kelly could survive many things because of her resilience as a werewolf. If her phone was broken, it might explain why she hadn’t answered, but the device had rung. It was powered on.

Who the hell else should I contact?

Before I could answer that question, my phone vibrated. Chad’s number lit up my screen.

“Hey.”

“Jacob, get to Pack HQ right now.” Chad’s voice sounded urgent. “The enforcer spotted a wolf girl downtown. He thinks she’s one of Jared’s. The Council is considering executing her as a show of force for his supporters.”

My breath caught in my throat. Execute her? It didn't make sense. None of this made sense. "I can't get a hold of Kelly." Numbness washed over my body. This couldn't be happening. "I'll..." I didn't have a car. What could I do? A taxi ride to Pack HQ was a terrible idea, and Brax had taken one of his horses to a veterinarian appointment after dropping me at home. "I'll come as quickly as I can."

"Shit... I'll be here and try to act as the voice of reason, but my influence isn't great right now. Get here soon, man."

"I will." I disconnected and stared at my phone. My hands shook as I tried to process Chad's words. A sense of disbelief hit me first, followed by the cold grip of panic. My worst fear was unfolding right in front of me. They were going to execute her. This was all my fault.

Who to call? Wait, he'd mentioned The Council... Mom!

I tried calling her, but after several attempts, it went straight to voicemail. Part of me wanted to believe she would help, that she'd see Kelly as mine and step in. Deep down, I knew she might use this as an opportunity, a chance to push her own agenda. She'd wanted me to be mated to a born wolf like Alayna. The thought disgusted me. I couldn't trust her. Not anymore.

This situation sucked. What made it feel worse was I couldn't trust my own mother to help me.

That left Shane. Would he come through for me this time? He was the only one I could turn to now.

With trembling hands, I dialed his number. The phone rang a few times, and I almost wondered if he would answer. But his voice came over the line.

“Hey. What’s going on, Jacob?” His voice held a confused edge, like he couldn’t figure out why I was calling. Fair enough. Guess he hadn’t heard about Kelly’s situation. Or maybe he hadn’t connected two and two yet.

“Can you drive me to the Pack’s headquarters? It’s...” The words died on my tongue. What I’d done had only made things worse. I’d put Kelly in danger. If something happened to her, this would be all my fault. “The Pack has her. They?—”

“I’ll be right there, man. We’ll get this straightened out. The Pack’s about justice and law. They can’t just?—”

“They think Jared changed her, so they want to make an example of her for his supporters.” A low snarl ripped from my throat. “Fuck! I was such an idiot, and now she might die.”

“No way. That won’t happen, bro. It won’t.” His key jingled over the line. “What the hell? I’ll be there soon, I promise.”

The moment Shane hung up, I raced to my closet. Neither of us had touched the research folder since we brought it in from Kelly’s trunk. But I knew exactly where it was. If the Council needed to understand what had happened to us, I’d bring them the truth. Every fucked-up detail was in that folder. It might be the only thing that could save her life. I tugged on a jacket, then tucked the folder away inside.

Taking the stairs three at a time, I hit the building’s entrance fast. My gaze kept darting to my watch, ready to hop in the car the second Shane showed up.

He was true to his word. Minutes later, his muscle car screeched to a halt in front of me. Before I could even process it, I was in the passenger seat, buckling my belt. His presence was the only steady thing in my world right now.

26

KELLY

Just when I thought Garrick might finally leave, a familiar man's voice echoed from deeper within the dungeon. "Bring her on up."

My claws and fangs withdrew painfully, leaving me defenseless. I blinked at Garrick, surprised he wasn't moving. He remained in place, his gaze still focusing on mine. Obviously still trying to understand the problem that was sitting before him.

"Come along and bring the girl," he yelled again.

"Heard you the first time, Ron." Garrick shook his head and extended to his full height from the crouch. "Come now, special one," he muttered. "Don't make trouble." He slid the keys from his pocket to my cage and waved me forward to the opened door.

He knows. Somehow, he knows.

I shook my head, not wanting to be anywhere near him. "No, please..."

With a huff, he snapped forward, lightning fast, and grabbed me by the upper arm. My legs buckled as he yanked me up. His hard grip tightened, sending sharp jolts up my arm. A sense of dread rolled through me, and I'd bet anything he could break my arm with just a little more pressure.

My throat tightened as a scream threatened to escape, but I cut off the sound, refusing to show him my pain. I pressed my lips together and managed only a soft moan. The cage door slammed shut behind me. As he dragged me along, I tripped for the third time, my legs failing to keep up as his long strides chewed through the distance.

“Where are we going?” My foot slipped on a stair, only his firm grip kept me upright.

He glanced down at me with a rumble. “Changed your mind about talking? Too late. You’ll see the Pack Council. They advise our Alpha on laws so fewer humans enter this world.”

My lower lip trembled, and I frowned. “But I haven’t broken any laws. This isn’t my fault. I didn’t ask for this.”

“I know.” Garrick frowned, patting my shoulder. “You’ve said as much. You’re new.”

And then we continued up the stairs.

The doors opened before us, and we stepped into a regal-looking, masculine boardroom. A long, solid oak conference table ran the length of the room, surrounded by people in business attire. At the end of the table stood a man with blond hair and blue eyes, towering over the rest. Was this the Alpha? He looked pissed off, a snarl curling his lips.

“I’ll remain here,” Garrick murmured, and I nodded to him. He leaned next to the dungeon’s door as I stepped forward.

My gaze drifted to the people around the table. A man with a greying, pencil-thin mustache wrinkled his nose at me, while another guy in a suit with slicked-back blond hair inspected his nails like I wasn’t worth his time.

Several other werewolves mirrored that reaction, but not a blonde female werewolf. She leaned forward and drew in a deep breath. Her eyes narrowed as though something about this clicked. She pursed her lips. Who was she? She clearly wanted to speak, but maybe protocol prevented her? I didn't know.

The Alpha rounded the table and stopped a few steps away. The intense wave of power sweeping from him was worse than Garrick's, if that was even possible.

I backpedaled toward the basement, but Garrick's hand on my shoulder kept me in place. If these were the people Garrick spoke of, then I didn't feel comfortable with my chances. All of this felt like an awful mistake, but it was going to happen. Part of me wanted to collapse, curl up, and cry.

Don't show weakness.

I lifted my chin, remembering how Garrick had responded to the strength I'd shown. Maybe attacking was a bad idea, but otherwise, I needed to rely on my beast. If we were going to get out of here, we needed to prove ourselves, not whimper. But I wasn't who they thought I was. I didn't know Jared. I'd been changed in the research lab.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself, girl?" the Alpha said.

My mouth opened and closed as I struggled to find the right words. Should I mention Jacob? I didn't have much choice. They were going to kill me if I didn't do something. "I'm Jacob Armstrong's mate."

The Alpha lifted an eyebrow at me. Behind him, an immediate uproar of conversation exploded at the table, and he whirled on them. "Silence!" A few grumbles filtered through, but the Alpha narrowed his eyes at me. "Who are you? How do you know Jacob?" I sensed he believed me, but he needed proof I wasn't making things up.

“I’m Kelly Lopez, sir. Jacob and I attend the same university. We were studying together during finals week when we got into an argument. He left. There was a knock on the door, and I’d thought maybe he returned...” My voice faltered, and I lowered my gaze to the floor, my nails biting into my palms. Tears threatened to spill, but I fought them back. Now wasn’t the time to start sobbing. Garrick’s hand on my shoulder gave a soft squeeze. “But these mercenaries took me from my apartment. I...” A tear swept down my cheek, and I brushed it away.

“I see.” The Alpha waved Garrick away to stand by the door once more. “Come, sit down.” He gestured toward a leather armchair opposite the intimidating group.

For a few seconds, I glanced back at Garrick, who nodded subtly. Why was I looking for guidance from the wolf who’d said he would be my executioner? But I followed the Alpha and perched on the chair.

“Why didn’t the Pack know about you sooner? Were you hiding from us?” the man with the pencil-thin mustache asked. The way he steeped his fingers matched his cold, calculating gaze.

I swallowed hard. “Um?” My mind raced as I glanced between each councilmember, trying not to look at any of them for long. “Before that night, I was a human, sir.”

“Is that so?” A middle-aged woman with brown hair cascading over her shoulders tapped a long, manicured nail on the oak table. Her red lips pursed with irritation. “How did you become one of us then?”

My mind pulled me back to that night, and I fought off images of the man I’d nicknamed Baldie pushing me against the cage.

“My abductors told me their scientists had uncovered a way to turn humans into... shapeshifters. They weren’t after me but this wereleopard named Caitlyn, so when

they realized I wasn't a shifter, one of them decided to 'fix' their mistake. He pinned me to a cage and..." My hands trembled in my lap. "I thought I was dying. There was so much blood, and I lost consciousness."

My gaze slid to the Alpha, who nodded for me to continue. "When I woke up, I felt different. Violent, almost feral." I shook my head. "Jacob risked his life to save me. He's the best mate I could've asked for. I would've lost my mind if it hadn't been for him."

Any boredom on the councilmembers' faces disappeared with my declaration. The blonde woman leaned forward, watching me. I still wondered who she was. Something about her facial features felt familiar.

"You are the woman my son cares for?" the female werewolf asked. "The one he says is his mate..."

Son? It took a second to click. "You're Jacob's mom?"

"I am. You must be special for him to have risked his life." She turned to the Alpha. "Aaron, I believe we should?—"

The door opposite the conference table burst open causing the councilmembers to shout objections and jump to their feet. I stiffened in my seat as fear clenched at my stomach. What was going on? It took all my strength not to glance back.

"Kelly! Are you okay?" Jacob's voice washed over me, instantly easing my fear. Maybe I'd be fine after all. I hoped so.

I turned in the chair and saw Jacob a few feet away, flanked by two men. My nostrils flared, catching a familiar scent. Could one of them be his brother? The other man looked like a younger version of the Alpha. Were they related?

“I am,” I said. Or I was now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Garrick watching me. He straightened, the flicker of recognition in his expression fully formed. He gave a small nod, then returned to his usual blank, feral stare.

A low growl reverberated across the room, pulling my attention back to Jacob.

He hadn’t moved, but locked his eyes on my face, dark and unreadable. His lips were pressed tight, the muscle in his cheek ticked like he was holding himself back. His gaze traced the damage—the split lip, the bruises... then dipped to my throat.

The skin there felt raw. I didn’t need a mirror to know Garrick’s fingerprints were still visible. My jaw throbbed from the punch, but the ache dulled under the weight of Jacob’s fury. I touched my neck without thinking, as if to cover the bruises. Too late.

Oh shit...

The possessive gleam in Jacob’s eyes was back. And then some. If he had his way, I knew he’d fight Garrick.

No, no, no... Don’t be an idiot for me, baby.

“Jacob, it’s good to see you.” The Alpha’s calm voice cut through the tension. “I’m glad you’ve finally decided to chat with me and the Council, especially with what we now know.” He leaned a hip against the conference table and nodded past Jacob to the other men. “Chad, Shane, you may leave. The Council wishes to speak with them alone.”

The man who I suspected was his brother patted his shoulder, then they left, closing the door behind them.

Jacob lowered his head, momentarily flustered. “I’m sorry?—”

“I’ve wanted to speak with you for a while now,” the Alpha said. “Where have you been?”

“It didn’t feel like the right time.” Jacob stepped behind my chair, placing his hands on its back. “I needed space to get my head on straight after—” His thumb brushed over my shoulder as I looked up at him. “I was concerned about her. Didn’t want anything happening to her. She’s innocent. They mistook her for someone else, and?—”

“We know her story.” Aaron crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s unfortunate, but that’s not a satisfactory reason to hide from your Pack. You acted selfishly, young man. I think you know it too.”

Jacob bowed his head as if ready for an axe to fall on his neck. His voice dropped to a mere whisper. “I know, and I apologize to all of you.” His gaze met mine, and a shiver raced down my spine. He didn’t need to say sorry, especially when he always forbade me from doing the same. I placed a hand over his. If it wasn’t for him, I’d be dead.

The Alpha cleared his throat. “Your apology is duly noted.”

“I don’t know how much you’ve learned about the scientists, but they were trying to build super soldiers from shifters.” He pulled a familiar folder from an inside jacket pocket and placed it on the table beside Aaron.

The Alpha’s brows lifted, and he glanced at the other councilmembers, sharing his apparent surprise with them. The others looked intrigued by the research too.

“We took that during our escape. It has some of the information they had on us.

Somehow, they knew I wasn't a changed wolf. They thought I was their best hope for producing a super soldier, with Kelly being the one to carry it. The scientists conducted so many tests. They pushed us to our limits. Food was scarce, barely enough to keep us alive. We almost escaped the night I called Shane. While fighting the guards off, they tranquilized me. I could barely keep my eyes open, much less focus on driving."

Jacob placed his hand on my shoulder, and I nuzzled into his arm. "I keep letting you down."

"Don't say that. You've done the best you could for me. For us." I glanced up at him, brushing the unbruised side of my face against his arm, happy to have him close.

"This new information is impressive, son. It will help us combat whatever the scientists have spread to their contacts in the government." Aaron set the folder aside, shaking his head. "However, you shouldn't have hidden her away. That wasn't your decision to make, Jacob."

Jacob froze, and I could tell he was holding his breath. My lower lip trembled, hating the scent of fear that emanated from his pores. It seemed like he was waiting for a death sentence. I blinked, feeling my heart skip a beat in my chest. Or was he waiting for mine?

The Alpha kept going. "The Council makes decisions for the betterment of the Pack as a whole... and the individual members. Ms. Lopez could have died. She also could've caused irreparable damage to another." His nostrils flared as he looked between us. "The uncontrolled nature of her beast is easy to see. We must teach her how to live like us. If she wishes, I'd like to welcome her to join as a member of this Pack."

Jacob breathed out a sigh of relief. He all but collapsed against me, wrapping his

arms around my shoulders. Tension still lingered in the grip of his hands on my biceps, as though he wasn't yet able to forgive himself. "Thank you, sir." His gaze met mine, an almost pleading note in them as he waited for my response.

"Yes, sir. I'd like that." I nodded to the Alpha, even as I hugged Jacob's arms to me. "Thank you, sir." The words felt right, even if part of me still felt overwhelmed at the thought of becoming enmeshed in their world. But with Jacob, I could face anything.

Aaron inclined his head toward us. "Good. We'll reconvene at a later time. Normally, I would discipline you for your actions, but I think you've learned your lesson, kid. I'm sure the Council recognizes the immense stress you were under when you made that poor decision." A rumbling agreement came from the members around the table. "Consider this your warning. Never keep secrets from us again." The Alpha picked up the folder, then sauntered to his high-backed chair at the end of the table. He sat for the first time, leafing through a few more pages. His impassive face hardened, eyes narrowing like he understood exactly what he was looking at, though I couldn't begin to guess how or why. Whatever he'd found, it was dangerous. Worse than we'd imagined. He closed the folder and set it aside again. "Go now. You're dismissed."

"Once I've finished my business here, I'll swing by your place," Jacob's mom said, a small smile on her face. "Go rest."

27

JACOB

My heart thudded in my chest. I couldn't believe what had just happened. We were safe... at least for now. Kelly wouldn't be executed.

I could finally breathe again.

Not all of my worries were gone, though. She'd gone to the university without telling me. We still needed to have that conversation. But after almost losing her? It was hard to hold on to anger. If anything, the past hour had only cemented how much she meant to me.

Outside the Council chamber, Shane and Chad stood near the door across from one another, speaking in low voices. Garrick, the Pack's enforcer, followed us out and stretched across a nearby bench like he owned the place. His golden eyes tracked Kelly with vague interest. He didn't speak, and honestly? I preferred it that way.

Kelly smiled at him as we passed, and he gave her a small nod.

My jaw clenched. That didn't sit right.

Garrick was intimidating, ruthless—not someone you got comfortable with. Not someone you smiled at. He wasn't the welcome wagon anyone wanted introducing them to the Pack.

That should've been me.

Besides, he'd choked her. Struck her hard enough to split her lip and left finger-shaped bruises on her face and throat. And now he was eyeing her from that bench like he hadn't almost killed her?

I slowed, my grip loosening on Kelly's hand. My wolf roared inside me to protect my mate, to seek justice against the beast who had injured her. Something more than the quiet, too-casual look Garrick threw her way.

No matter what she'd said in there, I'd failed her. How the hell was I going to make that right?

Garrick's gaze locked with mine. It burned with feral energy. But his stare was unreadable and calm. Like I posed no threat to him.

The low, guttural growl rose within me instinctively. I shifted my weight forward, stepping straight toward him. Then I took another step.

Chad's hand clamped down on my arm, firm and unshakable. He moved between us, his jaw tight. His eyes flashed a silent warning—don't.

Behind him, the bench creaked as Garrick's weight lifted from it. Each movement was slow and deliberate. All six foot eight inches of raw muscle and menace loomed over us. He didn't snarl or bare his sharp teeth. He just stood there, crossing his arms over his chest like a mountain that dared us to move it. Muscles rippled and flexed beneath his tight t-shirt, a testament of the power he contained. His gaze flicked from me to Chad, then drifted past us, like we weren't worth his time.

I took shallow breaths, not moving or blinking. Chad's grip on my arm tightened like he sensed the coiled tension within me, ready to strike at the first sign of aggression.

Then Kelly held onto my waist from behind like she realized what was going on. Her face pressed against my back. Her warmth, her scent... The feeling of her wolf nuzzling mine through our skin. It pulled me back from the edge. I rested my hand over hers near my navel and closed my eyes briefly. With a soft exhale, the fury faded just enough.

We continued walking. The moment passed, but it stuck in my paw like a thorn.

“You good?” Chad asked as we moved down the mansion’s long hallway.

Kelly flinched at the sound of his voice, like she expected someone to leap out from one of the many doors at us. Her hand found mine once more.

“Better,” I said, gently squeezing her hand. “Kelly, this is Chad. He’s the Alpha’s son and second-in-command.” I nodded toward my brother, who walked to the other side of Kelly. “And that’s Shane.”

She cleared her throat, glancing between them. “Nice to meet you both.”

“Shane’s giving us a ride home.” The less time we spent here, the better. I didn’t want her having a panic attack at Pack HQ. Hell, I didn’t want her to have one at all.

But maybe I didn’t want to stick around here either. After all, I was the one who’d nearly lost control and wanted to fight the Pack’s enforcer. I’d always feared Garrick. He radiated enough menace to make the whole Pack shrink away. That man was a living weapon. I knew better than to cross him, but in that moment, all I’d seen was a bastard who put his hands on Kelly.

Good thing Chad had more brain cells than I did. He probably saved my life. I clapped a hand to his shoulder, drawing a small scowl from his lips. But he didn’t pull away. My best friend.

“That’s right,” Shane said, a smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth. “Good to meet you too. You must be pretty special.”

Kelly looked between us like she couldn’t decide whether he was teasing or serious. She finally offered a polite, if hesitant, smile and nodded. “Thanks.”

“See you around, Chad,” I said when we reached the long driveway. I pulled him into a quick hug. It wasn’t something we did often, but it felt right. “Thank you. I mean it.” If he hadn’t called me, I couldn’t bear to think about how today would’ve ended.

Before we could leave, Garrick reappeared in the Pack’s front door. He jogged down the steps and strode over to us, holding up a small plastic bag and a purse. His golden eyes slid over us before he held the straps out to her with a grunt.

“My purse!” Kelly’s face lit up. “Thank you.”

I wondered about the shopping bag. Had the girls gone somewhere beside the cafe? The scent of pine and wax caught my attention, but that didn’t matter right now. She was safe. Which reminded me of?—

Shit. Emma...

I pulled out my phone and fired off a text.

Jacob

Kelly’s fine. No accidents. She’s with me. I’ll explain later.

Emma

Oh my god! Thank you. I was worried sick.

Jacob

Same. Gotta go.

When I glanced up, everyone was looking at me, including Kelly. She stepped closer, trying to peek at my screen. “It’s Emma. I called her earlier when you didn’t show up.”

“Oh no. I bet she has been worried sick.” Kelly frowned and rifled through her purse, but I placed a hand on her wrist. “I should text her.”

“Don’t worry, babe. I told her you’re okay. We’ll reach out later. For now, we’re going home.” I opened the back passenger door for her, then nodded to Chad and even Garrick. He hadn’t needed to save Kelly’s stuff, but it was a decent thing to do.

She hesitated, like she wanted to say more, but her gaze flicked to the others standing around us. She sighed and climbed in.

Once we were in his muscle car, Shane threw me a sidelong glance with a raised brow. He subtly tipped his chin toward Kelly. What did he want from me? Did he expect I’d pour my heart out with him sitting right there?

I rolled my eyes as I fastened my seatbelt. Classic Shane. My fingers twisted the dial to his radio, needing music more than talking, even if I wanted to ask if he’d spoken to Alayna yet about his feelings, about everything. But this wasn’t the time or place. Unlike him, I knew when to keep my damn mouth shut.

The drive back didn’t take long, but the silence that stretched between us was thick enough to cut with a knife. It wasn’t unbearable, and that was a first with Shane. He didn’t fill the space with words or sarcasm. Just occasional glances that told me more than anything he could’ve said.

Maybe our earlier conversation had helped resolve things between us. The thought brought on a sense of relief. We were brothers. Things weren't perfect, but they didn't have to be. We were watching each other's backs. Family was supposed to look out for one another.

Shane pulled into a parking spot near my building's entrance and shifted into park. "Have a good evening, you two." He adjusted the rearview mirror to look at Kelly. His voice was warm, offering her a genuine smile. "Welcome to the Pack."

28

KELLY

Shane's words chilled me to the core. During the car trip, the brothers hadn't said much, but they were having a silent conversation. Though I tried to breathe deep and relax after surviving the Pack Council, my body wouldn't listen. Sweat dampened my palms, and my mind raced with all the possibilities of what could've gone wrong.

Now I was alone with Jacob, and I didn't know if he was angry with me.

He'd reached out to Emma when I hadn't come home. When I checked my phone in the car, both Emma and Jacob had blown it up with missed calls and texts. The sheer number was gut-wrenching. Still, I'd sent a quick reply to assure her I was okay. I owed my best friend so much more than this, but it would have to do for now.

The moment we stepped into his condo, I headed straight for the main bathroom and cranked on the hot water. I stood under the spray, steam curling around me. My raw nerves were grateful to be here again. I wrapped my arms around my stomach and rested my forehead against the cool tile.

I was safe again.

Being abducted, caged, and thrown before the Council had been terrifying. But Garrick's presence had somehow made it feel less intense. Maybe it was the weird comfort of familiarity he provided. He'd hurt me, but he was known. Predictable in a way the rest of them weren't.

Once I'd spoken my truth, the Pack had accepted me. I was a member now. Might've helped that Jacob's mom was there. For the first time in what felt like forever, I didn't need to keep one eye over my shoulder.

Still, the worst part of today hadn't been facing the Alpha. It was seeing Jacob nearly lose control outside the Council chamber. He'd almost gone for Garrick. The rage in him was terrifying. I'd frozen, afraid of losing him right after we'd found each other again. The way his body had trembled under my hands, his wolf barely restrained... Holy shit. But I'd remembered how his touch had calmed my raging wolf in his bathroom, and I was so glad hugging him worked when he needed me.

Unfortunately, I wasn't out of the woods yet. I still needed to talk with him, and that worried me even more.

When I finally emerged in shorts and a tank top, Jacob was in the kitchen, leaning against the breakfast bar. A towel-wrapped ice pack rested on the end table like a silent olive branch. That thoughtful gesture warmed my heart.

I sank onto the couch, tucking my legs under me, and pressed the cold pack to my cheek. The throbbing was duller now. The shower had made me feel more like myself and less like a broken toy or prey.

The Pack's headquarters had been nothing like I'd imagined. It was opulent and intimidating. Every person on the Council and the Alpha had radiated power, and Jacob's family was only one piece of that puzzle. There was an entire world here I still didn't understand.

And I'd thought I could hold my own. God, I'd been so na?ve.

Going to Eternally Magick, then the cafe... it felt like a dream now. Or a mistake. If I'd stayed at Jacob's place, none of that would've happened. But I'd needed to feel

like I still had some control over my life.

However, it was important to meet the other wolves sooner than later. And now I had.

The Alpha knew my beast lacked control, and he wasn't wrong. My emotions nearly got the best of me at the university, again in Jacob's bathroom, and finally at the cafe. Maybe running on instinct was enough at the research facility. But in the real world? Instinct alone didn't cut it.

A sinking feeling settled in my gut.

"Hi," I said, watching Jacob linger in the kitchen. He hadn't come over yet. Was he furious with me? But I'd feel his simmering emotions... wouldn't I? What if he didn't want me as his mate anymore?

"Hey." His gaze drifted toward the counter just out of view, where the soft bubbling of water filled the silence. He tore open a tea bag and dropped it into a mug. "You okay?"

I licked my dry lips, feeling like a boulder just rolled off my chest. He was just making me tea. My brain was so busy creating chaos where there was none. Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back. "I don't know." I turned toward the blank TV screen instead of facing him.

Water poured into a cup, then the soft sound of his bare feet padded across the floor. He set the chamomile tea on the end table beside me, then sat down on the sectional's chaise longue right in front of me. He was so close I could feel the warmth of his body and the storm brewing behind his emerald eyes. The vibes rolling off him were chaotic and intense, even if his face remained neutral.

"Talk to me." He leaned over, grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch, and

tucked it around my shoulders.

If my heart had been made of chocolate, it would've melted into a puddle right then and there.

The sun was setting outside, casting golden light across the room. This was the first time we'd been alone since this morning, and I wanted to tell him so many things. But the words clung to my throat. I drew in a deep breath, trying to push through.

I reached for the warm mug, but my hands trembled. Probably for the best. While I could heal from burns, I'd rather keep my mouth and skin safe.

"Sorry, baby." I sat up straighter, trying to be stronger than I felt. He pulled me into his lap, wrapping an arm around me, and I sank into his embrace. He made me feel loved and protected. "I need to tell you something. It was stupid of me, but I..." This could tear us apart. Still, I needed to do this.

Jacob stiffened, his grip tightening around my waist.

"I went to the university and met with the Dean of Students. I never should've gone." The words tumbled out in a rush. "The meeting was horrible, and my control vanished toward the end. I ran to my car, feeling like I was being watched. They knew where I was." The ice pack slipped from my hand into my lap, forgotten. "I didn't meet with Emma that day, didn't even talk to her before this morning, but I wanted to make up with her. That's why I agreed to see her today."

He lifted my chin, guiding my gaze to his. "I know you went to the school, babe."

My jaw dropped. "How?" But really, it didn't matter. "I was going to tell you, but I—" My lower lip trembled. "I was scared you'd be pissed, and I'd ruin what we have. But I needed my life back. My scholarships... I've worked so hard. If I lose it

all, I don't know what I'd do. And I refuse to let the scientists win. I don't want to be paralyzed by fear, afraid to leave home or your place. That's not living. That's... It'd be letting them win." Tears spilled from my eyes.

Jacob brushed his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping them away. "I wanted us to heal first. I thought taking care of ourselves meant hiding away from the world. But I should've listened better. I thought I knew what was best, and I'm sorry." He lowered his head and pressed his forehead against mine.

"I love you, baby." My nose brushed his, and I slid my fingers over his shoulders. "I know I went behind your back, but I didn't mean to. I was just scared of ruining everything."

"Babe, I love you too." He released a sigh, his breath warm against my lips. "Don't worry about that now. I should've told the Pack about you sooner. You could've started learning about your abilities and how to control them. They wouldn't have taken or hurt you..." He picked up the ice pack and gently pressed it back to my cheek. "Please forgive me."

The ache in his words cut through me, and I leaned into his touch. That guilt bothered me. I didn't blame him for this. We both had a part in what happened. "I do, baby. Of course, I do." I tilted my head, sliding my lips over his.

His mouth crushed mine in a passionate kiss. Only his arm around my waist kept me from losing my balance. He shifted us, lowering me onto my back on the couch. The ice pack hit the floor as he pressed against me. Our lips moved together in a wild blend of love and longing. But this wasn't about the full moon's pull... or even lust. This was about us. Reconnecting. Healing.

My tongue caressed his, drinking in the heat pouring from him. He was a paradox—untamed and careful, sweet and fierce. I loved him so much it hurt. The

press of his hard cock against my thigh felt like heaven, and I tugged at his shirt, needing more of him.

He leaned up to help, yanking the fabric over his head with one hand. Then he reached for mine. His gaze dropped to my bare breasts, and he licked his lips before bending to suck one nipple into the damp heat of his mouth. I arched beneath him, moaning as my fingers tangled in his hair. The distant zip of his jeans drew a needy whimper from me.

And then, a knock at the door shattered the moment.

His head jerked up, and we exchanged a cautious look. Who could be here? His brother? The Pack? His nostrils flared as he drew in a deep breath. "It's my mom," he said. He shot to his feet, tugged on his shirt, and zipped his pants, then bent to grab my tank top and the fallen ice pack. He set the pack on the coffee table and tossed me my shirt.

"Oh." I sat up quickly, pressing my damp thighs together. "Awkward." Would she be able to tell we'd been making out? The scent of Jacob's arousal clung to the air, and I was drenched for him. My body still ached to be filled by his cock. "I'll get cleaned up real quick."

"Sure. Don't forget your tea." He jogged toward the front door. "Coming, Mom!"

The mug might be cool by now, but I wouldn't forget it. The fact he'd prepared it for me, especially knowing what I'd needed to say, made it feel special. Embarrassment reared its ugly head, but I shoved it down.

In the main bathroom, my reflection in the mirror was a mixed bag. The swelling in my cheek had gone, but faint bruises still colored my jaw and neck. At least the cut on my lip was only a thin scar. No wonder kissing Jacob hadn't hurt. My healing had

improved. They'd seen me worse than this at the Pack Council, so no point in trying to cover it up with foundation. Still, I could fix my messy hair, and it wouldn't hurt to put on a bra.

From the living room, I heard Jacob and his mom talking, their voices low. I couldn't hide in here forever, and I wasn't sure how I felt about meeting his mom like this. Were we really at the meet-the-parents stage? Then again, I'd seen her in the Council chamber. She hadn't been cruel. In fact, she'd seemed... powerful but kind.

Once I'd freshened up, I stepped into the hallway that led to the living room. Jacob and his mother sat on the couch. They stopped talking as I entered.

"Hey," Jacob said. "Mom, I'd like officially to introduce you to my mate, Kelly Lopez."

She tilted her head and smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. Something about her felt effortlessly dominant, like she was used to getting what she wanted. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kelly. I'm Jennifer Armstrong." Her voice was smooth but purposeful. "Jacob and I were just discussing the situation with the university. I understand your parents aren't in the picture, but I'd be pleased to speak with the dean on your behalf and on Jacob's. If that's okay with you?"

I blinked at them. She'd really do that? Jacob had said his mom could help, but hearing it from her hit different. My parents would never trouble themselves to help me. The words remained lodged in my throat, so I simply nodded.

"Wonderful. I'm happy to assist, dear." Her gaze swept over me with the calculating grace that came from power and experience. "Come, sit down." She patted the couch between her and Jacob. "Everything will be okay. You're part of our family now, Kelly. And I take care of family."

My heart thudded in my chest as I crossed the room to sit between them. “Thank you.”

Jacob took my hands in his. “I’m here for you too, babe. We’re mates.” His warmth grounded me. I didn’t need to worry about what I lacked. I had him, and that was more than enough.

“Thank you. Both of you.” My thumb stroked his wrist, grateful for this moment. For this family.

He leaned in and kissed my temple. When he pulled away, he glanced past me at his mom. “We need to talk about Shane.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes, her full lips pressing into a thin line as she exhaled. But she quickly composed herself. “Is this really the best time for that discussion?”

“Yeah. We need this talk.” He squeezed my hands like he needed the comfort. “Shane told me Dad pushed him into getting a business degree. Said he wouldn’t pay for college unless Shane followed his path. Alma mater and all.”

Jennifer’s expression softened. “This is the first time I’m hearing of this.”

He frowned. “Kinda figured that. I asked him, but he didn’t think you’d care. He said you were always too busy with the Pack or the family business.”

Her brows drew together. “I have hopes and dreams for my children, but they should never be forced into something they don’t want.” A flicker of wolf amber flashed through her hazel eyes, and I stilled, then she placed her hand over Jacob’s, which still rested on mine. “I will speak with Shane—and your—father about this. Thank you for telling me.” Her gaze slid between us. “Despite Henry’s actions, I’m not sure that alone is enough reason to fully forgive Shane for what happened to you two,

but?—”

“I talked with him about that too. He feels awful, Mom. The guilt’s been eating him alive. He apologized. Besides, we didn’t have a great relationship then... but I think that’s changing.” Jacob shrugged, but the relief on his face spoke volumes about how much the conversation had meant to him.

I felt a little like a voyeur watching this moment unfold. But maybe they accepted me. They trusted me enough to have this conversation right now. That meant something.

“I see. I’ll try to do the same,” Jennifer said, her voice quieter now. She lifted her hand to cup Jacob’s cheek. “I missed you so much, son. I’m so glad you’re home.” Her gaze met mine. “And that you have such a lovely mate.” A small smile curved her lips. “Perhaps Shane will tell me what his true passion in life is.”

Jacob laughed. “Well, I know something he’s passionate about. Alayna.”

Jennifer’s perfectly arched brows lifted, and a mischievous grin spread across her face. “Is that so? I’ll have to speak with her, then. Hmm... Where one door closes, another opens. Thank you, son.” She gave my knee a quick pat. “Now get some rest, you two. I’ll call tomorrow morning about meeting with the university.”

“Thank you again.” I smiled, my nerves and excitement twisting together. Another chance at college. It felt almost too good to believe. How would I even catch up and complete my finals after a month away? At least Jacob would be there.

As I looked between them, warmth blossomed in my chest. I wasn’t alone anymore. Life was still messy and uncertain, but it would be okay. I had people in my corner now. People who cared about me and my future. I’d dreamed of finding someone who to love and who would love me in return. I just never expected I’d find that

person so soon.

JACOB

A second after I locked the door behind my mom, I stepped into the open concept kitchen and spied Kelly sipping the now lukewarm tea. She remained seated on the couch. But something about her seemed lighter. I couldn't imagine what was going through her head, but her happiness was infectious.

She turned to look at me. "I wasn't sure what to expect, but your mom seems so cool." She snuggled into the blanket again, then took another drink of tea. "Thank you for everything."

I crossed the space between us, wanting to hold her in my arms. "You're welcome, babe." After setting aside her mug, I dropped on the couch beside her. Before she could react, I pulled her onto my lap. "Now... where were we earlier?"

She let out a yelp as I dipped her backward to first kiss her lips and then her neck.

"Mmm... This seems about right." Her fingers carded into my hair with one hand while the other rested on my leg right above my knee. She tilted her head to the side, giving me better access.

My gaze skimmed the faint bruises on her neck and jaw. I never wanted to experience the terror I'd felt earlier ever again. The pain of seeing her injured by the Pack's enforcer was awful. How could she still be pleasant to Garrick? I kissed over her throat with care, dipping down to her clavicle.

We'd talked about me not ripping off her clothes anymore. At least not unless I replaced them. She hadn't seemed comfortable with the idea, but we were mates. I'd care for her in whatever way I could. Besides, I needed to have her naked and writhing with pleasure beneath me, to keep her safe and loved in my arms.

I nipped at her shoulder as my free hand slipped under her tank top and trailed along her stomach to cup her breast. She arched against my touch. Her grip on my leg tightened while she softly tugged my hair. The pulling sensation lit a fire inside me, and a rumbling growl bubbled to the surface.

My vision sharpened, and I knew my wolf was coming out to play. We'd been terrified for our mate, afraid of her execution. Now we were going to claim her as our own.

I leaned back to tear her shirt away. Her breath hitched in her throat, and she blinked up at me. A small smirk tugged at my lips. "Don't worry, babe. I'll replace this outfit."

"Wha—" Her hands lifted to cover her bra, but I was quicker. The lacy material fell apart under my swift tug. "Jacob! You?—"

Before she could finish that sentiment, I bent to suck one of her perky nipples into my mouth. Her words melted into a moan, and the scent of her arousal filled my nostrils. It called to me, begging me to taste her. Instead, I kissed my way to her other nipple, then flicked and swirled my tongue over it.

She was relaxed in my arms. When she opened her eyes, the trust and love within them took my breath away. "Fine." Her tongue swept over her lower lip. "You win, but I get to do this." I lifted an eyebrow, but my confusion twisted into amusement when she ripped open my shirt. "Now, make me naked, baby."

“Yes, ma’am.” I laid her on the couch, watching as her long brown hair splayed out like a halo. I tossed aside the remnants of my shirt, then gripped the hem of her shorts and panties. My gaze met hers, asking for permission to tear them away.

The twinkle of affection and desire in her eyes told me everything I needed to know. Her hips lifted off the sofa, as if trying to help get the cumbersome barrier out of the way. “Do it.” With one firm rip, the shorts and panties ceased to cover her. Her thighs pressed together, and then she mischievously dropped them open.

No matter how many times I saw her, I’d never get over how beautiful she was. “Babe... You’re gorgeous.” I tossed the shredded shorts and panties aside, then flopped onto my stomach between her thighs. Her core glistened with need.

“And you’re handsome, baby.” She squirmed under my gaze. Each time her hips lifted, it drew me closer until my breath caressed her thigh. “Please... I need this. I need you.”

“Your wish is my command.” I pressed kisses from her inner thigh down to her mound. My tongue slid over her outer lips from her core to her clit. Once, twice, and then I was spreading her open. My lips covered her clit, and I sucked on that sensitive nub, enjoying the way she cried out and ground her hips against my mouth.

Her fingers tangled in my hair, and she draped one of her legs over my back. “God, you’re amazing.” She breathed heavier, causing her breasts to rise and fall faster. “Your mouth is...” A moan rose from her throat as I pressed a finger inside her wet pussy. She glanced down at me, and her beautiful wolf amber eyes glowed in the dim light.

I added a second digit, curling them inside her while I alternated between sucking and pressing my tongue over her clit. Her core squeezed my fingers, and my hard cock ached to be inside her. I shifted my hips against the couch to adjust myself. Nothing

tamed my hunger like Kelly. Withdrawing my fingers, I licked her entrance before thrusting my tongue inside. My hands clenched her thighs, holding her open for me.

“Mmm... I’m so close. I—” A scream ripped from her throat, and she bucked her hips, riding my face.

I brushed my thumb over her clit, savoring the way her inner walls quivered around my tongue. Every caress sought to draw out her orgasm. The tightness of her grip on my hair, and the way she pressed her thighs together against my head drove me wild, along with her hungry pants and gasps.

Fuck, I needed her. Now. More than I ever needed someone before, possibly even counting full moons. Reconnecting with her and proving to myself that we were both safe mattered so much. After settling on top of her, I fumbled with the button and zipper of my jeans before shoving them down to my thighs. Pre-cum leaked from my tip as I fisted my length. My thumb swiped over it, spreading the moisture.

“Take me. Please, I need to feel you inside me.” Her arms circled my neck, pulling me down for a kiss. She nipped my lower lip between her teeth, then slid her tongue over mine. Each sensuous caress made my control slip further.

I didn’t want to rush this time together. My body was desperate, and she deserved over sixty seconds of stamina. Not because I couldn’t last, but because I craved her so much. I leaned back, pulling her onto my lap facing me. “Climb on, babe.”

She pursed her lips, looking down at the space between our bodies where my dick strained for her touch. “Hmm... Looks like you really want me to.” Her hand wrapped around me, and I sucked in a breath. She stroked my length, causing my head to tilt back into the couch cushion. One of her hands braced on my shoulder, and she inched forward, guiding me to her entrance.

My hands gripped her hips, supporting her as she lowered herself onto me. Oh fuck... The way her pussy squeezed me was like a blessing and a curse. I gritted my teeth against the urge to pull our bodies flush. Those soft whimpers coming from her lips were heavenly.

“Jacob...” When she was seated on my lap with our bodies joined, she opened her eyes again. Her walls fluttered around my cock, and my fingers bit into her hips, holding her close. “I love you, baby.” She leaned her forehead against mine.

“I love you too, Kelly.” I tilted my head to the side, kissing her once more. Her hips rotated, taking me with slow and gentle strokes. It took all my strength not to thrust up into her. She deserved this moment of control while her body got used to me.

At least, that was the ideal outcome. My inner wolf howled at me to claim her, to make sure no one ever thought she could be taken from us again. I needed to rub my scent over her and soak in hers until the Pack could forever tell we belonged to one another. My hips bucked beneath her, driving a gasp from her lips. For a moment, I second guessed myself, but seeing that heat in her eyes brought a smirk to my lips.

“Don’t stop. I need this.” She leaned into me. Her lips trailed over my neck as her hot breath ghosted along my skin. The graze of her teeth over my pulse set my heart racing.

“Baby, I know what you need.” I gripped her ass, holding her in place. My hips surged upward, thrusting into her welcoming heat. Her mewling whimpers brought me ever closer to release, and I breathed in her citrusy scent.

“Oh... That’s...” Her fingernails dug into my shoulders as she muffled a whine against my neck. “More. Harder.” She rocked her hips, taking me deeper and seeking more friction. “Yes. Fuck.” Then her core squeezed me tight.

The feeling of her nails set my body on fire. I loved the way she played rough, even if I wasn't certain she knew what she did to me. A low growl rumbled in my chest, and my hips snapped up against hers faster, thrusting into her harder. Giving her all of me. She deserved everything. I slid a hand between us to rub her swollen clit. She was so close to falling apart.

Her eyes widened, and she rubbed against my hand with her hips. "So close. So..." And then her body convulsed with pleasure, her breath hot against my neck. She cried out as her pussy quivered around me, milking my cock.

The sensation caused my pace to falter, and I slowed my thrusts to empty myself inside her with a growl. My breath came out hard as I held her close, my hands trailing over her back in small circles. "I'll never get enough of you, babe. You're everything I want. Everything I need."

"I..." She leaned back to look me in the eye. "I feel the same way. You make life better and more satisfying than I'd thought possible." Her teeth worried at her lower lip, but a smile brightened her eyes. "I'm so happy you're my mate."

"Yeah? I'm thrilled you're mine too, babe." I slid my gaze over her body. "We're going to be okay. We can survive a lot when we face obstacles together."

"Mhm. That's right." She pressed a hand to her mouth as she yawned, then nuzzled my neck again. "No more secrets. I promise."

"Same, babe. Let's get some rest. Tomorrow's going to come bright and early." I lifted her into my arms and stood. "My mom does nothing in half measures." By the time I made it to the bedroom, her soft snores told me she was already asleep. My lips twitched in a smile as I laid her down and covered her with a blanket. I pressed a kiss to her forehead unable to help myself.

Our path forward wouldn't always be easy, but I knew it would be worth it. Having Kelly in my life gave me what I'd always dreamed of—a bond no one could ever take from us. We were mates, not a marriage of convenience. We built our relationship on love.

After cleaning up, I climbed into bed beside her. This woman made me so happy. I wanted to wake up beside her every day for the rest of my life. It gave me an idea, and I hoped she'd agree.

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Jacob's mother managed to schedule time with Dr. Butler the next day. When Jacob said she did nothing in half measures, I hadn't realized how true that was. Then again, she carried the same cool professionalism I'd seen during the Council meeting.

The dean was almost comically apologetic—a complete one-eighty from how he'd treated me before. He insisted there must've been a misunderstanding during our previous discussion. For a moment, I'd been curious about his demeanor, but the pleasant, almost bored look on Jennifer's face told me everything I needed to know. Somehow, she'd gone over his head, and his boss likely demanded that all of this get swept under the rug.

At least, that was my assumption.

We could take our final exams and register for our spring semester classes, which was an enormous relief. If any professors gave us trouble, we were told to contact him directly. The make-up finals would need to be completed soon. Not ideal, but I believed in us. We'd get through this.

Once we stepped out of Dr. Butler's office, the relief I'd been holding in broke free. A grin tugged at my lips, and when I glanced over at Jacob, his smile mirrored mine. Maybe his grin was just because I was happy. It didn't matter, not one bit.

He took a step toward me, but something about his demeanor seemed off. Or more accurately... seemed mischievous. He lunged, and I gasped, flinging my arms around his neck as he swept me up and spun us in a circle.

"Jacob!" I let out a small yelp of laughter and clung tight. "What are you doing?"

“Mmm... Just celebrating with my beautiful girlfriend.” A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, and his gaze dipped to take in the heat spreading from my neck to my cheeks. He set me down, letting my body drift over his. Thank goodness I wasn’t wearing a skirt as I’d originally planned. “What do you think?”

“Well, all I know is your mom’s a saint.” Maybe that was an exaggeration, but I didn’t care. She saved my dreams from crashing and burning. I beamed up at him.

He chuckled and lifted an eyebrow. “I bet she’d love to hear that.”

We turned toward Jennifer and Dr. Butler as they spoke in the doorway of his office. Their voices were low, but I caught the words ‘large donation.’ Jacob sighed beside me. Money made the world go ‘round. To be honest, I wasn’t sure I even cared. We could resume our studies. That was the most important thing here... and our life together.

I brushed my fingertips over Jacob’s cheek, drawing his attention back to me. “Is everything okay?” I glanced back at them before eyeing my boyfriend. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, babe. Absolutely nothing.” A sexy smirk slid across his lips. “Although, I believe we should plan some study time for our make-up finals. I don’t know about you, but I can’t even remember what we learned this past semester.” He tilted his head to one side. “My bed would be the best location.” My eyes widened, then I grinned. “Big enough for all our textbooks, you know, and if we need a break, well...”

My eyebrows rose, and I was more than a little enraptured by the idea of study breaks. Finally, I’d get to experience what I’d missed the night we’d made a terrible mistake. “You might be right. Good thing my backpack is at your place. We won’t need to run by my apartment to pick it up.”

The moment I said those words, it reminded me that I wouldn't be able to stay at Jacob's forever. Eventually, I'd have to rebuild my own life. He might eventually miss having his own space.

"Exactly. Besides, some of my supplies aren't in great condition." He'd told me his car had been totaled, then the mercenaries tried to destroy it, along with most of his belongings. His backpack was charred, but at least we'd survived. Maybe living together was helpful for both of us. Sharing my car and all... "Hey." He cupped my chin, forcing me to look up at him. "You okay?"

"Oh, um... Yeah, I'm fine." My gaze dipped to his polo shirt. I'd never seen him in anything so polished. "I'm always happy to share with you." My fingers trailed over his collar, savoring this moment together.

"Speaking of that..." He furrowed his brow, as if he wasn't sure how to continue.

Oh no... Last night felt like a total reconnection and reclaiming after what happened with the Pack. We were in love. I knew that to be true, but maybe he needed his independence back. Was he having trouble putting that sentiment into words? How should I even react?

Don't get pissed. Keep your cool.

It made some sense. Maybe the danger had passed, but that didn't feel quite right. Not after seeing the Alpha's face as he read from the research. Still, I was stronger now. Jennifer had arranged for me to learn from one of the Pack's best teachers to help me master my new abilities. It'd take more for the mercenaries to capture me again.

Granted, they'd overcome Jacob's strength with their tranquilizers. Maybe I shouldn't be quite so cocky yet.

"Yes...?" My brows knitted together, feeling a wave of panic roll through me at his

extended silence. “What is it, baby?”

He opened his mouth before closing it again. His hands rested on my shoulders, and he cleared his throat. I’d never seen him struggle with his words like this. He drew in a breath, then released it. “Move in with me, Kelly. Permanently.” The words flew from his mouth so fast it took a moment for them to make sense.

I blinked at him. “W-what?” All logic fled my brain. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jennifer turn in our direction with a surprised look on her face. At least that made two of us.

This relationship meant so much to me. I couldn’t believe my dreams were coming true. The thought of not having Jacob by my side was more than I could bear. I’d gladly give up my apartment to be with him.

“Earth to Kelly?” Jacob frowned at me, waving a hand in my face. “Is that a no?”

“N-no! I mean...” I squeezed my eyes shut, needing to focus hard on pushing the words from my lips. My fingers fisted in his shirt. “Yes. Of course, I want to move in with you. But...” I looked up at him, and my lower lip trembled. “Are you sure? This isn’t too much? Too fast? I mean?—”

“It’s not too fast.” He rested his hand on my shoulder. “This is the right step. I want to share my days and nights with you. Let me pamper you. You mean the world to me, Kelly.”

I placed my shaking hands over his. Tears ran down my cheeks. “I feel the same way, Jacob. I love you.”

He leaned his forehead against mine, and we stared into one another’s eyes. “I love you too, babe.”

A soft sniffle from the secretary's desk pulled my attention. Miss Denise dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue. "Sorry for interrupting. That's the sweetest thing I've seen in so long, especially between people your age." She waved the tissue in our direction. "Don't worry about me. I'll take my break now." With another sniff, she stepped away from the desk and rounded a corner.

A grin tugged at Jacob's lips. "Let's get out of here."

"Good idea." I stared in the direction where Miss Denise had disappeared. It hadn't occurred to me we'd have an audience. Somewhere nearby, someone blew their nose in the distance. I glanced up at him with a giggle. "Let's grab something for lunch on the way home. I think cooking might be out of the question, especially with how ridiculously thrilled I'm feeling now."

"Hmm... That sounds promising. I'll have to make sure you remain in a great mood." He waved to his mom, and I followed suit, deeply grateful to her.

After we left the university, we skipped getting food since we had much to celebrate, and both of us knew exactly how we wanted to do that—by curling up in Jacob's bed and making love all night long. Only when our stomachs began rumbling did we tear ourselves away from each other long enough to have some Chinese food delivered.

Whatever came next, I was ready to face it with Jacob by my side.

* * *

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