







# The Wolf's Plus-Size Bride (Stardust Hollow Wolves #11)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** He once rejected me and broke my heart. Now, I'm his pretend mate.

When he kissed me, I couldn't believe a guy like him could love a plus-size girl like me.

When I told him I felt the mate connection, he just laughed in my face and insulted me.

A year later, I need a mate fast...and so does he. So we make a deal: we'll pretend to be mates...

My family says I need a mate. They've started matchmaking already.

To get out of it, I lie that I have one already. Turns out he's in the same boat.

We agree that feelings can't be involved, and that we'll need to be convincing.

He says that our physical contact is too awkward, and that we need to practice.

But our practice sessions are distracting, and I keep forgetting that it's all just pretend.

I also keep forgetting that he's the arrogant player who broke my heart.

He plays my innocent full curves until I'm weak with want.

He tortures my intense dreams until I wake up in sweat.

Could the mate who rejected me be the one?

The small town of Stardust Hollow is full of wolves who will fight to protect you, howl to impress you, and claim your lips to win your love. Because a true wolf won't let go until he gets what he wants...his

## Page 1

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

I'm a wallflower by nature, so it's no surprise that Piper finds me in the corner of the room like a maiden at her first ball. Only instead of dancing in dizzying circles, I'm sipping beer and eating cookies, my two favorite activities.

I'm working on being sociable, but as an introvert, it's hard. With my social battery running low and being in a room full of mostly strangers, I need a recharge, which means I need my room and my bed.

"You need to mingle, Jane," Piper says, sliding up beside me. "You know how important it is to Ram that we make the shifters from Green Lake feel welcome."

"I am making them feel welcome," I say, looking up and gesturing toward the table. A three-by-four-foot array of desserts sits untouched in the middle of the room, filled with different treats that took me weeks to master. They are the showpiece of this little soiree. "I show my hospitality in my baking."

Besides, it's not my fault our alpha has decided on this new little tradition, and it's not like my input was ever asked for. If Ram had bothered to solicit my opinion, I might have told him I thought it was a bad idea. He wants our packs to get closer, learn from each other, solidify our ties, and all that. Sure. Makes perfect sense. But there have to be easier ways to do that than sending a pack of strangers here for two months.

The Green Lake Pack will just mix with ours, feel what we feel, and experience what we experience, and then next year, we will go there and do the same. That sounds incredibly simple and easy, but will it really work? I doubt it.

We're very different people than these outsiders. They're much more traditional and stuck in the old ways. They're not bad, but they are different, and it feels a bit like adding apple juice to orange juice. Both taste good on their own, but the combination is strange.

But hey, he's the alpha, and as far as leaders go, he's not so bad. So, if he wants to make changes, that's his prerogative.

"That won't make up for the lack of conversing and interacting you've been doing tonight," Piper chides me. "You can't learn about my new family if you don't talk to them."

"Sure I can. You're technically one of them since you married their beta. I can learn all I want from you." I flash her a smile and lift my cup, which is nearly empty. Again.

She rolls her eyes and gives me that look. The one that says, Stop being a moron and join the world already. The one that has always made me laugh since we were pups. If not for Piper and her parents, I would have had a much different life. They did for me what I could not do for myself—take care of me. They took me in and gave me everything after my parents passed away. They were the ones who raised me, loved me, gave me everything I needed, and I owe everything to them. So when Piper asks something of me, it would take someone with a bigger backbone than me to refuse her.

I groan, knowing defeat is inevitable. "Fine."

"Great! I need to get back to Rafe. Just go talk to whoever looks approachable. It'll be fine."

As she walks away, I finish my beer and wonder who the hell is approachable. The

Wolf's Den, our pack's bar, is filled to capacity with shifters tonight. In fact, I'm pretty sure we're breaking some sort of fire code for how many people are packed in here, but not one of them looks approachable. A large, mostly male crowd tends to intimidate me.

You can do this. It's not that scary. Look at them. They're probably going through the same thing you are right now. Actually, it's worse for them. They're new here. They don't know anybody. You can make them feel welcome. And at the very least, you can talk to a few of them and pass the time. And who knows, you might actually make a friend.

The thought is a pleasant one. My whole life, I've relied on Piper to be my only friend, and since she went off and got married and mated with Rafe, I've felt a bit abandoned. That's harsh, I know, but it's like the only friend I have ever had just... faded. I have gotten a bit closer to another female shifter in Stardust Hollow named Sonya, but she had to work tonight and didn't make it, so now I'm really on my own.

All right. Deep breath. Do it. Come on. Stop being a coward.

"You look awfully deep in thought, considering you're at a party."

At the sound of the husky voice, I look up from my cup. A small squeak of surprise escapes my lips. Blinking rapidly, I stare at the handsome stranger in front of me. He's big with broad shoulders. His blond hair is cut short, and a rough, raspy five o'clock shadow frames his jaw. A quick glance at his arms, and I see they're covered in scars and tattoos crisscrossing across the tan skin like ribbons. And then there's his eyes. His honey-brown eyes are staring directly at me, observing and waiting.

"I... uh..." Lamely, I hold up my beer. "Beer?"

Smooth. Really smooth.

The stranger laughs and moves around the table, his long legs eating up the space in an instant. He pauses next to the table of desserts and looks the display over. There must be nearly every kind of cookie and bar known to mankind, from double chocolate to oatmeal raisin to the gooey s'mores cookies that barely made it through transport.

My love for those sugary delights is a double-edged sword. On the positive side, having a wide variety of baked goods means the crowds go nuts. On the not-so-positive side, my waistline goes up a size or two, and I'm already curvy to begin with.

The thought makes me tug on my white blouse, pulling the bottom of it away from my body and letting it billow out. As though that will do any good. It's not the clothes, it's just me. Or my hips, or whatever.

The stranger selects a blondie and takes a bite, and his expression gets even warmer. "Damn. This is amazing. It's chewy."

"Coconut flour," I explain, finding a smile growing on my face, an automatic response to making someone happy with my baking. "The texture and the grain are different, but it holds up."

He holds up what remains of his snack and grins. "You made these? All of them?"

"Uh, yeah. But it's nothing." I shrug and push my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. "I have to contribute in my own way."

The stranger lifts his chin toward my cookie-laden table. "Better than my contribution. All I did was supply the karaoke machine."

I cringe when a wailing, drunken female shifter starts belting out "Amazed." The

words aren't even close to coherent, and the tune is nothing like the original. "So, we have you to thank for that, huh? Lucky us."

He laughs, a surprisingly melodious sound for someone as large and muscly as he is. "I apologize for that. What's your name? I'm Reiner."

"I'm Jane. So, you're from Green Lake? Tell me all about it."

"Well, it's nice. Quiet. Lots of trees. Very outdoorsy. It's not nearly as modern as Stardust Hollow, but that's not a bad thing. I'm of the opinion that technology has made us a world of idiots."

"Hmm." I snort and lift my cup. "Pretty profound, there."

"True, though. But why are we standing in the corner when there's fun to be had? Surely your boyfriend wouldn't be so stupid as to leave such a stunning woman alone in a crowd like this."

At that, I laugh. Loudly. There's no chance of a man in this crowd resembling the word "boyfriend," let alone one of them thinking I am pretty. I'm not an idiot. I'm twenty-three, but I've learned a lot in that time. Regardless of all the body-positivity rhetoric flying around, I take it all with a large dose of salt. Like it or not, men tend to prefer women who aren't built like I am, and I accept that.

But the way Reiner's eyes travel over me from head to toe and back again says something different. His eyes are smoldering—even a complete fool can see that. Without any conscious thought or direction, I feel my head shaking back and forth.

"No boyfriend. No anything."

His eyes come back to mine, and his lips spread into a wide grin. It's dazzling,

lighting up his handsome face and causing the corners of his amber eyes to crease and sparkle.

“Well, isn’t this just my lucky night, then? Want to dance, sugar? Show me some of your local moves?”

My heart beats triple-time, filling my chest with its loud throbbing. Dancing? With him? And people would see us. This feels like that movie with the curvy girl and the ridiculously sexy guy, and now she’s finally living out her fantasy.

Before I can even force my vocal cords to cooperate, Reiner steps away from the table and reaches for my hand, lifting it up and smiling the whole time. He whirls me out to the center of the room with an easy grace that seems unfit for a large man like him, and he pulls me close to his hard, sculpted body.

Just seconds before, the crowded room was almost unbearable, but now it’s beautiful and bright. Magical, even. We’re in a sparkling cocoon of our own making, and I feel invincible. For once, I’m feeling confident. This strong, handsome man chose me to dance with. Me, Jane Forrester. Not the skinny blonde two tables over, but me. That surely counts for something, right? And maybe if I close my eyes, the spell won’t end, and I can feel like this forever, pressed up against Reiner like this.

Soon, my feet are moving, and they’re doing it effortlessly. Dancing has never been a talent of mine, but being in Reiner’s arms is making me tap into some previously unknown well of rhythm. How it happens, I don’t know, but as we twist and glide around the room, I forget that there are eyes on us, watching as everything happens. I give over to Reiner and close my eyes.

Bliss.

Around and around we go until the karaoke stops and all that is left is our footfalls.

All too soon, the notes of the song start to fade away, and then we're just standing there, him holding me tight, my head on his shoulder, breathing in that fresh, clean scent of his. It's the perfect dream. The one you don't ever want to end, the one that doesn't feel real.

Reiner eases back until I'm forced to open my eyes and look at him. What he's going to do or say, I haven't a clue, but when he slips a finger under my chin, I think I have a good idea.

Lick your lips , I tell myself. Close your eyes. Let him do the rest.

The anticipation kills me. My heart is in my throat. I can't breathe. Goosebumps prickles down my arms and legs, and my cheeks are aflame. This is it. The scene of a lifetime, and it's happening to me.

When his lips do brush my own, it's like lightning bolts hitting me. The sensation buzzes along my nerve endings, sending jolts that leave my knees buckling. My stomach drops, my heart leaps, and my blood goes hot in my veins. Nothing, not a single day of my existence, has ever made me feel this much.

I've heard stories about what it feels like when you find your mate, but now that I'm experiencing it, I have to wonder how I could have ever doubted it was real. It is very real. I understand now.

Oh my god. I love this feeling.

His head moves back, and when my eyelids slide back, I find him looking down at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Jane?" he begins. His voice comes out softer than it ever has, and my skin goes hot, tingling with pleasure and joy. When I don't answer right away, he lifts his head a

little higher, peering around the room before glancing back at me. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

Staring at him? But how can I not stare? After the mind-blowing connection I felt with Reiner, the one that resonated through my body—no, my soul—it’s like nothing I’ve ever felt. The only conclusion I can reach is that Reiner Thomas is my mate. My male. The one fated to be with me for the rest of my life.

And he kissed me! It was a short, heated kiss, the kind full of passion and promise, and my lips still tingle as I try to form words.

“Did you—” My voice breaks, but I try again. “Reiner, did you feel that? Did you feel something with me just then? Did you feel like... I don’t know... destiny? Because I did, and I...”

I pull in a slow breath to continue talking, but his expression stops me cold. At the amusement pulling at the corner of his mouth and the pity flickering in his expression, I realize with a burst of clarity and sharp regret just what’s happening. The first wave of heartbreak explodes in my chest, and I struggle to breathe as Reiner looks down at me with growing mirth.

“Oh, come on, sugar. You couldn’t possibly think...” He barks out a loud, sharp laugh, and I tense as more waves of distress threaten to knock me flat. I’m in danger of sliding right down to the dirty bar floor. “Sugar, just because I danced with you doesn’t mean we’re mates. Get a hold of yourself. What the hell do you think is going to happen?”

The situation is too familiar. Looking around, I catch sight of other Green Lake wolves sneering, and just like that, I’m at prom all over again. Back then, someone dared Lenny Carlton to kiss the chubby orphan girl, and I fell for his act and suffered the consequences of believing it could be real. Prom night ended with pictures

circulating throughout school, calling me fat and laughable.

Yes, I'm incredibly familiar with this prank. Even after all these years, I fall for it, and I feel like such a fool.

Except now, it's twice as humiliating, and the pain is triple anything I felt that night.

His laughter is deafening, directed entirely at me. Somewhere nearby, I hear the chuckling of others joining in, their cruel mockery wrapping around me. Tears sting my eyes, and I shove at Reiner's broad chest, pushing him away from me.

The touch of his lips had my body burning with intense flames, my clothes too constricting and too warm. But now, as I push him away and look down to hide the tears in my eyes, those sensations are different. The flush from a few moments ago feels like a burn of shame, and my blood runs cold.

Escape. I have to escape and find a quiet, private spot where no one can see me cry and make fun of me for having the nerve to think someone would find a plus-sized girl like me attractive. It was all a prank, just like it was in high school, and now I'm so embarrassed, I could die.

## Page 2

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

### One Year Later

Pack parties. There are days when I can't stand them, and today is turning out to be one of those days.

It's our turn to host Stardust Hollow and their wolves, but I'm really not in the partying mood. I've been working for twelve hours at the steel mill in town, and I'm just ready to get home and curl up on the couch with a beer or three and let the brainless drones of reality TV wash over me like white noise.

Yeah, I know. It's no fun, it's boring, blah, blah, blah. But even highly social animals like shifters need alone time, and after sweating over a welding torch all day, I'm definitely ready for some solitude.

Sadly, though, the next month or two is dedicated to Stardust Hollow's visit, and we're all under orders from Alpha Evan that all pack members are expected to be social and supportive. Ugh. Yes, our alliance is very important to keep things in check, but there's a point when a wolf just needs a break.

They've set up a bonfire in the center of our commune, and from where I'm parked and gearing up to attend the shindig, I can see packs gathered from both areas. Green Lake wolves, Stardust Hollow wolves—all of us packed together in one area. For all that these visits are supposedly peaceful, we still naturally gravitate toward our own packs, keeping to ourselves and not really fraternizing with the other crowd.

I feel it when I get out of my vehicle, the apprehension and distrust. It's an energy in the air and a general tension that no amount of pack politics can push under the rug.

But both our alpha and our beta married she-wolves from Stardust Hollow, so maybe we should be warming to the idea of mixing it up.

Shaking my head, I start up the hill, slipping my hands into my front pockets as I go. The dirt under my boots is packed hard from the summer heat, and I feel a shift of pleasure when my eyes move to the dark nighttime sky. From there, the stars above me look impossibly bright, all the colors in the rainbow sprinkled across the inky black. You don't get a view like this in Stardust Hollow, with all the city lights and pollution messing with your ability to see the splendor above. Yeah, the city can be a hoot and a good place to party, but sometimes the country speaks louder than boisterous crowds and neon-light club scenes.

Tonight, however, my little piece of heaven isn't so quiet, and my eye begins to twitch again.

"Hey, there he is!" my younger cousin Jack calls, lifting his voice until he's shouting over the general ruckus. "What's going on, Reiner?"

"Fine, Jack. Just exhausted from spending all damn day welding flaming-hot pieces of metal."

Jack laughs. "Oh, quit with your moping. Would it kill you to be friendly? All this time, and you still can't make nice with the other team."

My face hardens, and I sigh with irritation. Jack is a good guy, and we get along well enough. If pressed, I might even consider him a friend, but just because it's pack-bonding day or whatever, he's trying too hard to get along, and I hate the fake-ass bullshit of it all. We're shifters, for Christ's sake. We're supposed to keep to our own people. There's enough fucking drama without inviting outside elements into the mix.

"I'm nice when I want to be. I just don't like this parade, and you know it. We have

no business mixing with those city slickers.”

As if to prove my point, I hear a table go crashing to the ground on the far side of the encampment, followed by a chorus of whoops and clapping. Now, generally, I’m the first guy to go running to a fight and the last to back down from a rough-and-tumble tussle. I may not always be ready to talk about my feelings or whatever, but I do like excitement. Fighting is my jam. Excitement is my drug.

At least, it usually is. Lately, though, I’ve been feeling restless. I’m not sure what’s wrong, really. All I know is the thrumming and frenetic energy doesn’t entice me like it once did. Instead, the crashing, splintering wood and the thumping, brawling bodies feel like a headache, and the sound of breaking glass inspires more annoyance than rabid enthusiasm. The things I usually find enjoyable nowadays only leave me feeling drained and cranky.

I must be getting old. Damn.

“Come on,” Jack grumbles, leading me closer to the crowd. “Just because we’re different doesn’t mean we’re better. You’d do well to remember that, Reiner.”

“Sure, Jack. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Avoiding looking at the fighting and wreckage around the party, I shrug, shoving my way through the crowd and heading straight for the cooler. Surrounded by several of our shifter wolves, including Evan and Rafe, along with their respective wives, Mia and Piper, the conversation doesn’t stop when I pop open a beer and spin the top off. It’s very rare that Alpha Evan steps away from his duties these days. But tonight is definitely one of those nights when our whole pack gathers in a sea of tents and motorhomes for Stardust Hollow, and even our fearless leader is chilling.

“Lots of pretty new she-wolves out there, Reiner,” Rafe announces when I sit.

Leaning back in my camping chair, I kick out my feet in front of me, raising the bottle of local brew to my lips for a long pull. “You should go and take a look, see what catches your eye.”

“Nah,” I give the same answer as I’ve done for the last year. “I have no interest in settling down with the sort of girl who can’t even catch a fish.”

The joke earns me some laughter and rolling eyes.

“Stardust Hollow women aren’t as helpless as you think,” Mia says, an unimpressed eyebrow cocked. “They’ve just got more culture.”

I shrug off her words and toss out a lazy smile in her direction. “Call it what you like, honey, but it’s the truth. There ain’t much substance in there.”

Piper sits up straighter. “You know what your problem is?”

Oh, here goes.

“What’s my problem?” I ask, and as soon as the last word leaves my mouth, I feel the chill in the air coming off of her.

“You, my friend, are an arrogant asshole,” Mia supplies for her. “And you think you’re better than everyone.”

I try and hold in my laughter, I really do, but fuck, it’s impossible. Hearing the insult come from sweet, innocent Mia’s lips, of all people, is too damn funny. She never speaks like that, and seeing her face with her cheeks blazing has me almost spitting out the mouthful of beer in my mouth.

Coughing, I grimace. “Jeez, Mia. Tell me how you really feel about me.”

Her slender shoulders rise and fall while she rolls her eyes. “Trust me, Reiner, I am holding back. No one here is brave enough to tell you, and I’m sick of it.”

“And why isn’t anyone brave enough to tell me?”

“Because,” Jack, the cousin I love and loathe in equal measure, interrupts with a laugh, “you’d kick our asses, Reiner. That’s why.”

Rafe shakes his head, finally breaking away from his own private conversation to put his two cents in. I’m seriously just waiting to see where this goes and who says what next, so I keep my cool. My cocky smirk remains on my lips like I’m not even noticing the talk of my single status.

Rafe sits, and as he gets comfortable, he angles his head, a calculating glint in his eyes. “Reiner, this whole self-assured ‘womanizer’ thing was cute and all when we were younger, but you’re not a kid anymore. What are you now, thirty-four? It’s time you think about settling down and hanging up your belt.”

I laugh, and the sound of it is too bright and fake not to tip off my pack that I don’t like the turn this conversation has taken. I push up from the chair and slug back the beer I’ve been nursing. When I look back over my shoulder, I grin wide.

“None of you need to worry about my personal life, thank you very much. As a matter of fact, I met a girl.”

A moment of total silence follows.

“No way,” Jack hoots, and then all my pack are climbing up from their chairs, pouncing on the sudden information like vultures, diving into the gory details without any respect or censure.

“What’s her name?” Jack wants to know, and all the others yell out more questions in a flurry of voices.

“Where did you meet?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

I hold my hands up and back away, one slow step at a time. “Look, it’s all still pretty new, if you know what I mean. I’d rather not get into it just yet. Leave us a little mystery.”

The only one I’m not sure is buying it is Piper. Those blue eyes of hers see far too much, and right now, they zero in on me with a fiery force I can feel digging under my skin. “Reiner?”

Ignoring her, I shake my head and keep walking, only pausing to stop and grab another beer from the cooler. As soon as I have one in my hand, I skip on by like I’m not a nearly middle-aged man claiming I have a secret love.

I stand to the side and watch from a distance while Rafe, our beta, drapes his arm over Piper’s shoulders. Those two are together constantly. I don’t think he’s let her out of his sight for more than two seconds since she had their pup, Margie. Kind of interesting, considering the kind of wolf he was before they got married and she became pregnant. Back in the day, Rafe Woods was considered a wild card, so seeing him all domesticated is a little weird. But he’s not the only one. Our pack is growing pups left and right, and a lot of our unattached wolves are finding the magic with their mates.

That’s why the recent and steady encouragement to move my ass and find myself a suitable female to settle down with is grating on my nerves. Of course, I want all that mushy stuff, too, but these days, it feels like there’s this timer hanging over my head,

dangling over my entire future. The timer is ordering me to take my mark and settle down, or else.

The one and only time I've ever felt anything close to what they've described to me happened when I was with Jane, but I completely fucked that up. Now, a year later, I can barely recall her scent, and the impression of her face is a bit blurry. Still, every now and then, I catch myself scanning the crowds, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

Back then, I panicked. When I kissed her, sparks erupted, and it was more intense than anything I've experienced since with anyone. But instead of embracing it, I acted like a douche. The look on her face when I gaslit the shit out of her and pretended I felt nothing still haunts me to this day.

Yeah. I'm an asshole, like she said, and now I'm a fucking liar, too.

It's only a matter of time before they all find out there is no girl and that I said what I did to save face and pull the focus off myself. Green Lake is a small community. There aren't any real secrets here, and when they discover the truth, I'm going to be the butt of all the jokes for at least the next year, I'm sure.

Just fucking great. I need to get the hell out of here.

## Page 3

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

The smell of peanuts and old, worn leather hits my nose, filling my lungs like a cloud of despair. This place is not somewhere I would ordinarily go for fun, but fun really isn't the objective here, now is it?

I've been in Green Lake for just a handful of days, and things are not at all what I expected. Piper has been so occupied with her new husband and daughter, which I get and expected, I suppose, but being away from the Stardust Hollow Pack has left me feeling stranded. Fortunately, I'm not entirely alone in this backwoods town. Piper's parents have, not surprisingly, come with me on this trip, and Sonya was selected to come, too.

All I can say is thank God for Sonya. Don't get me wrong, I love Piper's parents like they're my own, but their sole objective has been to make sure I'm settled, too. By "settled," they mean married or paired with a suitable mate. While I'm happy for Piper's newfound happiness, the constant fixation on love and mating seems so extreme, a little overkill. Sonya, however, is my age, single, and in complete agreement with me that planning out our future days with "settling down" sounds about as much fun as an acid enema.

Earlier this evening, my aunt actually sat me down and told me she had arranged for a blind date. Blind date! I know she meant well, but I was mortified. I don't know what came over me, but I became desperate to stop it. Before I had time to think twice about it, I told her that I'd met someone at the bonfire the other night and that I wanted to see where things go with him. That, unfortunately, is when things started spiraling. After that, my aunt and uncle hounded me with questions and then suggested I bring him back to the trailer we're staying in for dinner soon.

Sonya saw right past my ruse, and as soon as I promised to introduce my new beau to them, she dragged me out of there and brought me here to this seedy little bar. Well, the bar isn't actually that bad. It's rather nice, actually. It's just that Green Lake has this whole vibe like they're clinging to the Old West. Charming, but not for me.

Sonya seems to sense my soured attitude and nudges me in the arm. "Come on," she urges, an encouraging smile lifting her lips. "Cheer up, Jane. We have plenty of booze, a lot of noise to get lost in, and who knows who we might meet? Maybe we'll find you someone to bring home to your aunt and uncle by the end of the night."

"You're such an optimist," I tease, but as Sonya guides me through the throng of people in the little bar, I have to admit, even if only to myself, that the prospect is a little exciting. I haven't been to an actual bar in quite a while, not since Ram planned to marry me off to Green Lake's beta a couple years ago. Thankfully, Piper took that bullet for me, and she fell in love with Rafe, who I discovered is a very loving, doting, and kind shifter who treats her right. My cousin is more than taken with that mountain of a man.

"Hey," the bartender calls over the bar top, waving us over. "How can I help ya?"

"You serve wine?" Sonya calls back. When the guy answers yes, she raises her brows and glances at me. "Want something?"

I debate whether I should drink, but then I figure, what the hell? What's the harm? Besides, it will help me pretend, which, I have to admit, sounds rather fun. "Sure."

"Red or white?"

"White."

Sonya says to the bartender, "Two glasses of white, then."

He grabs the glasses and makes quick work pouring out a chilled white. Then he places the stemless glasses on top of napkins, angling his body away and placing all his attention on Sonya. “You ladies got any plans this evening?”

Coyly, she blushes, tilting her head to cover her mouth as she laughs a little too throatily to my ears. “Why, that depends. Do you got anything special planned for us?”

Sonya is one of those shifters who’s very forward and unafraid to be in her feminine skin. She’s also one of the most stunning she-wolves I’ve ever laid eyes on. Her hair is as red as a flame, her eyes are a very pretty shade of gray, and her smile rivals the rays of the sun. Once she sets her sights on her prey, she’s usually a very successful hunter. Apparently, tonight is no exception.

I look on as she does the eye thing, the thing I’ve seen her do a million times before with men. I can already tell this bartender’s her next victim. At this point, I might as well have disappeared altogether.

I leave Sonya to flirt with the bartender and my untouched glass of wine, inching my way back through the sea of people to the deck chairs stationed outside of the bar, overlooking the quaint little town of Green Lake. Despite the small population and the acres of mountains and forests surrounding them, there is an extremely high number of shifters. Probably because the entire place reeks of shifter heritage and ancient magic.

A car pulls up and kills its lights, drawing my attention. A massive man unfolds himself from the cab of the truck, and when I catch sight of his face, I drop down as low in the chair as I can, hoping he doesn’t notice me.

Shit, shit, shit.

With my pulse echoing like cannon fire in my ears, I groan, sinking further down. When Ram told me I was coming to Green Lake, I stupidly assumed I could avoid this man at all costs. So far, I have been successful, but clearly, my streak has come to an end.

Reiner, the pompous, arrogant, absolutely vexing jerk, stalks across the parking lot and up the stairs of the place like he owns it. I haven't seen him since the party in Stardust Hollow last year, but of course, he's still so damn fine. It's painful, really. Even though he's a bit older than me, maybe even by a decade or so, he is easily one of the most attractive men I've ever seen. And the way his physique appears to be chiseled from stone doesn't hurt.

When he passes through the doors to the bar, he glances down at me briefly, his brows furrowing, and it takes me a second before he seems to recognize me. Even from this distance, I can see his eyes shift, their light golden brown suddenly darkening so much that they're nearly black. I can tell I've caught him by surprise, too, but there's something else in his gaze that I just can't define. Whatever it is, it makes the butterflies in my stomach take flight, and my belly does backflips.

Without a greeting, he breaks eye contact and steps inside, leaving me on the patio to dwell on my bad luck. At some point, I'm going to have to go back in there and find Sonya, but I'm in no rush. The longer I can avoid Mr. Perfect Jawline, the better. With that goal in mind, I busy myself downing my wine and start people-watching the shifters of Green Lake.

There's a group of females walking, arm-in-arm, towards the parking lot, and they pass by a group of males, all rough-housing with each other. As I watch them interact, I can't stop myself from wondering what that would feel like, to fit in so effortlessly and connect with others. I just never have.

I know a big part of that is my own fault. I tend to keep to myself, and I'm not as

confident and outgoing as others. Honestly, the more people there are in one place, the more I withdraw and feel anxious. But even with that admission, sometimes I envy the women around me and how easy they make it all seem. I watch how they enjoy being females, and it makes me wonder about myself.

What's wrong with me? Why can't I let go and be carefree for once? Why do I have to think and worry so much about absolutely everything?

With a heavy sigh, I climb to my feet and head inside. Sitting out here sulking and feeling sorry for myself isn't going to solve anything. I'm just going to march in there, find Sonya, and convince myself to have a good time tonight, no matter who is here and how much he pisses me off. Reiner is just a single male amongst many, and I refuse to let him mess with my good time.

Pushing past the crowd, I return to the bar. The seat next to Sonya is still empty. She's put her purse there to make sure nobody else claimed it, but on the other side of that empty stool is the man in question.

Great. Just great.

"Hey, Jane!" The excitement in Sonya's voice nearly makes me cringe, and I freeze, resisting the urge to let my eyes sweep to Reiner's. "I thought you disappeared on me. Come watch my drink, will you? I gotta pee."

Slowly, I creep closer. As soon as I sit down and order another drink, she brushes my shoulder in passing and jets off, leaving me alone next to Mr. Perfect.

"Hey, sugar," he grumbles without so much as looking at me. "Long time, no see."

Of all the fucking sardonic shits in the world. "Good to see you, too. Actually, that's a lie. I'm not exactly thrilled to see you."

Reiner takes a deep pull from his bottle. “Color me surprised.”

I glare at him, twisting around in the seat to face him. His face is stoic, but there’s something about his eyes, the way the honey-brown color is so... muddled. Dark. Gloomy, even.

“Looks like someone’s in a good mood,” I snap, then instantly feel guilty about it. He could very well have a good reason for looking so sullen.

“Yeah, well,” he quips back just as snarkily. “Someone stole my usual spot, but I guess I should get used to Stardust Hollow wolves invading my territory, huh?”

Ouch. That was rude. If he’s trying to rile me up, he succeeded, because I’m suddenly fuming. Who does this shithead think he is, anyway?

“Invading your territory?” I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “Sorry, buddy. I wasn’t aware you had a claim on the place.”

Finally, he turns to me, his scowl making my skin pebble. Something about his expression looks fierce and desperate, almost anguished. In that moment, he looks so worn down. “Listen, I’m not in the mood, okay? I came here to get away from you people.”

“What the hell did we ever do to you? Pardon us for showing up at the order of both our alphas. You’ve got a real fucking complex, you know that?”

Reiner reaches up, snatches his bottle off the bar, and tosses back another gulp. His throat works, flexing in the most maddening way, and for a second, I forget what I was saying. “My problem is every time they bring our packs together, someone gets on me about sniffing around your she-wolves to find a mate. It’s none of their damn business, but somehow they back me into such a tight corner that I have to lie and say

I found one just to get them to leave me alone. If your pack would just stay away, I wouldn't have to lie."

Did he just say what I think he said? I burst out laughing, nearly falling out of my chair as I double over with tears in the corner of my eyes. "You've got to be joking! What are the chances?"

To my absolute pleasure, his hard features crack, and his stern expression morphs into a reluctant smile. The transformation knocks the breath from my lungs, and I'm left speechless as he gestures for me to continue.

"I'm sitting here, at this bar, because I lied about the same thing to my aunt and uncle. They keep trying to set me up with men from your pack. I freaked out, and now I've told them that I'm seeing someone."

He lets out a disgruntled scoff, finishing the rest of his beer. "You can't be serious."

With a nervous giggle, I admit, "But I am. Turns out, we're in the same boat. Un-fucking-believable. Almost like the damn stars are aligned."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the door to the bar open, and a group of males file in. I recognize them at once. They're the same friends who came with Reiner to Stardust Hollow. The same ones who laughed at me when I ran out crying after the shit he pulled.

Of course they'd show up here, too. And just as soon as I had started to relax and enjoy the night. Great. How perfect.

## Page 4

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

I smelled her before I actually saw her. As soon as I closed my car door and started walking to the door, a rush of cherry blossoms wafted past me on the breeze. At first, I convinced myself I was being delusional, but the closer I got to the entrance of the bar, the stronger the scent became. I tried like hell to keep walking, to not glance in her direction, but I wasn't strong enough to resist.

There she was, sitting all alone on the outside deck in that adorable little dress that fits her curvaceous body so perfectly. And now, she's sitting just a few feet away from me with that same shy little smile that drew me in the first time we met. Her midnight-black hair is a little longer now, stopping just below her shoulder line, and it's silky and shiny as ever, accentuating her pale skin. Like magnets, those gray eyes always seem to draw mine and hold them hostage, like she cast a spell that I'm powerless to avoid.

That sharp tongue has gained a few barbs, it seems. Every damn time she opens her mouth to speak, she jabs, poking holes in me. I guess I've earned it, given the way I treated her the last and only time we spoke, but her attitude isn't really winning any awards with me. Still, no matter how much she insults and ridicules me, my cock can't ignore her sassy little mouth. Or the way she squirms when she's angry. Those full tits look amazing in that dress, and it isn't hard to imagine sinking down between the cushions of her ample cleavage.

When her face falls as she glances over my shoulder, it's like a huge ice cube has been tossed down the back of my shirt. I spin around in my stool, facing the group of men coming in. Jack, along with Piper's brothers, Lenny and Riley, are waltzing toward us, each one sending up a smug warning in my head. Right behind them is an older man and woman I don't recognize, but judging by the look of panic on Jane's

face, I gather she does. That must be the aunt and uncle she spoke of.

Damn it all to hell. I told Jack I was going out to meet up with my pretend girlfriend, using it as an excuse to get a breather from them. I didn't expect them to come tracking me down. Well, I knew this lie would come back to bite me in the ass sooner or later. At least I'm not alone. Jane's screwed, too, I realize.

Unless...

Don't be stupid, a voice whispers to me. Do not do what you're thinking.

It's a dumb plan. I should put it out of my mind right away. Dwelling on something so bone-headed and idiotic will only lead to trouble. After all, Jane can't stand me, and despite the attraction I feel toward her, she isn't the kind of woman I would want to play house with, either. Besides, in the grand scheme of things, I don't need this kind of complication in my life.

"I have a crazy idea," I breathe, so quietly that only a shifter would be able to hear me.

Jane quirks a perfect eyebrow, her plush lips turning down in a confused frown. "Okay..."

I quickly down the rest of my beer and grab her waist, tugging her off her stool to stand and slide between my spread thighs. With my heart beating in my chest like a piston, I cup the side of her face and put everything I have into gazing into her eyes like a lovestruck idiot. She wiggles against me in her attempts to squirm free, but with her rounded hips trapped between my thighs, all the movement is doing is driving me wild and infuriating her.

"What are you doing?" she demands in a low, frantic whisper. "Reiner?"

A shiver races up my spine when she utters my name in that tone. It's so damn sexy, even though she's furious with me right now.

“Just follow my lead and play along, sugar.”

“What? You'd better not—”

I grab her by the waist and pull her tight to my body, earning a satisfying grunt from her pretty mouth, her eyes bulging as the force jerks her off-balance. She can't say anything, though, because I kiss her then, sliding my tongue between the seam of her lips.

The second our mouths meet, it's like everything else suddenly fades away. My stupid friends, our stupid lies, her feisty attitude, and her disdain for me, all of it. Nothing but the soft curves of her plush body pressed against my hard, starved groin remains, and Jane makes the most deliciously adorable sound as I devour her mouth. A whimper, maybe? Or is she moaning? Is she even aware that she made any noise at all? Fuck, it sounded so hot.

A bolt of possessiveness bursts in my chest. It almost sounds like a claim of a female from her male, except she isn't mine. Not really. This is all just for show.

Shocking me completely, Jane grips the front of my shirt and releases a seductive sigh, actually returning my kiss. Her soft little tongue dips inside to twine with mine, moving cautiously, but the shy hesitancy is... well, arousing, to say the least. For such a closed-off woman, she really lets go and lets her inhibitions fall away. Or is that just an act?

“Jane! There you are!”

Instantly, the kiss is broken. We spring apart like two kids who just got caught trying

to light firecrackers in the middle of Main Street. All eyes are on us as we feebly put distance between our bodies, then on me as I wipe my mouth and scratch the back of my head sheepishly.

“Aunt Gwen,” she coughs, glancing away from me and shifting her weight anxiously from one hip to the other. “Uncle Richard. Uh... um... this is...”

“Reiner Thomas,” I supply, holding my hand out for her uncle to shake. “Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Jake and the guys are standing close, eavesdropping like a bunch of rubbernecking shitheads. I catch Riley nudging Lenny and nodding with a cocky grin on his face.

“You’re the one Jane’s been so secretive about,” Gwen says, wearing a knowing smile. “My, my. It all makes sense now.”

Richard watches the exchange in silence, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. The tiny woman at his side moves closer, tugging on his arm as she does. “Dick, darling, say hello. We don’t wanna be rude.”

He shoots her a flat look, rolling his eyes, but corrects the mistake. “Nice to meet you, Reiner.”

“Jane, dear, where did Sonya go?” Gwen asks. “I thought you two came out together?”

“Oh, uh...” Jane peeks behind them at the group. “She went to the restroom, but the bartender disappeared, and they were flirting earlier, so... I think she might be busy at the moment.”

“I see.” Gwen straightens, dusting off her hands on her cotton blue sundress. “Well,

we just came in to get a couple of drinks before heading home. Thought we'd stop and say hello first."

She steps forward and hugs her niece, patting her back lovingly. A warm feeling settles in my gut as I watch them together. How close these two are is so obvious, it's adorable.

Once Gwen releases Jane, her eyes meet mine, and she points a menacing finger at my face. "You take care of our girl, ya hear? Jane's special."

For no reason whatsoever, her words embarrass me. I can feel a fierce heat creep up my neck and invade my face as all eyes turn to me. "Yes, ma'am."

The couple bids their farewells after that, and as soon as they leave our side, my friends take their place. Shit. Jack seems to find all of this extremely amusing. I knew he would.

"So, this is your girlfriend?" he asks, grinning deviously.

Fucked. I'm fucked. No way out. "Jane, this is my cousin Jack, and the dopes behind him are?"

"Riley and Lenny, I know," she informs me. "They're my cousins."

My stomach drops. "I'm sorry, what now? But Piper is their sister."

"And she's also my cousin. And best friend."

"I thought I was your best friend," a girl whines from behind the boys, playfully pouting at Jane as she sticks her head between them. "How you doing, boys? Haven't seen you in ages."

I recognize the girl as the same one who asked Jane to watch her drink. “You must be Sonya,” I surmise.

Her blond ponytail bobbles and swishes as she nods, pushing her way past them and squeezing in to reclaim her barstool. “Yup, that’s me. Sonya Riddles, Jane’s personal enabler.”

A collective “What?” is shared with some uncertain glances as we gape at the bold, pretty young woman.

She waves a hand in the air, dismissing our confusion. “What I mean is, when she needs someone to kick her out of her comfort zone, I’m the gal you call.”

“Well, if that’s the case, you and I should talk,” I say. “I may need your help on this one.”

Images of the kiss keep playing through my head. I can still feel Jane’s soft lips moving beneath mine, her stiff body melting into mine. I’m utterly fucked because I want more, so much more. For the sake of our little ruse, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to sneak in another kiss.

I quickly shoot down the idea, telling myself I’d just be increasing the problem. If I kiss her, I’ll want to do it again, and again.

“I’m just a little confused,” Sonya begins, darting her eyes between me and Jane. “I just assumed Jane was bullshitting when she said she was seeing someone. I figured if it was true, I would’ve been the first to know. So, why all the secrecy? And how long have you two been, you know...?”

An uncomfortable look crosses Jane’s face, but I pick up on something in the look on her face. Help.

“I don’t think I need to tell you Jane is a very shy and private person,” I say. “We agreed to keep things to ourselves for a while, at least until we were sure what was happening between us was worth telling everyone about. We don’t want to jinx it, right, sugar?”

God, the look on her face is priceless. She stammers, searching her brain for something to say, and bites her bottom lip. “Yeah. What he said. We thought it’d be a good idea if we kept things quiet until we got used to it first. No reason to get everyone worked up if things... don’t work out.”

I slip my arm around her waist and, without hesitating, plant a loud, smacking kiss on her cheek. When I turn back to the others, they’re all staring at us like our heads just switched bodies or something.

“This is really weird,” Riley says, mostly to himself.

“Nah, man, I’m down,” Lenny interjects. “It makes sense. It’s like yin and yang. Our sweet, mild-mannered cousin.” He points to Jane, whose face immediately screws into a defiant scowl. Lenny responds with a chuckle before turning his attention back to me. “With this fucking broody hothead. Just fits, ya know?”

Jane squirms, trying to pry my fingers loose, but I don’t budge. Shit, I actually tighten my grip. I bury my nose in her hair and inhale deeply. Her scent is so damn alluring that my body instinctively responds. I can’t stop it from happening, can’t seem to control it even the tiniest bit.

She slaps me with her other arm and starts whispering furiously. “What are you doing? Get off me, ass hat!”

“C’mon, sugar,” I respond, hovering my mouth just over hers, not even trying to ignore the instant hard-on I’m sporting. “It’s all for show, right?”

Sparks fly when I brush my lips against hers. It's like a live wire trying to run current into my system. To my surprise, Jane visibly melts into me, inhaling deeply as I massage my lips against hers. The sensation is addictive and intoxicating. Having her pressed so closely to my body, I can feel her arousal growing as I slide my tongue through her parted lips. Soon enough, we start to forget about everyone else, quickly losing ourselves in our makeshift embrace.

Good God, this woman is going to be the death of me.

## Page 5

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

Reiner sucks my bottom lip into his mouth as if seeking to eat me alive, and hot damn, it feels amazing. His hands grab fistfuls of my ass, kneading roughly, and I'm surprised by just how much I like it. My pussy's getting wet. Tingling, even.

I can't seem to pull away from him. It's like no matter how much I try, my body won't cooperate. It wants to be closer to him, even if my head knows that's not exactly the best idea. From the way his abs feel pressed against me, he wants to get closer, too. My movements are slowed, like I'm trying to walk through waist-deep mud. I grab his biceps, but it feels like my hands are encased in lead mittens. My fingers can barely bend, and in fact, they are merely splayed fingers resting on his muscles with no force to aid.

When he kissed me a year ago, I felt like this, too. I actually lost my senses for a bit, not consciously aware of anything except his heat, his passion, and his strength. This is what made me so sure he was my mate; the raw, consuming, blinding strength of a thousand suns, brighter than the hottest, most intense heart of a star. I swore I would spend the rest of my life with him, vowing to become one with him. That was before I found out what a two-faced bastard he is, though.

It's that thought right there, the one that reminds me of just who he is as a person, that snaps me out of my stupor. Wrenching my head back and squeezing my eyes closed, I somehow manage to put just enough distance between us to come back to my senses, forcing myself to breathe in deep through my nose, steeling my spine, and opening my eyes to shoot daggers at him. A tiny whisper is there at the back of my skull, telling me to go back. To press myself against his hardness again. I try to push the voice back and banish it, hoping my breathing will deepen.

“Jesus, Jane,” Sonya’s voice sounds from somewhere behind me. It cuts through the fog in my mind, bringing me back from whatever fucked-up trance I’d fallen into during that damn kiss. “I’ve never seen this side of you before, girl.”

“Me either,” Lenny agrees. “And it’s disgusting.”

I’d completely forgotten where we are and the fact that there are literally dozens of witnesses to this hot display of passion. Trying to mask the intense embarrassment, I wriggle my way out of Reiner’s embrace.

Reiner growls. There’s no other way to describe it. His voice becomes so low, so rough, it comes out as a sort of scratchy, guttural purr. It sends the weirdest ripple through my entire body, like ants dancing on my skin. I reach out instinctively, running my palm down his arm as he drags me back into his embrace, hugging me close.

“Sorry, guys,” I breathe. “We, uh, got carried away there.”

“You think?” Sonya drawls, shoving her way through our blockade—well, friends, I mean. “That was hot as fuck. Damn.”

She gives a whistle, actually beaming and grinning from ear to ear.

Lenny’s phone pings, and he leans in to read the screen. “Guess the alpha is throwing another pack meet n’ greet at his place.”

“No way. We just got here!” Sonya nearly wails. “I’m so tired of all these social obligations. Let’s just stay here. You can tell your dear old gramps we have other plans. Big sexy ones.” She winks, grinning, and I roll my eyes.

Riley sighs, straightening the cuffs of his shirt. “Would you say that to Ram? We

wouldn't want Green Lake wolves disrespecting our alpha. Let's extend the same courtesy to Reiner's. It's called mutual respect."

"Spoken like a true goodie two-shoes," Sonya coos, patting his head.

Riley bares his teeth, clamping them shut in a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Look here, you little?"

"Riley's right," Reiner says, giving a decisive nod. He removes his arm from around my waist and offers his hand for me to take. "If Evan wants us there, we should go. C'mon, sugar, I'll drive."

Sucking in a sharp breath, I allow him to take my hand. Trying to keep this act up in front of a small crowd is hard enough. Forcing myself to act couple-ish in front of an entire freaking pack would test my boundaries and be dang near impossible. But for some reason, as I look up into his handsome face, I can't bring myself to deny him.

"Fine," I say. "Let's go, babe."

"Fucking hell, you guys are so cute," Sonya groans, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Shall we?"

I don't protest when Reiner guides me to his car, because why would I? As much as I want to call all of this off, I have to do it. The alternative is allowing my aunt to play matchmaker with every single wolf in Green Lake, and Lord knows that's not an option. And it certainly isn't because I want to go. Really, I don't. I want to turn and run, hide out somewhere with a bottle of wine and some homemade cheesecake until I don't have to think about all this idiocy anymore. This is necessary. I remind myself of this several times in my head as I make myself comfy in his passenger seat.

Being alone with him like this, practically in the dark, is super awkward. And

dangerous. Even now, I'm acutely aware of everything he does. I can hear him breathing, hear his heartbeat, sense his movements. I should've insisted I drove with Sonya instead.

"You all right over there?" he asks, glancing over at me with those beautiful dark eyes. "You gonna hold up, sugar?"

"Why do you keep calling me that? Sugar, I mean. Why do you call me that?"

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel as if he's trying to decide if he should tell me. Finally, he says, "Remember when we first met?"

"Vaguely," I snort.

"You were standing guard over the dessert display, and you were so proud of all the work you put in them. I don't blame you, they were all fantastic, but I don't think you realized you had a dusting of powdered sugar on your left cheek, covering that dimple. Probably from one of the sugar cookies, right? Anyway, I guess I just attached that moniker to you after that."

I'm stunned. My god, the guy actually notices details. "And you didn't think to tell me at the time?"

He shrugs, a self-satisfied grin making his lips turn up on both ends. "Nah. I thought it was cute. Still think so."

I have no freaking idea what to say. Is this some sick sort of game? Just another bet between him and his buddies? See if he could manipulate me into thinking he likes me before he showed his true colors?

Part of me wants to ask, to confront him and call him out on his bullshit, but then I

risk him deciding against this whole charade and dealing with my aunt, so the other part of me keeps my trap shut. What the hell am I supposed to say to that, anyway?

Reiner pulls his car into the driveway and turns the key to silence the engine, but doesn't get out. Instead, he sits, adjusting the seat belt strap running across his torso and down around his hips. "Jane, there are going to be a lot of people at this thing. A lot of expectations."

"Well, yeah. That's a good thing, right? More witnesses to believe this shit."

"Just, uh, whatever happens, try not to make it too obvious that we hate each other, okay?"

My stomach feels suddenly queasy. I wish I was drunk. This would be easier if I was. "I'll try, but I can't make any promises. I really don't like you."

He clenches his jaw as if fighting back the urge to say something. Perhaps the same urge that was clawing at my own insides. To think it aloud, to shout it at him so he'd never forget. This isn't fair. We shouldn't have to resort to something like this just to get people off our backs. We shouldn't have to force ourselves to tolerate each other just to live our lives peacefully. But I'm stuck. It fucking sucks, because once again, I've managed to dig myself a hole I have no idea how to crawl out of.

"I know," he sighs, rubbing his palms on his jeans before he opens the car door to climb out. "I know you don't."

Reiner walks around the car, opening my door and offering his hand. I grab it like I would with any other guy I'm dating. Because, for now, that's what he is.

I let him lead me into the house, where, unsurprisingly, a ton of people have already gathered. From the outside, it almost looks like a small army is moving within the

house. I don't like it, not one bit. It feels crowded, like I can't fucking breathe without touching someone.

Rafe and Evan spot us as we step inside, and both of them smile at us greeting. "Jane, good to see you again," Rafe says, nodding once to me before turning his attention to his cousin. "Reiner, glad you were able to make it."

It's Evan who realizes we're holding hands first, and he motions his attention to our interlocked fingers. "I assume this is the mystery woman, then? The one you told us about the other night, Reiner?"

With a chuckle, Reiner rubs the back of his neck. "It is. Where are my manners? Jane, this is Evan and Rafe, Green Lake's alpha and beta."

"We've met," I say, leaving out the part where I was supposed to marry Rafe just a couple years ago. It seems weird to mention it.

"It's good to see you again," Rafe says, gracing me with his award-winning smile. He always did have a hell of a nice smile. "I'm glad we're getting another chance to talk. How're things going for you in town? I know I've kept Piper pretty busy, but I hope you've been able to make some new friends?" His gaze swivels to Reiner, and the implication there is clear.

"Yeah, for sure," I reply. "She's your wife, of course you're keeping her busy! And, um, I have, thank you."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. Reiner is a good guy at heart. Just don't go telling him I said that. He won't let me live it down."

The Green Lake alpha grins and sips his drink.

“Fucking hell,” Reiner mumbles under his breath. “Jane, c’mon, let’s grab a drink from the kitchen. Then we can mingle a little.”

“Ooh, a drink sounds delightful.” The sooner I can get drunk enough to sort of forget about being here, the better.

“Excuse us, gentlemen.” He pulls me off to the side, but a lot of folks are between us and the kitchen, and it seems every one of them is shocked to see Reiner here with a woman at his side.

“Reiner?” One of the pack members walks up, a shockingly beautiful woman with dark auburn hair, piercing green eyes, and a set of tits that’d make Angelina Jolie jealous. She goes in for a hug, which I’m positive he didn’t expect because his eyes grow wide with surprise, and not in a good way.

“Dani, hey. Wow, you look great.” Reiner doesn’t return the hug, instead stepping back so he can keep his arm around my waist. “This is my...” His voice cuts out, and I raise a curious eyebrow at him. “...Girlfriend. Jane, this is an old friend, Danielle. Dani, Jane.”

“Hiya.” I don’t offer my hand, it doesn’t feel right somehow. Something about the look in her eyes just doesn’t sit well with me. “It’s a pleasure.”

“Friend,” Dani snorts. She runs her eyes over my body, and I can feel the judgment in her glare as if it were tangible.

I’m instantly insecure, pulling at my dress and running my fingers through my hair. Reiner notices, straightening and squaring his shoulders, his hold on my hip going tighter and tensing. He opens his mouth to say something, but I speak up first.

“It was lovely to meet you, Dani.” I look at Reiner and mouth “kitchen,” but he

doesn't catch my hint. "Babe, let's go get that drink, shall we?" I add.

Not waiting for him to agree, I head in the direction of the bar in the kitchen, weaving my way through the crowd and trying not to look at anyone. Why am I insecure? Who cares what these wolves think? They're all strangers. None of their opinions matter. I'll literally never see most of them again after this. And if I'm really lucky, I'll never see them again after we ditch our scheme.

Taking the first drink I lay eyes on, I sigh and take a sip. When Reiner finally catches up to me, I drink it in long gulps. He raises a brow. "Easy, speed racer. Is everything okay? I didn't know Dani would be here."

What? Did he think I was mad that one of his old... friends was here? Hell, no.

"Hey, are you listening? Jane? What's up with you?"

I drain the rest of the liquid in my glass. "Nothing. Relax. I'm not bothered by it."

I feel a twinge of... something. Not embarrassment, because what do I have to feel embarrassed over? We're just pretending. None of this is real. We're putting on a show, and despite the feelings I thought I had for him a year ago, I'm over him. I really and truly am. I'm doing this to save my butt from my aunt trying to marry me off to the first stranger who offers.

So, what is this feeling in my gut?

I don't know how long I can pull this off. People are going to start asking questions, wanting details, and I don't know if I can lie to everybody and continue upholding this whole thing. Christ, this is exhausting, and we've only bet at it for a few hours.

Just when I feel like I might start spiraling, Sonya approaches me with a drink in her

hand and a broad grin. “Hey! You owe me some girl talk.”

Oh no. As much as I want to get it off my chest, I can’t. I love Sonya, and for the most part, she’s fiercely protective of me, but there’s no telling what she’ll do if she finds out I’m in the process of lying my butt off. “Right, okay, let’s talk,” I say.

She loops her arm through mine, tugging me off in the direction of the back porch. I glance over my shoulder and give Reiner an apologetic smile, because that feels like something a girlfriend would do. He doesn’t look happy as we exit the back sliding glass door. Maybe he is worried I’m going to blab and tell her the truth.

When we get outside, I cross the porch and lean against the banister, running my fingers over the smooth, treated wood, thankful for the cool autumn breeze that ruffles through my hair.

“So, when did this happen?” she asks.

“Just a couple days ago.”

“Yeah, right. You two look like you’ve been into each other for longer than a few days.”

Okay, time for a little half-truth. “Well, it’s complicated. We met last year, when he came to Stardust Hollow. We kissed, but nothing else happened. And then we just met again recently. There’s not much more to it than that.”

She squints at me like she’s trying to dissect what I’ve just said. “I don’t know. Something feels off.”

Of course, it does. Because why would someone who looks like Reiner just go for someone like me? She’s not saying it aloud, but she’s thinking it.

“Believe it or not,” I say with a firm tone, “not all guys are only interested in women who look like runway models.”

Her eyes go wide, and her hand darts out to settle on my arm. “Oh my God, no. That’s not what I meant at all.”

“Sure it’s not. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to grab another drink and do my best to forget this whole night.”

Sonya grabs my forearm as I try to turn and leave. She fixes me with this serious expression. “You are so beautiful, Jane. Inside and out. I’ve never thought any differently. Any guy would be so lucky to have you.”

I sigh, rubbing my forehead. I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions like that. It’s just so easy to do when you’ve spent your entire life being told otherwise. “Look, I’m sorry, I... I know it’s sudden, it feels crazy, but...” I decide to wing it, just roll with the whole thing. “Reiner makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. Being with him, it’s just, it’s everything. No one else comes close.”

One eyebrow shoots up her forehead. “Wow, that’s very poetic. I love this for you, Jane. I really do. I’m glad you found someone.”

Guilt squeezes my guts like a boa constrictor. Here she is, being genuine and emotional, and I’m here bullshitting her to her face.

Good God, I hate myself right now.

## Page 6

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

Last night was weird as hell. I can admit that. Seeing everyone together, lying through my teeth like I was... I'm so fucking glad this isn't going to last forever. At least Jane and I were able to tolerate each other at the party. Things didn't go south like I expected. Small blessings, I guess.

Though, I'm at a loss for what to do now. Have we got the deception down pat? Can we pull this off? Maybe. But what if we have a big fight and she decides to out the whole damn lie in anger? People can get vindictive, and hell, this is my family and pack. I can't risk them finding out I've faked this. All we have to do is make it two months, and then she'll be back in Stardust Hollow and we can blame the distance and go our separate ways.

I crack an egg into a skillet, the yellow yolk sizzling in a welcome hiss, then place the shells in the compost bin for the garden. Looking around my little cabin, I can admit it's not much to look at. The walls are wood slats, bare except for a few deer antlers and other hunting trophies my father and I collected when he was still alive. The floor is covered in pine boards. He took great care to treat it regularly so that it remains soft and pale, and it reminds me of honey with its deep color. A fireplace is surrounded by a single, dark gray pillow and bearskin rug, and off to the left is a window set above the kitchen sink so I can look out over the tree line while I do dishes.

Somehow, I can't imagine a girl like Jane feeling at home here, and there's no way in hell I'd like to move to her territory to live like a city boy. No, there's no plausible future where we work out, even with all this fake relationship nonsense, though I have to admit I've got the oddest pull in the pit of my stomach when she's near. Like it feels right to have her close. Strange. Very strange, indeed.

It's probably just... hunger. I haven't had sex in a hot minute; maybe I'm just craving some female attention. Physical attention.

Right? Yeah, yeah. Has to be.

I slide my finished eggs onto a plate and toss it on the table. As I pull on the back of the chair to sit, a pounding starts on my front door. Sitting up straighter, I glance at the clock and try to figure out who the hell could be on my porch at nine in the morning on a Sunday. A quick sniff of the air answers that question, and I run a hand down my face before making my way to the door.

Cherry blossom and vanilla assault my nostrils as I swing it open. There stands Jane, her lips pulled into a scowl, her jaw clenched tight, and her arms across her chest, pushing her breasts up until they're almost bursting from her white tank top. Leggings hug every curve of her thick legs, and holy fuck, do I want to strip her of those right now.

Dammit, stop. Get yourself together.

"It's a Sunday," I tell her.

"I realize that."

"The day of rest. No arguing allowed."

"Well, today's the exception because we're arguing."

I let out a groan as I step aside, letting her in. Better that than the neighbors listening in. A lover's squabble is one thing; it's the content of this particular squabble that I'd rather people weren't privy to.

“How did you even find out where I live? Last I checked, I never gave you this address.”

She flashes me a sweet smile. “Wouldn’t it be weird if I didn’t know where my boyfriend lives? Besides, you’re friends with my cousins, remember? It wasn’t hard. I just told them everything here looked the same and I couldn’t tell one dinky cabin from another. Boom, address.”

Dinky? Seriously? And they call me arrogant. “Pardon the hell out of me. Maybe I’ll redecorate and add some skylights and an open floor plan. But then again, we aren’t going to do long-distance because I don’t ever want to see you again after we’re done, so I won’t bother.”

I shut the door and turn toward her, watching as her entire face gets redder and redder.

“Actually, I came here to tell you this stupid ploy is off,” she snaps. “I don’t know how I let you talk me into this last night, but I’m out.”

“What? You can’t be serious.” I trail behind her as she follows the scent of coffee to my kitchen. She sniffs my mug, sighs, and drops a spoonful of sugar in it before grabbing a tea bag from a drawer.

“As the fucking plague, Reiner. You saw me in a vulnerable situation last night, and you took advantage of me with a scheme to solve your own problems. I don’t even know why I let you talk me into this.”

“I took advantage of you? I think you have that wrong. If I remember correctly, you were a very willing participant. No, no, don’t pull the innocent card.” I snatch the carton of creamer she was about to pour and hold it high above my head. I hear the air hiss from between her teeth before her arms cross her chest. “You wanted the out

just as much as me. We have the exact same reason to pull this off.”

“I’m not a liar!” She jumps to grab the creamer, but dammit if the woman isn’t short. I’d put her at five foot two, tops. Grunting, she jumps again, and finally, her hands close around the milk, yanking it free.

Only, her jump launches her right into my torso. We knock together in an “oomph” and stumble backward. She flattens a hand on my abdomen, and dear God, her touch sears me. Fire and ice rocket up and down my skin, dancing a complex tango, making me shiver.

“Neither am I,” I counter, catching myself before it escapes on a low, throaty grunt. Is she close enough to feel my... cough... excitement? I can’t help it. “But desperate times call for desperate measures, and I’m willing to bet you’re just as desperate as I am.”

When she opens her mouth, I fully expect another complaint to tumble out. Instead, she huffs and looks away, smacking her lips. Cautiously, I lift a hand to her chin and make her meet my eyes.

“I can’t force you into this, Jane. All I can do is ask. This is both our futures. They want to pair you off to the first man, and I...”

She looks up at me, concern in her gaze, waiting for me to finish my thought. I feel the air in my lungs dissipates as her mouth parts. Those plush, pink lips catch my attention. I have to look away before I can continue. What the hell was I going to say?

“Look, everybody in Green Lake has this image of me, okay? All tough-guy playboy. Nothing I say will ever shake that perception. Except maybe settling down. I’m not saying I haven’t earned my reputation, because I have. But I’m getting older now,

and the women of the Green Lake Pack think I'll never change. None of them will even look at me beyond what happens between the sheets. So, if we do this, I can prove myself. Be someone my pack can respect."

Her stern expression softens, and pity gleams in her gray eyes. I loathe it, truly. I'm stronger than she can imagine; I don't want her pity. If anything, I'm the one who feels bad for dragging her into this. Asking her to lie to her friends and family. But we both have something to gain here, and even though she's a little hesitant, I truly think she can look past her qualms.

Or, I hope so, at the very least.

I don't even know why I felt compelled to tell her so much about my motives. She doesn't need to know the details or why I feel the need to put on this stupid show. Maybe I just wanted her to know I had a reason, that I wasn't just out to torture her. Or maybe I wanted to level the playing field, make her feel like she wasn't alone here. Like she wasn't the only one feeling vulnerable and exposed.

"Okay," she replies with a simple nod. "But we need to lay down some ground rules."

"Rules are important," I agree with a nod of my own.

"If we do this fake dating thing, there can't be a single thread of emotions involved. None. It's not happening."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem. I mean, look at us. You can't stand me, and I..."

She wets her lips before speaking again. "I got it. We've made our positions clear. And that little attitude brings me to my next rule."

“Shoot.”

“I will not tolerate another second of your arrogance, okay.” She says it more like a statement than a question. “I don’t care how little you think of me and my pack. I will not?”

“What makes you think I don’t think highly of you?” It’s a genuine question.

“Is that a joke? After the way you humiliated me last year, the way you laughed at me when I...”

I cut her off with a dramatic roll of my eyes. “I went a little overboard in Stardust Hollow last year. I’ll admit it. But let’s just put that behind us and focus on the situation right in front of us.”

She stares at me for a moment, chewing her lip like there’s something more she wants to say. “All right, then. Just as long as we’re on the same page.”

“And I have one condition of my own.”

That little dimple pops in her left cheek as she chews on the inside of her mouth. “Which is?”

“We need to practice our... physical connection.”

She blinks twice before she barks out a laugh. “Wow, and there it is. This is just an excuse for you to get laid, isn’t it?”

As much as I try, I can’t hide the smirk tipping up my lips. She can see the mischief in my gaze, I know she can. But dammit if the girl isn’t cute when she riles me up.

I inch closer to her, and she backs away until she bumps into the counter. “You really think I need to create a whole elaborate scheme to get into a girl’s pants? Let’s face it, Jane. All I’d have to do is ask, and you’d bend over my kitchen table right now and drop your panties.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Dear God, who even says things like that? You’re such an animal.”

I edge closer and wait until she’s trapped, her lower back pressing against the edge of the countertop. My arms come up and box her in on either side.

“You’re right. I am.”

## Page 7

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

Reiner is standing so close to me, it takes effort not to squirm.

No, more like... it takes every bit of willpower and conscious choice not to.

I came here with every intention of ending this ridiculous charade, and I still don't know why I'm agreeing to do it. I mean, yes, I know the benefits if we pull this off, and I guess I can admit I have a small motivation out of sheer annoyance. But I can't stand him, can't stand the smug grin he wears like a crown on his arrogant head. There is no part of me that believes we're compatible.

So why the hell do my knees tremble every time he flashes that smile my way? Why does my pulse tick upward, skipping like a stone?

"You sure seemed to enjoy our kissing last night," I point out. "I don't recall you complaining. Especially that second time."

"It wasn't the kiss itself that was the problem," he clarifies. "It was after the kiss. You can't tell me that wasn't awkward as hell. I'm willing to bet the only reason the others didn't notice is because they were all so shocked that we were kissing to begin with. A terrible display like that will only work once, if that. Which brings me back to my original point. Practice makes perfect, and we need to... well..." He wrinkles his brow, choosing his words carefully. "Practice."

Okay, he's not wrong. About the first part, I mean. After we kissed, we sat staring at each other for a good thirty seconds. And yes, I guess that's a little weird. A lot weird, really. If Sonya had been on her game, she would have called us out. But she wasn't, and now we have to pull it off for real. Maybe he has a point, and we

should... practice.

Yes. That's all it would be. Practice.

So why am I squeezing my hands into fists to keep myself from trembling with anticipation? I wonder if the look on my face gives it away. I attempt to mask the excitement coursing through my veins, to temper the electric awareness crackling along my skin.

"Then, practice," I finally say. "But none of that other shit. No touching or... or... you know..."

His rough, calloused palm curls around my throat, and I try not to shiver. I truly do. The fact that my skin erupts into goosebumps against my will is annoying at best and mortifying at worst. And dammit if my stomach doesn't join the fun, swooping wildly at the pressure.

"You mean none of this? You want me to let go of you and not touch this..." His thumb moves to caress the artery at the side of my neck, and my face heats until I can barely take a proper breath.

I want to tell him yes, want to watch as that cocky smirk disappears from his face as I shut him down. But it's more than a little difficult to put a thought together, let alone muster up the will to lie. Instead, I wait, shivering when he lowers his face to trace the line of my jaw with his nose.

"Nothing like this at all?" His mouth parts, and the gentle brush of his teeth skims my ear.

A loud groan slips between my lips, and I feel him smiling against my skin, satisfied. I hate that he knows exactly what he's doing to me, but by the same token, I'm

enjoying it. Truth be told, I've never been this worked up in my life. My arousal soaks my panties, sending slick dripping down my inner thighs. Damn him.

I dig my fingers into his flannel shirt. Reiner's scent engulfs me, and his presence alone feels like a flame touching my flesh. This man is fire, and I'm nothing but a match ready to be struck.

All he has to do is ignite me, and I'm gone.

Just as I think that, his hands explore the curves of my waist, and he brings his mouth down on mine. My body fits perfectly against his muscled physique, and just like that, he sets me aflame. Heat creeps through my body, igniting a slow burn of desire in my core. He kisses me possessively, like he owns me, his mouth confident and commanding.

I just might melt right into the floor.

I whimper against his mouth and tell myself I shouldn't be enjoying this as much as I am. But when his tongue dips between my lips, I'm done for. With a low growl, he pushes me backward, not breaking the kiss, his lips greedy and fierce, his tongue expertly teasing mine. He presses his body between my legs, his hardness pushing between my thighs as he lifts me onto the countertop. Tangling a hand in my hair, he tugs my head to one side and places hot, open-mouthed kisses along my neck.

A low moan rises from deep within my throat. I'm wound up, tighter than a spool of fishing line. Every nerve ending sparks and quivers in response. I feel weightless. Like I'm floating.

I need more, so I reach for him, hooking a leg around his waist, bringing him closer. His hands leave the counter, one finding its way to my knee and pushing up my thigh, forcing my skirt even higher. Just as his fingers graze my white lace thong, I hear a

low whistle that nearly causes me to jump from my skin.

“Oh, shit. My bad.”

Reiner breaks the kiss, and he curses beneath his breath, glancing over his shoulder. The only thing keeping me from falling off the counter is a death grip on Reiner’s muscular shoulders. I peer over his shoulder, cheeks burning as Jack leans nonchalantly against the open threshold of the kitchen. He flashes us both a crooked, apologetic smile.

“Dude, what the hell are you doing here?” Reiner demands, pulling himself free from my grasp. I sit up and pull my skirt down.

“Uh, I live here. Same as you, man.” Jack raises both eyebrows. “I wasn’t aware you were... entertaining. Good to see you again, Jane.”

I immediately scoot off the counter, and Reiner turns around. I stand there feeling sheepish while they stare at one another. I guess, if nothing else, this will make for a pretty convincing story. Jack saw us.

“Good morning, Jack,” I manage after a full second of silence, attempting a casual smile.

When Jack walks fully into the kitchen, he’s still scratching his head. He makes himself right at home, opening the refrigerator and snatching the milk. He cracks the lid and takes a swig straight from the carton.

“I apologize for my cousin,” Reiner announces. “I’d say I have no idea how he was raised, but actually, I do. I was there.”

Jack grins, unashamed, slamming the milk back onto the top shelf of the fridge. “That

was some party at Evan's last night, huh? Even though the guy has kids, he still knows how to throw down, am I right?"

"Uh... sure," I respond with a nervous chuckle.

He plops down at the kitchen table and asks, "So, what are you two lovebirds up to today?"

"We..." I gulp, taking a deep breath. I glance at Reiner, but he isn't looking at me. He's watching his cousin carefully, brow furrowed. "We're going to dinner later," I finish.

"Huh," Jack replies, folding his hands. "You know who I bumped into last night? Dani. She looked all kinds of worked up that Reiner was going out with you, Jane. Man, she had it bad for you, didn't she, Reiner? She's one hell of a looker, and lord knows she'd do anything for you, too. She was going on and on about how you told her you weren't ready for a relationship, and now you're running around with a she-wolf from Stardust Hollow."

I shift from one foot to the other. Truthfully, it feels like the information he's laying out was an intentional dig at me. Like he's shoving in my face that a Green Lake she-wolf like Danielle is better suited for Reiner. I suppose that has nothing to do with me, really, but I can't help feeling the sting all the same.

Reiner clears his throat, shooting Jack a warning glare. "You don't know the half of it, man, and I'm not interested in rehashing it right now if you don't mind."

Jack ignores the thinly veiled command and takes the opportunity to continue while he has my attention. "It's just so strange to see him this way, like..." He thinks for a moment, brows scrunched. "You wouldn't know, Jane, since you just got here, but the Reiner I know would never agree to mate. I mean, hell, Reiner, how many women

have tried their luck and fallen at your feet? And now..." He gestures toward me with a knowing grin. "Jane, how did you tame the beast, exactly?"

"Uh..." Is he really expecting me to respond to that?

I glance toward Reiner, hoping he will step in and put an end to this unexpected interrogation. I honestly can't tell if Jack is testing the legitimacy of our "relationship" or if he simply enjoys watching us squirm.

When it's clear he's waiting for a real answer, and a more serious one, I decide to just be truthful. After all, Jack has caught me off-guard, and I'm unprepared to make something up. Lying about it, in any case, would probably only expose me.

"Well, to be honest, I believe that my lack of interest is what attracted him to me."

Jack tilts his head, looking me up and down in a way that sends a chill skating up my spine. "Lack of interest?"

"I wasn't the type of girl who would just throw herself at him. Who would fall at his feet and beg for his attention, as you put it. So..." I shrug, because it doesn't really need more explaining than that. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I think I've overstayed my welcome."

Reiner lays a large hand on my shoulder as I try to pass, holding me still. "Jane, wait?"

"It's fine," I insist. "I'm supposed to meet Sonya, anyway. You two enjoy your morning."

Without giving him a chance to stop me again, I duck under his arm and flee, practically tripping down the steps on my way to the gravel drive. I climb into my car

and put my forehead against the steering wheel, just trying to catch my breath. I should never have agreed to this. I know damn good and well that I can't trust a man like Reiner. That guy doesn't know the meaning of commitment. All he wants is sex, and I'm not in the business of giving it up to bad boys who'll break my heart in the morning.

I start the engine and pull out of the driveway, noting with dismay that Reiner is standing on the porch, watching me leave.

I'm going to have to keep myself in check if I have any hope of surviving this farce with my dignity intact. It was a colossal mistake, slipping up with him like that. I'm going to have to remember: for this "relationship" to work, I have to do whatever it takes. This includes forgetting all about those blazing hot kisses that nearly melted me into a puddle right there on the countertop.

Because to Reiner, it doesn't mean anything.

I repeat that in my mind as I head back toward the main part of town. It doesn't mean anything. Absolutely nothing.

I wish that mantra had a chance of working.

## Page 8

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

Downtown Green Lake is usually slow and low-key, just the kind of place you want when you're trying to blend in. Most shifters living here, despite their wolf sides, tend to be gentle folks. Hardworking people who don't usually cause much of a fuss or draw a lot of attention.

But right now, it's filled with people from Stardust Hollow, and our sleepy little town is overwhelmed. Shop owners and service employees alike already have their hands full today, and it's barely past lunchtime. Even the hardware store is experiencing an unexpected turnout. One of the proprietors is helping a customer change a filter, and I make eye contact with him for just a second. An awkward nod passes between us, and he tugs his ball cap down, returning his attention to his purchase.

I love this town. Really, I do.

I also really don't want these pack members here any longer than necessary. When they all return home and things go back to normal, I will go back to living my simple, uncomplicated life. Until then, we're stuck with them.

Once I grab what I need and pay, I start back toward my car when an unwanted scent fills my nostrils. Cursing, I come to a dead stop, trying my damndest to avoid turning and catching sight of her, but no such luck. There she is, right across the street, with her arm linked with Piper's. My faux lover Jane laughs with our beta's wife and disappears into the throngs of shoppers, none the wiser.

Everything in me tells me I should not follow. I should hop in my car and go home and not look back.

But I think about the way she tasted, her softness, and the warm, wet brush of her tongue against mine. The high-pitched moans that caressed my ears, and the way she quivered in my arms.

Shit. I'm getting hard all over again.

After Jack interrupted us, Jane took off so fast, I'm surprised my welcome mat didn't catch fire. We never did end up going to dinner. No doubt, she was thrown off by Jack's little comments, and I can't blame her for that. He does have a tendency to needle, and when he gets rolling, it's hard to make him stop.

Again, I know I should let her go.

There's nothing keeping me glued to this spot; no reason why I can't escape the two chattering women and lock myself in my truck. Maybe I should go home and take a shower to rid myself of the sticky heat she seemed to fill me with when I touched her. And yet, I don't move.

Maybe it's the odd sense of curiosity I feel, or maybe my subconscious won't allow me to let her disappear so easily. All I know is that when they duck into one of the stores, I cross the street and stick close enough to follow the tinkle of their laughter through the aisles, taking extra care to stay out of sight.

"I saw the way you two looked at each other last night at Evan's place," Piper's voice teases. "Give me the gossip."

I roll my eyes, peeking down an aisle and seeing that they're surrounded by women's clothing, blouses, dresses, nightgowns. They're browsing and chatting, not interested in leaving anytime soon. I lean against a shelf, pretending to look at the contents. A sign that says "Bubble Bath" is staring back at me, but my mind is focused only on Jane.

Piper giggles, lifting a red and green knit top to her shoulders and spinning around with a flourish.

Jane smiles, folding her arms and twisting her lips in a nervous expression. “There’s really nothing to tell, Piper. Honestly, this is all just so... unexpected. For both of us.”

“I’ll say,” Piper agrees. “I’ve known Reiner for a while, since I first came to Green Lake. He’s the last person I expected you would hit it off with, but the moment I saw you last night...” She playfully slaps Jane’s arm and squeals. “You two were drawn to one another, everyone could see it. I swear, I felt like I was watching a couple of magnets struggling not to cling to one another.”

“Now you’re just being silly.”

“Uh-huh,” Piper replies, grinning and wagging her brows. “If I’d known he was your type, I would’ve introduced you a long time ago. I feel like such a shit cousin. I guess I just thought you were too young for Reiner, is all.”

Silence.

When I peer over a shelf, I see Jane staring at her shoes, looking a bit frazzled. She’s chewing on her lip, and I have the distinct feeling that Piper won’t give up until Jane tells her everything. The truth will get out one way or another. Which means I will have to intervene here.

I take a few steps in their direction, but before Jane can say anything, Piper comments, “You know, Lenny thinks it’s all just a giant scam.”

Jane gasps, and I stop walking.

“Scam?” Jane repeats.

“I know, I know. My brother is always looking for some kind of conspiracy. Always seeing plots and schemes where there are none,” Piper says quickly. “He says you’re not Reiner’s usual type, but I told him that’s probably what makes you special.”

Jane squares her shoulders, and something in her posture tells me she’s back in the game. I sidestep and go back into hiding.

She starts tearing through the rack, mumbling to herself about fat-shaming assholes, clearly agitated. She holds something to her body that is far too small, gives it a brief once-over, and tosses it aside, looking disgusted. Finally, she jerks some skimpy, lacy number free from its hanger and holds it up with an angry glare. “If this was a sham, why would I bother buying lingerie for my boyfriend to enjoy?”

Oh, good God.

Piper is stumbling over herself, going on about how she didn’t mean anything by it, but my mouth has gone dry. An image of Jane wearing what she just pulled from the rack invades my brain. I picture her sprawled out on my bed, her legs spread wide and beckoning me over... I can almost taste her. Almost. What if she’d let me taste more than her lips?

My eyes move on their own to the dressing room at the end of the aisle. There’s no attendant, and I don’t see any cameras. I could drag her in there, give her a taste of exactly what she’s getting herself into.

Fuck. I adjust myself behind the shelf. I need to get out of here. Now.

With a low growl, I turn on my heels and stalk back to the entrance.

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A few hours later, I'm at home, trying desperately not to think of Jane. I've already jerked off twice, and yet she's still invading my thoughts like some kind of curse. Normally, I'm not hung up on a woman at all. I can usually take her or leave her, totally fine with either option. But Jane? I can't get my mind off her.

I need a distraction and a good, stiff drink. Maybe even someone else to take the edge off. My wolf is restless, insistent, and the only way I can think to calm him is to go for a run.

I strip down naked?no need to ruin perfectly good clothes?and am about to shift when a sharp knock beats at my front door.

A rumbling growl sounds from my chest, reverberating through my very bones as I move through the living room and head into the foyer. I should probably grab a shirt or put on some pants, but I'm over it. Most of us in the area are in the same pack, minus the Stardust Hollow wolves, so my nudity is probably nothing they haven't seen before.

But when I swing the door open, it's not a pack member standing on my welcome mat.

"Jane," I say her name slowly, as if asking a question. My mind goes back to the lingerie store and that scandalous outfit she was holding. I try not to think about how snugly it would stretch across her curvy hips or strain against her ample breasts.

It's useless. I groan, scratching the stubble lining my jaw.

Her gray eyes flick down, and I swear I see a hint of blush on her cheeks. But she shakes it off and smooths her wavy black hair behind one ear. "Sorry, I would've called, but I don't have your number. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

She can't stand still, rocking back and forth on her heels, hands clasped tightly in front of her. The subtle movement causes her full, plump breasts to jiggle, drawing my attention once again to those stiff, perky nipples that are poking through her dress.

My focus snaps back to her when she clears her throat pointedly.

"No, I was just, uh... come on in." I step aside and wave her through.

She hesitates at first, then closes her eyes and sucks in a deep, shaky breath before letting it all out and strutting past. "Sorry for dropping in unannounced like this."

I shut the door and walk over to the couch, where I have a throw blanket tossed across the back. I wrap it around my hips and sit down, hoping to lessen the intense atmosphere in the room. "Don't worry about it. What's up?"

"So," she pauses, flicking her tongue out to moisten her lips, and my stupid dick twitches in response. "Dinner."

I tuck an arm across the back of the sofa. "What dinner?"

"With my family," she explains. "My aunt is putting together a dinner, and she is insisting I bring you along. I tried to tell her that we hadn't gotten that far yet, but she's relentless."

My shoulders slump. I do not have the energy or interest to go hang around a group of Stardust Hollow shifters. No, thank you.

"Sorry, I can't make it."

She walks to the couch and plops down on the edge of the cushion, facing me, and lifts one brow. "Can't, or won't? Because I thought we agreed to try to make this

believable.”

I huff, gritting my teeth, and cross one ankle over my knee. “There will be plenty of other opportunities for us to play kissy face in public, sugar.”

“You mean, when it benefits you? When it’s your friends we’re trying to convince? You don’t know my aunt, Reiner. If she thinks for one second I’m faking things, she won’t leave me alone until I break down and tell her. If I show up without you tonight, she’s going to start asking questions. Worse, she’ll probably march right over here and start poking around. And if she does, everyone will know we’re lying. She won’t stop until she figures out the truth.”

I sigh, squeezing the back of my neck with my hand and looking up at the ceiling. She makes a good point. If anyone in her pack finds out, then my pack will learn the truth, too. And I don’t want to even think about what Rafe will do if he finds out I’ve been using his wife’s cousin.

“All right, give me your phone. I’ll put my number in it, and you can text me the information. When and where, and that sort of thing.”

“Thank you,” she says, and for the first time since she walked in my door, she seems genuinely pleased. She pulls out her cell, unlocks the screen, and hands it over to me. Our fingers brush, and the hairs on my arm prickle at the sensation. My wolf stirs within, lifting his massive head with a grunt, telling me to take her.

I let out a slow breath and tap in the numbers. When I press send, my phone dings from somewhere in the kitchen.

“There. We should probably come up with our own private signals, too. In case one of us needs an exit out of a conversation. A code word, if you will.” I hand the phone back. “You know, save one another from unsavory social obligations.”

“And by that, you mean my family.”

“Oh, I’ll be just as bored at any of our pack gatherings. Trust me.”

She stands, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear, and smiles. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure, no problem.” I stand as well, running a hand through my hair. The blanket around my hips begins to slip, and in my effort to stop it from pooling at my feet, I let go. “Aw, shit.”

Jane is biting back a laugh when I lower my arms.

“Right, I’ll just...” I hook a thumb over my shoulder, hoping to avoid this becoming any more awkward. “I’m going to go finish getting dressed now. Be right back.”

“No, no,” she says. “Don’t bother. I’ll show myself out. See you at dinner. Bye!”

I watch the door swing shut behind her, and finally, I hear her tickle of laughter bubbling to the surface. I shake my head, retrieving the blanket, and head to my room, my run long forgotten.

This should be an interesting evening.

## Page 9

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

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather wear your hair up?” Aunt Gwen asks, fluffing the back of my head with her expert hands, fingers moving too quickly to track. “I think you have such a lovely neck. If you’re sporting those earrings I gave you, why not show a little skin?”

I resist the urge to shrug her off and roll my eyes. She is far too giddy about me dating someone, and honestly, she is being completely over the top about it. This dress is the fifth thing she’s picked out for me to try on, and when I stand back to examine myself in the mirror, I’m just praying this is the last one.

But when I get a good look at myself... I see she’s got good taste after all. It’s an off-white, short-sleeved summer dress with a small, bright floral print. It hugs my curves ever so slightly, and the elastic waist sets right under my bust. It’s modest enough but still sexy in an old-school kind of way.

“I think this is the one,” I tell her, running a hand over my stomach.

“Of course, it’s perfect. Oh, I can’t believe you’re finally putting yourself out there. You have no idea how worried I’ve been about you, Jane.”

“Aunt Gwen, don’t. I promise you I am perfectly fine, with or without Reiner in my life. Promise me you won’t get too invested in this. I told you, we’re still seeing where it’s going.”

Gwen looks like she wants to say more, but there’s a light knock on the bedroom door. Uncle Richard calls out. “Gwen? Jane? You both decent?”

“Come in, darling,” she replies.

He slowly pushes the door open and steps through the doorway, taking me in with a skeptical expression. Finally, he shakes his head, closing his eyes. “Jane, you look lovely.”

Gwen chimes in excitedly, “Doesn’t she? Just like her mother.”

I wince at that, knowing I could never measure up to the woman she’s comparing me to. My mother was stunning. Absolutely gorgeous, truly a one-of-a-kind woman. When she died, a lot of people commented on how much I looked like her, and it always made me feel weird. Partly because I have never been able to see it and partly because, well, she was literally the most beautiful woman on the face of the earth, and I knew I couldn’t ever live up to that.

“Yes, indeed,” my uncle agrees. “I just wanted to let you know your gentleman friend is here, along with his friend.”

“His friend?” I question.

“Jack, I believe it was,” Uncle Richard replies. “Nice boy, very polite.”

Why on earth would Reiner bring Jack? After the things Jack said to me last time... I just hope, for my aunt and uncle’s sake, he behaves tonight.

I sigh and thank my aunt for helping me get ready. As I walk out of the bedroom, an all-too-familiar scent slithers its way into my nose. There’s something very... masculine about this cologne, and for a moment, I get flustered trying to place the flavor of it. Something fresh, woody... but with a bite of citrus?

The trailer we’re staying in is a triple-wide, so it’s not tiny, but it’s not huge, either.

The living room and kitchen are open concept, with a little table tucked in the corner. My aunt and uncle have a nice, cozy setup, and it's the first time I've seen Reiner out of jeans and a t-shirt. His hair is combed, and he's wearing a button-down with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of khakis.

When I enter the room, Reiner's gaze sweeps over me, and a slow smirk tugs at his lips.

"Hey, Jane," Jack says, drawing my attention. "You look great."

Okay, we're off to a good start. No smartass remarks. "Thank you, Jack."

Reiner takes a step closer. "You do look gorgeous."

I can't help the blush that stains my cheeks. "Thanks. You clean up pretty nice, too."

"Well, aren't you two just the cutest," Gwen says, clapping her hands together. "Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes. Please, make yourselves comfortable. Richard, can you give me a hand with the grill? I need to check the chicken."

"Of course, dear. We'll be outside."

Once they're gone, I gesture to the boys to take a seat on the couch. "Can I get you guys something to drink? Beer, soda, water? I can make you a mixed drink if you'd like."

"I'll take a beer," Jack says.

"Same," Reiner adds.

I walk to the kitchen and pull a couple of beers from the fridge, popping the caps off

and taking a deep breath before heading back to the living room. I'm nervous. I've been around Reiner a few times now, and I've felt a sort of connection with him, but this feels different.

"I hope you don't mind that I brought Jack along," Reiner says when I hand him his bottle. "I thought since it was a family dinner, I should bring some family, and well... Jack's all the family I've got, so..."

"Oh." I pause, unsure of what to say. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

Jack chuckles, leaning back on the sofa. "It's not a big deal. I was actually surprised he asked me to come, but I'm glad he did. I've enjoyed getting to know the wolves from Stardust Hollow."

I glance between the two men, and I can't help the smile that stretches across my face. They definitely do look alike, and I can see the resemblance in their mannerisms, too.

"You guys are really close, aren't you?" I say.

"We're like brothers," Jack says. "You can't choose your family, but I'd pick Reiner every single time."

"That's very sweet."

"He's a good guy," Jack says, shrugging. "A pain in the ass, but a good guy."

"Gee, thanks," Reiner says, rolling his eyes.

"You're lucky to have each other," I comment. "When I lost my parents, I didn't have any siblings. Piper's family took me in, and I don't know where I'd be without them."

It's interesting, though. I always felt like I had a different relationship with my alpha than the other kids in the pack. It was almost like he was my father, too. Ram's father, Talos, was alpha back then, and he was a good man. He never seemed to mind stepping up to the plate."

"It was a lot like that for us, too," Jack replies. "We were both pretty young when our parents died, and we actually lived with the alpha for a while. Rafe and Evan were like brothers to us."

Reiner doesn't say anything, but I can feel his eyes on me. I turn to face him, and he looks away.

When Aunt Gwen and Uncle Richard come back inside, they take a seat in the armchairs across from us.

"Just a little bit longer," my aunt announces. "So, tell me, boys, what was it like growing up in such a rural pack? You guys are really tucked away from it all, huh?"

"Yeah, it was pretty isolated," Jack agrees. "But it was a good place to grow up. Lots of space, lots of land to run. We have a huge lake on the property, and a lot of the pack members have cabins there. It's a nice little community."

"It sounds lovely," she says. "And your alpha. Rafe, is it? He seems like a good man."

"Evan is the alpha," Jack corrects. "Rafe is the beta. But yes, they're both great. They're our uncles, actually."

"Do your parents live here, too, then?" Uncle Richard asks, and I press my lips together.

Reiner has been pretty quiet since we started talking about our pasts and families, but I can tell my uncle's question strikes a nerve. He straightens up a bit before standing up. "If you don't mind, I just need a breath of fresh air for a moment. Excuse me."

I watch him walk out the front door, and I can't help but feel guilty.

"Did I say something wrong?" Uncle Richard asks, looking to me.

Jack shakes his head. "No. It's not you. His parents died when he was younger, and it's a bit of a sensitive subject for him. I lost mine when I was a boy, too, but I was so young, I barely remember them. Reiner... he saw the whole thing. He's never been the same since."

My heart suddenly aches for Reiner.

"I'm so sorry," my uncle says. "I had no idea."

"Oh, the poor boy," Aunt Gwen coos.

"Don't worry about it," Jack assures him. "He'll be fine."

"I think I'll go check on him," I say. "I'll check on the meat while I'm out there. Be right back."

I find Reiner sitting on the steps, staring off into the distance. I'll say one thing about Green Lake. The stars are much brighter out here, and the night sky is a deep, rich black.

"Hey," I say, taking a seat next to him. "You okay?"

"I'm good," he replies. "Sorry, I just got up and left like that. I just really don't enjoy

talking about my family.”

“I understand. I should’ve steered the conversation away from family, so I’m sorry. More than anyone, I know how hard it can be.”

“I guess you do,” he replies quietly. “But it’s not your fault, you know. You don’t have to apologize.”

I shrug. “I know. I just... I want this to work, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

“I’m not,” he says, turning to look at me. “It’s not you. It’s me.”

“That’s a very cliché line,” I tease.

“I’m serious,” he says, and his voice is so soft, so vulnerable, I can’t help but lean in. “Do you know I still have nightmares about the day my parents were murdered?”

“Oh, Reiner...”

“I was ten years old, and I watched those assholes tear my parents apart. I can still hear their screams, and I can still see the blood. I can still feel the fear that flooded through me. I was powerless, and it was the worst feeling in the world. I swore I’d never let myself be that weak again. So, I trained, I fought, I pushed my body and my limits, and I got stronger. I worked my ass off to become the strongest, toughest wolf I could be. I had to. I had to make sure nothing ever happened to me or Jack, and I couldn’t let my parents’ deaths be in vain.”

“Who did it?” I ask.

He gives me a half-shrug and says, “Rogues. There’s a lot of ‘em out there. They’re

lone wolves—no pack, no allegiance. They just roam the country, picking fights and fucking shit up. They're just a bunch of low-life criminals. When I got older, I did a lot of hunting, but I never found the ones who did it. I don't even know if they're still alive."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, and I reach out to touch his shoulder. "That's horrible."

"Yeah, it is," he says, and his voice is tight. "And I'm not proud of a lot of the things I've done. I was a real asshole, and I'm still working on the whole anger management thing. But you know, when you're younger, being pissed off is a lot easier than being sad, you know? I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to feel weak. So, I made a lot of enemies, and I didn't care."

"I can't even imagine what that must've been like," I whisper.

"It was a long time ago," he says, and his tone is lighter, as if he's trying to convince himself more than me. "I'm okay now. I'm not the same person I was back then. I just wish I could convince everybody else of that."

"Jack seems to understand."

"Jack's always had my back, even when I was at my worst. Not long after my parents died, his did, too, and I've been looking out for him ever since. I didn't have a choice. Even though he's only my cousin, I was like his big brother, and I had to make sure he was taken care of. I had to make sure he was safe."

"You're a good man, Reiner," I say, and I mean it. "You're not the monster you've made yourself out to be."

He scoffs. "You don't know me."

“Maybe not,” I reply, shrugging. “But I know enough. And I like what I see.”

He draws in a shaky breath and asks, “How did your parents die?”

The question catches me by surprise, and I feel my cheeks grow tight. “They died in a fire. No one knows exactly what happened. We were asleep, and all I remember is waking up to smoke. I couldn’t see a thing. I tried to get my parents, but a beam had fallen from the ceiling and blocked their way out. My mom told me to run, to get help. I did, but by the time I came back, the house was completely engulfed in flames. There was nothing I could do.”

“That’s terrible,” he whispers.

“It was a long time ago,” I say, echoing his own words.

“Yeah, but it still hurts, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I admit. “I miss them. I miss them so much. But I know they’d be proud of me. I try to focus on that.”

“I hope my parents would be proud of me, too,” he says. “I’ve done some shitty things, and I’m not proud of a lot of the choices I’ve made, but I’m trying to be better. For Jack, for the pack, and for myself.”

“I’m glad,” I say, and I really am.

When he cranes his neck to look at me, his eyes are shining, and I can’t help the pull I feel toward him. I lean in, but just before our lips touch, I get a whiff of burning meat, and I jerk back.

“Shit,” I curse. “Dinner’s burning.”

## Page 10

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

The Forresters prepared a full feast for dinner, and Jane and I saved it just in time.

“Thank god,” Jane says, looking over the smoldering grill. “I think it’s salvageable.”

Glancing over her shoulder, I take in the sight. They’ve got chicken, ribs, sausage, and steaks. “What are you feeding, an army?” I ask, and she laughs.

“Aunt Gwen always gets carried away when we have guests. She loves to cook, and she loves to feed people.”

“What if I was a vegetarian? You’d have a lot of leftovers.”

She snorts. “I doubt that. You’re a shifter, and we’re carnivores. I’ve never met a vegetarian shifter.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I tease.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re not a vegetarian,” she says, nudging me. “Because my aunt would be devastated.”

“I’m not one to turn down a home-cooked meal.”

“Good,” she says, and her smile is so bright as she hands me a big roasting pan. “Here, hold this.”

She piles the meat into the dish, and once she’s collected it all, she takes it from me and leads me back inside. Jack is right where I left him, entertaining her family. It

was a good call, bringing him here. He and Jane's aunt and uncle seemed to hit it off.

Jack's always been much more outgoing than me, and he's definitely the charmer. He can talk to anyone, and he doesn't have a problem opening up. Me, on the other hand... well, that's a different story. I've never been one for small talk, and I've never been one for sharing my feelings.

I'm not a big fan of talking about my past, either. I've never been able to open up about my parents' murder. Jack's the only one who knows the full story, and that's only because he was there. Jane is the first person I've ever opened up to about it, and I don't know why I did. Maybe it's because I feel connected to her, like we're similar in many ways. Or maybe it's because I'm just tired of holding in the pain and the grief.

"Food's ready," Jane announces, and her aunt and uncle are quick to jump up and follow her into the kitchen.

They've already set the table, and Jane places the pan filled with meat in the center of the table while Gwen serves up the sides. Richard takes his seat at the head of the table and gestures for Jack and me to sit down.

"I'm afraid we don't have a lot of space," he comments. "Not that we're ungrateful for the trailers your pack provided for us, mind you. It just takes some getting used to when you're accustomed to having a large house and a big yard."

"I can imagine," Jack replies. "Reiner and I had the pleasure of visiting Stardust Hollow during the swap last year. It was quite a town. Very beautiful."

"Thank you," Richard says, grinning. "We're very proud of it."

"Did you enjoy your visit, Reiner?" Gwen asks as she sits down across from him.

Jane's gaze flicks to me, and she clenches her jaw. No doubt, she's remembering how awful I treated her that night at the bar, but she doesn't say anything.

"It was... interesting," I reply, and Jane scoffs.

"That's one way to put it," she mutters.

"Oh, I'm sure you boys had a great time," Gwen says. "It's been such fun, hasn't it, introducing our packs to one another's way of life? Sort of like a foreign exchange program for shifters. I'm just glad we have the opportunity to meet you."

"Us too," Jack agrees. "And thanks again for having us over. Dinner is delicious."

"Oh, it's no trouble," Richard says. "It's not every day we have the chance to meet our niece's intended, and it's so nice to have a house full of people. We've missed having a full table."

At the word "intended," I nearly choke on my water. Jack gives me a look, and I clear my throat. "Sorry. Water went down the wrong pipe."

Jane smirks at me from across the table, and I duck my head down, concentrating on the mountain of meat on my plate.

After dinner, Gwen suggests we all sit down and watch a movie together. She and Richard have a huge collection of DVDs, filled with lots of old movies from the '70s and '80s. They're both huge fans of Clint Eastwood, and they've got almost every film he's ever made.

"What's your favorite Clint Eastwood movie?" Richard asks me as he and Gwen search through the rows of cases.

“Mine’s Dirty Harry ,” I say, and he grins.

“That’s a good one,” he agrees. “But mine’s The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly . Have you seen it?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You haven’t?” he gasps, and I shake my head. “Well, we’ll have to fix that. Here, let’s watch this one.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jack says.

Gwen pops the disc in, and she and Richard settle next to Jack on the couch. I take a seat in the chair, and Jane plops down on my lap, throwing her arms around my neck.

“You’re in my seat,” she teases.

“You’re sitting on me,” I tease back, and she laughs.

“I can’t believe you’ve never seen The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly ,” she says. “It’s a classic.”

“I’m not really a movie person.”

“Yeah, but it’s Clint Eastwood. How can you not be a fan?”

“Oh, I am. I just haven’t seen this one.”

She shakes her head. “Well, you’re in for a treat. It’s one of his best.”

The movie starts, and I try to pay attention, I really do, but I’m distracted by Jane’s

weight in my lap. Every time she moves, I get a whiff of her hair, and it's driving me crazy. Her scent is so sweet, so intoxicating, and I can't resist the urge to lean in and inhale.

She shifts in my lap, and I grip her hips, steadying her.

"Sorry," she whispers, and I grunt in response.

"It's okay," I say, and I'm surprised by the gruffness in my voice.

The hem of her skirt is riding up, and if I wasn't wearing pants, her creamy thighs would be pressing against my bare skin. My cock is rock-hard, and I'm pretty sure she can feel it.

"Are you okay?" she asks, and I nod.

"Yeah," I say, clearing my throat. "Why?"

"You're really tense," she says.

"I'm fine," I reply, and she arches a brow at me. "Really, I am."

"Okay," she says, and she turns her attention back to the TV.

I try to do the same, but it's difficult, and I'm finding it hard to concentrate. I can't seem to focus on anything other than Jane, and her ass is right there, pressed against my cock. I can't help it, she's just too fucking sexy.

By the time the movie is over, I don't even remember what it was about, and I'm pretty sure I fell asleep for the last half of it. Now that it's over, we're all sitting around the coffee table, and her family is still sandwiching Jack on the sofa. From the

way Richard leans in, resting his elbows on his knees, I'm pretty sure I know what's coming.

The inquisition. Oh, hell.

"So, Reiner," her uncle begins. "Tell us a little about yourself. What do you do for a living? You said you and Jack are brothers, right?"

"No, not brothers," I correct. "We're cousins. But we grew up together, and we're really close. I'm a welder, and I work in town in the old industrial district. It's not much, but it pays the bills."

"I'm sure it's a very respectable job," Gwen says. "And what about your family? You mentioned that Jack is all you have left?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply. This time, I'm going to keep my cool. "My parents died a long time ago, and I don't have any siblings."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," her uncle says. "But it's nice to know you have someone. Family is very important, and I'm glad you and Jack have each other."

"Thank you," I reply.

"You know, Jane has a real talent for baking," Gwen beams. "She's always been good in the kitchen."

The corner of my mouth quirks up, and I recall the first day I met Jane at that bar in Stardust Hollow when she had that sugar on her face still. "Yes, ma'am. I've had the pleasure of sampling her goods."

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she turns to look at her niece. "Is that so?"

“Smooth,” Jack coughs into his fist. I want to kick his ass.

“No, no!” I hold my hands up in defense of myself. “That’s not what I meant. I mean, I tried some of her baked goods. That’s what I meant.”

Jane lets out an amused little giggle, and I glare at her. “What?” she says. “I’m not the one who made it sound dirty.”

“You’re not helping,” I growl.

“I’m not trying to,” she retorts, and I can’t help but laugh at the feistiness in her eyes.

“It’s all right,” Gwen chuckles, and she seems genuinely pleased. “She taught herself that, you know. She’s always loved to bake, and she’s very good at it.”

Looking around the room, it’s pretty evident that these two love their niece. Sure, they are a bit pushy and nosy, but I can tell they have nothing but the best intentions. At every opportunity, they gush about her, and it’s obvious that they’re proud of her.

Something akin to jealousy bubbles up inside me. I can’t help it. I’ve never had what Jane has. I’ve never had a loving, doting family, at least not since my parents died. Of course, the alpha was good to me after he took me in, but it wasn’t the same. Gwen and Richard seem to treat Jane like a daughter, and I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to have that.

But then Jane wiggles her ass against me, and all those thoughts fly right out the window. Her heat radiates through her jeans, and I’m instantly hard again.

Shit. I have to think of something else, anything else.

“So, Piper is your daughter, huh?” I don’t miss the squeak in my voice, but I pretend

to. “It must’ve been hard when she moved to Green Lake to marry Rafe. I’m sure you miss her.”

“It was,” Richard concedes. “But she’s happy, and that’s all that matters.”

“Plus, you know, they come to visit often,” Gwen adds.

“We love having her here,” Jack says. “She’s a great girl.”

“Well, we sure think so,” Jane agrees.

“These girls were inseparable growing up, you know. Just like sisters. A lot like you and Jack, it seems. They were always getting into trouble,” Richard chuckles.

Gwen sighs. “Those were the days.”

I glance at my phone to check the time, and when I notice it’s almost eleven, I clear my throat. “Oh, wow. I had no idea it was so late. Jack, we should probably head out. Let these guys get to bed.”

Jane climbs off my lap, and I stand up, adjusting my slacks and praying they have enough give to keep my boner hidden.

“Nonsense,” her uncle says. “You boys are more than welcome to stay the night. We have plenty of room. You know how dangerous it can be out there so late.”

Gwen nods. “Besides, we have a very special breakfast tradition, and now that you boys are part of the family, we’d love for you to join us.”

“Oh no, it’s quite all right,” I say quickly. “We?”

“Nonsense,” Gwen insists. “Reiner, you can stay with Jane in her room, and Jack, I can make up the couch for you. It’s a pull-out.”

“That’s very nice of you, but I don’t want to intrude,” I argue.

“You’re not intruding,” Richard says. “You’re family now, and we’d love to have you.”

Family.

The word hangs in the air, and I’m not sure how to respond.

“Okay, well, if you’re sure,” I relent, and I’m not sure why I say it. I don’t know why I’m agreeing. I should be running for the hills. The truth is, I’m not certain I can sleep next to Jane and be respectful of her family’s hospitality.

## Page 11

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

If my eyes could shoot lasers, this whole trailer would be up in flames.

It was bad enough that I had to spend the whole evening pretending to be dating Reiner, but now I'm supposed to let him sleep in my room? If Aunt Gwen doesn't think I know what she's up to, she's got another thing coming. Those two have taken meddling to a new level, and I'm not sure I can take it anymore.

Okay, so fine. Reiner wasn't completely intolerable tonight. He was kind of... sweet. When he opened up to me out on the porch about his family and his childhood, I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. I mean, I'm not excusing his behavior, but I can understand why he's such an ass. It's a coping mechanism. A way to protect himself.

And the way he interacted with my family, it was almost like he was interested. Like he wanted to know everything about them. About me.

Still, that doesn't mean I want to share a bed with him.

He's tried to get out of it, so I can't blame him. Maybe I can talk some sense into them.

"Aunt Gwen," I begin, "I'm sure Reiner and Jack would be much more comfortable at their own house in their own beds. I don't think it's necessary for them to stay the night."

"Don't be silly," she replies. "We'd love to have them. Besides, I don't want to hear they've gotten hurt because you went out in the middle of the night. It's not safe."

“It’s perfectly safe,” I protest. “It’s their town—they know it. I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

Uncle Richard rubs his chin with his knuckles and says, “I didn’t want to say anything, but I heard some gossip in town today. Someone said there’s rogues running around, and I’d hate to think of you out there, unprotected.”

“Rogues?” I question, and my mind immediately goes to what Reiner told me about what happened to his parents. “What do you mean?”

“Just rumors,” he says. “But it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Okay, obviously I don’t want something horrible happening to them, but the idea of being locked in a room with Reiner all night still makes me nervous. What if I snore? Or drool? Or, oh god, what if I fart?

“But what about poor Jack?” I try. “Look at him, he’s huge! He’s not going to be comfortable on the couch.”

Jack shakes his head. “I’ll be fine. I’ve slept on worse.”

“See?” Aunt Gwen says to me. “It’s all settled. Now, we’re going to head to bed. You kids have fun.”

I want to scream and kick something until they listen to me, but I also realize that if I protest anymore, it’s going to raise some questions. What she-wolf who is head-over-heels for her boyfriend would object so much to sleeping in the same bed with him?

Dammit. I’m trapped.

“Come on,” I sigh, and I turn to lead Reiner down the hall.

“Have a good night!” Jack calls, and I wave without looking back.

“Goodnight!” I say.

When we get to my room, I hesitate. I don’t know how to do this. Do I just strip down and get into my pajamas right here in front of him, or do I go into the bathroom to change? That would look weird, wouldn’t it, considering this is my own room?

But when I think about removing my clothes with Reiner anywhere near me, my stomach turns. I remember the way he looked at me last year, how disgusted he was, and my cheeks heat up. I can’t take seeing that look. Not again.

“Well, this is one for the books, huh?” Reiner jokes. “I don’t think I’ve ever had any girlfriend’s parents insist I sleep with her.”

“They’re not really my parents,” I point out, and I can’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry about that. They’re really embarrassing.”

“No, it’s okay,” he says. “They’re nice. I can tell they love you.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “They do.”

“And they’re right,” he adds. “It’s not safe to be out there at night, not with all the rogues running around. That part was true, by the way, just in case you were wondering if they were making it up. I heard something about it the last time I talked to Rafe. He’s been patrolling the borders.”

“Oh.”

“But it’s not a big deal. Just a few stragglers. They’ll be gone soon.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

I grab a pair of shorts and a T-shirt from my dresser. Like a gentleman, Reiner surprises me and turns around while I change. I turn my back to him as well, and as I strip, I hear the rustle of clothing behind me. Once I’m dressed again, I can’t help myself, and I peek over my shoulder. He’s taken his shirt off, and he’s standing in front of the bed in a pair of boxers.

Oh, shit.

This isn’t the first time I’ve seen him so… exposed. That day, I went to his house and he was completely naked, I just about creamed myself. But this is different. He didn’t know it was me at the door. This is… intentional. He’s just… standing there, and damn, he’s so fucking sexy.

His shoulders are broad and muscular, and his arms are thick and defined. His stomach is flat, and his abs are cut. He’s not overly ripped, but he’s definitely built. And those tattoos. I’ve never been a fan of them, but on him, they’re perfect. He’s so… masculine.

My mouth goes dry, and I swallow hard, trying to bring moisture to my tongue.

“Jane,” he says, and his voice is low and gruff.

“Yeah?”

“You’re staring.” That trademark smug grin is back, and I realize he’s caught me.

“I’m not,” I argue, and I’m pretty sure my cheeks are bright red.

“You are,” he teases. “And I’m not complaining. You can stare at me any time you

want.”

“Whatever,” I scoff. I scurry over to the bed and climb in, pulling the covers up to my chin.

“Are you shy?” he laughs, and the bed dips as he climbs in next to me.

“No,” I lie.

“You are,” he says. “That’s adorable.”

“Shut up,” I grumble.

“Make me.”

“What are we, five?” I roll my eyes.

He rolls over to face me, propping his head up with his hand. “This reminds me of when I would hook up with girls back in high school. They’d sneak me into their bedrooms, and we’d try so hard to be quiet because her parents were in the next room. It was a huge rush.”

“You’re so romantic.”

“Hey, I was a teenage boy. All I could think about was sex.”

“And now you’re a man,” I say. “And what do you think about now?”

“Sex,” he says wryly. “But I’m more sophisticated now. I think about multiple positions and locations.”

“Wow,” I snort. “So, you’re like a real Casanova. A regular Don Juan.”

He laughs and lies back, staring up at the ceiling. “All right, out with it. What’s your weird dating story? I know you’ve got one.”

I press my lips together as I think, running through the options. I’ve had some bad dates and some good dates, but I can’t come up with anything that’s too crazy. “I got nothing,” I finally say.

“Come on, sugar,” he urges. “There’s gotta be something.”

“It’s not like it’s a long list. I’m not nearly as experienced as you are, Mr. Bigshot.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I immediately regret them. The last thing I want Reiner to think is that I’m some inexperienced little girl.

“What does that mean?” he asks.

I blow out a breath, wishing I’d never said anything. “It means, I’ve only had two boyfriends, and neither of them were long enough to...”

“Are you telling me you’re a... virgin?” he echoes, and he turns to face me again. I wish I could disappear under the covers.

“I know, I’m a total loser.”

“No, you’re not,” he says. “You’re just... picky. I don’t blame you. Why settle for less than the best?”

“Ha-ha,” I deadpan. “I’m not picky. I’m just not the most attractive girl in the world, and you can’t blame me for not attracting a lot of attention.”

“Jane.” He says my name like a warning, and he sits up, turning to face me.

“What?”

“You don’t mean that, do you? You’re fucking gorgeous.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious,” he says. “You’re a knockout. You’re the kind of girl guys fantasize about. Hell, I can’t count how many times I’ve jerked off thinking about how since we met.”

“Reiner!” I gasp, and my cheeks burn. “Jesus, you can’t just say stuff like that.”

“Why not?” He reaches for me, cupping my face in his hands. “It’s true.”

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I’m going to kiss you, and I’m going to prove to you how beautiful you are.”

“You can’t,” I protest. “We can’t.”

“I can,” he says, “and I will.”

I should push him away. I should tell him to stop. But I can’t.

He leans in, and his lips brush against mine, tentatively at first, and then he presses harder, his tongue sweeping across the seam of my mouth. I open for him, and he groans.

He’s so strong, so powerful, and I melt against him. His fingers tangle in my hair, and

he pulls me closer, his tongue probing, exploring.

I've never been kissed like this. I've never had a man's hands on me like this. I'm lost in him, and I don't ever want to be found.

"Jane," he whispers, and his voice is husky, needy. "Sugar, you taste so sweet. Like honey."

"Reiner," I murmur, and I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my breasts against his chest.

"You're so soft," he says. His hands move down my back to my hips, and he squeezes my ass. "And if your aunt and uncle weren't right down the hall, I'd really give you something to moan about."

When he pulls away, I'm left panting and gasping for breath. My entire body is on fire, and I'm not sure I'll ever recover from that.

"Goodnight, sugar," he says. "Sleep well."

I can't speak. I'm speechless. So, I just nod and roll over, trying to get comfortable.

I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep tonight. Not with the way my heart is pounding and my skin is burning. Not with the way I can still feel his lips on mine, and his hands on my body.

But eventually, I drift off, and I dream of him.

When I wake up, I'm still tired, but I can't go back to sleep. Reiner's arm is slung over my waist, and his body is pressed against my back. His cock is hard and prodding me, poking me in the ass, and I bump against it on instinct.

“Morning, sugar,” he rumbles, his voice husky with sleep.

“Morning,” I reply, and I try to shift away from him, but he holds me tight.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Um, to get ready?”

“Not yet,” he says. “I’m not done holding you.”

What the hell? Is he serious? I have no idea what to make of this guy.

I bolt upright, fully intent on asking him what the hell he’s talking about, but before I can get a word out, there’s a knock at my bedroom door.

“Jane?” Aunt Gwen calls. “Reiner? Are you awake? We’re getting ready to make breakfast.”

“Be there in a minute,” I call back, and I scramble out of bed.

“Breakfast sounds great,” Reiner says. He stretches, his muscles flexing and rippling.

“It’s a whole production,” I warn him. “You’ll see. It’s a family tradition.”

“I look forward to it,” he replies, and he heads into the bathroom.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. By the time I’m dressed, Reiner emerges, and we walk to the kitchen together.

“There you are!” Aunt Gwen says. “Jack is taking care of the bacon on the grill, and Richard and I will handle the pancake and eggs. You two go ahead and juice the

oranges and apples.”

“Sounds good,” I reply.

“We’ll do our best,” Reiner adds.

“Great. It’s all in the fridge. The juicer is in the cabinet.”

“Got it,” I say. I grab the fruit and set it on the counter. “You know how to work this thing?” I ask Reiner.

“Nope,” he says.

“Of course not,” I laugh. “Here, I’ll show you.”

I turn the machine on, and he watches as I slice an orange in half and pop it inside. I run the machine, and once the juice is collected, I pour it into a glass.

“Easy enough,” he says. “I can handle that.”

“You’re going to cut your finger off,” I tease.

“I will not,” he shoots back. “My fingers are safe.”

“We shall see. I’ll slice, you squeeze? Or the other way around?”

“I’ll slice,” he says, and he takes the knife from me. “That machine is scary.”

I laugh and shake my head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“So you’ve said.”

“And I’ll say it again.”

We spend the morning in the kitchen with my family, and I’m struck by how seamlessly Reiner and Jack fit in. We all work around one another, talking and laughing and making jokes. It’s like they’re part of the family.

So much so that when we finally sit down at the table to eat, I have to remind myself that this is fake. It’s a lie. It’s not real.

In a couple of months, when I go back to Stardust Hollow, Reiner will stay here, and it’ll be like none of this ever happened.

## Page 12

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

Patrolling has always been one of my favorite things to do. I love the thrill of the hunt, of being out in the wilderness. And I love the adrenaline rush that comes with it.

But today, I'm distracted.

My mind keeps drifting to Jane, and I can't focus. I'm supposed to be looking out for rogues, for humans, for anything that could pose a threat to the pack, but my mind is stuck on the way her ass felt pressed up against my cock this morning. I spent half the night wide awake and hard, and I'm exhausted, but damn, was it worth it.

And then, when she told me she was a virgin, I almost lost it. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from coming right then and there. I've never been with a virgin before. Even my first time was with an older woman who was much more experienced than me. She taught me everything I know.

The thought of being the first man to touch Jane, the first man to make her come, the first man to fuck her, is enough to send me over the edge. She's so innocent, so pure. And I want to corrupt her. I want to take her, claim her, make her mine.

But I can't. I can't do that to her. I can't ruin her life like that. She's destined for someone better. Someone who will make her happy.

I'm not that guy. I'm the guy who fucks and runs. I'm the guy who leaves a trail of broken hearts in his wake. I'm the guy who doesn't do commitment or relationships. I'm the guy who's not good enough for her.

When I think back to breakfast with her family, I can't help but think how nice it was.

How normal it was. Everyone worked together to make the meal, teasing and joking the entire time. It was like a scene from a movie or a TV show, the perfect family. And I was right in the middle of it.

It was weird, but not in a bad way. It was weird in a good way. It was weird in a way that made me want more. Everything in me expected to find it uncomfortable or awkward, but it wasn't. I was right at home. And that's what scares me the most.

I'm not the kind of guy who fits in with a family. I'm the kind of guy who's on the outskirts, the one on the fringes. I'm the one who's always on the outside looking in. I'm the one who doesn't belong.

But this morning, I belonged. I was a part of something. Don't get me wrong, I've always been part of a pack, but this was different. This was family. It was more intimate, more personal. It was something I never knew I wanted until I had it.

And now that I've had a taste of it, I want more. I want to be a part of it. I want to be a part of Jane's family.

But I can't. I can't let myself get sucked into this. I can't let myself believe that this is real. I can't let myself fall for her.

"Hey, asshole," Rafe snaps. "Pay attention. This isn't a fucking game."

"Sorry," I grumble.

"What's wrong with you?" Gael asks. "You're acting weird."

Gael owns the bookstore in town. He's not one who typically goes on patrols, so I'm surprised he's out here. But then I remember at the last pack meeting, he said he wanted to get more involved.

“Nothing,” I snap.

Gael eyes me for a moment before he says, “I heard a rumor the other day about you. Someone said you took on a mate.”

“Who told you that?”

“Doesn’t matter. Is it true?”

“It’s complicated,” I reply.

“Complicated, how?” Rafe asks. He gives me a look, and I know I have to be careful here. Rafe is Piper’s husband, which means Jane is like family to him by default.

“It’s a long story,” I say.

“We’ve got time,” Gael says.

“We don’t,” I argue. “We should be paying attention.”

We’re standing off to the side of the road just in front of the tree line. This street leads straight through town, and it’s the main thoroughfare. The sign that says “Welcome to Green Lake” is just in front of us, and right on this edge is where we’ve heard rogues have been sighted.

My guess is they know better than to cross that territory line, but they’re not too far from it. That just pisses me off. We’ve had trouble more than once in this exact spot, and I’m not about to let it happen again.

After a brief silence, Gael gets a big, stupid grin on his face. “So... what’s her name? Tell me about her.”

“Oh my god,” I groan. “Would you just let it go?”

“I’m just saying it’s not like you to be so secretive. Especially about women. Usually, you can’t shut up about your conquests.”

“It’s not like that,” I counter.

“You’re being awfully defensive,” Rafe remarks.

“I’m not,” I growl.

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say it’s someone we know,” Gael says. “Someone in the pack.”

“She’s from Stardust Hollow,” Rafe supplies, waggling his eyebrows.

“Oh, so she’s one of the visitors,” Gael says. “How exotic.”

“Shut up,” I hiss.

“Do I know her?”

“No.”

“Come on, man,” Gael says. “We’re a pack. We’re brothers. You can tell me.”

“It’s really not a big deal,” I insist. “Can we just?”

In this distance, coming from behind, I hear footsteps approaching. I whirl around, ready to attack.

But it's not a rogue, it's a woman. Queenie, to be exact. She's one of our more prominent females, and she helps run the orphanage with Alpha Evan's wife, Mia.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask her.

"I had an errand," she explains. "I was just dropping some stuff off at the school, and I picked up your scent. Wind is heading south, so I figured you'd be around here somewhere."

"You shouldn't be out here," I caution.

"Why not?" she asks, and she puts her hands on her hips. "I can take care of myself. I'm a wolf, same as you."

Rafe snorts. "Don't underestimate her, Reiner. She's tougher than she looks."

"I wasn't saying she's not," I argue. "I'm just saying it's not safe. There's a reason we're all out here together. Rogues have been spotted close to the line."

That makes Queenie stiffen. Her eyes widen, and she looks around. "Rogues? Here?"

"It's just hearsay for now," I clarify. "But we're taking every precaution. Evan has ordered round-the-clock patrols, and we're all on high alert."

Queenie sets her bag down in the dirt and plants her hands on her hips. "I've got a few minutes. I'll hang out with you for a bit. Four noses are better than three."

"You sure?" I ask.

"I'm sure," she replies. "Besides, I'm not letting you have all the fun."

“Suit yourself,” I say.

We continue on, pacing the length of the boundary. I keep my nose to the wind, and I listen for any sounds out of the ordinary. But so far, it’s silent. There’s not even a hint of a rogue. If they’re out here, they’re being very, very careful.

“So, Reiner,” Queenie says. “Tell me about her.”

“Not you, too,” I groan.

“What?” she asks. “You know I love gossip, and it’s all over town. The guys were talking about it at the bar the other night.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter. “It’s none of their damn business.”

“You’re not denying it,” she points out.

“He’s not denying it,” Gael echoes.

“Fine,” I bark. “Yes, I’m seeing someone, but it’s not a big deal, and I’d appreciate it if you’d both lay off.”

“Ooh, touchy,” Queenie says. “So, what’s her name?”

“I’d rather not?”

“Jane,” Rafe cuts in. “Her name is Jane, and if it’s as casual as you say, Reiner, then you better let her know that. Jane isn’t one of your usual flings. She’s not the kind of girl who’s okay with that kind of thing.”

I turn around to face my beta, and he’s got his arms crossed over his chest. He’s

scowling at me, and I can tell he's not fucking around.

"I'm not playing games with her," I say.

"Good," he replies. "Because I don't want to have to kick your ass. Piper and Jane are more like sisters than cousins, and that makes her my sister-in-law. I don't want to have to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

Oh, shit. What the hell have I gotten myself into? My cousin is looking at me like he wants to rip my head off, and I have a feeling his wife would back him up.

"I'm serious, Reiner," Rafe growls. "I'm not kidding around."

I hold my hands up in surrender. "I'm not, either. I'm not playing games with her. I'm not going to hurt her."

He just holds his stare, and I can see the wheels turning in his head. Rafe is trying to figure out if I'm lying or not.

Before he can make up his mind, a car turns onto the road, headed straight for town. I'd recognize that little red convertible anywhere.

Oh, crap. It's Dani.

"You have got to be kidding me," I groan.

"What?" Rafe asks.

"What's wrong?" Gael asks.

Dani pulls up beside us. She's got her sunglasses on, but I can see how her eyes are

scanning the group. She plasters on a wide, flirtatious smile when they land on me, and she wiggles her manicured fingers.

“Reiner!” she exclaims. “Fancy meeting you here.”

I can feel Rafe’s eyes on me, burning into the back of my skull as I step up to the side of her car.

“What are you doing here, Dani?” I ask.

“I’m just passing through,” she says. “I saw you and thought I’d say hi.”

“Hi,” I say. “Now you can go.”

“Oh, come on,” she purrs. “Don’t be like that, Reiner. Hey, you know they’re playing karaoke at the bar tonight. Why don’t you and I have a drink and sing a song?”

“I’m busy,” I answer.

“Aww,” she pouts. “You’re no fun. Come on, it could be like old times. Remember how much fun we used to have?”

I wince, fighting every urge to look over my shoulder to see the look on Rafe’s face. I can picture it nice and clear. No doubt he’s got his eyebrow raised, his arms are crossed over his chest, and he’s giving me that “I’m disappointed in you” look.

“That was a long time ago,” I tell her.

“So?” she asks. “We can have fun again. I’m still single, you know. I’m not seeing anyone.”

“I am,” I inform her, even though I know she already knows. She met Jane at the party. She’s just trying to stir up trouble. “You should get going, Dani. It’s not safe out here. We’re patrolling.”

“Oh, I’m not scared,” she says. “I have a big, strong wolf here to protect me.”

I step back and roll my eyes. “Get home, Dani. Now.”

She blinks at me for a moment, and without a word, she peels away, kicking up a cloud of dust as she goes. I watch her taillights disappear down the road, and I’m dreading turning around. I know what I’m going to see.

“Well, that was interesting,” Queenie says.

“I’ve got a question,” Gael says.

“Me too,” Rafe chimes in.

“Oh, Jesus,” I mutter.

“Me first,” Queenie declares. “What the hell was that, Reiner? I’ve never once seen you turn down an opportunity to fuck a hot woman.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a question about that,” Gael says.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Can we not do this right now? We’ve got rogues out here.”

“So, you’re saying there is a story,” Queenie prods.

“I’m saying we have bigger things to worry about,” I argue.

“I think it’s great,” Rafe says. “Jane’s a good girl. She deserves a guy who’s not a total asshole.”

“Gee, thanks,” I mutter.

“You know what I mean,” Rafe says. “You’re not exactly known for your serious relationships.”

“I’ve had a few,” I argue.

“Name one,” he prompts.

“There was that girl, uh...” I trail off.

“You can’t remember her name, can you?” Gael says.

“Okay, so I’ve had a lot of flings,” I amend. “It’s not a crime.”

Queenie starts to chuckle as she shakes her head. “Well, this has been a blast and all, but I’ve gotta get to the school. I’ve got a bunch of kids waiting for me.”

“Thanks for the help,” I say.

“Anytime,” she replies. “And, Reiner, I’m rooting for you. I think it’s great you found someone.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, so I just nod and wave as she starts walking towards town.

The three of us go back to our patrol. We’re silent for a few minutes, scanning the area, and I’m grateful for the reprieve. I’m getting pretty tired of the interrogation, the

constant reminders of the mistakes I've made, and the fact that I'm not good enough for Jane. I don't need Rafe or anyone else to tell me as much. I already know.

A snapping twig in the distance draws my attention, and I cock my head to the side. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Gael asks.

"That noise," I say. "It sounded like a branch."

Rafe is frowning, and he's got his head tilted to the side, too. "I heard it. Something is out there."

"It could be an animal," Gael suggests.

"No," I argue, drawing in a long sniff to catch the scent. "It's not an animal. Well, not entirely. It's a shifter. A rogue."

"Are you sure?" Gael asks.

"Of course I'm sure," I snap. "I can smell him."

Rafe is stock-still, and his eyes are closed. I know he's concentrating, listening for steps and movements, and I watch him take a deep breath.

"You're right," he says. "I can smell him, too."

I take a step toward the tree line, and just as my boots move from asphalt to dirt, a large brown wolf bursts from the trees and lunges at me. I'm knocked off my feet, and I hit the ground hard. I can feel the air leave my lungs, and I'm momentarily dazed as I struggle to catch my breath.

“Reiner!” I hear Rafe’s voice, but it sounds like it’s coming from a mile away.

I can feel the wolf’s hot, rancid breath on my neck, hovering just over my throat. All he has to do is bite down, and I’m done for.

“Hold!” a man shouts. “Don’t move.”

I can’t see him. He’s behind me, but I can hear his footsteps approaching.

“You’re on the wrong side of the line, wolf,” the same man declares. “Your territory is three feet that way.”

“Do you really want to start something here?” Rafe asks. “The alpha isn’t going to much care where the property line is. If you kill one of our wolves, you’re as good as dead yourself.”

I crane my neck to look up, and I see a man standing over me. He’s wearing an expensive suit, and his hair is slicked back. The guy looks like a fucking mobster. A rich, arrogant mobster. I have to take a second sniff to convince myself he’s a shifter and not just some corporate douchebag.

“You’re trespassing,” the man states with a brief shrug.

Gael shakes his head and inches a bit closer to the stranger. “This area is unclaimed between Green Lake and Stardust Hollow. No pack has a claim to it.”

“Perhaps that used to be the case,” the man sneers, “but things change, don’t they? And money can buy a lot of things, including property.”

Well, shit. If this guy is telling the truth, then this alliance we have with Stardust Hollow just got a lot more complicated. How are we supposed to travel to and from

there if this guy has bought this land?

“This is county property,” Rafe explains. “You can’t buy county property.”

“Well, not technically, no. But what you can buy is shifters who are willing to defend it as though it’s yours.” He strides over to my beta and holds out his hand. “You must be the man in charge here. Name is Lionel.”

Rafe stares at the man’s extended hand, and I can see the disgust on his face. This guy is a real piece of work.

“I’m not shaking your hand,” Rafe finally growls.

Lionel smiles. “Very well, then. I’m guessing you’re the beta of this little pack, which means you’re the one responsible for these men. Now, I’m a reasonable man, so I’m going to offer you a chance to walk away and forget this little incident ever happened.”

“Incident?” Rafe echoes. “You attacked us. That’s not an incident. If you think we’re going to let that slide, then you don’t know Green Lake.”

I watch as Rafe’s chest heaves, and the instant I see his eyes flash, I prepare to shift. Looks like we’re not leaving this place without a fight.

## Page 13

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

I've been lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling for what feels like hours. It's the middle of the day, and there are a million other things I should be doing, but I can't seem to force myself to get up and do any of them. I'm too busy trying to sort my head out.

I've been spending so much time with Reiner, and I can't help but feel like I've gotten sucked into his world. I'm not the kind of girl who dates a guy like him. Girls like me don't end up with guys like him. Not in the movies, not in books, not in real life. Guys like him don't want girls like me.

I don't fit into his world. I'm not a part of his pack. I don't even live in the same town. But the way he was this morning with my aunt and uncle, the way he acted, the way he spoke, I almost believed him. I almost thought that maybe, just maybe, he really did want me.

After a while, I could actually picture it. Me living with him, waking up beside him every morning, sharing his bed every night. I could see us going to pack meetings together, him holding my hand as he introduces me to his friends and family. I could see us going on runs, him chasing me through the woods and tackling me to the ground. I could picture us making love under the moon, the cool grass tickling my naked skin. I could see it all, and it felt real.

But how could it be real? How could a guy like him, a man who's never had a serious relationship, suddenly decide that I'm the one he wants to be with? It doesn't make sense.

I'm not the kind of girl a guy picks. I'm not the girl a guy chooses. I'm the girl a guy

settles for because he can't have the one he wants. I'm the girl a guy sleeps with and then moves on from. I'm the girl a guy has fun with but never takes home, and I've always been okay with that. Well, not okay with it, but I've accepted it. I've learned to accept it.

I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why I'm suddenly reaching for something I can't have. I'm not a stupid girl. I'm not naive. I'm not a romantic. I've never been a romantic. I've never wanted a prince to come sweep me off my feet. I've never dreamed of a happily-ever-after.

There's a reason I'm still a virgin at twenty-three years old. I've had two relationships, but they were short-lived. The guys I dated were never interested in anything serious, and I wasn't about to give up my V card to a guy who didn't care about me.

I'm not sure what's different about Reiner, but something is. I don't know what it is, but it's there, and it's pulling me in.

My phone rings, and I reach for it, grateful for the distraction. It's Piper, so I shake the thoughts of Reiner from my head and answer.

"Hey, Pipes."

"Jane, have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"About the scouting team," she says. "They were attacked. They're back, but they're hurt."

"Oh, god," I gasp. "Is everyone okay?"

“I think so,” she says. “But they’re all at the infirmary with the healer. Jane... Reiner was with them. I think he’s hurt.”

I bolt upright, clutching my phone to my ear as my heart thunders in my chest. “Where is the healer? Where are they? How do I get there? I need to see him. I need to see him right now.”

“I’ll pick you up,” she says. “I’m coming.”

I hang up and scramble for clothes, throwing on the first things I find. I yank a brush through my hair and pull it up into a messy bun. I’m out the door before I can think twice about it.

Aunt Gwen chases me down the steps to the trailer, calling my name, and I turn to face her.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” she demands. “You look pale.”

“It’s Reiner,” I say. “I have to go. I have to see him.”

She reaches for me, and I lean in, letting her wrap me in a tight hug. “It’s going to be okay, Jane. Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

I nod, but I’m not sure I believe her. She keeps asking me what’s wrong, but I can’t say it out loud. Part of me knows it’s absurd to get so worked up over a fake boyfriend, but the other part of me can’t help it. Even if I’m not in love with the guy, even if this is just a silly arrangement, I still care about him. And I can’t stand the thought of him getting hurt.

When I see Piper’s car roll to a stop, I run to it, flinging open the door and sliding inside. Aunt Gwen hurries to the driver’s side and taps on the window. Her daughter

rolls it down and says, “Hey, Mom.”

“What’s happened? Is everything okay?”

“The scouts were attacked,” Piper says. “The boys are at the infirmary.”

“Oh, dear,” she gasps. “That’s awful. Jane, honey, Uncle Richard and I will meet you there, okay? Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

I don’t reply. I can’t. I’m too busy panicking. I need to get to Reiner. I need to see him. I need to know that he’s okay.

The drive to the infirmary seems to take forever, and I’m antsy the entire time. My leg is bouncing, and I’m picking at my fingernails, and I can’t seem to sit still.

“Calm down,” Piper says. “I’m sure he’s fine. He’s a shifter. He’ll heal.”

“But what if he’s not fine? What if he’s badly hurt? What if he’s dying?”

“He’s not dying,” she tells me. “I promise.”

“How do you know? Rogues killed his parents, Piper. Did you know that? They were murdered. By rogues.”

She draws in a shaky breath and nods. “Rafe told me that, yes. But listen, Rafe is there, too, and you don’t see me freaking out.”

“Rafe is your mate,” I remind her. “Of course you’re not freaking out. If something horrible had happened to him, you would feel it. Reiner and I haven’t... we’re not...” I almost let the truth slip, but I pull it back.

Piper glances over at me, and I'm just praying she's too distracted by the situation to notice. Thankfully, she doesn't press the issue.

"You'll see," she tells me. "Reiner is fine. Just wait."

When we arrive at the infirmary, I'm out of the car before it even fully stops moving. I race to the building and burst through the doors, looking around frantically. There are people everywhere, and I can't find him.

"Jane!"

I hear my name and turn to see Rafe striding toward me. I rush to him, and he wraps me in a hug.

"Are you okay?" I ask him. "Where's Reiner?"

"I'm fine, but we were ambushed. Reiner got attacked, but he's okay. He's back there with the healer."

"Where?"

"Down the hall and to the left," he says, pointing.

I don't waste any time. I hurry down the hallway, following his instructions until I spot a sign that reads "Healer's Office." I push through the door and freeze.

There's a young, beautiful blond woman standing over Reiner as he lies on a bed. She's leaning over him with her hands pressed to his chest, and he's shirtless.

I can feel the heat rising in my cheeks, and I'm suddenly not sure what I'm doing here. I'm not his girlfriend. I'm not his mate. I'm not his anything. What if he doesn't

want me here? What if this is a mistake?

“Jane?”

I snap out of my trance and look up. Reiner is staring at me, and the woman is watching me curiously.

“Hi,” I say softly. “I heard what happened, and I was worried. I came to see how you were.”

“I’m fine,” he says. “Just a few cuts and scrapes.”

“He was lucky,” the woman says. “If this gash had been just a few centimeters to the left, it could’ve hit his heart.”

“Don’t scare her,” Reiner chides her. “It’s not that bad.”

“Not that bad?” the woman echoes. “You almost died. If you’d been human, you would’ve.”

“Well, thank god I’m not,” he mutters.

“I’m sorry,” I say, stepping forward. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’m Jane. I’m Reiner’s girlfriend.”

I hold out my hand, and the woman shakes it. “I’m Clara. I’m the healer.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. “Thank you for taking care of him.”

“It’s my job,” she says. “But you’re welcome. I just have a couple more bandages to apply, and then he’s good to go.”

“I’ll do it,” I offer before I can stop myself.

Clara gives me a strange look, and I can’t blame her. I’m acting like a crazy person. I’m sure I look like a crazy person. I have zero medical training, and she’s the healer, but as stupid as it sounds, I don’t want her touching him.

“I can do it,” I repeat. “I’m his girlfriend. I should be the one to do it.”

“Okay,” Clara agrees after a moment. “I’ll go grab the supplies.”

I watch her leave and then turn to Reiner. “I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t have come. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m glad you did.” He flashes me a smile, and my knees go weak. “I’m fine, really. It’s just a few scratches. I’ll be back to normal in no time.”

He sits up and reaches for me, pulling me between his legs so I’m standing between his thighs. He’s looking up at me, and I’m so aware of his bare chest. My hands glide across his shoulders, and I’m careful not to touch his wounds.

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah,” he says. “I’ve had worse. I’ll be fine.”

“I was so scared,” I admit. “When I heard you were hurt, I was so scared.”

“I’m fine,” he assures me, cupping my cheek. “I’m okay. Everything is okay.”

My eyes fall to his lips, and I lean in, unable to resist. I press my mouth to his, and he lets out a soft groan. His fingers tangle in my hair, and he deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine. But then, just as quickly as it started, he pulls away, and my

heart sinks.

“Jane,” he whispers. “We shouldn’t.”

Of course we shouldn’t. Because there’s no one around to see, so what’s the point? I take a step back, reminding myself of my place here. None of this is real. This is all pretend, a means to an end, and there’s no point in acting if there is no audience.

“Right,” I agree. “Sorry.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but before he does, Clara reenters the room.

“Here are some bandages and ointment,” she explains, handing them to me. “He will heal pretty quickly, but in the meantime, you’ll want to change the dressings and reapply the salve twice a day. If you need anything, just stop by. I’ll be around.”

“Thanks, Clara,” he says.

She smiles and nods, and I’m grateful she’s not sticking around to witness this awkward moment.

“Let me help you with those,” I tell him, reaching for the bandage.

“I can do it,” he says.

“I’m sure you can, but I’m here and I want to do it. Please?”

He sighs and nods. “Okay. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

I get to work applying the bandages, and he watches me. I can feel his eyes on me, and I'm suddenly nervous. My hands are shaking, and my breath is coming out in short, choppy bursts. I can't focus on what I'm doing.

"Jane, I?"

"Oh my goodness, you poor boy!" Aunt Gwen rushes into the room, followed closely by Uncle Richard. She hurries to the bed and gathers him in a hug, ignoring the way he winces. "I'm so sorry! I'm so glad you're okay!"

"Aunt Gwen, careful," I caution her. "He's hurt."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry," she says, releasing him. "I'm just so relieved. I'm so happy you're okay."

"I'm fine," Reiner says. "Really. I'm okay."

"What happened?" Uncle Richard asks.

"Some rogues have been spotted in the area, and we were trying to track them down. We were ambushed, and they nearly killed us. We were lucky. We all got out of there and made it home. Can't say the same for all of them."

"This is a nightmare!" Aunt Gwen exclaims. "See? We told you the other night, didn't we? It's not safe out there. The rogues are getting bolder. They're attacking our people, and they're killing them. They're not going to stop until everyone is dead."

"We're working on it," Reiner assures her. "We'll catch them."

"They're rogues," Uncle Richard says. "They're not like the rest of us. They don't follow the rules. They don't care about the treaty or the peace we've had for the last

century. They're wild, and they're dangerous, and they're not going to stop."

"You're right," Reiner agrees. "But we'll stop them. We'll make sure they can't hurt anyone else."

"But they?"

"Guys," I intercede, "maybe we should talk about this later. Reiner is still healing. He shouldn't be stressed."

"You're right," Aunt Gwen says. "I'm sorry, I got a little carried away. I'm just so worried. I don't know what we'd do if something happened to you, Reiner. You're like a son to me. Ever since Jane brought you home, I've felt like you were a part of the family."

Guilt twists in my gut. It's going to break her heart when this is all over.

"I'm fine," he says. "I promise. I'll heal up in no time. I'll be back to normal soon."

"Good," she says. "And until then, you'll be staying with us. I insist. Jane will help you, and if you need anything, I'll be there, too. We'll make sure you have everything you need."

"That's not necessary," he protests. "I'm not an invalid. I can take care of myself."

"Nonsense," she insists. "You're injured. You're staying with us."

He looks to me for help, but I shrug. I can't argue with her. I'm not even sure I want to.

"Fine," he concedes. "But only until I'm better."

“Of course,” my aunt agrees. “Now, let’s get you home.”

Well, I guess that’s settled. I’m moving in with a boyfriend I’m not really dating.

Great.

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

If you told me a month ago that I'd be living in a house with a girl who was pretending to be my girlfriend, I would've laughed in your face. But here I am, sitting on her couch, arguing with her about where I'm going to sleep.

"I'm not taking the bed," she argues. "You're the one who's injured. You're the one who needs to rest. You're the one who needs to heal. I'm fine. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No," I state without room for argument. "A man does not make a woman sleep on the couch."

"This isn't the 1950s," she counters. "Women can sleep on the couch if they want to."

"Not in my house," I say.

"You're not even sleeping in your house," she reminds me. "You're sleeping in my house. So, therefore, you don't get a say in what happens in my house."

"I'm not sleeping in your bed."

"Then I'm not, either," she declares. "I guess we're both sleeping out here, then. I'll take the floor, and you can have the couch."

"Don't be ridiculous," I scoff. "You're not sleeping on the floor."

"I'm not letting you sleep on the floor, and I'm not taking the bed."

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Gwen stomps out of her bedroom. Her curlers are still in her hair, and she’s wearing a long, pink nightgown. “You two are the most stubborn people I’ve ever met. Why are you even fighting about this? Why can’t you both sleep in the bed?”

“Because...” Jane trails off, and for a second, I’m almost afraid she’s going to tell her the truth. “Because Rafe is hurt, and I don’t want to accidentally roll over and hurt him.”

“Oh, honey, you sleep like the damn dead,” Aunt Gwen says with a sigh. “I doubt you’ll even move. Now, enough of this. I’m tired, and I have a headache. Stop arguing and go to bed. Both of you. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I grumble.

“Aunt Gwen, I don’t think?”

“Bed. Now.”

“Okay,” Jane relents, holding her hands up. “We’re going.”

“Good,” Aunt Gwen says with a curt nod. “And I don’t want to hear another word about it. Now, good night.”

She disappears back into her room, and Jane and I look at each other.

“Looks like we’re sharing the bed,” I comment with a smirk.

“Yeah,” she agrees. “Looks like it.”

“I’ll try not to hog the covers,” I tease.

“I’ll try not to drool all over you,” she retorts.

“You can drool all over me,” I say, winking at her. “I don’t mind.”

She blushes and turns away, and I laugh.

“Come on,” I say, standing. “Let’s go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

She nods and stands, and we walk to her room. I pause in the doorway and watch her. She’s so beautiful. She’s wearing a pair of tiny shorts and a tank top, and her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Even in this relaxed state, she’s breathtaking. Sleeping next to her that first night was torture. I could feel her heat, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to touch her. And now I’m going to have to sleep next to her again, and I’m not sure I’ll be able to resist.

“Do you need help getting your shirt off?” she offers, getting quieter with each word as though she’s embarrassed by her question.

“Uh, yeah,” I agree. “That would be great.”

I turn around, and she helps me lift the shirt over my head. Her fingers brush against my skin, and I have to suppress a groan. It was the same way back at the infirmary. When she was helping me with the bandages, her hands were everywhere, and I could feel her touch all the way to my bones. And when she kissed me, I had to stop myself from taking it further. The disappointment on her face was clear as day, but I just didn’t trust myself not to do something stupid.

Not to mention I was in a pretty vulnerable state. The last thing I ever want Jane to see me as is weak, and I was definitely feeling weak at that moment.

But now here we are, alone in her room, and she’s touching me again. I’m half-

naked, and she's right here, and I want her. I want her so badly.

"There," she says, tossing the shirt in the hamper. "All done."

"Thanks," I murmur, looking anywhere but at those beautiful gray eyes.

"You're welcome," she replies. "Now, let's get some sleep. You need your rest."

"Yeah," I agree. "Sleep."

I climb into the bed and lie down, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. I don't dare look at her. Not if I want to keep my resolve.

She climbs into the other side of the bed and pulls the covers up. I can feel the heat of her body, and I close my eyes, trying to block out the urge to reach for her.

"Night, Reiner," she whispers.

"Night, Jane," I reply.

It takes her a long time to fall asleep. I can hear her breathing, and I can feel her tossing and turning. I stay still, my back to her, and I focus on the sounds of the night. When her breathing evens out and her movements stop, I know she's asleep.

I wait a few more minutes, just to be sure, and then I roll over and look at her.

She's lying on her side, facing me, and she's so beautiful. Her dark hair is spilling across the pillow, and her lips are parted slightly. She's so peaceful and so perfect.

I can't help myself. I reach out and brush her hair away from her face. She doesn't stir, and I smile. I lean over and press a soft kiss to her forehead, and then I settle

back on my side of the bed and close my eyes.

When Lionel and his wolves attacked us, I was certain I was going to die. I was ready for it. I was prepared. But now, as I lay here listening to the sound of Jane's breathing, I realize that although I made it out, the danger is still there. As soon as it was obvious we were going to come out the victors, Lionel and his men retreated, but I know they're still out there. I know they're still a threat. I know they're going to come back, and I'm terrified.

I'm not afraid to die. I'm not afraid of the pain. But the thought of anything happening to Jane and her family terrifies me. I don't know where the protective urge is coming from, but I do know there's no use fighting it. I'm going to protect her, and I'm going to make sure she's safe. I'm going to make sure everyone is safe.

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It's not the sun that wakes me up. In fact, when I open my eyes, it's still pitch black in the room. But I'm awake, and I'm alert.

Jane is lying beside me, whimpering and moaning in her sleep. It's not until I hear her moan my name that I realize what's going on.

She's having a sex dream.

About me.

Holy shit.

I'm frozen, unsure of what to do. Her breath picks up until she's panting, and her hips start rocking.

“Reiner,” she moans.

That’s it. I can’t take it anymore.

“Jane,” I whisper, shaking her shoulder. “Wake up, baby.”

She whimpers and rocks her hips harder.

“Jane,” I say a little louder. “Wake up.”

“Reiner,” she moans.

“Jane, wake the fuck up,” I growl.

“Huh?”

“Open your eyes, sugar,” I demand.

She does, and her eyes widen when she sees me hovering over her.

“What are you?”

“Sounded like you were having quite the dream,” I comment with a smirk.

She thinks for a moment, and then her face turns bright red. “Oh my god,” she groans, covering her face with her hands. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I didn’t mean to. I?”

“Shh,” I say, pulling her hands away. “Don’t apologize.”

“But?”

“I liked it,” I admit. “I like the thought of you dreaming about me. About us.”

“What makes you think I was dreaming about you?” she snaps.

“You said my name,” I tease.

“I did not,” she argues.

“You did,” I insist. “Several times.”

“No, I?”

“You moaned my name,” I counter. “You were really worked up.”

“Oh, god.” She tries to roll away, but I stop her, grabbing her hip and holding her in place.

“I’m not complaining,” I assure her. “In fact, I loved it.”

“You did?” she asks, her voice a little breathless.

“Yeah,” I whisper, leaning closer. “I did. And I was thinking...”

“What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I’d like to help you with your problem,” I murmur.

“I don’t have a problem,” she says.

“Yes, you do,” I reply. “You’re horny. You’re turned on. You’re aching.”

“I?”

“I can help,” I tell her. “If you want me to.”

She’s silent for a moment, but then she says, “But you’re hurt.”

“I am,” I agree. “But I’m not dead. I can still make you feel good. I can still make you come.”

“But?”

“Do you want me to?” I ask. “Do you want me to make you come?”

“I... I...”

“Tell me, Jane,” I command.

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Good girl,” I praise. “Now, I’m going to eat you out, and you’re going to be quiet. If you make a sound, I’m going to stop. Understand?”

“But what if I?”

“You won’t,” I assure her. “You’ll be a good girl and be quiet. Won’t you?”

“I’ll try,” she agrees.

“Good,” I say, smiling. “Now, I’m going to pull these off.”

I hook my thumbs around the waistbands of her shorts and panties and slowly tug

them down her legs. She lifts her hips, helping me, and I toss them aside.

“Spread your legs,” I order.

She does as I say, and I groan at the sight of her glistening pussy in the moonlight.

“Fuck, sugar,” I hiss. “You’re soaking wet.”

“Reiner,” she whispers, her cheeks turning pink.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” I tell her. “It’s hot.”

She doesn’t say anything, and I know she’s nervous.

“Have you ever had an orgasm before?” I ask.

“I... I... no,” she admits.

“I’m going to be the first one to taste you,” I state.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Good,” I say, planting my lips on her jaw.

She sucks in a breath and closes her eyes. I trail my lips down her neck and across her collarbone. I can feel her pulse racing under my lips, and it’s intoxicating.

I move lower and bunch up her t-shirt until her breasts are exposed. Her nipples are hard, and I can’t resist. I swirl my tongue around one, and she gasps.

“Shh,” I remind her. “Quiet.”

She nods, and I continue my exploration. I lick and suck and nibble, and she's trembling beneath me as I lavish attention on her body.

I move to her other breast and give it the same treatment. Then, I kiss my way down her stomach and settle between her legs, where I nip at her thighs and inhale her scent. She's going to remember this night for the rest of her life—I'll make sure of it. I'm going to go slow and take my time. I'm going to make sure she enjoys every second of it.

I run my tongue through her folds, and she bites her lip to keep from crying out. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are fisted in the sheets. She's trying so hard to keep quiet, and it's adorable.

When she tries to buck her hips as I flick my tongue over her clit, I grab them and hold her still. She whimpers, and I chuckle against her skin. She tastes so fucking good, and I can't get enough.

I lap at her, licking and sucking, and she's writhing under me. She's panting and moaning, and when I slip a finger inside her, she arches her back and lets out a strangled cry.

"Shh," I murmur, looking up at her. "You're being too loud. You need to be quiet."

"I'm trying," she whines.

"Try harder," I demand. "Or I'll have to stop."

"Don't stop," she begs.

I smirk and return to her pussy. I lick her from top to bottom, and she squirms as I add a second finger, stretching her. She's so tight, and I'm already imagining what

it's going to feel like when I'm finally inside her.

I wrap my lips around her clit and suck while I thrust my fingers in and out, and her breaths come faster. She's close, and I'm loving it.

I curl my fingers, hitting that spot, and she lifts her hips off the bed, her back arching. She's biting her lip so hard, I'm surprised she hasn't broken the skin.

"Come for me," I growl.

I suck her clit into my mouth and thrust my fingers deep, and she explodes. She clamps her thighs around my head as her pussy clenches around my fingers, and she slaps her hand over her mouth to muffle her scream.

I keep pumping my fingers and flicking her clit, drawing out her orgasm as long as possible. When she finally comes down, I slowly remove my fingers and kiss her pussy.

"That's my good girl," I murmur. "You did so well."

"Oh my god," she whispers, her chest heaving.

"How was it?" I ask, kissing her inner thigh.

"Amazing," she breathes. "I never knew it would be like that."

"I'm glad I could be the one to show you," I reply, and it strikes me how much I actually mean it.

Somehow, the idea of any other man touching her, making her come, makes me want to rip someone's throat out.

I don't understand it. I don't want to think about it. This is just a physical attraction, a mutual need. Nothing more.

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

For the past week, I've been doing everything I can to avoid Reiner. It's not easy, considering we're living together, but I've managed. I pop into the bedroom every so often to check on him, bring him food, and make sure he's taking his meds, but I've avoided being alone with him.

It's not that I didn't enjoy what happened between us. I did. More than I should have. When I fell back asleep, I had another dream about him, but this one wasn't about sex. My mind had conjured up this grand illusion of us being a real couple. We were happy and in love, and we were getting married.

The idea of it terrifies me. I'm not a stupid girl. I know there's no way a guy like Reiner could ever fall for a girl like me. Sure, he went down on me and kissed me a couple of times, but let's be real. He's trying damn hard to convince everyone in this town that we're in a relationship, which means he can't exactly go around hooking up with random girls.

I was there, and I was willing. So, he took advantage of the situation. That's all it was.

It didn't mean anything.

There's no point in indulging in this fantasy that there could be something real between us. I'd only be setting myself up for heartbreak. And that's why every night after he falls asleep, I've been sneaking out of bed and moving to the couch. Because I don't trust myself. All it would take is one look, one touch, and I'd be putty in his hands.

He's asked me about it a couple of times, about why I'm not hanging out or sleeping in the room with him. I'm not proud to admit I've been gaslighting him. I've told him more than once that he's imagining things, that when he's woken up in the middle of the night, I was just in the bathroom and have been getting up early. I'm busy, I tell him, but we both know that's not true.

So, this morning when I really am in the bathroom and I hear the front door open and then close, I'm not sure if I should be relieved or worried.

I take my time in the shower, and when I walk out of the bathroom, the house is quiet. Aunt Gwen and Uncle Richard have gone into town, but Reiner is supposed to be resting, per Healer Clara's orders.

I poke my head into the bedroom, and the bed is empty.

"Reiner?"

Silence.

I check the kitchen and the living room, but he's not here.

"Dammit," I mutter, grabbing my phone and calling him. It rings twice before it goes to voicemail.

I call again, and it goes to voicemail.

I try a third time, and the same thing happens.

"Goddamn it," I curse, shoving my phone in my pocket.

He could have at least left a note or a text or called me and told me where he was

going. I'm pissed. No, that's not right—I'm furious, but even I know I have no right to be. Not after the way I've treated him the last few days.

I'm not sure what to do. I could stay here and wait for him to come home, or I could go searching for him. I decide on the latter and grab my keys.

The first place I check is his house. I know it's a long shot, but I drive over, anyway. The driveway is empty, but I park and go up to the front door and knock. No answer. I try the handle, and it's locked.

"Shit," I whisper, running my hand through my hair. Where the hell could he be?

I return to my car and pick up my phone again, dialing Piper's number instead of his. Maybe Rafe knows where he is.

"Hello?" Piper answers.

"Hey, it's Jane," I say. "Is Reiner there, by chance? He's not answering his phone, and I've looked everywhere for him."

"Isn't he supposed to be at your place?" she asks.

"He was," I reply. "But he's not anymore. I was hoping he was with Rafe."

"Rafe is here," she says. "I'll ask."

I hear muffled voices as she covers the receiver, and then she's back.

"He said he hasn't seen him," she tells me. "But he said he would give him a call and see if he has any luck."

“Great, thank you. Let me know if he gets anywhere, okay? I’m going to keep looking.”

“Sure,” she says. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Bye.”

I hang up and drop my head back against the headrest. Dammit, this is all my fault. If I hadn’t been avoiding him, he wouldn’t have felt the need to leave the house. Then again, I wouldn’t have been avoiding him if he’d kept his hands to himself.

The more I think about it, the more aggravated I get. He’s the one who has blurred the lines, the one who’s been making this complicated. We had rules in place, and he’s the one who’s broken them. It was clear as day that the only time we were supposed to even touch one another was when we were in public.

Okay, so I might’ve kissed him at the infirmary, but that was technically in public. Even if no one else was in the room.

I’m so conflicted. I’m angry and hurt and worried. I’m afraid something has happened to him. Those rogues know he’s weakened. What if they find him before I do? Or worse, what if Reiner has gone looking for them? Rogues killed his parents, so it’s only natural that he’d want revenge.

No. I can’t think about that. I need to find him.

I start the engine and drive away from his house, heading toward town. Maybe he’s at the bar.

I’m halfway there when my phone rings. I press the button on the car’s console to connect, and Piper’s voice fills the cab.

“Rafe spoke with Reiner. He said he had to go to work and that he’s fine.”

“He’s not supposed to be working,” I snap, and I instantly feel bad. This isn’t Piper’s fault, and she’s only trying to help. “Sorry. I’m just worried about him.”

“I know,” she replies. “And Rafe told him it was a bad idea, but you know how Reiner is.”

Oh, I know how Reiner is. Stubborn, hard-headed, pig-headed, and frustrating as hell.

“Thanks,” I tell her. “I guess I’m headed to the industrial district now. I’m dragging him out of there by his ball sack if I have to.”

“Good luck,” she laughs.

“Thanks. I’m going to need it.”

“Call me later and let me know how it goes.”

“I will.”

I disconnect the call and take a deep breath. I’m still mad, but I’m not sure if I’m angrier at Reiner or myself. I’m not sure why I’m even surprised. Of course he’d rather be at the shop than stuck at the house with me.

When I pull into the shop’s parking lot, the first thing I notice is Reiner’s truck. I park next to it and climb out, making my way inside the building. I’ve never even been to this part of town, let alone been in this shop.

I pause in the doorway and look around. Massive sheets of metal are piled up along the wall, and a huge machine is taking up the far side of the room. There’s a small

office in the corner, and about a dozen men are milling about, some talking, some working. The stench of burning metal and grease hangs in the air, and I wrinkle my nose.

“Can I help you?” someone asks, and I turn to see a man approaching. He’s tall with broad shoulders and a stocky build. He has dark hair and a beard, and his eyes are a piercing blue.

“I’m looking for Reiner,” I explain.

“Over there,” the man says, pointing to the back of the room.

I follow his finger and see Reiner bent over a table, his back to me. He has a welding torch in his hand, and a pair of thick, protective glasses cover his eyes. Blue sparks fly, and he’s focused on whatever he’s doing.

I have to admit, it’s kind of hot. Sweat is dripping down his back, and his muscles are tense. His jeans are hugging his ass, and he has a black bandana tied around his head.

“Thank you,” I say, and the guy nods, walking away.

I approach Reiner, and he doesn’t even look up. I’m not sure if he can’t hear me over the noise or if he’s ignoring me. Either way, it pisses me off.

I walk up behind him and lean closer, yelling in his ear. “What the hell are you doing?”

He jerks, startled, and the torch slips, nearly setting his pants on fire. He curses and shuts it off, then turns and glares at me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he snaps.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I shoot back.

“I’m fucking working,” he growls. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re being an idiot,” I retort.

He looks around, no doubt checking to see who’s listening. I don’t care, let them hear. But he doesn’t sound so keen on the idea of his coworkers witnessing our fight.

“Let’s take this outside,” he says, grabbing my arm and dragging me out the door.

“Get your hands off me,” I hiss, ripping my arm from his grasp.

“You’re the one who came barging into my place of business and started yelling at me,” he counters. “If you wanted to talk, you should’ve called.”

“I did,” I say. “Three times. You ignored me. And I know you spoke with Rafe after I called, which means you saw my calls and chose to ignore them.”

“I was busy,” he says, and his tone is dismissive. He stops right in front of his truck and crosses his arms as he leans against the hood.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” I point out. “Clara said—”

“I don’t give a shit what Clara said,” he interrupts. “I’m not a child, Jane. I know my own body, and I know what I can and can’t do. Besides, I couldn’t take one more second sitting in that house with you acting like I have some contagious disease. You’ve been ignoring me, Jane. And don’t you dare try and tell me it’s in my head, because we both know that’s bullshit.”

“I’m not ignoring you,” I say, but the lie sounds hollow even to my own ears.

“Bullshit,” he repeats, and I flinch. “You’re a terrible liar, Jane. Why have you been avoiding me? And don’t tell me it’s because you’re busy or you’re tired. I want the truth.”

I open my mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. I’m not sure what to say.

“That’s what I thought,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“You know what? Forget it.” I stomp over to my own car and try to yank the door open, but Reiner’s large hand slaps against the window and pushes the door closed.

“We’re not done yet,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “You came all the way out here because you wanted to talk, so let’s talk. Why are you avoiding me, Jane?”

“I’m not.”

“Liar,” he whispers, his lips brushing against my ear. “I can smell the fear rolling off you, sugar. What are you afraid of? Are you afraid that you’ll give in to me? That you’ll let me kiss you, touch you, fuck you, and you’ll love every second of it?”

“Reiner,” I whisper, my heart pounding in my chest.

He smirks, and my cheeks burn. “That’s it, isn’t it? Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you didn’t love what my tongue felt like between your legs. That you haven’t been dreaming about it, craving it ever since.”

“Stop,” I whisper, but it’s half-hearted.

“No,” he growls, his eyes flashing. “I’m not going to stop. Not until you admit the truth. You want me, Jane. I can smell it. I can see it in your eyes. You’re fighting a losing battle, and you know it.”

“You’re delusional,” I scoff, trying to hide my embarrassment.

“Am I?” he asks, his gaze dropping to my lips. “Then why are you trembling? Why are your nipples hard? Why is your pulse racing?”

“You’re imagining things,” I insist.

“I’m not,” he counters. “And you know it. You’re attracted to me, Jane. Just like I’m attracted to you. There’s no shame in that. It’s natural. It’s normal. It’s okay to want me, to want this.”

“This?” I repeat. “What is ‘this,’ Reiner?”

He doesn’t answer. Not with words, anyway. Instead, he takes a step forward, closing the space between us. My back is pressed against the car, and his body is a wall of heat and muscle in front of me. And then his lips are on mine, and I’m lost.

I don’t even try to resist. I can’t. The feelings he stirs inside of me are too strong, too powerful. I can’t fight it. I can’t fight him.

His tongue slides into my mouth, and I moan, tangling my fingers in his hair. He tastes salty and masculine, and his scent wraps around me, pulling me deeper under his spell. He presses his body against mine, and I can feel his erection straining against his jeans, pressing against my stomach. I whimper, and he growls, his hands gripping my hips.

It would be so easy to give in, to let him take me right here and now. But I can’t. I can’t let myself fall for him. I can’t let myself get hurt. Every ounce of me wants to, though. I want him. I want him more than I’ve ever wanted anything, and it physically pains me to pull away.

“I can’t,” I whisper, my voice shaky. I push against him, inching him back so I can pry my door open. “I’m sorry, Reiner. I can’t.”

“Jane,” he says, but I shake my head.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, and I climb into the car.

I slam the door and start the engine, peeling out of the parking lot. I don’t look back. I can’t. If I do, I’ll turn around and go back to him. I’ll give him everything, and I’ll end up with nothing. I can’t let that happen.

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I've tried everything to get out of going to this party. I told Evan I was busy, but he wouldn't hear of it. I even tried telling him I was still hurting from the ambush, but he just laughed and told me to suck it up. And then, when he heard I'd already gone back to work, there was no getting out of it. According to him, if I was fit enough for work, I was fit enough to celebrate my alpha's birthday.

It's not that I want to miss the occasion. It's just that I know Jane will be there, and I'm not sure I can handle seeing her. She had been acting so strange, refusing to even look at me when she brought me food or changed my bandages. And then she just showed up at the shop, demanding to know why I was there.

I can't get a read on the girl, and it's killing me. One minute, she's kissing me, and the next, she's pushing me away. I don't know what to do or what to think. It's not lost on me that I've treated plenty of girls the same way. Maybe I deserve this ache in my chest. Lord knows I've caused my fair share of heartache.

And that's exactly what it feels like. Like someone is taking my heart and squeezing the life out of it. I can't eat, I can't sleep, and I can't even enjoy being back at the shop. All I can think about is Jane and her beautiful face, her perfect body, and the way she makes me feel.

I'm pathetic, and I know it. But I can't seem to help myself. I'm drawn to her like a moth to a flame, and I don't know how to break the spell.

And that's why even though I'm surrounded by people who are celebrating my alpha's birthday, I'm standing in the corner, nursing a beer. I've barely spoken to anyone, and I can't bring myself to mingle. I'm being antisocial, even for me, and it

doesn't take long before someone notices.

"You're a ray of sunshine tonight, aren't you?" Lenny comments, coming to stand beside me.

"I'm fine," I mutter, taking a sip of my beer.

"Bullshit," he counters. "You've been sulking all night. What's going on with you? Something happen with my cousin? I thought you two were hitting it off. Figured you guys would show up together."

I have no idea what to say to him because I don't know what Jane has been telling people. For all I know, she's run around telling everybody we broke up. If our stories don't match up, it's going to be obvious that something is wrong, and Lenny's been skeptical of our relationship from the start.

"I don't want to talk about it," I finally say, hoping that will shut him up.

"Oh, come on," he says. "I'm not going to tell anyone. I'm not a gossip. I'm just worried about her. She's my family, and I care about her. I know you do, too. So, talk to me. Maybe I can help."

I raise an eyebrow and glance at him for the first time. "Why would you do that? I thought you hated the idea of us dating. You've made your opinion on the matter pretty clear."

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I don't hate the idea of you guys dating," he admits. "I just don't want to see her get hurt. She's been through a lot, and the last thing she needs is some asshole playing with her heart."

"I'm not playing with her," I insist, and I know I sound defensive, but at least on the

next point, I don't have to lie. "I care about her, Lenny. More than I've ever cared about anyone. I'm not going to hurt her. I would never do that."

"Look, man, I believe you," he says, holding up his hands. "I can see that you're serious. I can see the way you look at her. That's why I'm here, talking to you. Because I can tell you're hurting. And I know you're not the kind of guy who likes to talk about his feelings, but it might help to get them off your chest. Sometimes, it's easier to talk to a stranger, and I'm the closest thing to a stranger you've got in this town. I know we've gone out on missions together, but we haven't exactly been chummy, right?"

"Maybe that's true," I concede, "but you're also Jane's cousin. That means you aren't impartial. You're not going to listen to me objectively. You're going to take her side."

"Maybe," he agrees, "but maybe that's a good thing. Maybe you need to hear someone else's perspective. Someone who isn't involved in your history."

I hesitate, unsure if I want to pour my heart out to him. But then I think about Jane, and the pain in my chest grows. I can't keep going like this.

When I open my mouth to let it all pour out, that's when I see her. She's standing over by the beer pong table with Piper and Sonya, laughing and having a good time. She's wearing a simple black dress that hugs her curves and shows off her cleavage. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and her makeup is subtle and natural. I've never seen anyone more beautiful.

"Shit," I mutter, tearing my gaze away from her.

"What?" Lenny asks, following my gaze.

“She’s here,” I say, and I know I don’t have to elaborate.

“Ah,” he says, nodding. “I see. Well, you’re going to have to talk to her eventually, so you might as well do it now.”

“I can’t,” I insist.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t,” I repeat, my tone harsher than I intended.

“Fine,” Lenny says, holding his hands up. “I won’t push, but you’re going to have to deal with this sooner or later. You can’t avoid her forever.”

“Watch me,” I mutter, taking a swig of my beer.

Lenny shakes his head and tips his beer at me before he strolls away, and I’m left alone again. I glance back at Jane, and I can’t help but notice the way she keeps checking her phone. She’s not normally a phone person, and I wonder for a brief moment if she’s hoping I’ll text her.

But then I watch as two shifters from my pack sidle up next to her and Sonya, and the jealousy burns through my veins. I know them. They’re not bad guys, but they’re not exactly respectful, either. And I know it’s not my place, but I can’t help the way I feel.

I watch as one of them puts his arm around Jane, and I can’t take it. I’m not usually the jealous type, but this girl has me twisted up in knots, and I can’t stand the thought of her with someone else.

I stomp across the room, my eyes locked on Jane. I don’t even bother to acknowledge

the guys. I just place my palm on the small of her back and steer her away from them.

“Hey!” she protests, but I don’t stop.

I lead her away from the party out into the backyard where it’s quieter, but Sonya is hot on our heels.

“What the hell, Reiner?” she demands, planting her hands on her hips. “You can’t just drag her off like that. You don’t own her.”

“This is none of your business,” I snarl, my eyes still on Jane.

“Like hell it isn’t,” she retorts. “Jane is my best friend. Who the hell do you think you are, treating her like that?”

“Sonya,” Jane says, her voice calm and even, “it’s okay. I can handle this.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

Jane nods, and Sonya looks at me, her eyes narrowed. She doesn’t trust me, and I can’t blame her. I haven’t given her any reason to.

“Okay,” Sonya says, her eyes still on me. “But I’m not far, and if you hurt her, Reiner, I will end you.”

I snort. “I’m absolutely terrified.”

“Reiner,” Jane warns, and I sigh.

“Look, I just need a moment alone with my girlfriend. Do you mind? Or do you want to hear the intimate details of our sex life?”

She pauses in front of the door and turns back to me with a smug smirk. “Joke’s on you, asshole. I’ve already heard all about it.”

As she disappears back inside, I replay the comment in my mind. “What is she talking about?” I ask Jane. “What all did you tell her?”

“Relax. I didn’t tell her that we’re not really a couple, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Then what did you tell her?”

She throws her hands in the air and scoffs, “Girls tell each other things, Reiner. It’s what we do. I didn’t go into graphic detail, but I did tell her that we fooled around. Guys aren’t the only ones who brag about their sexual conquests, you know. Besides, she’s one of my best friends. I tell her everything.”

My shoulders relax, and I let out a breath of relief. “Good,” I say. “That’s good.”

“What the hell do you want, Reiner? Why did you drag me out here?”

“Because those guys were all over you,” I almost shout, pointing at the door we just came out of.

“So?” she challenges. “We’re not really dating, remember? You don’t have the right to get jealous.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, raking a hand through my hair. “I know, okay? I know. I’m sorry. I just... I don’t know what to do. I can’t stop thinking about you, and I can’t stand the thought of you with anyone else.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Reiner. None at all. Have you forgotten that I tried to get your attention a year ago? That I basically threw myself at you and you rejected

me? You didn't want me then, and the only reason you want me right now is because you don't want your pack thinking you have Peter Pan syndrome or some shit. The idea of someone else flirting with me bothers you because you're afraid of how it would look to other people."

"No, that's not it. I?"

"You humiliated me! I told you I thought we were mates, and you shut me down and laughed in my face. I thought we had something, something special, and you made a fool of me. And why, Reiner? Because I'm not a size two, I'm not a bimbo, and I'm not a damsel in distress. I'm a chubby, opinionated, independent woman who likes to eat and take care of herself, and that's not good enough for you. So don't you dare come here and act like you have the right to get jealous because I'm not yours. That's your fault."

I'm stunned, and I can't find the words to respond. I've never seen Jane like this. Even when she's had little moments of insecurity, she's always managed to pull it together and smile. But this is different. This is anger, this is pain, and it's directed at me.

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm so sorry, Jane. I know I hurt you, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't mean to because at the time, I did. But it had nothing to do with you."

She blinks at me, and I inch closer, reaching out to take her hand.

"When you asked me if I felt the same way, I panicked," I continue. "I wasn't ready for a mate, and I wasn't ready for a relationship. I was a mess, and I was in a bad place. I had a lot of shit to work out, and I was fucking terrified. What I felt for you, it was so much, and so intense. I didn't know how to handle it. I didn't know how to handle you."

“What the hell are you talking about, Reiner?” she asks, drawing her brows together.

“I’m trying to explain,” I say, exasperated. “I’m not good at this. I’m not good at talking. I’m not good at expressing my feelings. I’m a jackass, okay? I’m a big, dumb asshole, and I don’t know how to do this.”

“Do what?”

“This,” I say, gesturing between us. “I don’t know how to do this. But God, do I want to try.”

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There's no way I heard him right. No way. I still remember the look on his face when he turned me down. He was disgusted by the idea of us being mates. It was written all over his face. There's no way I'm not hearing him wrong.

"What?" I manage to croak out.

"I'm not good at this," Reiner repeats, gesturing between us. "I'm not good at relationships, and I'm not good at opening up. But I want to try. I want to be better. I'm not perfect, and I'm not going to pretend to be, but I can promise you that I'll try. I'll never hurt you again, Jane. I can't. I can't lose you."

I'm silent for a few minutes, digesting his words. I can see the sincerity in his eyes, and I can feel the honesty in his words. He means it. He's serious.

"I'm not asking you to forgive me," he continues. "I'm not asking you to forget. I'm just asking you to give me a chance. Give us a chance. I know I don't deserve it, but I'm begging you, Jane. I'll do whatever it takes. Just tell me what you want, and I'll do it."

I want to believe it. I want to believe him. I want to fall into his arms and let him carry me away. But...

"But what about at the infirmary after you were hurt? I kissed you, and you pulled away. You didn't want me then, either."

"Oh, I wanted you. I wanted you so badly that it was all I could not to bend you over the exam table and take you right there. I didn't pull away because I didn't want you.

I pulled away because I didn't want our first time to be in a hospital. I didn't want it to be fast and rough and dirty. I wanted it to be special. I wanted it to be romantic. I wanted it to be everything you deserved."

I blink at him. "Wait, what?"

"I'm trying to say that I want you, Jane. I've always wanted you. And I'm done fighting it. I'm done pretending that I don't care, that I don't want you. I know this is all supposed to be pretend, but I don't want it to be. I want it to be real. I want you. I want you, Jane."

I'm speechless. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Is this really happening?

"I know I fucked up," he says, his voice low and husky. "I know I hurt you, and I know I don't deserve a second chance. But I'm asking you for one, anyway. I'm asking you to give me a chance, to give us a chance."

I must be dreaming. There's no way this is happening. But as I look into Reiner's eyes, I know it's not. He's telling the truth. He's being honest. He's baring his soul to me, and the sincerity in his eyes is the biggest turn-on I've ever seen.

Without a word, I launch myself at him, capturing his lips with mine. He responds instantly, his hands gripping my hips and pulling me against him. The railing on the deck presses into my back, and I can feel the wood digging into my skin, but I don't care. I'm too focused on the feeling of his lips on mine, the taste of his tongue in my mouth, the heat of his body.

I've waited so long for this. I've dreamed about it, fantasized about it, and I'm tired of waiting. I want Reiner, and I'm going to have him.

His hands slide up the hem of my skirt, and he gathers a handful of my ass, squeezing

and kneading. My nails dig into his shoulders, and I moan into his mouth.

“Hot damn!” someone shouts from across the yard. “Get a room, would you? We don’t want to see all that.”

We break apart, panting, and I can’t help but giggle. Reiner’s eyes are dark with lust, and his lips are swollen from our kisses. He looks like a man possessed, and I love it.

“Take me home,” I whisper, and he doesn’t need to be told twice.

He grabs my hand, leading me through the backyard and around the side of the house. He’s walking so fast that I practically have to jog to keep up. Fortunately, my trailer is just a few blocks away, and my aunt and uncle are back at the party.

As soon as we’re inside, Reiner slams the door shut and pushes me against it, his lips crashing down on mine. I kiss him back eagerly, my hands roaming his body, exploring every inch of him.

His hands are everywhere, too, touching, caressing, squeezing. He backs me through the living room and down the hall, never once breaking the kiss. When we reach my bedroom, he pushes the door open and guides me inside.

I fumble with the buttons on his shirt, my fingers shaking with anticipation. I can’t seem to get them undone, and I let out a frustrated groan. Reiner chuckles and reaches down to help me. Together, we manage to get his shirt off, and then he peels my dress over my head.

I stand before him, wearing nothing but my bra and panties. Out of habit, I cover my stomach with my arms.

“Don’t,” he says, his voice a low growl. He pulls my arms away, and his eyes rake

over my body. “You’re perfect.”

I’ve never felt more beautiful than I do at this moment, with him looking at me like I’m the most precious thing he’s ever seen.

He cups my face with his hands and kisses me, his lips soft and gentle. His touch is feather-light, and his movements are slow and deliberate. It’s a stark contrast to the frenzied, passionate kissing from before, and it’s almost enough to bring tears to my eyes.

He’s not just having sex with me. He’s making love to me.

He trails his lips down my neck, nipping and sucking at my skin. I gasp and arch into him, pressing my body against his. With two long strides backward, the backs of my knees connect with the bed. He gently pushes me down, and I scoot back, my eyes never leaving his.

He crawls onto the bed, his body hovering over mine. I can feel the heat radiating off of him, and his scent surrounds me, enveloping me in a cocoon of desire.

He kisses me again, his lips moving slowly and deliberately. I can feel his restraint, the way he’s holding himself back. I don’t want him to hold back. I want all of him, everything he has to give.

“Reiner,” I whisper against his lips. “I’m not made of glass. I won’t break.”

“I know,” he murmurs. “But I want to savor this. I want to take my time, to enjoy every second.”

I can’t argue with that. I’ve waited a year for this, and I want to make sure it’s everything I’ve dreamed of.

He kisses me again, his tongue sliding past my lips and into my mouth. As he explores my mouth, he takes my hand and guides it to the front of his pants, where his erection is straining against the fabric.

I gasp and instinctively squeeze, eliciting a low groan from him. Encouraged by his response, I rub my hand along his length, tracing the outline of his cock before unbuttoning his pants and slipping my hand inside. I wrap my fingers around his shaft and stroke him, and I can feel him shudder. He breaks the kiss and buries his face in my neck, his breath hot against my skin.

“Fuck, Jane,” he growls. “You’re driving me crazy.”

I smile and continue stroking him, enjoying the way he feels in my hand. I can’t wait to have him inside me, filling me up and stretching me to the limit.

Reiner lowers his head and captures one of my nipples between his teeth, biting down gently. I cry out and arch my back, pushing my breast further into his mouth. He swirls his tongue around the sensitive peak, and I whimper, my body trembling with pleasure.

He moves his attention to my other nipple, repeating the same sensual torture. I writhe beneath him, my hips bucking involuntarily. I’m desperate for him, and I can’t wait any longer. I need him inside me now.

“Reiner, please,” I beg. “I need you. I need you inside me.”

He lifts his head and looks at me, his eyes dark with lust. “Are you sure?” he asks, his voice husky.

“Yes,” I breathe. “I’m sure. I want you, Reiner. All of you.”

He doesn't need any more encouragement. He sits up and slides his pants and boxers off, and I can't help but stare. He's huge, and I'm suddenly nervous. Will he fit?

He must see the apprehension on my face because he leans down and kisses me. "I'll go slow," he promises.

I nod, and he settles between my legs, his cock nudging my entrance. Before he presses himself inside me, he slides his hand down my stomach and between my thighs. He runs a finger over my clit, and I gasp, my hips jerking.

He strokes my clit, circling the sensitive bundle of nerves. I squirm and moan, my body on fire. I've never felt anything like this before. I've touched myself, but it's nothing compared to the way Reiner is touching me.

As he continues to work his magic with his fingers, he slowly pushes himself inside me. I bite my lip, pain and pleasure mixing together in a delicious way. He fills me up, and I can feel my body stretch to accommodate him.

He stops when he's fully inside me, giving me a moment to adjust. I breathe deeply, my heart pounding.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod, and he begins to move, easing in and out of me. He starts slow, letting me get used to the sensation. I expected pain, but there's only a bit of discomfort, and as he continues, the slight pressure fades, replaced by a growing sense of pleasure. I can feel my body responding to him, my muscles tightening and my breath becoming shallow. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss, our tongues tangling together.

The feeling of him inside me, the taste of his lips, the heat of his skin... it's all so

much better than I'd ever imagined.

"More," I whisper. "I want more."

He obliges, his pace increasing. He thrusts into me, his hips moving in a steady rhythm. I cling to him, my nails digging into his back. He groans and kisses me, his tongue mimicking the motion of his cock.

I can feel the pressure building inside me, the heat coiling low in my belly. I'm close, so close.

"Oh, God," I moan. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

He doesn't. He keeps going, his movements growing more urgent. He's grunting and groaning, and the sound is so primal and sexy that it sends me over the edge.

I cry out, my body convulsing as the orgasm crashes over me. It's the most intense thing I've ever felt, and I can't believe I've been missing out on this for so long.

Reiner slows, drawing out my pleasure. When I finally come down from my high, he picks up the pace again.

"Come for me," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "I want to feel you come inside me."

That's all it takes. He thrusts into me one last time, and I feel him explode. He groans, his body shuddering as he empties himself inside me.

He collapses on top of me, and I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding him close. We stay like that for a few minutes, our hearts pounding and our bodies entwined.

Finally, he rolls off of me and pulls me into his arms, cradling me against his chest. I rest my head on his shoulder and listen to the sound of his heartbeat, strong and steady.

I'm not sure what to say. There are so many emotions running through me, and I don't know how to process them. I'm holding my breath, waiting for Reiner to change his mind now that I've given myself to him. I want to enjoy this moment, to bask in the afterglow, but I can't. I'm too scared.

Who's to say that next week, he won't decide he doesn't want me again? Who's to say that tomorrow, he won't wake up and realize he's only settling for me?

I just don't think my heart could take it.

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

I could stay like this forever, wrapped up in her arms, breathing in her scent. The sunlight streaming through the window is warm on my skin, and I can hear birds chirping outside. It's a perfect morning, and I don't want it to end.

Jane stirs beside me, her eyes fluttering open. She smiles at me, and my heart skips a beat.

"Good morning," I murmur, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead.

"You're still here," she says, her voice soft.

"Of course," I say in surprise. "Where else would I be?"

She shrugs, and I can see the uncertainty in her eyes. At the sight, I make a silent promise to myself to do everything I can to erase that look for good. I could tell her she has nothing to worry about, that I'm not going anywhere, but I know words won't be enough. Jane needs me to show her.

And I will.

From the nightstand, my phone pings, and I groan as I reach for it.

"Leave it," Jane says, her voice pleading.

I check the message and see it's from Rafe, which means her request is not an option. One does not ignore a text from their beta.

“It’s Rafe,” I tell her, sitting up. I tap on the screen, bringing up the message. “Well, shit. Looks like I’ve got another scouting mission.”

“What? Why?” She bolts upright, covering her breasts with the sheet as if I hadn’t just spent all night worshipping them. “It’s not the same rogues, are they?”

“That’s what we need to figure out, I guess.” I brush some of her messy black hair out of her face and lean in to kiss her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She nuzzles her cheek against my palm. “Do your duty, soldier. Just, maybe don’t get attacked this time? Because then I’ll have to kill you.”

I laugh and give her a quick peck on the lips. “I’ll do my best,” I assure her.

Reluctantly, I slip out of bed and start gathering my clothes. As I’m pulling my boxers on, I notice Jane watching me, her eyes raking over my body. I flex my muscles, putting on a little show for her.

“Like what you see?” I ask, winking at her.

“Very much,” she purrs, her voice low and husky.

God, I love the way she looks at me, like I’m the only man in the world. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to it.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I promise.

“I’ll be waiting,” she replies, giving me a sultry smile.

I finish getting dressed and head out with the image of her naked body burned into my mind. It’s going to be a long day, and I have a feeling I’m not going to be able to

focus.

Rafe and Jack are waiting for me when I pull up to the alpha's house. They're both wearing serious expressions and are quick to jump into my car.

"Where are we headed?" I ask, shifting the car into gear.

"A few miles west of here," Rafe replies. "Right on the property line, just like last time. These assholes are really pressing their luck."

"I'm starting to think they want us to find them," I grumble.

"Maybe," Rafe agrees. "Either way, we need to deal with them. If they're dumb enough to let themselves get caught, then so be it."

"No Gael this time?" I question.

"I think Gael has had enough excitement for a while," Jack says. "The poor guy was shaken up pretty bad when you guys got back last time. He's just not built for this kind of stuff."

"He's a lover, not a fighter," Rafe teases. "I can't believe I ever thought that guy was a threat."

"What?" Jack and I say in unison.

"Oh, yeah. When Piper and I first got together and she went to work for him at the bookstore, I was convinced he was going to steal her away from me. I was jealous as hell."

"You?" I scoff. "Jealous? No way."

“Believe it,” Rafe chuckles. “I was ready to fight the guy. Love will do funny shit like that to a man’s head. From what I hear, Reiner, you know a thing or two about that. Heard you dragged poor Jane away from the party the other night and mauled her right there on the front lawn.”

“It was a bit more romantic than that,” I protest, but I can’t help but grin.

“You’ve got it bad, bro,” Jack laughs.

“Yeah, I do,” I admit. “I’m crazy about her.”

“I’m happy for you,” Rafe comments. “Seriously, man, I’m glad things are working out.”

“Me too,” I agree.

“Right here.” Rafe points to the side of the road, where it looks like a dog has been pawing at the grass.

I pull the car over, and we get out, looking around. There’s a definite scent of wolf, and it’s recent.

“Let’s shift,” Rafe suggests. “We’ll cover more ground that way.”

We strip down and shift, our wolves taking over. I can smell the rogues’ scent clearly now, and it’s coming from the forest.

The three of us take off, following the scent. We run for a few miles, our senses on high alert. Finally, we spot a small campsite, and the smell of wolf is overwhelming.

The rogues are here.

“Stay close,” Rafe growls through our connection. “Don’t engage unless you have to.”

We creep closer, staying low to the ground. We can see the rogues now, four of them. They’re gathered around a fire, talking and laughing.

“You think it’s the same ones?” I ask.

“Hard to say,” Rafe replies. “They’re definitely not from around here, though. I’ve never seen them before.”

“What do we do?” I press.

“We watch,” Rafe says. “We see what they’re up to. If they’re just passing through, we leave them be. But if they’re causing trouble, we’ll deal with them.”

“Roger that,” Jack grunts.

The three of us settle down to keep an eye on the rogues. It’s a long, boring afternoon, but we manage to stay hidden. The rogues don’t seem to be doing anything other than cooking and talking, and I’m starting to think Rafe’s right that they’re just passing through.

After a couple of hours, I’m starting to get antsy. I don’t know about these guys, but I have a woman I’d like to get back to.

“I’m gonna go check on something,” I tell Rafe.

“Be careful,” he warns.

“Always am.”

I slip off into the trees, making sure to keep the rogues in sight. If I can just find something, anything to indicate whether or not they're with that Lionel guy, then we can figure out what to do next.

I'm so focused on my task that I don't realize someone is behind me until it's too late.

I whirl around, and there's a man standing there, puffing out his chest. "What the hell do you want? You're trespassing."

I shift back into my human form, keeping my eyes on the man. "You're over the property line," I point out. "Technically, you're the one trespassing into Green Lake territory."

The man looks genuinely confused, and I can tell he has no idea what I'm talking about. "Green what?"

"Green Lake Pack," I repeat. "This is our land."

He eyes me for a minute. For a second, I think he's going to charge, but then Rafe and Jack come walking out of the bushes, and he shuffles backward, raising his hands.

"Look, I'm sorry, I didn't know," he says. "We were just making camp for the night. We'll move on in the morning."

"You should be more careful," Rafe warns. "You're lucky we're not the type to just attack on sight."

"We're not here to cause trouble," the man insists. "We're not from the area, that's all. We're just passing through. Please, we mean no harm."

Rafe studies the man for a moment, then nods. “All right, we’ll let you off with a warning. But we’ve had some problems with rogues around here, and I’m talking about the kind that do mean harm. So I suggest you pack it up right now and keep moving.”

“Will do,” the man promises.

Rafe turns and walks away, and Jack and I follow. To think we just wasted the whole day out here when we could’ve just had a damn conversation with them from the start.

“Well, that was anticlimactic,” Jack laughs.

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s what happens when you don’t just kill first and ask questions later,” I joke.

“Well, at least we know they aren’t with the same group that attacked us,” Rafe says. “That’s something.”

“I guess,” I sigh. I’m still not sure what to make of the whole situation. Something about it doesn’t sit right with me.

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By the time I finally make it back to Jane’s place, I’m exhausted. All I want is to crawl into bed with her and sleep for a week.

I’m not expecting her to be waiting up for me, but the light is on in the kitchen, and Gwen and Richard’s car is gone. I open the door and step inside, inhaling the delicious aroma of food.

“Jane?” I call out.

“In the kitchen!” she replies.

I walk in, and my heart nearly stops. She’s standing there in front of the stove in the sexiest little black dress I’ve ever seen.

“Hey,” she says, her voice soft.

“Hi,” I say, my voice catching in my throat.

She smiles at me, and I can’t help but smile back.

“I made dinner,” she says, gesturing to the table. There’s a steaming plate of pasta and a bottle of wine sitting there, waiting for us. “And for dessert, I made those blondies you love so much. I figured after a long day of scouting, you’d be hungry.”

“You didn’t have to do all this,” I say, but I’m touched by the gesture.

“I wanted to,” she replies. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I admit.

It only takes a few steps to reach her, and then I’m pulling her into my arms, kissing her deeply. She melts against me, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” she murmurs.

“Me too,” I chuckle. “Now, let’s eat. I’m starving.”

She laughs and sits down across from me, pouring two glasses of wine. “So, how did

it go?" she asks.

"Well, we didn't get attacked, so that's a plus," I reply. "Turns out it was just a couple of packless wolves passing through. We told them to get lost."

"I'm glad you didn't have to fight again," she says, her eyes full of concern.

"I'm a tough old dog," I tease. "I can handle myself."

She twirls her fork in the pasta, shaking her head. "Is it always like this in Green Lake? Always having to be on guard, looking over your shoulder? I've never lived in a place like that."

I shrug. "It got worse when Evan took over, but that's pretty typical. People always tend to test the boundaries when there's a leadership change. They want to see if the new guy is a pushover or not. I'm sure it was the same in Stardust Hollow when Ram took over. But it's not all bad. We have a lot of strong bonds here, and we take care of each other. And it's not like we're constantly fighting. Most of the time, it's pretty peaceful."

"I can see that," she admits. "I've really enjoyed getting to know everyone here."

I reach across the table and take her hand. "I'm glad, Jane. I want you to feel at home here."

"I'm starting to," she says, giving me a shy smile.

As we eat, we chat about everything and nothing at all. She tells me about her childhood growing up with her aunt and uncle, and I tell her about my early days in Green Lake. Everything flows so naturally between us, and I can't remember the last time I felt so at ease with someone. The way she waves her hands around when she

gets excited, her adorable laugh, the way her eyes sparkle when she looks at me... it's all so perfect.

In spite of myself, I start to imagine what it would be like to have this every night. To come home to her, to have her waiting for me. But then I remember she's only here for a few more weeks. In no time at all, she'll be back in Stardust Hollow, and I'll be here. Alone again.

The thought makes my chest ache, but I refuse to let it spoil the evening. We're together now, and that's all that matters.

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

“So, let me get this straight,” Sonya manages to get out between giggles. “You’re telling me that Jane has never told you this story?”

“No, she hasn’t,” Reiner answers, his voice playful.

We’re all sitting around the fire, drinking and eating the snacks we brought with us. This is the first time I’ve managed to get Reiner, Sonya, Lenny, and Riley all together. Until now, they’ve all been avoiding spending time with Reiner. Every one of them has been so convinced that he’s using me. I know they’re just looking out for me, but it was starting to get on my nerves.

To my complete and utter shock, it was Lenny who suggested we all go camping. In the beginning, he was so dead set on hating Reiner, but ever since Evan’s birthday party, he’s been a little more open to the idea. I think he’s finally starting to see that there’s more to Reiner than meets the eye.

“Oh, man, you’re going to love this,” Riley cackles.

“I’m telling you, it’s not that funny,” I protest, but I can’t help but smile.

“Oh, trust me, it is,” Sonya laughs. “Okay, so it was our senior year of high school, and we were at this bonfire party—”

“Sonya, don’t you dare,” I warn.

“Shhh, Jane, let the woman talk,” Reiner says, grinning.

“Anyway,” Sonya continues, “we’re at this bonfire, and Jane is totally trashed. Like, I’m talking falling-down drunk. She’s already thrown up twice, and she’s still going. She’s out of control.”

“I was not,” I protest.

“You were, too,” Sonya shoots back. “You were so wasted, you didn’t even know what you were saying. So, anyway, she’s out there dancing, and the next thing I know, she’s stripping down to her underwear and jumping into the lake.”

“What?” Reiner laughs.

“Oh, yeah,” Sonya chuckles. “She just starts taking off her clothes, and before anyone can stop her, she’s running into the water, completely naked.”

“You’re joking,” Reiner says, his eyes wide.

“Nope,” Sonya replies. “I’m not even kidding. I had to go in there and drag her out, but not before half the damn school got a look at her goods.”

“Including her two male cousins, who very much did not care to see it,” Lenny adds.

“Oh, God,” I groan, burying my face in my hands. “I was so embarrassed when I woke up the next morning. Not to mention sick as a dog. I swore I’d never drink again.”

“But you did,” Sonya points out.

“Of course I did,” I laugh. “I’m not a saint.”

“I had no idea you were into that kind of thing,” Reiner says to me, his voice low and

husky. “Jane Forrester, the exhibitionist. Who the hell knew? I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

“I’m not an exhibitionist,” I insist. “I was drunk. And it was dark. I didn’t think anyone could see me.”

“Yeah, right,” Sonya laughs. “Everyone could see you. You were the talk of the school for weeks after that.”

“Well, I’m glad you enjoyed it,” I say sarcastically.

More than anything about the night in question, I remember the way Sonya took care of me. We weren’t even really friends then, but she still came to my rescue. She could’ve just left me to fend for myself, but she didn’t. She covered me up and dragged me away from the party. She put me in her car and drove me home, and she wouldn’t leave my side until she was sure I was okay.

That’s the thing about Sonya. She’s wild and crazy, but she’s also one of the most loyal people I’ve ever met. She has a maternal side, too. She’s always looking out for the people she cares about, and I’m lucky enough to be one of those people. Not to mention that sometimes the wisdom that comes out of her young mouth is astonishing.

“All right, all right, let’s not torture Jane anymore,” Reiner says, putting his arm around me. “She’s clearly embarrassed.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad,” Sonya counters. “I mean, you’re not the only one who’s done something embarrassing while drunk. Right, Riley?”

“Oh, no, not me,” Riley protests, holding up his hands. “I’m not getting in the middle of this.”

“Come on, you have to have some good stories,” Sonya says. “I mean, you’re the biggest party animal I’ve ever met. You’re just lucky you’re a few years older than us so we weren’t around to witness it.”

“I don’t know,” Riley says, his voice hesitant. “I mean, I’ve done some pretty stupid stuff, but I’m not sure it’s the kind of story you want to be sharing around the campfire. Although, you know, Piper has told us a pretty good one about Reiner.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Reiner says, shaking his head. “Don’t go there. Don’t even think about it.”

“What is it?” I ask, curious.

“Nothing,” Reiner says quickly.

“Oh, come on, Reiner, don’t be such a baby,” Riley teases. “It’s not that bad.”

“Fine,” Reiner sighs, rolling his eyes. “It was during my college days. I was at a frat party, and I was pretty wasted. I was walking through the house, and I accidentally tripped and fell into a pool. I guess I was a lot more wasted than I realized because I didn’t even try to swim. I just sank like a rock.”

“Oh my God,” I say, trying not to laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Reiner says. “Some of my buddies pulled me out, but not before I swallowed a bunch of water. I was coughing and choking, and then I threw up all over the alpha’s wife. Not Evan, mind you, this was before he took over. But his dad was the alpha then, and he was not happy. I was mortified. I was sure I was going to get kicked out of the pack, but Evan’s mom took pity on me and convinced her husband not to throw me out. That was a close call.”

“I can’t believe you almost drowned,” I say, shaking my head.

“I can’t believe you stripped at a party,” Reiner teases me back.

Everyone laughs, and I lean back, observing the group as they trade stories back and forth. It’s such a wonderful feeling, having all my favorite people together like this. I never imagined I’d be so lucky.

But then I have to wonder if when the truth comes out, I’ll be able to hold onto this. Technically, they were right. Reiner was using me, but I was using him, too. I just don’t know if they’ll be able to accept him when they learn the truth.

I push the thought out of my head. I can’t let myself think like that. Right now, all I want is to enjoy this night, this moment. I want to live in the present, not worry about the future.

Reiner nudges my shoulder with his and says, “You know, there’s a lake right on the other side of the hill. I thought since you like skinny-dipping and all, you might want to give it a shot.”

“Are you serious?” I laugh.

“Completely.”

My first instinct is to say no, that it’s a terrible idea. I haven’t had nearly enough to drink to strip down and jump into a lake. But there’s a part of me that wants to do it. I’ve never been one for big risks, but I’m starting to realize that maybe it’s time for me to take a few.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s do it.”

“Really?” he asks, sounding surprised.

“Yeah, why not? It’s not like we’re going to get caught. We’re in the middle of nowhere. Come on, I’ll race you.”

“You’re on,” he says, grinning.

Without a word to the others, Reiner and I jump to our feet and start racing up the hill, peeling off our clothes and throwing them aside as we go. We’re both laughing and giggling, and I feel more free and alive than I have in a long time.

When we reach the top of the hill, we’re completely naked, and the moonlight is shining down on us.

“Ready?” he asks, his voice husky.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Go!” he shouts, and we’re off, running down the hill toward the lake.

The cool night air feels amazing against my bare skin, and the adrenaline pumping through my veins is exhilarating. When we crash into the water, it’s ice-cold, but I don’t care. I’m too busy laughing and splashing around, enjoying this moment.

“You’re crazy,” Reiner laughs.

“Maybe a little,” I concede.

“I love it,” he says. “You’re so full of surprises, Jane Forrester.”

He pulls me close, and I wrap my arms around his neck, looking into his eyes. I can’t

believe I'm here, in a lake, naked, with the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. It feels like a dream, but it's not. It's real.

"So are you, Reiner Thomas," I murmur.

Our lips meet, and the kiss is electric. My whole body tingles, and I can feel the heat between us. He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist, clinging to him as if my life depends on it.

The rest of the night, we're inseparable. We make love under the stars, and it's the most magical experience of my life. I've never felt so connected to another person, and I'm not sure I ever will again.

I know this won't last forever. Soon, Reiner and I will have to return to our respective lives and go our separate ways. But for now, I'm going to enjoy every second I have with him.

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

I've been welding since I was old enough to pick up a torch. It's always been a passion of mine, and I've spent countless hours perfecting my craft. When I was offered a job at the local steel mill, I jumped at the chance. I've always loved the smell of the shop, the sound of the machines, and the feeling of accomplishment that comes from a hard day's work. It's my safe place, my sanctuary.

Mostly, I make parts for cars, trucks, and other large machinery, but when I get a bit of free time, I like to try my hand at more artistic projects. Today, I'm working on a piece for Jane. It's a small sculpture of a wolf, and it's coming along beautifully. The details are intricate, and the lines are clean. I'm proud of my work, and I can't wait to see the look on her face when she sees it.

"You really should think about making a career out of this," a voice says from behind me.

I turn, smiling when I see Rodney, my boss. He's a short, stocky man with a thick beard and a bald head. He's got a gruff exterior, but he's a good guy. He's always been supportive of my artistic side, even though he knows it's not exactly practical.

"Yeah, right," I chuckle. "I don't think there's a big demand for handmade sculptures."

"You'd be surprised," he says, shrugging. "People like unique things. They're willing to pay for quality. My daughter has a shop on Etsy for the soaps she makes. I'd bet you could find a market for your stuff. I'm sure she'd be willing to help you get set up online."

Yeah, no. See, the thing about art of any form is that it's personal. It's not just about the product; it's about the process, the emotion, the connection. And then you've always got some asshole who has to come along and pick that work apart, tell you what's wrong with it and why you're not good enough. That's not for me. I don't need the validation. I'm happy doing my own thing.

"I'll think about it," I say, humoring him.

"That for the girl who came by the other day by chance? What was her name again?"

"Jane," I say.

"Right, Jane," he nods. "She's pretty. Bit of a firecracker, though. Might do you some good to have someone like her in your life. Keep you on your toes."

"She does," I agree.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," he says, clapping me on the back. "Just keep in mind what I said. You've got talent, Reiner. Don't waste it building car parts for me."

"Thanks, Rodney," I say, appreciating his support.

As he walks away, I can't help but smile. He's right. Jane is a firecracker, and she definitely keeps me on my toes. She's unlike anyone I've ever met, and I'm lucky to have her in my life.

I turn my attention back to the sculpture, determined to finish it before the end of the day. I want it to be perfect for her. The ears need a bit more work, and the tail is a little uneven. I lose myself in the details, letting the rest of the world fade away. I don't know how much time passes until I hear a familiar voice.

“Hey, Reiner.”

I look up, surprised to see Jane standing in front of me. She’s wearing a simple white blouse and a pair of jeans, but she looks stunning. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and her gray eyes are bright and full of life.

“Hey,” I greet her with a smile, wiping my hands on a rag. “What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” she explains. “I thought I’d stop by and see how you were doing.”

“I’m good,” I say. “Glad you’re here. I’ve actually got something for you. I was going to bring it to you tonight, but since you’re here, you might as well have it now.”

I take her hand and bring her closer. Her nearly finished gift is sitting on the workbench, and I watch her face as her eyes fall on it.

“Oh, Reiner,” she gasps. “It’s beautiful.”

“You like it?” I ask, pleased with her reaction.

“I love it,” she says, reaching out to touch it.

“Careful, it’s still warm.”

“It’s incredible,” she breathes, moving her eyes from me to the wolf. “I can’t believe you made this for me.”

“Of course,” I say. “I wanted to make you something special. I know it’s not much,

but—”

“No,” she interrupts. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

She moves to me and kisses me, and I can feel the heat between us. I pull her close, and she moans softly, her body pressed against mine. I’ve never felt such a strong connection with anyone before. It’s like we were made for each other.

“I’m sorry,” she says, pulling away. “I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

“Don’t apologize,” I say, caressing her cheek. “I like it when you get carried away. It’s sexy.”

She blushes and shifts, looking everywhere but at me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “You look uncomfortable.”

Jane shakes her head and says, “No, it’s not that. I’m fine. It’s just... seeing you work, it’s...”

“Sexy?” I tease, smirking.

“Very,” she admits, her cheeks flushing.

“Come on,” I say, taking her hand. “I haven’t taken my lunch break yet. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

“Okay,” she agrees, her voice breathless.

I lead her to the back of the shop, to a small room where we keep extra supplies. It’s quiet and private, and it’s the perfect place for a quick rendezvous. When we step

inside, I can tell by the smile on her face that she knows just what I'm up to.

"What are we doing here?" she asks, her voice playful.

"I think you know," I say, closing the door behind us.

I step toward her, and she meets me halfway, pressing her body against mine. We kiss, and it's like electricity is flowing through us. Our hands are all over each other, and I can feel the heat rising.

"You're so fucking sexy," I murmur, kissing her neck.

"So are you," she whispers, her hands exploring my body.

When she drops to her knees, I can barely contain myself. She looks up at me with those big gray eyes, and I feel like I'm going to explode. But then I remember how inexperienced she is, and I try to control myself.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask, my voice husky.

"Yes," she says, unzipping my pants. "I want to taste you, Reiner."

Well, who the hell am I to say no to that?

My cock springs free, and she wraps her hand around it, stroking it slowly. I groan, and she smiles, clearly enjoying the effect she's having on me.

"Jane," I gasp, my hips thrusting forward involuntarily.

"Shh," she whispers, kissing the tip of my cock. "Let me take care of you."

Then she opens her mouth and takes me in, inch by inch. I've never felt anything like it. Her mouth is hot and wet, and the way she's looking up at me is almost enough to make me come right then and there.

"Fuck," I moan, my hands tangling in her hair.

She starts to move, bobbing her head up and down, her tongue swirling around my shaft. It's the most amazing feeling in the world, and I can't believe she's doing this for me. It's so fucking hot, and I'm so goddamn lucky.

"Just like that," I encourage her, my hips thrusting in time with her movements.

She picks up the pace, and I can tell she's getting into it. She's moaning and sucking me off like she can't get enough.

"God, Jane," I gasp. "You're so fucking good at this."

She pulls back and says, "I've been practicing."

"Practicing?" I ask, confused.

"On bananas," she admits, her cheeks flushed.

"Bananas?" I repeat, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah," she says, smiling. "I wanted to make sure I could do it right."

"You're doing it perfectly," I assure her.

"Good," she says. "Because I want to make you feel good, Reiner."

“You are,” I pant. “You are.”

She takes me into her mouth again, and I’m lost in the sensation. She’s so eager and enthusiastic, and it’s driving me wild. I have to reach out and steady myself on the wall to keep from falling over. I tilt my head back, closing my eyes and just enjoying the feeling of her lips wrapped around my cock.

“Jane,” I groan, my hips thrusting forward.

“Mmm,” she moans back, her eyes locked on mine.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her.

“Mm-hmm,” she hums, her eyes full of desire.

“Fuck,” I growl, my body tensing.

She takes me deeper, and I can’t hold back any longer. I explode, and she swallows, her eyes never leaving mine. It dribbles down her chin, and she licks it up, making sure not to waste a single drop.

“Fuck, Jane,” I pant, trying to catch my breath.

“Was that okay?” she asks, her eyes wide and innocent.

“It was more than okay,” I say, pulling her to her feet. “It was amazing. You’re amazing.”

She smiles and kisses me, and I can taste myself on her lips. It’s surprisingly erotic.

“I can’t believe you did that,” I murmur, my hands roaming over her body.

“I can’t believe I did, either,” she giggles.

“You’re full of surprises, Jane,” I say, nuzzling her neck. “Best lunch break I’ve ever had.”

“Glad I could be of service,” she teases. “I better get out of here before I get you in trouble.”

“Yeah, probably,” I agree, even though the last thing I want is for her to leave.

“I’ll see you tonight,” she says, kissing me one last time.

“I’ll be counting the minutes,” I reply, earning another smile.

She slips out of the room, and I lean against the wall, a smile on my face. I’ve never felt so alive, so connected to another person. I know it’s only been a few weeks, but I can’t imagine my life without Jane in it. She’s everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

That thought scares the shit out of me, and my eyes spring open just as soon as it comes to mind. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I’m not sure what to do about it. I’ve never been a relationship guy. I’ve always been the love ‘em and leave ‘em type. But with Jane, it’s different. I can’t imagine being with anyone else now that I’ve found her.

The realization makes me want to run for the hills, but I know I can’t do that. I can’t walk away from her and hurt her again. Besides, she’ll be leaving very soon. Whatever time we have left, I want to spend it with her.

I take a deep breath and push myself away from the wall. I need to get back to work. I’ve got a lot to do before the day is over. But as I make my way back to the front of the shop, I can’t help but smile. Even if things don’t work out between us, I’ll always

have these memories.

For the rest of the afternoon, I can't stop thinking about her. The way she looks at me, the way she laughs, the way she feels in my arms. I've never felt this way about anyone before, and it's both exhilarating and terrifying.

When it's time to close up shop, I'm the first one out the door. I can't wait to get home and see her.

## Page 21

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

Reiner is back at his place instead of staying with us. Once he went back to work, it became obvious that he was pretty much entirely healed and didn't need the extra care.

But that doesn't mean that we're spending less time together. If anything, we're spending more. We're sneaking around, hooking up in every spare moment we can find. It's exciting and dangerous and just a little bit thrilling. I've been staying at his place most nights, and I've fallen asleep in his arms more times than I can count.

It's not just the sex, though. We talk, too. About our lives, our dreams, our hopes. Anything but the future. Both of us have been very careful not to bring it up. It's an unspoken rule, and we've both been keeping to it.

My family adores him, and his pack has welcomed me with open arms. It's been an amazing experience, and it's something I'll carry with me for the rest of my life.

I'm standing in my bedroom, admiring the metal wolf Reiner made me, when my aunt Gwen walks in. She lingers in the doorway for a few minutes, not saying anything, just watching me.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she finally says.

"Yes," I agree, running my fingers over the cool metal.

"He's quite talented," she says, stepping into the room. "I think he could make some good money selling his sculptures."

“I think so, too,” I agree, smiling at her.

“You know, we’re supposed to go home in a couple of days. Are you going to come with us or stay here?”

“I... I’m not sure,” I say, hesitating.

“Because if you’re staying, it’s okay, Jane,” she says, putting her hand on my shoulder. “You’re an adult, and you can make your own decisions. But I want you to be sure. This is a big step, and I don’t want you to regret it.”

“I know,” I say, sighing. “I’m just not sure what I want to do yet.”

“Well, how serious are things between you two? You seem quite taken, but I’m just wondering how much of that is new relationship excitement and how much of it is real.”

I hesitate, not sure how to answer. I’ve never been in a situation like this before. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and Reiner and I haven’t talked about anything beyond the present.

“We’re taking it slow,” I say, evading the question.

“I can understand that,” my aunt acknowledges, nodding. “But the time will come, and fairly soon, when you’ll have to make a decision. You can’t put it off forever.”

“I know,” I tell her, sighing. “I just... I’m not ready to make that decision yet. I’m still trying to figure things out.”

“I know, honey,” she says, giving me a hug. “Just remember, no matter what you decide, we’ll support you. I’m sure Piper would love to have you here close to her,

but we'll miss you like crazy if you stay."

"Thanks, Aunt Gwen." I hug her back. "I'm not going anywhere just yet, so let's not worry about it, okay?"

"Okay," she says, smiling. "I'm on babysitting duty tonight, so I'll be out late. Piper and Rafe are going to the movies, and I'm going to watch Margie. Don't wait up for me."

"I won't," I promise. "Have fun."

"I will," she says, laughing. "You too."

"Don't worry, I will."

She leaves, and I'm alone with my thoughts. I keep staring at the wolf Reiner made me, and I can't help but wonder if there's a message in it. Aunt Gwen is right. I can't put off making a decision forever. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to make a choice.

I've refused to even entertain the idea of a future here with Reiner. I've been so focused on enjoying the moment and not worrying about the future. But now, it's all I can think about.

I'm falling for him. There's no denying it anymore. But what if it's not the same for him? What if I'm just a fling, a way to pass the time until I leave?

I don't want to think like that, but I can't help it. The possibility is there, and given our history, it's not an unreasonable assumption.

I'm not sure what to do. My heart is telling me to stay, to give us a chance, but my

head is telling me to be smart, to protect myself.

I'm not sure who to listen to. Another knock on my door pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Come in," I call out.

The door opens, and Reiner peeks his head in. I jump, fully expecting it to be Aunt Gwen.

"Oh my gosh, you scared me," I say, my hand on my chest.

"Sorry," he apologizes. When he holds out his hand, a glint of metal catches my eye. "I have something for you."

"Really?" I ask, curious.

"Yeah," he says, coming into the room.

He hands me a small metal object. I turn it over in my hands, examining it. A small flower. A delicate, intricate, beautiful piece of art. When I take it from him, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out half a dozen more.

"Reiner," I breathe, tracing my finger over the petals. "These are gorgeous. There's no way you made these."

He smiles, his cheeks flushed. "I've been working on them for a couple days. You liked the wolf so much, I just thought..."

"They're perfect," I whisper, tears pricking my eyes.

This has to mean something, right? He wouldn't have gone through all the trouble of

making all this for me if he didn't care about me. Right?

"Thank you," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"You're welcome," he murmurs, kissing my cheeks. "Care to go for a walk? It's a beautiful night."

"I'd love to," I agree, smiling.

We head out, and he takes my hand in his. We walk in silence for a while, just enjoying the night air. He's right. It is lovely out. The night sky is clear and full of stars, and the moon is bright. It's looming in the sky, full and round, casting a silvery glow on everything.

That's another thing I would miss about this place if I go back home. The sky is so much clearer here. At home, the light pollution makes it hard to see the stars.

"What are you thinking about?" Reiner asks, glancing over at me.

"I was just thinking how much I'm going to miss this place," I say, gesturing to the sky.

A strange look crosses his face, but it's gone as quickly as it came.

"Yeah," he says, his voice tight. "It's a nice place. When I was in Stardust Hollow, the first thing I noticed was how different the sky was. It's not as clear, not as beautiful."

"I know," I agree, sighing.

"So, when are you guys supposed to leave?"

“In a couple of days,” I say with a shrug.

“Oh.” His jaw clenches, and I’m waiting for him to say something, anything.

I want him to ask me to stay. My heart needs him to be the one to bring it up, to make the first move. But he doesn’t.

“Well, that’s not too long,” he says, his voice strained.

“No, it’s not,” I say as disappointment floods me.

Maybe I was just imagining things. Maybe he doesn’t care about me the way I care about him. I know he said he wanted to give us a chance, but based on what I’m seeing right now, that chance was only meant to span the time between then and now. He makes no mention of the future, and I’m not sure if that’s because he doesn’t want to pressure me or because he’s not interested. But the bottom line is, I was the one to put myself out there last time.

When he was in Stardust Hollow, I put my heart on the line. I told him I had feelings for him, and he shot me down. I just can’t bring myself to take that risk a second time. If Reiner wants me to stay, then dammit, he needs to be the one to say it.

I’m not going to chase him. Not again.

“We better head back,” he says, clearing his throat. “I’ve got an early day tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I agree, trying not to let the disappointment show on my face.

I guess that’s that, then. I’m leaving in a couple of days, and he’s not going to stop me. Reiner doesn’t want me to stay. If there’s one thing I know about this man, it’s that he speaks his mind. Granted, he’s not the best when it comes to articulating his

feelings, but if he wants something, he goes after it. The fact that he's not asking me to stay tells me everything I need to know.

The realization hits me like a ton of bricks, and I feel my heart breaking. I've been holding out hope, but now it's clear. He doesn't feel the same way I do. I knew I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up. I knew I shouldn't have let myself fall for him. But I did, and now, I'm paying the price.

My heart feels like it's shattering into a million pieces. Every step we take back toward my place is a reminder that this might be one of the last times we do this. My feet are moving, but my mind is a tangled web of thoughts I can't escape. How did I let myself get here? How did I let myself fall for someone who can't or won't catch me?

I feel like an idiot for believing that this time could be different. That maybe, just maybe, Reiner saw me as more than just a temporary distraction. All those nights spent wrapped up in his arms, feeling like the world outside didn't matter, are starting to feel like illusions. Like something I conjured up in my head to protect myself from the truth.

The truth is, I'm a fool for thinking I could mean something more to him. He made me feel special, sure, but I should have known better than to think it would last. Reiner's good at keeping things light, at making you feel like you're the only person in the world when you're with him, but that doesn't mean he's in it for the long haul. I should have seen the signs. The way he avoids talking about the future, how he never lets the conversation drift too close to anything serious. How he's so damn good at making me laugh, making me feel alive, but not good at letting me know where I stand with him.

I guess it's my fault, too. I knew the risks. I knew that getting involved with someone like Reiner would be complicated, that he was a wild card. But I still let myself

believe in the possibility of something more. And now, that hope is turning into a bitter taste in my mouth. A lump in my throat that I can't swallow down.

The walk back feels like it's taking forever, each step dragging me closer to the moment when I'll have to say goodbye. Not just to Reiner but to everything we could have been. I can feel him beside me, and his presence is a comforting weight, but it's also a reminder of what I'm about to lose.

By the time we reach the door to the trailer, my chest is aching with the effort of holding it all in. I want to scream, to demand that he tell me what he really feels, but I know it won't do any good. If he wanted me to stay, he would have said something by now. He would have given me a reason, something to hold onto, something to make this decision easier. But he hasn't, and that silence is all the answer I need.

Reiner opens the door and steps aside to let me in, and I feel like I'm walking into a tomb. The air inside is filled with the ghost of everything we shared. I can't help but think about all the nights we spent here, all the mornings we woke up tangled in each other, the way he'd kiss my forehead and pull me close, making me feel like I was home. But now, it's just a place. A place where I'll sleep for a couple more nights before I leave. Before I go back to a life that feels a little more hollow than it did before.

I can feel the tears burning behind my eyes, but I won't let them fall. Not yet, not here. I need to keep it together, to hold onto whatever dignity I have left. I can cry later, when I'm alone in bed, when the darkness hides the pain and I can let it all out. But for now, I need to be strong. I need to pretend like this isn't tearing me apart.

Reiner doesn't say much as he heads to the kitchen, grabbing a glass of water. I watch him, feeling like I'm seeing him for the last time. The way his muscles move under his shirt, the way his hair falls into his eyes, the way his lips curl up in that half-smile that's always made my heart skip a beat. God, I'm going to miss him. I'm going to

miss everything about him, even the things that drove me crazy.

I can't stay here much longer. I need to get out, to breathe, to find a way to keep myself from falling apart in front of him. I tell myself that I'll be okay, that I'll survive this, but it feels like a lie. Like something I'm saying just to keep myself from breaking down.

I mumble some excuse about needing to get to bed. Reiner nods, but his expression is unreadable. He doesn't stop me, doesn't ask if I'm okay, doesn't pull me into his arms like I desperately want him to. He just watches me go, and that's what hurts the most. Because at that moment, it feels like he's letting me go. Like he's already moved on. Like I'm just another chapter in his life that's coming to an end.

As I walk to the bedroom, I can feel the tears threatening to spill over, but I won't let them. Not until I'm alone, not until the door is closed, and I can finally let myself feel the full weight of what I'm losing.

I climb into bed, pull the covers over me, and curl up into a ball, trying to hold myself together. But it's no use. The tears come, hot and fast, and I can't stop them. I bury my face in the pillow, trying to muffle the sobs that are tearing their way out of me. It hurts. God, it hurts so much, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I feel like I'm drowning, like the pain is swallowing me whole, and I don't know how to escape it.

I cry until I'm exhausted, until there are no more tears left, and all I can do is lie there, staring at the ceiling, feeling numb and empty. I thought I could handle this, but I was wrong. I'm not strong enough to let him go, but I don't have a choice. Reiner made that decision for me, and now I have to live with it.

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

The two months are almost up, and it's like a heavy cloud hanging over me, a constant reminder that Jane and the other Stardust Hollow shifters are about to leave. We've played our part so well that everyone around us believes we'll make this long-distance thing work. But the truth? The truth is a tangled mess of guilt and confusion, and I can't shake it.

I'm not just fooling my pack; I'm fooling myself. Letting things get this far, letting myself get so wrapped up in her was a mistake. Or was it? I don't even know anymore. My head tells me it was, that I should have kept my distance, but my heart—my heart doesn't want to let go. Not now, not when I've gotten so used to having her by my side. To falling asleep with her scent filling my senses.

I should be relieved, I guess. Relieved that the charade is coming to an end, that I won't have to keep pretending. But the thought of Jane leaving, of not seeing her again, of her not being there when I wake up or not hearing her laugh—it's like a punch to the gut. It doesn't make sense, this attachment I've developed. It shouldn't hurt like this, but it does.

I know I need to do something to mark the end of these two months, give her a proper send-off. But not just any date—something special, something that she'll remember. So, I decide to take her around town to show her the spots I haven't shared with anyone else, not even my pack.

The sun is dipping low in the sky when I pull up to Jane's place, and my heart is pounding a little harder than usual. She's waiting for me, as always, and the sight of her brings a mix of warmth and a sharp pang of something I can't quite name.

“Ready for tonight?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light, even though there’s a weight in my chest that doesn’t belong there.

She smiles, but it’s a sad smile, and it tugs at something deep inside me. “Always.”

I nod, returning the smile, though mine feels more forced. “I’ve got something special planned.”

“Oh? What kind of special?”

“You’ll see,” I tease, keeping it vague. If I let myself think about what tonight really means, I might just lose my nerve.

We start off with a drive through the outskirts of town, taking the back roads where the trees line the path. The sky is a deep orange, fading into purples and blues as the sun continues its descent. It’s quiet, with the only sounds being the hum of the engine and the occasional rustle of leaves as the wind picks up.

I take her to the first spot—an old, forgotten trail that winds through the woods. It’s a place I’ve come to many times when I needed to clear my head, to be alone with my thoughts. The trees are tall and thick, their branches arching overhead, creating a canopy that filters the fading sunlight. It’s peaceful here, untouched by the world outside.

“Come on,” I say as I park the truck and hop out. Jane follows, looking around with that curious expression.

“I didn’t even know this place existed,” she whispers as if she doesn’t want to disturb the tranquility.

“That’s because I’ve kept it a secret,” I reply, taking her hand and leading her down

the path. “Just for us locals. I wanted to show it to you before you left.”

She doesn't say anything, but I can feel her hand tighten slightly in mine. We walk in silence for a while, just taking in the sights and sounds of the forest. There's something about being out here, away from everything, that makes it easier to breathe, easier to think.

Eventually, we reach the end of the trail, where the trees open up to reveal a small clearing. The grass here is a little taller, and wildflowers dot the landscape with bursts of color. A small creek runs through the middle, with water as clear as a crystal.

“This is beautiful,” Jane murmurs.

“I thought you'd like it.” I release her hand and walk over to the creek, crouching down to run my fingers through the water. It's cold and refreshing, and I can't help but smile at the memories this place holds.

Jane joins me, and for a moment, we just sit there side by side, listening to the water as it flows over the rocks. The world feels small here, like it's just the two of us and nothing else matters.

I can sense the shift in her mood, though. She's enjoying this, but there's something else, something heavier that mirrors my own feelings. It's the unspoken truth that tonight is our last night like this.

“Come on,” I urge after a while, standing up and offering her my hand again. “There's one more place I want to show you.”

She takes my hand without hesitation, and we head back to the car. The drive is shorter this time, and soon we're pulling up to a small, secluded spot just outside of town. It's where I go when I need to run—really run. The kind of run that lets the

wolf in me take over, where I can let go and just be.

I climb out of the car and walk around to let her out. “This is my favorite spot. No one else comes out here, so we’ll have it all to ourselves.”

She grins, and I can see the thrill of the hunt lighting up her eyes. We move together, our clothes discarded in a pile by the car, and then the shift takes over. It’s quick and seamless, like slipping into a second skin. My senses sharpen, the world coming alive in ways it never does in human form.

I see Jane’s wolf, sleek and powerful, her fur shimmering in the moonlight. She’s beautiful, even in this form.

I give her a playful nudge, and she responds with a soft growl, her tail flicking with anticipation. Then we’re off, tearing through the trees, the wind whipping past us as we run. It’s exhilarating, the feeling of freedom, of power coursing through my veins. I push harder, faster, my paws pounding the earth, my breath steady and strong.

Jane is right there with me, matching my pace, her movements fluid and graceful. We weave through the trees, leaping over fallen branches, dodging obstacles with ease. The world blurs around us, reduced to the rhythm of our run.

This is where I feel most alive. Where the world fades away, and it’s just us, two wolves in sync, driven by instinct and something deeper. I don’t have to think out here; I just am.

We run for what feels like hours until the moon is high in the sky and our muscles start to ache. Finally, we slow, coming to a stop at the edge of a cliff overlooking the town. The lights below twinkle like stars, and for a moment, we just stand there panting and looking out at the view.

It's beautiful, but it's bittersweet. This is it. The end of the run, the end of the night, the end of... us?

I shift back, and my human form feels almost foreign after the run. Jane follows suit, and we stand there in silence.

"I'm going to miss this," she says quietly.

"Yeah," I reply, not trusting myself to say more.

We stand there for a long time, just taking it all in, neither of us willing to break the silence. Because once we do, reality comes crashing back in, and the moment ends.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. I have to feel her one last time.

I turn to her, and my hands are on her waist, pulling her close. She looks up at me, her eyes wide with surprise, but she doesn't pull away.

"Reiner..."

"Shh," I murmur, leaning down to brush my lips against hers. She melts into the kiss, her body pressed against mine, and I can feel the heat radiating between us.

My hands roam her body, exploring every inch, committing it to memory. I want to remember this. Her scent, her taste, the way she feels beneath my fingertips.

I can't help it. I want her. I need her. Even if it's just for tonight.

I deepen the kiss, my tongue seeking hers, and she responds eagerly. Her hands are on me now, tracing the lines of my muscles, sending shivers down my spine. It's like electricity, the way her touch sets my nerves on fire.

I'm lost in her, in this moment, and nothing else matters. It's just us, the two of us, and the rest of the world falls away.

We're both breathing heavily now, our bodies pressed together, the heat building between us. I can feel her heart beating against my chest, and it's the most exquisite sensation.

I pull away, just enough to look into her eyes. They're dark with desire, and I know mine are the same.

"I want you," I breathe, my voice thick with need.

"I want you, too," she replies, her words a whisper on the wind.

We tumble to the ground in a heap, our lips locked, our bodies moving in sync. It's like we're one, connected in a way I've never felt before. It's perfect, and I can't get enough.

She rolls me over, pressing my back into the damp grass, her hips grinding against mine. I groan, my hands gripping her thighs, pulling her closer.

She kisses me again, her tongue hot and demanding, and I lose myself in the sensation. My hands find her breasts, teasing the sensitive skin, drawing a moan from her lips.

I roll her over again, pinning her beneath me, and she arches her back, her body begging for more. I trail kisses down her neck, her collarbone, her chest before taking one nipple into my mouth. She gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair, holding me close.

I move lower, my tongue tracing the curves of her stomach, her hips, her thighs.

She's trembling, her breath coming in shallow pants, and I can feel her need. My fingers dance across her skin, sliding down her belly, finding the slick heat between her legs.

"Please," she whispers, and I can't deny her. I slip a finger inside, stroking her slowly, and she moans, her hips rising to meet my hand.

I add another finger, and she's so wet, so ready, her body quivering with desire, so I move faster, deeper, my thumb circling her clit, and she cries out, her back arching, her body shuddering with pleasure. Curling my fingers, I feel her walls tighten, her muscles clenching, and I know she's close.

"Come for me," I growl, and she does. Her orgasm rips through her, her body shaking, her voice hoarse with ecstasy.

I keep going, my fingers pumping, my thumb rubbing her clit, readying her for more. When her climax subsides, I pull my hand away, replacing it with my cock, and she moans, her arms wrapping around my neck.

I push into her, and it's like coming home. She's tight and warm and perfect, and I can't hold back. I thrust into her hard and fast, and she meets me stroke for stroke, her nails digging into my back, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

We've had sex before, but this is different. This is more. It's like we're connected in a way we've never been before, our bodies moving as one, our hearts beating in sync.

It's raw and primal and intense, and I can't get enough. I pound into her, my hips snapping, my cock driving deeper. She matches my pace, her body responding to mine.

It's not just the physical connection, though. It's more than that. It's the way she

looks at me, her eyes filled with trust and desire. It's the way she touches me, her hands caressing my skin, setting my nerves on fire. It's the way she feels, her body wrapped around mine, her warmth enveloping me.

It's the way she makes me feel like I'm the only man in the world, like nothing else matters, like this moment is all that exists.

I lose myself in her, in the feeling of her, the taste of her, the scent of her. I'm drowning in her, and I never want to come up for air.

But I can't hold back any longer. The pressure is building, the pleasure coiling tight, and I know I'm close.

"Come with me," I growl, and she does, her body tensing, her muscles clenching around me as her climax overtakes her.

The feeling of her, the sound of her, the sight of her—it's too much. I'm overwhelmed by her, by us, by everything. And then I'm falling, the world fading to white as my orgasm crashes over me, my body shuddering with release.

Afterward, we lay there, tangled in each other's arms, our breathing slowing, our hearts pounding in unison. It's quiet, save for the sounds of the forest, and the silence is heavy with the weight of what we've just shared.

I know we can't lie here all night. We have to go back, and I'm already trying to figure out how I'm going to tell her I can't go home with her. As much as I'd love to, I can't. I can't sleep in the same bed with her, knowing she's leaving tomorrow. I can't wake up to her face, knowing it's the last time I'll ever see it.

I can't do it, even if that makes me a coward.

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

I watch him as he drives, the shadows of the trees lining the road flickering across his face. He's silent, his gaze focused ahead, his jaw set. I can't help but wonder what he's thinking, but I don't dare ask.

There was some sort of finality in what we just did out there in the forest. It was like a goodbye. Like he knew this was the end.

I glance at him again, and my heart aches. I don't want it to end, but I can't force him to feel the same way. When he glances over at me, there's such a difference in the way he's looking at me. He's pulling away, and I don't know how to stop it.

"Reiner," I start, but he cuts me off.

"I should probably get you home," he says, his tone flat.

"You're not going to stay the night? I thought we could—"

"No," he says, his voice firm. "I think it's best if we say our goodbyes now."

I stare at him, my heart breaking. This is it. This is the end. I can feel it, and I'm powerless to stop it.

"Okay," I whisper, the word barely audible.

He pulls up to the house and parks. I can see the lights are on, and I know my aunt and uncle are waiting for me. I don't want to go. I don't want to leave.

“I guess this is it,” I say, my voice thick with emotion.

“Yeah,” he replies, his eyes fixed on the steering wheel.

It takes me a moment to realize he’s not even going to walk me to the door this time. I swallow the lump in my throat and reach for the door handle.

“Goodbye, Reiner.”

“Bye, Jane.”

I can’t look at him anymore. I can’t stand to see the indifference in his eyes. I shove the car door open and climb out while my heart shatters into a million pieces.

I make it to the front porch before the tears start to fall. I’m not sure why I’m crying. Maybe it’s the loss of a dream, a fantasy. Maybe it’s the realization that it was all a lie. Or maybe it’s the knowledge that I’ll never see him again.

I’m not the type to cry. I’ve always been the strong one, the one who holds it together. But right now, I can’t seem to stop the tears from flowing.

I’m standing there, my shoulders slumped, my head bowed, and I can’t stop crying. It’s like a dam has burst, and the floodgates have opened. I’m sobbing, my chest heaving, my heart aching.

I’m not sure how long I stand there, but eventually, I hear the door open.

“Jane?” Piper’s voice is soft and concerned.

I look up at her, my vision blurred by the tears. She’s standing there, her brow furrowed, her eyes filled with worry.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her voice gentle.

I shake my head, unable to speak. I can’t form the words, can’t explain the pain I’m feeling.

“Come on,” she says, taking my hand. “Let’s get you inside.”

She leads me into the house, and I follow, numb and silent.

“Sit down,” she orders, and I obey, sinking into a chair at the kitchen table.

Thankfully, Aunt Gwen and Uncle Richard are nowhere to be seen. I’d hate for them to see me like this, a blubbing mess.

Piper bustles around the kitchen, putting on a pot of tea. The familiar scent of chamomile fills the air, and I feel a little better.

“Talk to me,” she says, setting a steaming mug in front of me. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I reply, my voice thick with emotion. “I just... I hate leaving him. I hate saying goodbye. I feel like there’s so much left unsaid, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

She draws her brows together as she rubs my arm. “Then why are you leaving? I thought things were going so well with you and Reiner. I was really hoping you’d stay. I was looking forward to having my adopted sister around all the time.”

“What’s the point?” I snap, the words coming out harsher than I intended. “He may be interested in me right now, but we both know that down the road, when some gorgeous, skinny blonde comes along, he’ll drop me like a bad habit. I’m not the type guys choose, and I’m tired of being the one who’s left behind.”

“Jane, what are you talking about? You’re beautiful, and any guy would be lucky to have you. Look at you! You’re smart, funny, and sexy as hell. Any guy would be crazy not to want you.”

“Yeah, right,” I scoff, rolling my eyes. “I’m the funny fat friend, and you know it. No one ever looks twice at me. I’m the one who gets left behind, the one who’s always the bridesmaid, never the bride. I’m the one who’s always on the outside, looking in. Reiner’s no different. He found a girl who would stroke his ego for a minute, and he took advantage of that. And stupid me, I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I should’ve known better. I should’ve seen the writing on the wall, but I was too blinded by my own feelings to see the truth.”

“That’s not true,” Piper argues. “You’re not seeing clearly right now. You’re upset, and you’re lashing out. But that doesn’t make it true. You’re an amazing woman, and I’ve seen the way Reiner looks at you. He’s crazy about you, and I know he’s going to miss you when you’re gone. He’s just afraid to admit it.”

“Afraid?” I repeat, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “Please. He’s not afraid of anything. He’s a big, tough wolf. He doesn’t care about me. He’s just using me, and I’m a fool for falling for it.”

“No, you’re not,” Piper insists. “You’re not a fool, and he’s not using you. I don’t know what’s going on in his head, but I know you’re not a fool. You’re the most intelligent, kind, and loving person I’ve ever met, and I’m lucky to have you in my life. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. If you want to stay, then stay. Don’t worry about what my parents or anybody else thinks. Stay and fight for what you want. Because if you don’t, you’re going to regret it for the rest of your life.”

I stare at her, my mind reeling. Is she right? Am I making a mistake?

“But what if he doesn’t feel the same way?” I ask, voicing my deepest fear.

“Then he’s an idiot,” she replies, her tone firm. “And you’re better off without him. But I don’t think that’s the case. The best thing you can do for yourself right now is shove your pride to the wayside and go talk to him. Tell him how you feel. Be honest. If he doesn’t feel the same way, you’ll have closure. And if he does, you’ll have the chance to start a real relationship, the kind that’s based on honesty and communication. You owe it to yourself, Jane. Take a risk. You might be surprised by what happens.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. She’s right. I have to try. I have to at least give us a shot.

“Okay,” I say, steeling myself. “But I have no idea where he is.”

“I just got off the phone with Rafe right before you got here. The two of them were headed to the bar. It’s not far from here. I’ll drive you.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “I need to do this alone. I can drive myself.”

She gives me a skeptical look but finally nods. “Okay, but call me if you need anything. I’ll be up late.”

“Thanks,” I say, giving her a quick hug. “For everything.”

She squeezes me back, and I can feel her smile. “Go get him, tiger.”

I grin and pull away, feeling a surge of hope and determination. I can do this. I can tell him how I feel. I can fight for what I want.

I head to the door, my heart pounding in my chest. This is it. This is my moment.

As I step outside into the cool night air, a million thoughts are racing through my

mind. I'm not sure what I'm going to say, but I know I have to say something. I have to try.

When I reach the car, I pause, taking a deep breath. I can do this. I can be brave.

The drive to the bar is short, and soon I'm pulling into the parking lot. My hands are shaking, and I can feel my palms sweating.

I look at the bar, and I can see the lights and hear the music spilling out onto the street. There are people milling around outside, smoking and laughing. It's a lively scene, but all I can think about is what I'm about to do.

I take another deep breath, steadying my nerves. I can do this. I can face him. I can tell him how I feel.

I get out of the car and make my way to the entrance. The bouncer barely glances at me before waving me in. Scanning the crowd, I search for Reiner. When I finally spot him, he's surrounded by his packmates, laughing and joking and having the time of his life.

My stomach twists into a knot. How can he be so carefree when I'm feeling so conflicted? He doesn't even seem to care that I'm leaving tomorrow. If he's bothered by my leaving, even a little, he's hiding it well.

I watch him for a few moments, my heart sinking. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he doesn't care about me the way I care about him. Maybe I'm the only one who's going to be hurting when I leave.

I'm not sure how long I stand there watching him, but eventually, I decide that I can't do this. I can't confront him, not here, not now. Not when he's so clearly enjoying himself.

I turn and walk away, my heart breaking with every step.

I'm halfway to the door when I hear someone call my name. I stop, my hand on the door handle. I don't want to turn around.

Jack's voice is loud and clear. "Jane, wait!"

I close my eyes, trying to compose myself. I don't want him to see me like this, but I can't just ignore him.

"Yeah?" I reply, my voice shaky.

I hear him approach, and I can feel his presence behind me. "What are you doing here?" he asks, his voice gentle.

I'm not about to tell him that I was looking for his cousin to profess my undying love, only to find him living it up, so I lie. "I just wanted to see the town one more time," I say. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"I know," he says, his voice tinged with sadness. "I'm sorry. I wish you didn't have to go."

"It's okay," I reply, forcing a smile. "I'm ready to go home."

And it's true. I've seen all I need to see. I'm ready to leave this town, and Reiner, behind.

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

My head feels like it's been trampled by a herd of wild horses, each one stomping a little harder than the last. The morning sun stabs at my eyes as if it has a personal vendetta against me. I'm not usually one to indulge in this level of self-pity, but damn, I feel like shit. And not just because of the hangover.

I lean against the porch railing, watching as the last of the Stardust Hollow shifters load into their trucks. They've been with us for two months, and while it hasn't been the easiest experience, it's also been rewarding in a lot of ways. We've learned a lot from each other, and I think we've forged some strong connections.

But now, it's time for them to go. And with them, Jane.

She's been distant all morning, and it's gnawing at me like a festering wound. Every time I've tried to catch her eye, she's looked away, like she can't stand the sight of me. Maybe she can't. Hell, I can't stand the sight of me right now, either.

When I tried to speak to her, she brushed me off, saying she had to go help Piper and her aunt with the final packing. But I know she was really just trying to avoid me.

As I watched her walk away, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was all a mistake. I should've told her how I felt. I should've been honest with her. But I was a coward, and now I'm going to lose her.

The thought of losing her is almost too much to bear. She's the first woman I've ever really cared about, and I can't imagine my life without her in it.

I'm still standing on the porch, lost in my thoughts, when Rafe approaches. "You

okay, man?" he asks, his voice laced with concern.

"Not really," I admit, running a hand through my hair. "I fucked up, Rafe. I fucked up big time."

"What happened?"

I sigh, leaning against the railing. "I was an idiot. I was afraid to admit how I felt about her, and now, she's gone."

"You guys can do long-distance," he suggests.

"Maybe," I say, my voice heavy with doubt. "But I don't think that's what she wants. I think she's done with me."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he says, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "She'll come around. Just give her some time."

"I hope you're right," I mutter, staring at the vehicles as they drive away.

I can't help but feel that I'm watching my chance at happiness go along with them.

I'm an idiot.

Jack comes trotting over to me, and the entire way, he's shaking his head. "How could you let her go?" he asks.

"I didn't let her go," I say, my voice tight. "I had no choice. She wanted to leave."

"Bullshit," he replies, his tone harsh. "You had a choice, and you made the wrong one. You let her go."

“I didn’t want to hold her back,” I say, trying to defend myself. “She’s young, she has her whole life ahead of her. She doesn’t need to be tied down to an old, broken-down wolf like me.”

He reaches out and gives me a shove, and my hackles rise instantly. “You’re a fucking idiot, you know that? She’s crazy about you, and you’re sitting here, feeling sorry for yourself and letting her get away. You’re a fucking coward.”

Oh, hell, no.

I shove him back, a growl rumbling in my chest. “I’m not a coward. I’m being realistic. She’s better off without me. She deserves someone younger. Someone who can give her the life she wants.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” he repeats, shoving me again.

My temper is fraying, and I can feel the shift coming on. My claws are itching to come out, and my teeth are aching to bite.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” I snarl, my voice rough and gravelly.

“I know you’re throwing away the best thing that’s ever happened to you,” he shoots back, his eyes flashing with anger. “I know you’re making a huge mistake.”

“Fuck you,” I growl, my fist connecting with his jaw.

We tumble to the ground, our bodies entwined as we roll around, trading punches and insults. I’ve never hit my cousin before, but I can’t seem to stop myself. He’s pushing all my buttons, and I’m beyond the point of reason. I don’t know if it’s the hurt, the anger, or the alcohol, but I’m not thinking straight. I’m just reacting.

“Enough!” someone shouts, and suddenly, we’re being pulled apart.

I’m breathing hard, my heart racing, my hands clenched into fists. I want to keep fighting. I want to make him pay for calling me a coward.

“What the fuck is wrong with you two?”

I spin around, fully intent on laying into whoever came between me and my cousin, but the words die in my throat. It’s Gael, of all people. Mr. Bookworm himself is daring to intervene here? I’m too stunned to say a damn thing.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Reiner?” Gael’s voice is low and dangerous. I can’t remember the last time I heard him sound so pissed off.

“I—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Gael cuts me off.

I close my mouth, my heart pounding.

“I don’t care what the fuck is going on with you and your cousin, but you need to get your shit together. We have bigger issues.” He swivels in place to face Rafe now. “Rogues. Clara just said she saw them when she was coming back into town. One of them matched Lionel’s description. We need to go after them. Now.”

“Fuck,” Rafe hisses, his eyes flashing with fury. “Get in the car. All of you.”

I don’t argue. I don’t even think. I just follow orders.

We pile into the car, and Rafe guns it, speeding down the road. I’m sitting in the back seat, my heart racing, my mind spinning.

“What’s the plan?” I ask, my voice tight.

“We’re going to track them down and take them out,” Rafe says, his voice cold. “No mercy.”

“Do we have any idea where they are?”

“They were spotted near the border,” he replies, his jaw clenched. “We’ll start there and fan out.”

“Roger that,” I say, my voice grim.

I glance at Jack, and he looks just as determined as I feel. We’re going to find these fuckers, and we’re going to make them pay.

It’s time to put an end to this madness once and for all.

When we arrive, we split up and begin searching the area. It’s quiet and eerily calm, but I know the rogues are here somewhere.

I move silently through the woods, my senses on high alert. I can’t hear them or smell them, and part of me wonders if they’ve already left. Jack falls into step beside me, his eyes scanning the trees.

“She came looking for you, you know. Last night. She wanted to talk to you.”

I stiffen, my heart hammering in my chest. “What are you talking about?”

“At the bar. I saw her pull up, and she said she was just getting a drink, but she never went inside. I watched her for a while, and she was just standing there, looking through the window.”

I think back to last night. I was at the bar, but I didn't see her. Oh, shit. I'm willing to bet money that she was there, and she saw me. She saw me laughing and hamming it up with my friends, and she thought I didn't care.

"Fuck," I mutter, running a hand through my hair.

"Yeah," Jack says, his tone sympathetic. "She was pretty upset. I think she was hoping you'd come outside and talk to her."

"I didn't know," I say, my voice strained. "I didn't see her. The only reason I was even there was to keep myself busy. I needed a distraction."

"I know," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "And I'm not saying this to be a dick, I'm saying it because you need to hear it. You were an idiot. You let her get away."

I sigh, my shoulders sagging. "I know."

"You guys need to come see this!" Gael's voice rings out through the forest.

We rush over to where he's standing near the road, and I can't believe what I'm seeing. Footprints, dozens of them, all headed in the direction of Stardust Hollow.

"Fuck," Rafe hisses, his eyes flashing with anger. "They're going after the other pack."

"That's why they posted up between our territories," I reason. "They knew we were running this exchange program, and they knew they'd be returning home soon. They were waiting for their chance to strike."

"We have to warn them," Gael says, his voice tight. "We have to get to them before

the rogues do.”

“I’ll call Ram,” Rafe says, pulling out his phone.

He dials the number, and we wait, our hearts pounding, but there’s no answer.

“Fuck,” Rafe hisses, his voice laced with frustration. “Reiner, try calling Jane.”

I pull out my phone and dial her number, but it goes straight to voicemail.

“Shit,” I mutter, clenching my jaw. “What if they’ve already got them?”

“Oh, man,” Jack mumbles. “This is bad. This is really bad.”

“We have to assume the worst,” Gael states. “We have to assume the rogues have attacked the pack, and we have to prepare for the possibility that we’re going to be walking into a bloodbath.”

“Fuck,” Rafe growls. “We need to let Evan know and wait for his orders. We can’t go charging in there without a plan.”

I throw my hands in the air. “There’s no time for that shit! They could be dying, or worse, already dead while we sit here and debate what to do. We need to go now.”

“You know that’s not how we do things,” Rafe walks over to me, placing his hands on my shoulders and squeezing a bit.

Tears prick my eyes, and I have to blink them away. “But what if they have Jane?”

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

I sit in the back of the van, staring out the window as the trees blur into a green and brown smudge. My wolf is pacing inside me, restless and angry, as if she's trying to claw her way out. I've tried ignoring her, focusing on the steady hum of the engine and the occasional chatter from Sonya and my aunt in the front seat, but it's no use. My mind keeps drifting back to him.

Reiner.

The way he looked at me this morning, the hurt in his eyes that mirrored the ache in my chest. It's been gnawing at me the whole trip, a constant reminder that maybe I'm making a huge mistake. I thought leaving would make things easier, that putting distance between us would help me sort out my feelings. But all it's done is make everything worse.

I feel like I'm leaving a piece of myself behind.

I shift in my seat, trying to find a more comfortable position, but the leather is hot and sticky against my skin, and nothing feels right. My wolf growls low in my chest, a sound only I can hear, but it echoes in my mind, making my head throb. She doesn't want to leave. She wants to go back, to run straight to Reiner and demand answers.

What are you doing ? she seems to ask, her voice a constant pressure in my head. Why are you leaving him ?

I don't have a good answer. I thought I did. I told myself it was the right thing to do, that it was what we both needed. But now I'm not so sure. All I can think about is how empty I felt when I walked away from him, how cold the air felt the moment I

left his side.

And I keep wondering if I made the same mistake twice.

My heart pounds as I recall the last time I let fear guide me—how I walked away without looking back, thinking it was for the best. All it did was leave me with regrets, with a constant “what if” lingering in the back of my mind. I can’t do that again. I can’t walk away without knowing if there’s something real between us, something worth fighting for.

The van hits a bump, jolting me out of my thoughts, and I clench my fists in my lap, nails digging into my palms. My wolf’s growling grows louder, more insistent, and I feel a surge of adrenaline like a spark of electricity running through my veins. I can’t do this. I can’t just leave. I need to know. I need to take the risk, even if it means getting hurt again.

Before I know it, the words are out of my mouth. “Pull over.”

Uncle Richard glances at me in the rearview mirror, his brow furrowing. “What?”

“Pull over,” I say again, louder this time.

My aunt turns around in her seat, resting her elbow on the back of it. “Jane, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just... I need to get out.”

Sonya flashes me a knowing smile.

I don’t have a plan, but I know I can’t just keep sitting here, feeling sorry for myself. I have to do something.

“Jane, I really don’t think—”

“Please, Uncle Richard. Just pull over.”

He sighs but obliges, slowing the van and easing it to the side of the road. The moment we come to a stop, I unbuckle my seatbelt and reach for the door handle.

“What’s going on?” Aunt Gwen asks, turning in her seat to face me fully now. “Why do you want to get out?”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady the whirlwind of emotions threatening to spill over. “I’m staying,” I say, the words solid, like a decision that’s been brewing inside me for a long time. “I need to go back and figure things out with Reiner.”

My aunt’s eyes widen, surprise flickering across her face. “Are you sure, honey? You don’t have to make any rash decisions. You can think this over.”

“I’ve been thinking,” I say, my voice trembling with the intensity of everything I’m feeling. “I’ve been thinking ever since we left, and I can’t keep going like this. I need to know where we stand, where this is heading. I can’t keep running away.”

Sonya looks at me for a long moment before she chimes in with a very practical, “And what if things don’t work out? What if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“Then, at least I’ll know. At least I won’t spend the rest of my life wondering.”

The van is silent for a few seconds, and I feel like they’re all looking at me like I’ve lost my damn mind.

“We have to stay with the caravan,” Uncle Richard reminds me. “It’s protocol.”

“I’ll walk. I know the way back to Green Lake.”

“Jane, that’s crazy,” my aunt argues. “You can’t just walk all the way back by yourself.”

“I’ll be fine,” I insist. “I can shift, and I’ll be there in no time.”

Sonya nods, a small, understanding smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “All right, Jane. If this is what you want, then you should do it.”

I exhale a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Thank you.”

“But be careful,” my aunt adds, her tone serious. “We’re not that far from Green Lake, but the roads can be tricky. Promise us you’ll use the safe path.”

“I will,” I assure her, nodding. “I’ll be careful.”

Sonya reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Go on, then. Go figure things out.”

I smile the first real smile in what seems like forever and open the door.

As soon as my feet hit the ground, I feel the tension in my chest begin to unravel. The fresh air fills my lungs, and the oppressive heat of the van gives way to a cool breeze that carries the scent of pine and earth. I close the door behind me, the soft click punctuating the decision I can’t take back.

The van pulls away slowly, leaving me standing on the side of the road, but I’ve never felt more sure about anything in my life. The sound of the vans fades into the distance, leaving only the rustling of leaves and the occasional bird call to break the silence. My wolf is still restless, but there’s a sense of purpose now, a certainty that wasn’t there before. This is right. I need to do this.

I take a step forward, then another, my boots crunching on the gravel as I make my way toward the tree line. The path to Green Lake is familiar, even though I've only driven it once. My wolf is keen to run, to shift and cover the distance in minutes, but I force myself to stay in human form for now. I need to keep my wits about me, especially when I don't know what—or who—might be out here.

As I move deeper into the forest, the trees close in around me. Their branches form a canopy over my head that filters the sunlight into patterns on the forest floor. It should feel peaceful, but there's an unease prickling at the edges of my awareness. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I slow my pace, listening.

A twig snaps somewhere to my left, and I freeze, my heart leaping into my throat. I strain to hear more, but all that follows is silence—too much silence. My wolf snarls inside me, urging me to turn and run, but I stay put, forcing myself to think. I know what that sound means. I'm not alone out here.

I start walking again, slower this time, keeping my movements relaxed as if I'm just another hiker enjoying a stroll through the woods. But every nerve in my body is on high alert, and I can sense the presence of others nearby. My senses sharpen, and I catch the faintest scent of something unfamiliar—wild, predatory. It sends a shiver down my spine.

Rogues.

My stomach drops, and I quicken my pace, trying to keep my breathing steady. I've heard the stories, seen the aftermath of what rogue shifters can do when they're desperate enough. My wolf is itching for a fight, but I know better. There are at least two of them, maybe more, and I can't take them on by myself. Not out here, not without backup.

I need to be smart about this. I need to lead them somewhere, anywhere I might have

a chance. I know Evan has ordered round-the-clock patrols of Green Lake territory. Their scouts are out here somewhere. The thought of running back to Reiner, of possibly leading these rogues right to him and the others, makes my stomach churn, but what choice do I have? If I keep going down this path, I'll be vulnerable and alone when they decide to make their move.

I keep walking, trying to keep my pace steady. My mind races, weighing my options. The path I'm on will take me closer to the area where Reiner and the guys were supposed to be scouting. It's a gamble, hoping that they'll still be there, that I'll be able to lead these rogues right into a trap, but it's the only shot I've got.

I veer off the main path, taking a narrow trail that cuts deeper into the forest. The undergrowth is thicker here, which means it'll be more difficult for them to give chase should they decide to. I push on, ignoring the growing sense of dread that's gnawing at me, focusing instead on putting one foot in front of the other.

The rustling behind me grows louder, and I know they're getting closer. My wolf is pacing. Her growls are a constant rumble in my chest, but I force her to stay in check. We can't afford to lose control now, not when we're so close. I just need to keep them on my trail a little longer.

As I weave through the trees, I keep my ears open for any sign that Reiner or someone else might be nearby. There's a scurrying sound behind me, and the scent of the rogues grows stronger. I quicken my pace, my breath coming in short bursts as I maneuver around the thick trunks and overgrown roots. I can almost hear their full footsteps now, closing in behind me, the thrill of the hunt spurring them on. But I'm not their prey. Not yet.

My eyes scan the area ahead, searching for any sign of movement, anything that might indicate I'm nearing the scouting area. And then, just as I'm about to lose hope, I catch a glimpse of something—a flash of movement up ahead, barely perceptible

but enough to make my heart leap.

Dear God, I hope it's Reiner.

## Page 26

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

“Look, isn’t that them?” Gael points to a row of white vans pulled off on the shoulder of the highway.

“Yeah,” I say, my pulse kicking up a notch. “That’s the caravan.”

Jack steps forward, his gaze sweeping over the vehicles. “Do you think they’ve stopped for a rest, or do you think something has happened? Maybe the rogues...”

“No,” I cut him off, shaking my head. “If the rogues had found them, we’d know it. There’d be bodies everywhere.”

“Well, then, what are they doing?”

“I don’t know,” I say, a wave of frustration washing over me. “Pull over, and we’ll find out. I’m tired of guessing.”

With a nod, Gael pulls the truck onto the shoulder of the road, parking a few yards away from the caravan. I hop out, not waiting for the others, and stride toward the nearest van. As I approach, I see a handful of people milling around the vehicles, but no sign of Jane.

“Hey!” I call out, waving at one of the men. “Which van belongs to the James’? I’m looking for Jane.”

The man, a tall, broad-shouldered guy with a thick beard, points forward. “Second van from the front,” he replies. “But you just missed Jane. She hopped out a few miles back.”

“What?” I bark, my heart hammering in my chest. “Why would she do that?”

“Beats me,” he answers with a shrug. “You’d have to ask Gwen and Richard. Thought it was a little odd myself, but?”

I don’t wait for him to finish; I’m already sprinting toward the second van, my feet pounding against the pavement. I can’t believe she would do something so reckless, so stupid. And all for what? She knows there are rogues out here, and she decided to go wandering off by herself?

I tear open the door to the second van, not caring that I’m causing a scene. “Where is she?” I demand, my voice rough with emotion.

Richard is in the middle of stuffing a handful of chips into his mouth, and he nearly chokes when he sees me.

“Reiner!” Gwen calls from the second row. “What on earth are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

I ignore her questions, my eyes fixed on her mate. “I want to know where Jane is.”

He swallows the rest of the chips, then wipes his hands on his shirt. “She’s not here. She jumped out a ways back to go back to Green Lake.”

Sonya, who is sitting beside Gwen, pipes up, “And before you yell at us, there was no stopping her. She was hellbent on seeing you.”

“Are you serious?” I growl, clenching my fists. “There are rogues out there! You let her go by herself?”

“Calm down,” Richard orders, his tone sharp. “Jane is a grown woman, and she can

make her own decisions. We tried to talk her out of it, but she was determined.”

“How could you just let her go?” I demand, my anger rising.

“We didn’t have a choice,” Sonya says, her voice calm. “She’s as stubborn as a mule, and once she makes up her mind, there’s no changing it.”

I run my fingers through my hair, my mind reeling. “I can’t believe this,” I mutter, shaking my head.

Gael, Jack, and Rafe come jogging up behind me. “What’s going on? Where’s Jane?” Rafe asks.

“She left the caravan,” I growl, my voice tight with frustration. “She went back to Green Lake.”

“What?” Gael exclaims. “Why would she do that?”

“Because she’s a fool,” I snap, my temper flaring. “A damn fool.”

“Come on, man,” Jack says, his voice placating. “Let’s not get carried away. We’ll find her.”

“Excuse me!” Gwen calls. “What’s the problem? Are you saying the rogues are in the area right now? Is Jane in danger?”

I hesitate, not sure how much I should share.

“Yes,” Rafe says, his voice steady. “But we’re here now. We’ll make sure she’s safe.”

Gwen and Sonya exchange a worried glance, but it's Richard who starts unbuckling his seatbelt. "We're coming with you," he announces.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "It's too dangerous."

"I'm not asking for your permission," he informs me. "That's my niece, and I love her like she was my own daughter. If she's in trouble, I'm going to help."

Gwen and Sonya are nodding in agreement, and I know there's no point in arguing.

"Fine," I concede. "But stay close to me. And if I tell you to run, you run. No questions asked."

"I'm a shifter, son," Gwen reminds me as she climbs out and hikes up her pants. "I don't run away like a damn puppy."

"Yes, ma'am." I motion for everyone to spread out. "Jack, Gael, you two head east. Richard, Gwen, Sonya, you guys take the west. I'll cover the north. Keep your ears open and stay in constant contact. If you find anything, let the others know immediately."

"Got it," Jack replies, his voice clipped. He's already moving, his eyes scanning the underbrush.

Gwen gives me a nod, her expression resolute. "We'll keep in touch. Stay safe."

"Same to you!" I call out as they head off.

The forest's shadows deepen as I push through the trees, my thoughts racing. Jane's gone back to Green Lake on her own, and the rogues are still out there. I feel the weight of my worry settle over me like a heavy cloak. Every snap of a twig, every

rustle in the leaves makes my heart skip a beat.

I move methodically, combing through every single leaf and branch. The forest is dense here, the undergrowth thick and tangled. I push through a particularly stubborn patch of brambles, my fingers brushing against the rough bark of the trees as I go. Every few feet, I pause, listening for any sign of Jane, but I keep coming up short. I try to picture where she might have gone, where she could have taken a route back to Green Lake. The thought of her wandering alone makes my chest tighten.

“Reiner!” Jack’s voice cuts through the quiet, startling me. I turn to see him holding up a piece of fabric. “Found something.”

I jog over and examine it. It’s a scrap of Jane’s jacket, the one she was wearing earlier. My stomach clenches—she’s definitely been this way. I pocket the fabric and continue forward, my pace quickening.

Minutes stretch into what feels like hours. We’re deep into the woods now, and I’m about to call it in when I catch a glint of something ahead. I push through a thicket and freeze. Scattered on the forest floor are pieces of metal and scraps of cloth. I recognize them immediately.

The welded flowers.

Jane must have taken them apart piece by piece. I crouch beside them, examining them closer. They’ve been arranged in almost a perfect line. It looks like a trail leading deeper into the woods. She’s trying to guide us.

“Over here!” I bark out as loud as I can. “Got her!”

They arrive quickly, and I point to the scattered flowers. “Jane’s been here. She’s left us a trail.”

“Damn, she’s smart,” Gael says, crouching beside me. “She’s trying to lead us to her.”

“This must be recent,” Jack observes, glancing around. “These are fresh.”

“Yeah,” I agree, tension knotting my shoulders. “And it means she’s still close by. Nothing has had a chance to kick them up.”

We start tracking the path, moving cautiously but with purpose. The metal flowers are more sporadic now, a few scattered here and there, but they form a clear direction. I try to keep my breathing steady, but every step feels like it’s dragging me closer to a possible confrontation with the rogues.

Sonya falls into step beside me, glancing over her shoulder to Gwen and Richard before she whispers, “Tell me the truth. Do you think she’s in immediate danger?”

“The rogues were tracking your caravan,” I explain. “If she jumped out and they saw her, they would have followed her.”

“Shit,” she murmurs, her expression grim. “I knew it was a mistake to let her go.”

“No sense in dwelling on it now,” I say, keeping my voice low. “The important thing is, we find her.”

The trail of welded flowers has led us to a small, secluded clearing. My heart races as I peer through the dense foliage and see the rogue wolves gathered in their makeshift camp. The sight sends a surge of adrenaline through me. These rogues are dangerous, and Lionel, their leader, stands at the center of the group, barking orders with authority.

“Everyone, hold position,” Rafe whispers, his voice low and tense. “We need to

approach carefully.”

Jack, Gael, and I crouch behind the thick tree trunks while Richard, Gwen, and Sonya move to the opposite side. I have no idea what use these three will be in a fight, but I guess we’re about to find out. Here’s hoping familial ties are strong enough to give them a fighting spirit.

Lionel is pacing back and forth with his hands clasped behind his back. He’s wearing a stupidly expensive suit, which is absurd considering he’s currently in the middle of a goddamn forest, but that tells me everything I need to know about the guy. He may be a shifter, but that gold watch on his arm tells me he shares at least one thing in common with humans. Greed.

“That’s the leader,” I explain to Jane’s family. “Lionel. He’s the one who ambushed us last time. He’s a fucking psychopath.”

“What’s the plan?” Richard asks, his gaze fixed on Lionel.

“We need to strike now,” I whisper to all of them. “Prepare to shift.”

Everyone nods in agreement. I glance over at Richard and Gwen, who are already shifting into their wolf forms. Their bodies elongate and transform with a series of pops and cracks, their clothes shredding as they become their new, larger selves. Gwen is a large, brown-furred wolf with a white underbelly while Richard is a sleeker, darker gray wolf.

At the sound of bones shifting, the rogue wolves finally notice something is amiss, and their heads snap in our direction. Lionel looks toward us, and when his eyes lock onto mine, a smirk curls across his lips. He strides over, stomping into the earth with far more force than necessary. He’s trying to intimidate me, I realize. Too bad for him it won’t fucking work.

“I knew you’d come,” Lionel sneers, keeping his arms behind his back. “You pack animals are just as predictable as you are foolish.”

I crouch low, my muscles tensing as I prepare to shift. “What’s your plan, Lionel?” I demand, my voice tight with anger. “Why are you doing this?”

Lionel chuckles darkly, and he shakes his head as if the answer is so obvious. “I’m disrupting the packs in this region to weaken them. Once they’re vulnerable, I’ll claim their land for development. Imagine it—luxurious resorts, commercial centers all built on land that was once theirs. I’m doing the world a favor. We need less wilderness and more civilization. Don’t you agree, Reiner?”

I clench my jaw, feeling the rage simmering beneath my skin. “You’re a monster,” I growl. “You’re willing to hurt innocent people just to make a profit? You’re no better than the humans.”

“I’m not a monster,” Lionel replies, his voice calm. “I’m a visionary. And I’ll do whatever it takes to achieve my goals.”

“You’ve killed people,” I snarl. “You’ve destroyed families. How can you live with yourself?”

“I’ve done what’s necessary,” he replies with a lazy shrug. “And if you get in my way, I’ll do the same to you.”

“And what about Jane? Was she in your way?”

“Oh, the pretty little thing you’re looking for?” Lionel asks, his voice laced with amusement. “No, no. She’s a treat just for me. We all deserve something scrumptious once in a while, don’t we?”

His wolves prowl forward, circling us, their eyes glowing with hunger and malice. I can hear the others growling and snarling, ready to pounce, but the sound is nowhere near as terrifying as what this bastard just said to me.

“If you have laid a hand on her, I will tear you apart,” I snarl.

Lionel laughs, his voice echoing through the trees. “I haven’t had the opportunity yet, but I’m looking forward to it.”

My wolf surges to the surface, and I can feel him clawing at my insides, desperate to break free. I grit my teeth, forcing him back down. I need to stay in control until the right moment.

“I’ll tell you what,” he says. “If you can take her from me, you can have her. But if I win, she’s mine.”

Without warning, Lionel shifts into his wolf form, his body expanding and transforming into a massive, powerful beast. His fur is a mottled gray, and his eyes blaze with predatory fire. The rest of his pack follows suit, their bodies morphing into various shades of gray and brown. It’s like a sea of evil converging, and my own allies leap out from hiding.

I waste no time. I shift into my wolf form, feeling the familiar rush of strength and agility as my body changes. Jack and Gael shift alongside me, their wolves sleek and ready for combat. The four of us move as one, our coordinated effort aimed at taking down the rogues quickly and efficiently.

The battle erupts into chaos. Lionel charges at me, his massive jaws snapping. I meet his attack head-on, our bodies crashing together with a thunderous impact. I manage to sink my teeth into his shoulder, but he’s strong and fast, and he quickly dislodges me.

I twist away from his bite, using my powerful hind legs to propel myself into a counterattack. I rake my claws across his side, feeling the resistance of his fur and muscles as I strike. Lionel howls in pain, his eyes narrowing with fierce anger. He lunges again, his jaws closing in on me, but I dodge and retaliate with a sharp bite to his shoulder.

Jack and Gael are already engaged with the other rogues. Jack's wolf is a blur of motion, his claws and teeth working in deadly harmony as he takes down a rogue with a fierce swipe. Gael, on the other hand, is using his agility to outmaneuver his opponents. What he lacks in size and strength, he makes up for in speed and precision.

Richard, Gwen, and Sonya are also fighting with intense focus. Richard's wolf is a hulking presence, and his strength and experience allow him to overpower the rogues he faces. Gwen's method is completely different, her movements a graceful dance of attack and evasion. Sonya's strategy is to support them both, sneaking in and biting the rogues when their backs are turned.

The clearing is filled with the sounds of snarls, growls, and the thud of bodies hitting the ground. The fight is fierce and brutal, and every moment is a struggle for survival. I keep my focus on Lionel, who's proving to be a formidable opponent. He's relentless, and his attacks are calculated and powerful.

I manage to dodge one of Lionel's swipes, rolling away and quickly regaining my footing. He's on me again, his jaws snapping. I sidestep his attack and counter with a powerful bite to his flank. The blood flows, but Lionel doesn't falter. He roars in fury, shaking off the pain and lunging at me with renewed vigor.

I dodge again, trying to stay one step ahead of him. As we go on, Lionel's attacks are becoming more erratic, his frustration evident. I seize the opportunity, launching myself at him with all my strength. I crash into him, sending him sprawling to the

ground.

Lionel's roar echoes through the clearing as I slam into him, our forms crashing to the ground in a tangle of fur and fury. I can feel his strength waning, his previous confidence crumbling under my relentless assault. My fangs are poised for the final strike when a sudden shift in movement catches my eye.

Jane, in wolf form, emerges from the trees, and Lionel stumbles in surprise. She must have been waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Seeing her now, my heart leaps with a mix of relief and hope. She's here. She's safe.

She moves with a predatory grace, darting through the melee of rogue wolves. Her fur gleams in the light as she navigates the chaos with a clear goal in mind. I watch as she maneuvers closer to Lionel without even acknowledging anyone else. She has her sights set on her target, and there's no stopping her.

I press my advantage, keeping Lionel pinned beneath me as I wait for Jane to make her move. She's almost within striking distance now, her muscles coiled and ready to pounce. Lionel senses her approach, and he struggles beneath me, his eyes wild with fear.

"No!" he shouts, his voice distorted by his wolf form. "You can't do this!"

Jane ignores his pleas, her gaze fixed on her prey. She's only a few feet away now, her body tense and ready to spring. I can feel the anticipation building inside me, the desire to see justice done. Lionel has caused so much pain and suffering, and it's time for him to pay the price.

With a mighty leap, Jane launches herself at Lionel, her jaws clamping down on his neck. He lets out a strangled cry, his body shuddering as she delivers the final blow. I release him, stepping back as he crumples to the ground. Jane stands over his lifeless

body, her muzzle stained with his blood.

The battle is over. We've won.

I shift back, and the others do the same. I look around the clearing, taking in the sight of the fallen rogues. The ones still standing are cowering with their tails tucked between their legs. With their leader down, they're no longer a threat.

I turn my attention to Jane, who's still in her wolf form. She's staring down at Lionel's body, her expression unreadable. I walk over to her, my heart swelling with pride and admiration. She's a true warrior, and I couldn't be prouder of her.

When I reach her, I run my hand through her coat, feeling the softness of her fur. I whisper her name, and she turns to me, her eyes shining with emotion. It takes her a moment, but then she shifts back to human form, and I follow suit. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close.

"I knew you'd come for me," she murmurs, her voice soft and full of love.

"I'd do anything for you," I reply, my voice thick with emotion. "I'm so sorry for not telling you how I felt before, Jane, but I need you to stay with me. Stay in Green Lake. I can't live without you."

"I'll stay," she whispers, her eyes glistening with tears. "I'll stay forever."

We kiss, and it's everything I've ever wanted. It's a promise, a commitment, a vow. I know that whatever the future holds, we'll face it together.

"I love you, Jane," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "I always have, and I always will."

“I love you, too, Reiner,” she replies, her voice filled with emotion. “And I’m never going to leave you again.”

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

### Six Months Later

Six months have flown by in a blur of new routines, shifting allegiances, and tentative steps toward a future I can almost grasp. Tonight, though, is supposed to be a simple family dinner with Aunt Gwen, Uncle Richard, Sonya, Jack, and Reiner, of course. We're in Stardust Hollow, back where everything started.

It feels so strange to be back home after spending so much time in Green Lake. It's become my new home, and being so close to Piper again has been wonderful, but it's definitely nice to be back.

I'm dressed in a casual but elegant green dress, the kind that makes me feel like I've put in the effort but still look relaxed. It's a family dinner, after all. Reiner is beside me, his usual easygoing smile in place, though there's something in his eyes tonight—something I can't quite place. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't noticed the way his gaze lingers on me with a bit more intensity than usual.

When we arrive at my aunt's house, she throws her arms around me in welcome. From inside, the aroma of home-cooked comfort food makes my mouth water, and Uncle Richard's hearty laugh is the soundtrack to the evening's preparation. Sonya looks effortlessly chic in a navy blue dress, and she gives us a dramatic wave from inside. It's a scene I've missed, a moment of normalcy that feels almost magical.

The dinner proceeds with the usual chatter and laughter. Aunt Gwen's cooking is as excellent as ever, with crispy roast chicken, mashed potatoes with just the right amount of garlic, and a vibrant green salad. As I savor each bite, I feel a deep contentment. It's nice to be back here, sharing these simple pleasures with the people

who matter most.

Halfway through the meal, Reiner reaches for my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. His fingers are warm against mine, and I look up, catching his gaze. There's something different in the way he looks at me tonight, something serious and filled with emotion. My heart skips a beat, and a flutter of nerves and excitement mix together.

"So," Reiner begins, his voice a soft rumble that draws everyone's attention, "I've been thinking a lot lately."

The table goes quiet, forks and knives pausing in mid-air as everyone turns their attention to him. I'm suddenly very aware of the weight of his words, and my pulse quickens.

He isn't about to... oh, he better not. I haven't gotten my nails done!

"I've been thinking about how lucky I am," he continues, "to have Jane in my life. How much she means to me. And I realized that I don't want to waste any more time."

Yup. He's going to. Holy shit, I can't breathe.

He stands up so fast, his chair scrapes against the wooden floor. I watch, both surprised and slightly apprehensive as he gets down on one knee beside me. The room seems to hold its breath, and Sonya and Aunt Gwen cover their mouths to stifle their collective gasps.

My heart is pounding so loudly, I'm sure everyone can hear it. Reiner's eyes never leave mine as he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small velvet box. He opens it to reveal a stunning engagement ring. It's a timeless piece featuring a round-cut diamond set in a delicate platinum band. Simple, but oh my gosh, is it gorgeous.

“Jane,” he clears his throat as his voice cracks, “I love you more than I ever thought possible. I know I’ve made mistakes, and I know I’ve hurt you in ways I never meant to. But I’m here now, and I’m committed to us. I promise I’ll never fumble this again. Will you marry me?”

I’m completely stunned, my mind racing through memories of our time together—the laughter, the tears, the quiet moments we’ve shared. My eyes fill with tears, and I nod, unable to form words. All I can do is squeeze his hand, and my heart swells with a joy I can hardly contain.

“Yes,” I manage to whisper, my voice choked with emotion. “Yes, I will.”

The room erupts into applause and cheers. Gwen and Richard’s faces are alight with happiness, and Sonya and Jack are grinning widely, Sonya’s eyes gleaming with unshed tears. Reiner slips the ring onto my finger. It fits perfectly, as though it was always meant to be there.

He pulls me into a tight embrace, and I bury my face against his shoulder, overwhelmed by the love and warmth surrounding me. The kiss he presses to my temple is soft and full of promise, and I can’t help but smile through my tears.

Once the excitement has settled and everyone has offered their congratulations, Reiner and I say our goodbyes. Aunt Gwen offered to let us stay with her in my old room, but I offered to let Jack stay there. If nothing else, this way, Reiner and I have some privacy. Which turns out to be a very, very good thing.

Reiner takes my hand and leads me outside. The night air is cool against my cheeks, a welcome contrast to the warmth of the house. We head to the hotel where we’re staying, and there’s a new excitement moving our feet. I just can’t wait to be alone with my fiancé.

As soon as we’re alone in our room, the door closes behind us, and Reiner pulls me

into his arms again. The hotel room feels intimate and cozy, with its soft lighting and the comfortable bed in the corner. I look up at him, seeing the love and adoration in his eyes.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper. “I just... I wanted it to be perfect.”

I smile, reaching up to cup his face in my hands. “It is perfect,” I assure him. “More than I ever dreamed it could be.”

We kiss, and it’s as though the world outside ceases to exist. The tenderness in his touch, the way he holds me close—it all feels like a dream. Every moment we’ve shared together has led to this one, and I’m grateful for each and every one of them.

When he moves his lips from mine, trailing kisses down my neck, I let out a soft moan. I can feel his desire for me mirroring my own. I want him, need him, more than I ever have before.

His hands slide down my body, caressing my curves. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the way his touch sends shivers of pleasure down my spine. He’s so gentle and yet so strong, and I know that I’m safe with him no matter what.

He unzips my dress, letting it fall to the floor. I stand before him, wearing nothing but my bra and panties. I reach back and unclasp my bra, letting it join the rest of my clothes on the floor. Ever since all the barriers have fallen between us, Reiner has shown me every day how attracted he is to me. I no longer cover my stomach or hide my curves.

He makes me feel beautiful and loved, and I can see the lust in his eyes as he takes in my naked form. “Good God, sugar. You’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen.”

I blush, feeling a little shy, but the heat in his gaze makes me bold. I step forward and start to unbutton his shirt, but he gets impatient and just pulls his shirt over his head, exposing his muscular chest. I reach out, running my hands over his bare skin. This man is all mine, and I can't wait to show him how much I appreciate him. He shivers under my touch, his eyes darkening with desire.

We kiss again, our bodies pressed together. My nipples harden against his chest, and I can feel his erection straining against his pants. We move toward the bed, our movements frantic and urgent. We both know what we need, and we're ready to take it.

When we reach the bed, I push him down, straddling him. I reach between us, undoing his belt and sliding his pants down his legs. His cock springs free, and I wrap my hand around it, stroking him slowly. He groans as his head falls back, his eyes closed.

I lean down, kissing his neck and collarbone. He smells so good, a mixture of cologne and sweat. I can't get enough of him. I continue to stroke him, feeling his cock throb in my hand.

"Fuck, Jane," he growls. "You're driving me crazy."

I smile, loving the way his body responds to me. I increase my pace, and he bucks his hips, thrusting into my hand. He reaches up, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples. The sensation sends a jolt of pleasure through me, and I grind against him, my pussy aching for release.

I can't wait any longer—I need him inside me. I lift myself up, positioning his cock at my entrance. I sink down on him, taking him inch by inch. He fills me so completely, stretching me in the most delicious way.

"Fuck," he groans, his hands gripping my hips. "You feel so fucking good."

I start to ride him, moving up and down on his cock. He thrusts his hips, meeting me in a rhythm that has us both panting and moaning while he grabs my ass and squeezes. My breasts bounce as I move, and he buries his face between them, licking and sucking on my nipples as they brush against his cheeks.

Reiner flips me onto my back, and I spread my legs wide, wrapping them around his waist. He starts to fuck me harder, his cock hitting my G-spot with each thrust. I cry out, the pleasure building inside me. I'm so close.

He reaches down, rubbing my clit with his thumb. The added stimulation is enough to send me over the edge. I come hard, my pussy clenching around his cock. He keeps fucking me, drawing out my orgasm.

I watch him, his face contorted in pleasure as he nears his own release. His body tenses, and he lets out a low groan as he comes inside me. He collapses on top of me, his breathing ragged.

"That was amazing," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"It was," I agree, my voice laced with exhaustion.

We lie there for a while, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking. I snuggle against him, enjoying the warmth of his body. It feels like home.

"I love you, sugar," he whispers, and the pet name he's called me since the day we met makes me smile.

"I love you, too, Reiner," I murmur, my heart swelling with happiness.

This is where I belong, in his arms. I've never been happier.

"I'll love you forever," he adds.

I grin, knowing that he means it. He's the man of my dreams, and I'll never let him go.

“Forever,” I echo.

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THE END