



Under His Mark

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Elaine Hayes's life changes forever in 7th grade when she is bitten by a boy named Dominic.

He is expelled, and Elaine didn't see him again.

Now in her senior year of high school, Dominic has transferred to her school, now a young man with an obsession with her.

Despite his good looks, Elaine rejects his advances.

However, she is also dealing with trouble at home as her parents' divorce is in progress.

Little does she know, Dominic is not human, but a werewolf and she is his mate.

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I traced the jagged scar on my shoulder, a ritual that had become second nature to me.

The sensation of the uneven skin beneath my fingertips brought a strange sense of peace amidst my nerves.

Despite being a senior, the first day of school never failed to stir up anxiety within me.

Familiarity with the halls didn't erase the fear of losing my way, prompting me to reach my first class half an hour before it began, determined to sidestep any chance of confusion.

My encounter with Ms. Parker this morning was a bit uncomfortable.

She was in the midst of her breakfast when I stepped into the room, forcing me to stand awkwardly as she rummaged through her papers for the seating chart, all while trying to chew her food.

Once she managed to find it, she gestured towards my designated seat and I took my place silently, not wanting to intrude on her mealtime further.

As I awaited the arrival of my classmates, I read a book to pass time.

It felt like they all burst into the room simultaneously around five minutes before the bell signaled the start of class.

As my classmates started to head to their seats, I looked through the faces to see if

any of my friends were there. Soon I saw Amelia come through the door. Her brown eyes made contact with mine, and she gave me a bright smile. Once she got her seating assignment, she ran over to me.

"I am so glad to see you!" She said as she embraced me.

"I'm glad to see you too." I smiled at her.

She sat down in the seat next to me and pulled her curly black hair into a ponytail. "Where were you all summer?" She gave me a concerned look. "Every time I tried to make plans, you were busy."

My face flushed as I tried to come up with an excuse. I didn't want to tell her the real reason I ghosted everyone during the summer. "I- I stayed at my cousin's house in Texas all summer so I could help her take care of the kids." I stammered out.

"I thought it was your sister that lived in Texas?" Amelia challenged.

"Yes, yes it was my sister. Sorry, I'm just out of it this morning." I explained.

The tardy bell for the class rang, and everyone got settled into their seats.

I was glad that I did not have to continue my conversation with Amelia.

She probably would have pressed me for more details that I was not prepared to give.

I did not have any evidence of being in Texas, and I realized too late that I would have to keep this lie going until the end of the school year.

"Good morning class, I am..." Ms. Parker was cut off by a student walking in late.

As he walked in I noticed that he looked familiar to me.

Though I could only see his back as he received his seating assignment from the teacher, I could swear that the new student's presence shifted something in the air.

It was as if a subtle energy had changed, and a strange tingling sensation ran down my spine.

As he turned to face the class, our eyes met, and a shiver crept through me.

He had an intense gaze, with icy blue eyes that seemed to pierce right through me.

His dark hair fell slightly over his forehead as he scanned the room, his presence commanding attention without him even trying.

Suddenly, I felt a wave of unease wash over me.

I knew him. His eyes suddenly changed color.

It was just for a second, but I didn't miss it.

They turned gold, and his gaze never tore from mine.

Amelia nudged me gently, pulling me out of my trance. "Elaine, are you okay?" she whispered, concern evident in her voice.

I tore my gaze away from the new student and nodded quickly. "Yeah, I'm fine." But I wasn't fine. There was something about him that unsettled me in a way I couldn't understand.

"That's my seat."

I jumped when I heard his deep voice. He was addressing Amelia, who did not move an inch.

"Find a different seat." She commanded, giving him her signature death glare that usually convinced people to do what she wanted.

"That is actually his seat." Ms. Parker interjected. "Your seat is in the back of the class." She pointed to a seat that was four rows behind me. Amelia sighed loudly, and dramatically made her way to the back of the class.

I dropped my head into my hands in embarrassment.

I really did not want any drama this school year.

Especially not even fifteen minutes into my first class.

I kept my head down, not wanting to look at the young man sitting next to me.

I felt uneasy the entire class. Though I did not actually see him, I could sense him staring at me the entire class.

However, that could have just been my anxiety playing tricks on me.

I never looked up to actually confirm my suspicions because I was too scared to acknowledge him.

When the bell rang, I quickly packed my bag and rushed out of the classroom. Amelia had to run to catch up to me in the hallway. She grabbed onto my bookbag to stop me in my tracks and pulled me off into a corner that we could talk in.

"Was that who I thought that was?" Amelia gave me an incredulous look.

I nodded because I was pretty sure she knew what had happened back then.

"That was the freak that bit you in 7th grade!" She blurted out.

I nodded again, the memory coming back to me. I rubbed once more at the scar on my shoulder, the one he left.

"I can't believe they let him transfer here after what happened! Let alone put him in the same class as you." Amelia continued, clearly upset by his presence.

I took a deep breath and let myself process the situation.

We were only thirteen at the time, and that was five years ago.

Maybe he has changed. Though, I never really knew him in the first place.

We rarely spoke. He moved to my middle school in 7th grade, and he bit me two weeks into the spring semester.

I was talking with my crush at lunch time one day, and that's when he came up to me all of a sudden and bit me in the area between my neck and my shoulder blade.

I remember it hurt like hell, and I almost passed out when I saw my own blood rushing down my arm.

The only thing I remember after that was being escorted to the nurse's office. I never saw him again, until now.

Perhaps he was going through a tough time back then. Boys can be quite childish when they hit puberty, maybe it was just a phase of aggression he needed to outgrow. Even though biting someone is really strange, I didn't want to dwell on it any longer.

"I'm sorry Amelia, but I really need to get to class. You know I hate being late." I gave her a weak smile before slipping by her.

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Entering my fourth period class was like a breath of fresh air.

It felt comforting to be in the same room where I've had film class for the past three years.

Settling into my usual spot at an iMac that I'd been using since freshman year, I inserted my flash drive to transfer all the footage I captured over summer break.

Spending most of my time at public parks, I managed to capture some breathtaking scenes.

Although I wasn't sure how I would use these clips, I was confident that I could incorporate them into a project somehow.

My seat was in a far corner of the class where I could avoid the loud kids that always goofed around instead of working on their projects.

I looked up at the door waiting for Amelia to come in.

We signed up for this class together, and we planned to complete our video assignments together.

When she came in she looked really frustrated, and dramatically threw her bag down on the ground next to me.

"He is a complete jerk." She huffed out as she sat down in her seat.

"Who?" I inquired. I hoped she wasn't talking about who I thought she was talking about.

She gave me a glare that confirmed my suspicions. Sighing, I waited for her to continue with the story.

"He was in my last class, Music Technology. I hate that Mrs. Morse gives us assigned groups. It would be a lot easier if she just lets us choose our own groups, like Mr. Gordon does for this class." She complained.

"So what did he do?" I interjected, wanting to get straight to the point. Amelia usually gives really long dramatic retellings of her experiences, and I was too anxious to hear what happened to listen through all of that.

"Well he was placed into my group for the semester." She gave another loud sigh.

"And?" I pressed. Her dramatics always annoy me.

"I just want to let you know that I did nothing to provoke him..." She hesitated.

I was absolutely sure she did something to provoke him. That is just her nature. If she doesn't like someone it is very clear, even if she tries to hide it. The more she is dragging this out, the more I am afraid that it will affect me in some way.

"When we met with our groups he barely said a word.

This is supposed to be a team effort, you know?

" She looked at me and I gave a nod of agreement.

"While the rest of us were exchanging contacts and trying to come up with a name for

our group, he just played on his phone the whole time.

When I called him out on it, he just snatched my phone out of my hand to add himself to the group chat. " She whined.

"Sounds like any other rude teenage boy." I shrugged.

"But that's not the worst part." Amelia continued. "When he handed me my phone back it was left on this screen."

Amelia showed her phone to me and I saw a picture of me.

My shoulder-length fawn colored hair was all poofed out and my hazel eyes reflected the flash of the phone taking my picture.

My face was all scrunched up and I looked like I was trying to block the camera from seeing me.

Amelia took this picture of me at a sleepover a year ago.

Underneath the picture of myself was my name and phone number.

"Why would he want my contact information?" I wondered. A chill went down my spine when I thought about it. "What does he want from me..." I whispered.

"I don't know, but you should definitely be careful." She said, placing her hand on my arm.

I nodded. Giving her a small smile to reassure her that I would be fine. Grabbing my phone from my bookbag, I checked to see if any new messages had come through. There were none so far. The anxiety of it overwhelmed me, so I decided to

completely power off my phone.

Mr. Gordon came up to the front of the class and started his beginning of the year presentation.

I zoned out the entire time, absentmindedly picking at the floral bandaid on my finger.

My mind was flooded with possible reasons why he might have taken my contact information.

Maybe he wanted to apologize for what happened four years ago, but that seemed unlikely.

There was also the possibility that he could have just accidentally opened my contact, but Amelia seemed too certain that it was done intentionally.

The only possible answer is that he had some ulterior motive for doing so.

Which could also mean he had an ulterior motive for biting me in the first place.

I felt Amelia shaking my shoulder and realized that my classmates were leaving. The bell must have rang and I didn't hear it. I look down at my hands and notice that the band aid that was there before was missing and that I must have scratched at the open wound on my finger.

"Elaine, are you seriously alright? This is the second time today you've zoned out like that." Amelia took my hand and looked at my finger. She sighed and looked up at me with concern.

"Don't worry I have a bandaid." I say while rummaging through my backpack to find

one. When I found it she took it out of my hand and placed it on my finger for me.

"If something is going on you can tell me. You can trust me, you know that." She insisted.

I nodded and smiled at her. Grabbing her hand, I walked with her to the lunch room.

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For lunch Amelia and I grabbed our trays and ate outside.

It was a beautiful day, and the warmth of the sun did wonders to calm me.

Amelia told me about her summer. She traveled to Kansas for a month to spend time with her grandparents and spent the rest of the summer working at a nearby coffee shop.

She pressed me for more information about my summer, and why I never responded to her texts.

I didn't tell her much other than that I wanted a break from people and social media.

My 6th period class was Anatomy and Physiology while Amelia had Statistics.

Her classroom was in the same hall as mine so we walked there together.

When I got to my classroom, she gave me a goodbye hug and left.

On my way in I greeted the teacher and chose to sit at a desk toward the back of the class.

The tables were set up in pairs, so I put my bookbag in the seat next to mine hoping no one would choose to sit there.

I put my head down on the desk and waited for the bell to ring.

Suddenly I felt a presence beside me and heard my book bag being moved to the ground.

When I looked up I saw him standing beside me.

Dominic. He was not the little boy he was back in 7th grade anymore.

He almost doubled in size. All lean muscle and sharp features.

His olive skin glistened with sweat and he wore a black shirt and gray sweatpants.

I immediately looked away and focused on my notebook in front of me.

Goosebumps rose on my skin and I could feel my face flush red.

I could not deny his attractiveness. Dominic's icy blue eyes bore into me as he took the seat next to mine, his scent filling my nostrils with a mix of pine and rain.

The teacher began the lesson, but I could barely concentrate with him so close.

I tried to take notes from the powerpoint, and I stole glances at him when I thought he wouldn't notice. He seemed to exude power and danger. His presence made my heart race with a mix of fear and an unfamiliar longing. Why did he have to come back now, after all these years?

When the bell finally rang, signaling the end of class, Dominic turned to me. "Elaine," his voice was deeper, rougher than I remembered. "We need to talk."

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. "About what?" My voice came out barely above a whisper.

"About us," he replied simply, his gaze unwavering. "Meet me after school." And with that, he stood up and left.

I had absolutely no clue what he meant, and I spent all of 7th period thinking about it.

What did he mean by "us"? Was he just referring to the biting incident, or something else?

He also never gave me a meeting time or location.

Dominic probably planned to text me the details, so my powered off phone would be a great excuse as to why I never showed up.

I was thinking about running to my car after this class and leaving before anyone could spot me.

I waited anxiously for class to end with my packed up bag on my shoulders.

When I heard the bell I rushed out of the classroom heading towards the closest exit.

I probably looked strange sprinting around people in the hallways, but I did not care as long as I left before Dominic realized I had no intention of meeting with him.

Once I exited the school building, I broke out in a full on run into the parking lot. I piled into my old red Silverado, and tried to crank it. The engine started to roll over but it would not start.

"Come on! Not now you stupid thing!" I cursed as it still refused to start. "I changed my mind, you are a beautiful truck. Now please start." I whispered.

The engine finally fired, and I fled the school grounds.

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I realized what a mistake I had made once I woke up the next day.

My phone stayed powered off, so I never knew if he texted me.

However, I would still have to see him in 1st period.

I knew I couldn't miss school because I didn't want my parent's attention to be on me.

So, I wore a baggy black hoodie that I pulled over my head and wore headphones.

I blasted death metal in my ears so I couldn't hear anybody.

As I walked in I kept my head down and looked at the floor and headed to my seat.

I prayed that Ms. Parker would not make me take my headphones off.

I could have made up the excuse that I am autistic and I need them.

Well, it wouldn't be a made up excuse because I am autistic.

However, I didn't want people to know that.

The only person who knows is Amelia, and she swore not to tell a soul.

It's not that I was ashamed to be autistic.

I just didn't want people to stereotype me based on it.

I was already an outsider, and I didn't need nobody judging me more.

Once I got to my desk and dropped my bookbag beside me, I slid into my desk and pulled out my notebook.

I started writing to make it look like I was busy.

My music blocked out all the noise around me, so I was able to focus on my writing.

I decided to write a fantasy story about a werewolf king falling for a fae princess.

It was nice to distract myself from my thoughts.

The thoughts that cause chaos in my mind.

My fantasy was broken by a squeeze on my arm.

Anxiety flooded my body and I was too afraid to look up.

My hood was snatched down and I saw the face of my best friend.

She started to talk but I couldn't hear a word she said.

Realizing this, she pulled off my headphones next.

My music was so loud that I was sure that the entire class could hear it.

"Dang girl, you are going to go deaf because of this." Amelia said.

When I looked around the room, all eyes were on me. I heard a few giggles coming from some girls around me. I didn't look to my right. I didn't want to see if Dominic

was there yet. Acknowledging his existence would give him an opening to speak to me.

"What's up with you today?" Amelia asked. Her eyes raked over my clothing with judgment. "You look like a wreck."

"Thanks." I rolled my eyes.

"Are you going to answer my question?" Amelia pressed.

"I decided to be emo today." I shrugged hoping she wouldn't press me further. But of course, she did.

"Did you not sleep last night, you have horrible dark circles under your eyes." She went on.

I reached up to touch my eyes. They did feel puffy. Since I rushed out of the house, I didn't even look at my face this morning.

"I actually slept too much. Probably thirteen hours. It was a wild night for sure." I laughed to make her worry less.

"Girl, you sleep like you're dead. I've never seen anyone who sees sleeping as long as possible as a challenge." She giggled.

"I managed seventeen hours one night over the summer. It took a good amount of melatonin, but it was totally worth it." I continued.

"Taking melatonin is definitely cheating. It's kind of like those bodybuilders taking steroids to get jacked." Amelia then came closer to whisper in my ear. "Probably like the freak sitting next to you."

Crap. He was there. Hopefully he didn't hear what Amelia said.

The bell rang and Amelia groaned. She begrudgingly walked away and went back to her seat.

I pulled my hood back over my head so it would block my side view.

Ms. Parker went to the front of the class and informed us that this unit we would be reading Hamlet.

Even though I was a big reader, I really didn't want to read Shakespeare.

It is so hard to understand, and I usually have to go online to understand what was going on in the story.

Suddenly, Ms. Parker locked eyes with me and she stopped what she was saying.

"I just want to remind you all that the dress code states that you are not allowed to wear hoods or hats on your head. The dress code has been the same since you started freshman year." She stated.

I sighed and slowly pulled off my hood. My anxiety all of a sudden overwhelmed me.

Even though my eyes were locked down at the desk, I was so afraid I would look next to me.

The intrusive thoughts flooded my brain.

Look. You know you want to. YOUR GONNA LOOK.

MOVE YOUR EYES. I covered my face with my hands and tried to control my

breathing.

I considered running out of the room, but I didn't want to bring any more attention to myself. So, I tried to dissociate and rubbed the bandaids on my fingers. My daze was broken by the bell and a hand placed on my shoulder.

"Didn't you get my text?" A deep voice from beside me asked.

Dominic.

"My phone died and I forgot to charge it." I replied, still staring at my desk.

I could feel his presence beside me. A flood of warmth raked over my body. Instead of feeling anxious, I felt calm. As if my body wanted to trust him. But, my brain remembered the little boy biting me. My brain took over and I was anxious again.

"Can we talk at lunch? We have the same lunch period."

How did he know that? I whipped my head to the side to look at him. His icy blue eyes locked with mine, and just like yesterday they suddenly glowed gold. I jumped up from my seat and turned away from him. Am I seeing things? Surely I am not going crazy. Am I going crazy?

"I don't have a lunch period." I mumbled before I left the classroom.

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I considered dropping out and running away.

I wished I could live in the forest like a nymph.

Life would be so much simpler. No more avoiding my home holed up in the library.

No more parents yelling at each other early in the morning.

No more hearing the cries of my mother as she vents to me about my father.

No more sitting on the couch while my father tells me that my mother is delusional.

I could just live amongst the animals and trees for the rest of my life. I wished my fantasies could be reality.

Instead of dropping out, I spent my lunch period in the film classroom researching colleges.

I looked for ones as far away from Tennessee as possible.

A fresh start would be amazing. I could build a new life somewhere else.

I could make new friends, find a job, and maybe find a husband.

Suddenly a picture of Dominic flashed in my head and I shivered.

"Arizona, really?" Amelia remarked, looking over my shoulder.

"It would be cool to see the Grand Canyon." I shrugged.

Amelia gave me a confused look and took a bite of her apple.

"Last year you kept saying that you never wanted to leave Tennessee." She mentioned with her mouth full.

"Over the summer I developed some wanderlust. I thought it would be cool to go to college somewhere I've never been."

Amelia just rolled her eyes in disbelief and was quiet as she finished her lunch.

I felt as if she felt some animosity toward me.

We were planning to go to the same college together last year.

I guess I should have said something to her before I started to plan to ditch her.

I felt bad, but I needed to flee this place.

Suddenly, I heard the door slam shut with a loud bang. All eyes turned to the front of the classroom. Dominic. He found me. He was stalking me. Turns out he was every bit of the psychopath he was as a child. Maybe I really should drop out.

"Elaine." Dominic commanded me. He looked frustrated, and I had no idea why.

I seriously need to get out of here. I thought of any possible escape routes, but the only door was blocked by Dominic. Crap.

"What the hell is going on?" Amelia whispered to me.

"I have no clue." I mumbled back, not taking my eyes off of Dominic.

I am not very good with confrontation, and the thought of being alone with him terrified me. But it seemed as if I had no choice in the situation. I stood up and grabbed my backpack and started heading his way.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Amelia yelled before I got to the door.

"No." Dominic and I said at the same time.

I followed him out into the hallway. Dominic walked with pure confidence. His head was held high, and he did not once look back to see if I was actually following him. I could have turned around and bolted at that moment, but my curiosity won over my anxiety.

Even from the back he was handsome. Today Dominic wore a green cargo jacket over a black shirt and dark blue jeans.

I never looked at him enough to notice what he looked like or what he was wearing.

Warmth once again flooded my body, and I quickly darted my eyes to the ground. What is wrong with me?

We eventually headed outside, and Dominic kept walking further away from the school towards the woods. There was no way I was going into the woods alone with him.

"What do you want to talk about?" I snapped in frustration, stopping in my tracks.

Dominic finally turned around and sighed when he looked at me. Then he rubbed a hand through his hair.

"I don't want to talk where everyone else can hear us." He said in a low voice.

"I'm not going to follow you alone into the woods." I stated, crossing my arms to try to look confident.

"Elaine." He said my name gently, taking a step closer. "I am not going to hurt you."

"You really expect me to believe that after you stalked me to get my phone number and to figure out my schedule. Not to mention that you bit me in 7th grade." I huffed.

"I only did those things because you were clearly trying to avoid me."

"Well maybe you should have just taken the hint and left me alone." I protested.

Dominic suddenly stepped forward and grabbed my hand. It was like time stopped. I felt electricity shoot from my hand into the rest of my body, and I stood frozen in shock.

"Please." He pleaded, his icy blue eyes digging into my soul.

I followed him into the forest.

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Why did I follow him into the forest? I literally followed my stalker into the forest. For some reason after he grabbed my hand I was instantly compelled to follow him.

Although, my anxiety still did not fade.

Maybe he just wanted to apologize for what happened.

He didn't seem to be aggressive, even though he was angry I was avoiding him.

Hopefully he learned by now not to bite people.

Dominic came to a stop and sat down on a fallen tree's trunk.

I decided to sit down next to him but kept a considerable amount of distance between us.

He held his head in his hands and looked down at the ground.

Anxiety seemed to flow out of him, replacing the confidence he had when confronting me in the classroom. Curiosity ate at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, the empath coming out in me.

I shouldn't have cared about him, but something inside of me wanted to comfort him.

Something inside of me longed for him. All emotions that were in conflict with what I knew about him.

I shouldn't trust him after what happened, but every bone in my body seemed to call out to him.

What's going on? I started to reach out to touch him, but I stopped my hand right before making contact with his hand.

Dominic looked up and locked eyes with me again, eyes that were filled with something that looked like longing.

His eyes glowed that gold color again, and it startled me so bad that I fell off the log.

I ended up falling on my back, my bookbag cushioning my landing.

Even though I was not hurt, I started to cry.

All of the hurt and sorrow I bottled up for so long started to flow out of me, and I couldn't stop it.

At that moment I didn't care what he thought about me, or about what anyone thought about me.

I just let myself cry and cry and cry. I forgot about my surroundings, and the pain consumed me.

Memories of the screaming, the horrific stories, and the loneliness flooded my mind.

There was nowhere I had to call home. Everywhere I went I was an outcast. At home I was the pawn my parents tried to play to get me to cross over to their side.

At school I was the girl that went quiet after she had her heartbroken.

In public I was just another face in the crowd, nothing notable for anyone to recognize.

But, maybe I didn't want to be recognized.

Maybe I did want this loneliness. I just wanted to fade into nothing.

When I physically could not cry anymore, my mind came back to the present. I realized I was being carried. Looking up, I saw Dominic's face. When he noticed me looking, he stopped in his tracks and met my gaze.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"Home." He replied.

Panic overcame me. I didn't want my mother to see me like this. It would only increase her grief over the divorce. "Please don't take me there." I pleaded.

"Why?"

I didn't respond.

"Where do you want to go?" His voice started to fade out as my mind faltered

I still had no reply. I felt numb. All I could focus on was the beating of Dominic's heart, and the warmth of his body against mine.

If he said anything, I did not hear it through my daze.

I felt us moving again. I did not care where we were going.

Slowly, my vision turned black and I gave myself over to nothingness.

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"Elaine?" I heard a soft, deep voice coming from close to me.

I opened my eyes and saw Dominic hovering over me, and I thought I was dreaming. Looking around, I saw I was lying on an unfamiliar bed with a soft blanket covering me. Dominic sat next to me, and his hand laid atop mine.

"Are you ok?" He asked, looking at me as if I were about to fall apart.

I blinked. Slowly, it started to feel less and less like a dream. The image of me crying in the forest came back to me. My memory was hazy, and it almost didn't feel real.

"Where are we?"

Dominic sighed. He looked around the room and his eyes drifted to the window. He seemed to be lost in thought, as if he were contemplating his next words.

"My room." He replied softly.

At his words, I suddenly snapped back to life. I quickly sat up and ended up hitting my head on the bed's headboard.

"Jeeze, be careful." Dominic chided.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I thought about what to say next. I felt embarrassed at how I broke down in front of him. A stranger. Well, for some reason he did not feel like a stranger.

??I took in his concerned expression, the light filtering through the curtains casting a soft glow on his face. Dominic's eyes held a mixture of emotions - worry, curiosity, and something else I couldn't quite place.

"Why did you bring me here?" I finally managed to ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Dominic hesitated for a moment before answering. "I couldn't just leave you in the woods like that. You were upset, Elaine."

His use of my name sent a shiver down my spine. It sounded so intimate, coming from him. I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly feeling exposed under his piercing gaze.

"I... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come here," I mumbled, trying to gather my thoughts and steady my voice. His presence felt both comforting and intimidating at the same time.

Dominic's expression softened as he reached out to gently touch my shoulder. "Elaine, you're safe here. You needed help, and I couldn't just leave you alone in the woods."

His words struck a chord in me. Despite the fear and confusion swirling inside me, there was an undeniable sense of security being around him. But the rational part of me knew better than to trust blindly.

"Why did you bring me here?" I questioned, feeling a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

He hesitated for a moment, his icy blue eyes searching mine. "There are things about me that you need to know, Elaine. Things that might sound unbelievable, but they're true."

My heart skipped a beat at his cryptic words. A part of me wanted to run, to escape whatever

mysterious secrets Dominic was about to reveal. But another part of me, a curious and reckless part, wanted to stay and uncover the truth. I bit my lip, uncertainty gnawing at me, as I studied his face for any hint of deceit. His gaze was unwavering, intense yet strangely vulnerable.

With a deep breath, I mustered the courage to speak, my voice barely above a whisper. "What do you mean? What could you possibly have to tell me that's so important?" The words tumbled out in a rush, betraying my anxious state.

Dominic's features softened, a shadow of melancholy passing through his eyes before he schooled his expression into one of determination. "Elaine, there's no easy way to say this, but... I'm not entirely human." His admission hung heavy in the air between us like a shroud of mystery.

A wave of confusion washed over me as I tried to process his words.

Not entirely human? He must be crazy. Well I knew he was crazy, especially after the biting incident.

Then he started stalking me once he transferred to my school.

I need to get away now. He is clearly delusional and I don't feel safe around him right now.

As Dominic's words hung in the air, my heart raced with a mix of fear and disbelief. Not entirely human? What kind of ridiculous claim was that? I knew he was intense and had a temper, but this was pushing things too far. My instinct screamed at me to flee, to get as far away from him as possible.

"I think I should go," I managed to say, my voice wavering slightly as I shifted to stand up from the bed. The room felt stifling, the air heavy with unspoken tension.

Dominic's hand shot out, gently but firmly gripping my arm to stop me. "Elaine, please, hear me out. I promise you, everything will make sense once you know the truth." His voice held a pleading undertone, his eyes searching mine for any sign of understanding.

I hesitated, torn between the urge to escape and the gnawing curiosity about what he could possibly reveal. However, I chose to escape.

Ripping my arm out of Dominic's grasp, I stumbled backward, my heart pounding in my chest. The room felt suffocating, and the weight of his revelation pressed down on me like a heavy cloak.

"I can't do this. I need to leave," I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper as I backed away from him. His expression shifted from pleading to resignation, as if he had expected this reaction.

"Elaine, please, just give me a chance to explain," Dominic implored, taking a step closer to me. His eyes held an intensity that both frightened and intrigued me.

But I couldn't stay. The fear that had been simmering beneath the surface erupted into a roaring blaze, urging me to flee. Without another word, I turned and bolted towards the door, my hand fumbling for the handle in my haste to escape.

As my fingers closed around the doorknob, a sudden wave of dizziness washed over me.

I tried to ground myself, afraid of passing out again.

I had no clue where I was, or how to get back to school.

I decided that I would need Dominic's help getting back.

But, he would probably continue to stop me from leaving.

I decided that my best bet was to try to find my own way back.

Before I could turn the knob and bolt out of the room, a sharp pain seared across my shoulder. Gasping, I stumbled forward, my vision blurring for a moment. Dominic was by my side in an instant, his strong arms steadying me as I fought to stay upright.

"Elaine, easy now," he murmured, his voice laced with concern. "You need to sit down."

I allowed him to guide me back to the bed, clutching my throbbing shoulder. The pain was intense, like a searing brand against my skin. Trembling, I looked up at Dominic, searching his face for an explanation.

"What did you do to me?" I managed to whisper through gritted teeth.

Dominic's expression was pained, regret flickering in his icy blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Elaine. It's the mark... the bond we share."

Confusion swirled in my mind as I tried to comprehend his words. The mark? Is he talking about the scar on my shoulder, the place he bit me? He seriously must be crazy.

With a mixture of fear and defiance, I pushed myself away from Dominic, his touch feeling like fire against my skin. The intensity in his eyes was unsettling as he watched me with a complex blend of emotions that I couldn't quite decipher.

"Stop it!" I exclaimed, my voice quivering with a mix of anger and fear. "I don't understand what's happening, but I can't stay here with you." Each word felt like a struggle as I tried to push past the pain in my shoulder and the confusion clouding my thoughts.

Dominic's gaze softened, a flicker of hurt crossing his features before he masked it with a composed expression. "Elaine, please, just listen to me. I know this is overwhelming, but I swear I would never harm you intentionally."

"I need to leave!" I shout at him, instantly feeling regret at being so harsh. "I have to be somewhere soon..." I start, unsure what lie I need to spin. "I told my boyfriend that I would be at his house by six and I need to get ready."

I didn't have a boyfriend, but it's better if he thought I did. Maybe it would make him back off from me and leave me alone.

At my words I saw his face sink. His eyes glossed over and a shadow of resignation crossed his features. "Your boyfriend... right," he muttered softly, the words heavy with unspoken disappointment. Dominic took a step back, his posture slumping as if accepting defeat.

I watched him warily, unsure of what to make of this sudden change in his demeanor. The intensity that usually emanated from him seemed to dim, replaced by a palpable air of dejection. It tugged at something within me, a strange mix of guilt and compassion.

"I will take you back to the school." Dominic said, sounding empty.

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The car ride back to school was very awkward. Dominic said nothing to me, and I could feel the tension in the air. I was right in thinking he would stop his pursuit if I told him I have a boyfriend. However, for some reason I felt like lying about it was the biggest mistake I've ever made.

I rubbed the scar on my shoulder, remembering the pain that shot through me in Dominic's room.

As soon as my fingers grazed it, he looked over to me.

His eyes flashed that strange gold color again.

What the hell? I quickly darted my eyes down, not wanting to think about the delusions I was having.

Maybe the pain in my shoulder was also a delusion, but it did not explain why Dominic seemed to know why it was happening.

"What is your boyfriend's name?" Dominic asked.

I hesitated, unsure of how much I should reveal to him. The truth felt dangerous, yet lying seemed equally perilous. "His name is Thomas," I murmured, watching Dominic's jaw tense at my words. His grip on the steering wheel tightened, his knuckles turning white.

"Thomas," he repeated in a low voice, his icy blue eyes now fixed on the road ahead.

A heavy silence settled between us like a thick fog, suffocating and tense.

I swallowed hard, hoping he would believe the lie.

Dominic's reaction was intense, his aura swirling with a myriad of emotions that I couldn't decipher.

As we reached the school's entrance, Dominic parked the car but made no move to get out. The air inside the vehicle crackled with tension, suffocating me as I waited for him to speak. Finally, he turned to me with a steely gaze.

"You don't belong with him, Elaine," he stated firmly. His eyes looked angry, as if he were mad at me for having a boyfriend. He barely knew me, so I had no idea why he would be so upset.

There was no way in hell I was going to let this conversation continue. He clearly was going to keep pushing me on the subject, and I had no energy left to deal with him.

"Thank you for helping me when I passed out." I said quickly before darting out of the car.

My truck sat close to where he parked, so I didn't have to walk far until I was in the safety of my cab.

I quickly locked the door and took a deep breath.

I could still feel Dominic's intense gaze burning into my back as I drove away.

The way he pronounced Thomas' name echoed in my mind, sending a shiver down my spine.

Despite the relief of being in the safety of my truck, his words lingered in the air, heavy with unspoken truths and hidden meanings.

Once I was back home, I tried to shake off the unsettling encounter with Dominic. I busied myself with mundane tasks, hoping to distract my thoughts. But no matter how much I tried to push him out of my mind, his presence lingered like an ominous shadow, creeping into every corner of my thoughts.

That night, as I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, I couldn't escape the memory of his golden eyes and the way his voice had resonated with conviction despite the absurd declarations he was making.

What did he mean when he said he wasn't human?

A part of me feared what his words might imply, but another part was inexplicably drawn to the mystery that surrounded him.

However, I knew Dominic would only bring trouble into my life.

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"Elaine." My mother's sleepy voice came from the door to the kitchen.

I had just opened the front door, and thought that I had managed to leave before my parents woke up that morning.

Sighing, I turned around to face her. Black was smudged under her eyes, and I guessed she never removed her makeup from the night before.

She looked like a complete wreck. My mother stopped really taking care of herself when she found out my father cheated.

She drank her sorrows away, and rarely ate.

She had lost a substantial amount of weight and looked like a corpse standing in front of me.

"Yes?" I asked softly, hoping she wouldn't want to talk to me for long. I already had an earful last night. She was upset I was never home and told me that I had abandoned her.

"Why are you leaving so early? School doesn't start for another hour and a half." She said groggily.

"You know me, I like to get to places early." I shrugged, hoping she would buy my excuse.

"But an hour and a half? For God's sake it's five in the morning! The teachers

probably aren't even at school yet!" She asked incredulously.

I didn't want to tell her where I was going so early in the morning.

The park and library had become my safe space since my parent's conflict began.

In the early mornings I would walk around the deserted park and take the time to destress.

My mother would probably try to tag along if she found out.

Although she was more pleasant in the mornings, she still usually had nothing good to say anymore.

"I meet up with some friends beforehand..." I lied, "we like to go over our homework together."

"Don't you spend time with your friends after school? Why don't you go over your homework then?" She pressed.

A while back I started the lie that I was spending most of my time with my "friends."

"At first, my parents were overjoyed that I had finally started to get a social life."

But, after a little while they started to get suspicious of how much time I would spend away from the house.

I tried to leave the house before my parents woke up and come back after they had fallen asleep.

Of course, some days that was not possible and those days I would try to sleep as

much as possible.

It was a mistake coming home after Dominic dropped me back at school yesterday afternoon.

I just wanted to take a nap, but my mom caught me before I could lock myself in my room.

"We don't want to do more work after we spent the whole day working at school." I tried to explain, hoping she would buy it.

My mom came closer to me and carefully looked me down. I slowed my breathing, and tried to look as confident as possible.

"You have a boyfriend, don't you? That would be the only reason you would be gone so long." She accused.

Seeing this as the perfect opportunity to keep up the facade that I started with Dominic, I said "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I figured you and dad would be upset."

"Why would I be upset? If anything I'm happy for you. You have never talked to boys before, so I am just surprised." She replied, changing her voice to sound more cheerful. However, it sounded forced. "What is his name?"

"Thomas." I replied quickly. "And he is waiting on me right now at school so I need to hurry."

"Have a good day." My mother whispered in my ear when she came over to hug me.

"You too." I said back, actually hoping she would have a good day for once. She shut the door behind me when I started heading to my truck.

I knew I was technically not supposed to be at the park this early, but there was no one there that could catch me.

I found a patch of grass free of dog crap and plopped down on the ground.

Water instantly seeped through my pants and I regretted that decision.

There were benches all around me, but I always preferred sitting on the ground.

That morning I was too distracted to see if the ground was wet before sitting.

I got up, and moved to a bench. My entire bottom was wet, and it probably wouldn't dry before getting to school. I groaned in frustration.

I pulled my phone out of my bookbag and powered it on for the first time in days.

As soon as it turned on, text message notifications flooded it.

Many were from Amelia. She was wondering where I went after lunch yesterday.

She was wanting to call the police if I didn't respond because she was afraid Dominic kidnapped me.

I mean, he kind of did. However, I prayed she didn't actually call them.

I finally texted her back saying I was safe and just went home after Dominic and I spoke.

I then noticed that I had a bunch of text messages from an unknown number. I held my breath as I opened them. There were nearly twenty messages from him.

"Meet me outside by the bench outside of the cafeteria.

I'm waiting there now

Where are you?

It's been nearly 30 minutes since school let out

Did you seriously ditch me?

Elaine, I really need to talk to you

Can we at least meet tomorrow morning before class?

Elaine?

Why are you ignoring me?

I have something very important I need to tell you.

I really want to tell you in person.

Elaine, I promise I am not going to hurt you.

Then there were messages from last night after he dropped me off at home.

I know everything I said sounded weird but if you just give me a chance to explain you will understand.

I really don't want you to be afraid of me.

Please give me a chance to explain.

Elaine, I would never hurt you. Well, not again at least.

This last message wrenched my heart for some reason.

Please don't ignore me. I don't want to be strangers."

I felt kind of bad for him. There was clearly something mentally wrong with him, and he seemed desperate to have me trust him. But, I didn't need to get involved with someone who doesn't have a concept of reality. He already bit me once, what if he lost control of himself and hurt me again?

I decided to send him a kind message. I'm sure if I just ignored his messages, he would just keep pestering me. So, I hoped that my message would finally put an end to this.

"Hey Dominic, thank you for helping me yesterday.

I am sorry but I don't think it's a good idea for me

to talk to you again. I hope you understand."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, and I could feel my stomach sink.

The weight of my decision felt heavier as I hit send.

I watched the message bubble appear, showing that Dominic was typing a response.

My heart raced, unsure of what his reaction would be.

Seconds felt like an eternity until finally, his message came through.

"Elaine, please, I beg you to listen to me. I can explain everything if you just give me a chance. I understand if you're scared or confused, but I promise you, there's more to all of this than you know."

His words tugged at something inside me. What did he mean by "more than I know"? I decided that I didn't want to know. Didn't need to know.

"Goodbye Dominic."

I blocked him.

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Did I make a mistake? That question swirled in my head as I took a seat in my first period class.

I arrived a little later than I usually did, so Amelia was already there sitting in her seat in the back.

I waved to her before I took a seat. I looked to my right and Dominic had his eyes glued to his phone and had airpods in.

A dark cloud seemed to be over him. He had no life in his eyes, and the dark circles under them indicated that he didn't sleep much last night. Is this my fault?

I turned my head away as a wave of guilt washed over me.

Maybe I should have heard him out. But, it was too late now.

I had already fabricated the lie that I had a boyfriend, and I blocked his number.

Maybe it was for the best. I didn't need any more chaos in my life right now. Even so, the guilt never left me.

The guilt gnawed at me like a persistent ache, a constant reminder of the mess I had created.

As the teacher droned on about the upcoming test, my mind drifted back to Dominic.

His intense blue eyes, usually filled with a mix of emotions, now seemed hollow and

distant.

I stole a glance at him, his jaw clenched tightly, staring ahead as if in a world of his own.

Amelia nudged me, snapping me back to reality. "Hey, you okay?" she whispered, concern lacing her voice. She must have moved seats in the middle of class to sit right behind me.

I plastered on a smile, trying to mask the turmoil within me. "Yeah, just tired," I lied, my voice barely above a whisper.

Her dark brown eyes bore into mine for a moment before she nodded slowly, seemingly accepting my response. But I knew she could see through my facade; she always did.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the class. I gathered my books quickly, eager to escape the suffocating guilt.

The rest of the week went on like this. Dominic and I kept our distance, and I was able to restore some semblance of normality to my life.

I spent more time with Amelia. I went to her house after school on Thursday, and it felt like a breath of fresh air.

I didn't realize how much I actually missed her.

"Elaine, what are you doing after school today?" Amelia asked, her mouth full with her lunch.

"Not much." I shrugged. My plan was to go to the library until it closed, and then go

for a walk in the park after.

"Would you like to go shopping after school?

And maybe after that you can stay the night at my house.

It's Friday, so we can stay up late and have some fun!

" She invited me with enthusiasm in her voice.

Amelia looked at me with her irresistible puppy eyes, and I knew she really wanted to reconnect with me.

"Yeah that would be great." I smiled at her. She wasn't as pushy as I thought she would be about why I ghosted her during the summer. Spending time with her made me regret pushing her away then.

The bell rang, and we made our way to our next class together. As we walked down the hallway, I felt a strange sensation on the back of my neck, like someone's gaze burning into me. I turned, expecting to see Dominic's intense blue eyes, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Elaine, wait up!" Amelia called out, jogging to catch up with me. "I can't believe we're going shopping today! It's been so long since we hung out like this."

I smiled weakly at her excitement, grateful for her infectious energy that managed to lift my spirits, even if just a little. "Yeah, it should be fun."

We spent the rest of the day discussing what clothes to check out at the mall after school. It was a welcome distraction from the weight of guilt that still lingered within me. But no matter how hard I tried to bury it, it clawed its way back.

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Amelia followed me home so I could get my things to stay the night.

I didn't let her come inside with me. When she asked why, I did not say anything.

Quickly grabbing my things, I tried to avoid seeing my parents.

My dad was probably at work, but it was likely that my mom was there.

Luckily for me, she was asleep on the couch.

I left her a note to let her know where I was going.

Once I grabbed my things, I piled them into the trunk of Amelia's car. With a sigh I plopped down into the passenger seat of her car.

"How long has it been since you've been shopping?" Amelia asked while turning on the radio to play her indie bands.

"I don't know... Maybe a year." I responded.

"I can tell." She looked over to me scrutinizing my clothes. "You definitely need a style change."

I let out a sigh as my eyes fell to my attire. I wasn't particularly concerned with my appearance. My typical outfit consisted of yoga pants and baggy hoodies. Maybe it was time for a style change.

As we drove through the quiet streets of Oakwood, I couldn't help but notice the concerned expression on Amelia's face. It was almost comical how she managed to blend her worry with amusement.

"You know, you could use a little fun in your life, El. Maybe a shopping spree is just what you need. New clothes, new beginning," she chirped, her words bubbling with enthusiasm.

I rolled my eyes playfully at her. "What am I going to do with you, Amelia? You act like my life depends on the clothes I wear."

Her laughter filled the car, a sound that always managed to lighten my mood. "Hey, a good outfit can change your whole outlook on things. Plus, when you look good, you feel good. It's science," she teased.

I couldn't help but smile at her infectious energy.

Maybe she was right; perhaps a small change wouldn't hurt.

We turned onto the main street, lined with quaint shops.

Excitement filled me. I haven't done something like that in a long time.

Part of me felt as if I didn't deserve it.

How come I get to go out and have fun while my mother is in misery at home?

As we strolled through the charming boutiques, Amelia was like a whirlwind of colors and fabrics, pulling out dresses and tops for me to try on.

She was so excited, treating me as if I were a barbie doll.

I couldn't remember the last time I had let myself indulge in something as frivolous as shopping, but her enthusiasm was contagious.

"Come on, El, live a little! Try this one on," she insisted, holding up a flowy blue floral dress that she swore would look amazing on me. I wasn't used to wearing dresses like that. I usually dressed in a more grunge style, but I decided to try it on for her sake.

With a slight grin, I relented and took the dress from her, disappearing into the dressing room.

As I slipped it on and looked at my reflection in the mirror, I saw a side of myself that felt almost foreign.

The dress hugged my curves in all the right places, and the vibrant colors made me look more alive than I had felt in a long time.

Though it wasn't my usual style, I decided it was time for a change.

Seeing myself like this made me want to live again.

When I stepped out of the dressing room, Amelia's eyes lit up with excitement. "See, I told you! You look stunning, El," she gushed.

I gave her a bright smile and twirled around, the skirt of the dress flowing around me.

"Wow, Elaine, you look incredible!" Amelia's words filled me with a sense of confidence I hadn't felt in ages.

It was strange how a simple dress could make me feel so different.

As we continued our shopping spree, trying on different outfits and laughing like we used to do, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders.

For the first time in a long time, I allowed myself to enjoy the moment without guilt creeping in.

I really needed to get out and get out of my own head.

After hours of indulging in retail therapy we decided to grab a quick bite at a local diner. I decided to order an omelet. Breakfast for dinner was always my favorite. Amelia decided to order a burger and some fries.

As we were eating I saw a familiar figure from the corner of my vision.

When I looked up I saw a guy with sandy blonde hair and a slim figure.

My stomach dropped. It was my ex boyfriend.

We dated most of my junior year of high school.

He decided to break up with me a month before school ended, and he never said why.

I froze in my seat, my heart pounding against my chest as I watched him laugh with his friends at a nearby booth.

Memories of our time together flooded back, the laughter, the secrets we shared, and the pain of his sudden departure.

My hand trembled slightly, making me drop my fork onto the plate, the clatter sounding loud in my ears.

Amelia noticed my sudden change in demeanor and followed my gaze to where my ex-boyfriend sat. She narrowed her eyes in his direction and then turned back to me, concern etched across her features. "Elaine, are you okay?" she asked softly.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "Yeah... Yeah, I'm fine," I whispered, but even I could hear the uncertainty in my voice.

Amelia reached out and placed her hand over mine. "Do you want to leave? We can go home if you're not comfortable."

I shook my head, grateful for her offer but unwilling to let him get to me. The waitress came back around, and Amelia and I decided to order milkshakes.

"Thank you for inviting me to do all of this. I really needed to get out." I smiled at her.

"Of course, I really missed you." She put her hand on top of mine and gave it a squeeze.

Suddenly, I felt a hand grab my shoulder. My heart started pounding out of my chest. When I turned, I was greeted with the face of my ex, Nick.

Nick's brown eyes bore into mine, a mix of surprise and something else I couldn't quite place flickering across his features. "Elaine... hi," he greeted, his voice uncertain.

I felt a surge of conflicting emotions rise within me as memories of our past relationship resurfaced. The hurt, confusion, and unanswered questions scrambled my thoughts.

"Nick," I managed to reply, trying to keep my tone steady.

Amelia shot him a fierce look before turning back to me, her gaze asking for guidance on how to handle the situation. I appreciated her protective instinct but signaled with a soft shake of my head that it was okay.

Nick shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, a nervous energy radiating from him. "I didn't think I'd see you here," he admitted, a hint of regret lacing his words.

I took a moment to collect myself before responding, not wanting to show any vulnerability in front of him. "Well, here I am."

This situation felt very uncomfortable. I could see his friends looking on to see what was happening, and I could practically feel Amelia's eyes shooting daggers at him. The anxiety I was feeling was so intense that I suddenly felt sick to my stomach.

"You look really beautiful." Nick said with a charming smile, looking down at my new dress. He's never seen me dress like this before.

"Thanks." I said, mustering up a small smile.

"Is it ok if we talk outside?" He asked, noticing Amelia's glare.

Oh crap. What should I do? Amelia gave me a glare of warning. She would definitely get on to me later about what I was about to do.

"Sure..." I said hesitantly, slowly sliding out of my seat.

I followed him outside of the diner. I couldn't help but notice how different he looked. He was much tanner than before, and it looked like he put on a little muscle. But, he did not hold a candle to Dominic's looks. Upon that thought my face flushed red. Why am I thinking about him?

Once we got outside he plopped down on a bench, and I decided to sit next to him. He let out a sigh and awkwardly looked down at his feet. This was a very uncomfortable situation. Nervous butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I waited for him to say something.

"I'm really sorry, Elaine." Nick said looking up, his eyes boring into me.

Taking a deep breath, I thought about what to say next. He broke my heart just out of the blue. There were no clues leading up to it, so I did not get a chance to brace myself for it. I loved him deeply, and he told me himself that he didn't feel the same.

"Why?" I asked in a cracked whisper. Tears started to well in my eyes. He was saying the words I hoped he would have said long ago.

Nick's gaze softened as he noticed the tears brimming in my eyes, regret shadowing his features. "Elaine, I messed up. I was going through some stuff, and I didn't handle it well. You were always so good to me, and I... I let you down," he admitted, his voice tinged with genuine remorse.

I felt a mix of emotions swirling inside me - hurt, anger, and a hint of lingering affection that made it all the more confusing.

Looking at him now, his vulnerability on display, memories of our past flashed through my mind.

The late-night conversations, the shared dreams..

. but they were shattered by his sudden departure.

"It hurts, Nick. You left without a word... without an explanation," I murmured, my voice barely above a whisper as I fought to keep my composure.

He reached out tentatively as if to touch my hand but hesitated, pulling back slightly. "I know I can never make up for what I did to you. But, please give me a chance."

A chance? I felt immense shock from his words.

Nick just showed up out of the blue after ghosting me for months and suddenly wants me back.

Part of me was hesitant, but the other part of me felt an intense longing.

I knew I was dumb for doing this, but I felt so lonely.

Today made me realize that I didn't want to be alone anymore.

"I-I..." I paused, fumbling over my words. "Let's just start as friends." I managed to get out. Was I making a mistake?

Nick's face lit up, and he gave me one of his warm, charming grins.

He was always like a warm ray of sunshine.

Well, until that day everything changed between us.

That day it was like a dark cloud was over him, and his face was lifeless.

I quickly shook my head trying to get my mind off of that memory. This was a new beginning.

"I need to go back inside. Amelia is probably waiting for me." I fumbled out, still feeling awkward about this whole thing.

"Yeah, yeah of course." He said looking down at his feet. Nick then grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'll text you."

"Ok." I gave him a small smile before heading back inside.

I sat down at the table right when Amelia was paying the check.

"Wait- let me pay." I said placing my hand down on the check right before she was going to slide in her card.

"No, it's fine, please just let me get this one." She insisted.

I relented and let her pay for our dinner. We sat awkwardly in silence as we waited for the waiter to bring back the check. Amelia looked a little pissed.

As we exited the diner, I could feel Nick's eyes on me. My anxiety kept me from looking back at him. I really hoped I made the right decision. We finally got to her bright red Honda Pilot and once again sat in silence as she drove off.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, sensing her frustration as she stared off into the distance.

Amelia let out a sigh, her gaze fixing on me. "Elaine, what the hell was that all about? Why did you go outside with him?" Her tone was a mix of concern and reproach.

I bit my lip, feeling guilty for causing her worry. "I just... wanted to hear him out. It's complicated, but we agreed to start as friends," I explained, hoping she would understand.

Her eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "Friends? Elaine, after how he treated you? Are you serious? You should never get back together with an ex. That is like common

sense."

The weight of her words hit me like a ton of bricks. Was I really making the right choice by giving Nick another chance? Doubt crept in, but so did a sliver of hope that maybe things could be different this time.

"I don't know, Amelia. I just... felt like I needed to do it," I mumbled, knowing my actions were completely reckless.

Amelia sighed and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "I'm not supporting your decision, but I'll be here for you. Just remember that he broke your heart once, and he might do it again. She warned.

I kept my mouth shut after that, and we did not talk about Nick again for the rest of the ride to her house.

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"El, can you pass the remote?" Amelia asked, mouth full of popcorn.

Once we got to her house we began a movie marathon. She wanted to catch me up on all of the movies she watched over the summer. When I checked the time on my phone it was two in the morning and we were four movies deep.

"I think I've had enough." I said with a huge yawn. I took the remote from where it sat on the bed close to me, and I shut off the TV.

"Hey! We have so many left to watch! Why don't we pull an all-nighter?" She protested.

"I have a hard enough time trying to pull an all-dayer." I chuckled. "I'm ready to pass out at this point. It's four hours past my bedtime."

"You're such a grandma." Amelia sighed.

Suddenly, I could feel my phone vibrate text to me. When I opened it, I saw it was from an unknown number. Dominic? My chest tightened, and I dreaded opening the message.

"Who is that?" Amelia asked even though she took my phone to look for herself.

Of course Dominic would still be trying to reach out to me. He was delusional and seemed hellbent on telling me whatever fairytale he conjured up in his mind. I doubted that he would ever leave me alone. How long will I have to keep running from him?

"Oh how cute! Nick sent you a good night text." Amelia said sarcastically.

Oh. It was just Nick. Why did I feel so much disappointment over that? Was it that I enjoyed the thrill of being chased down by someone? I didn't think I enjoyed it. The anxiety that Dominic brought to my life definitely did not feel like a thrill.

"What does it say?" I asked Amelia.

She gave me back my phone so I could look for myself.

(Hi Elaine, this is Nick. I got a new phone number over the break. I really enjoyed talking to you at dinner and I hope to see you again soon. Good night ??.)

Upon reading his text, butterflies danced in my stomach.

I forgot what it felt like to be admired.

It was like a high I never wanted to come down from.

My heart fluttered at Nick's message, a welcome change from the incessant dread that accompanied any communication from Dominic.

It was refreshing to have someone interested in me who didn't come with a complicated backstory.

"Seems like Nick is making a move," Amelia teased, nudging me playfully.

"He's just being nice," I replied, trying to downplay the giddy feeling bubbling up inside me.

It seemed as if he didn't want to take things slow. Even though I knew we shouldn't, I

wanted the comfort of being in a relationship. I didn't want to feel alone anymore, and Nick would help to keep me out of the house more. Out of the chaos that had become my home.

"Well, Elaine Hayes, the mysterious lady of Oakwood, finally has admirers lined up at her doorstep. First Dominic, now Nick. Who's next?" She wiggled her eyebrows mischievously.

I rolled my eyes at her antics but couldn't shake off the warmth spreading through me.

Maybe it was time to give normalcy a chance.

Nick seemed like he was genuine with his apology, no hidden agendas or otherworldly secrets.

It wouldn't be bad to give him a chance.

Even though he was my Ex, he was a comfortable and safe option.

We never fought when we were together, and he was always sweet and loving.

I replied to his text with a simple "good night" since I was so exhausted from the day. Powering off my phone to give me some peace of mind, I pulled my blanket over my head and fell asleep with a warm heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

It was finally the weekend, and the hellish first week of school was finally behind me. From now on I am starting the school year out fresh, pretending as if last week never happened.

As soon as I left Amelia's house I went to the park to go on my daily morning walk. Amelia was upset to see me leave so early, but I really needed time alone to clear my head.

As I stepped out into the crisp autumn air, the leaves crunched beneath my feet, releasing a familiar earthy scent.

The forest surrounding Oakwood beckoned me, its ancient trees standing tall like silent sentinels.

I took a deep breath, letting the cool breeze wash over me, momentarily washing away the lingering stress of the past week.

Lost in thought, I wandered deeper into the woods. The sunlight filtered through the canopy above, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor. A sense of calm settled over me as I walked, the rhythmic sound of my footsteps mingling with the gentle rustling of leaves.

Suddenly, a low growl rumbled through the trees, sending a shiver down my spine.

I froze, my heart pounding in my chest as I scanned the surrounding woods.

Was it just a wild animal, or something more sinister lurking in the shadows?

Despite the fear creeping up my spine, I couldn't shake off the curiosity that tingled at the back of my mind.

It was as if the growl had called out to me.

Tiptoeing cautiously, I followed the direction of the sound.

The trees seemed to close in around me, their thick trunks casting elongated shadows that danced eerily on the forest floor.

Each rustle of leaves made me jump, my senses heightened to a point where even the faintest whisper of the wind felt like a scream.

Then, as I turned a corner around a dense cluster of bushes, I came face to face with a pair of piercing amber eyes peering out from behind a tangle of undergrowth. A wolf, its fur a mix of silver and charcoal, regarded me with an intensity that sent a jolt of recognition through my veins. What?

For a moment, we stood locked in each other's gaze, the world around us fading into insignificance. And then, the wolf suddenly ran away, leaving me standing in awe. Did I just imagine it?

Maybe spending the weekend alone was not the best idea.

I can't be trusted to make good decisions on my own.

My dumb self decided to follow the sound of a growl without even fearing for my safety once.

Then, when faced with a wolf, I just stopped in my tracks and didn't try to run to save myself.

I was lucky I was able to make it out unharmed.

However, part of me believed that I just imagined the whole thing.

I didn't think wolves even lived in Tennessee.

As I sat in my truck, the AC on full blast, I stared at the sun. It hurt my eyes, but the pain recentered me. Snapping out of whatever fog I was in, I powered on my phone. I was greeted with a good morning text from Nick.

(Good morning, beautiful. I hope you have a great day.)

I blushed. It seemed as if he were trying to start where we had left off before we broke up. He always sent me good morning and night texts. I always found the effort very charming and sweet, and I think he knew that.

After what had happened this morning, seeing his text calmed my anxiety about the whole situation with the Wolf. I decided to call him to see what he was up to. The phone only rang twice before he picked up.

"Good morning, my little early bird." He answered, his voice gruff from sleep.

My heart fluttered when I heard his voice. It was like I was falling in love with him all over again. "Good morning Nick. Are you up to anything today?"

I heard him have a huge yawn. "Not really. I was just planning on catching up on my sleep."

"Oh..." I felt a little bad for bothering him all of a sudden. "Well, I'll let you get back to your sleep."

"No! No!" He cut in suddenly, sounding more alert than before. "We can keep talking, sleeping can wait." He paused. "What are you up to today?"

"I just finished a walk in the park, and now I'm in my truck trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my day." I sighed.

"Well you are more than welcome to come chill at my place. I would love to have you over." Nick suggested convincingly.

Spending time with him sounded like a great distraction from all of the chaos going on in my life.

Though it was a little nerve wracking to hang with him after all of this time, Nick was comfortable and familiar.

I could feel the sun's warmth on my face as I considered Nick's offer.

Despite the strange encounter with the wolf earlier, the idea of spending time with him felt like a comforting refuge.

"Alright," I finally replied, "I'll make my way over to your place. Just give me some time to freshen up."

Nick's voice brightened over the phone, "Great! Can't wait to see you. Drive safely, okay?"

I smiled, feeling a sense of ease wash over me. After hanging up, I gathered my things and started driving towards Nick's house. The familiar route seemed to pass by in a blur, my thoughts consumed by the upcoming reunion.

As I pulled into Nick's driveway, a sense of déjà vu washed over me. The quaint

house looked as welcoming as ever, with its cozy porch and blooming flowers adorning the yard. I took a deep breath before getting out of the car, nerves fluttering in my stomach.

The worn wooden steps creak under my feet as I climb up to the porch, my heart pounding with a strange mix of excitement and apprehension.

Nick swings open the door before I can even knock, a warm smile on his face that instantly melts away my worries. His eyes, a deep shade of blue that seems to glow in the dusky light, hold mine in a mesmerizing gaze.

"Hey," he says softly, reaching out to brush a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you," he murmurs, his warm breath tickling my skin. The familiar scent of his cologne mixed with the subtle musk of his natural scent envelops me, bringing back a rush of memories.

"I've missed you too," I reply, unable to tear my gaze away from his intense eyes. It's like time has stood still since we last saw each other, and all the unresolved emotions between us are bubbling to the surface.

Nick's hand lingers on my cheek, his thumb gently stroking my skin. Without breaking eye contact, he leans in slowly, giving me the chance to pull away if I want to. But I don't. My eyes flutter closed as his lips meet mine in a soft, tentative kiss.

It's like a spark igniting a flame inside me, the familiar warmth of his touch flooding me with a sense of belonging. The worries and fears that had plagued me earlier in the day melted away at that moment.

When he pulled back, he had a huge grin on his face as if he had won the lottery. Whenever he smiled that big you could see the dimples on the corners of his mouth. Sometimes I would tickle him just so I could see those cute dimples when he laughed.

Nick gestures for me to come inside, and I follow him into the cozy living room. The soft glow of the afternoon light filters through the curtains, casting a warm hue over everything it touches.

We settle on the couch, our shoulders brushing lightly as we sit close together. Nick reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers with a gentle squeeze. The simple gesture fills me with a sense of belonging, like coming home after a long time.

"So what movie do you want to watch?" He asked, gesturing towards the TV in front of us.

I groaned. "Please no more TV. Amelia already tortured me enough last night."

Nick chuckled. "So what do you want to do?"

I glanced around the living room, my eyes falling on the stack of board games tucked away in a corner. An idea sparked in my mind, and I turned to Nick with a mischievous grin.

"How about a game night instead?" I suggested, excitement bubbling in my chest. "I saw you have some board games over there."

Nick's eyes lit up with amusement, his smile widening. "Game night sounds perfect. It's been a while since we've had one."

We settled on playing Monopoly, spreading out the board and setting up the pieces. As we started playing, the competitive spirit between us emerged, teasing and playful banter filling the air.

"So what were you up to this summer?" Nick asks me as he collects his money for passing go.

Well crap. I didn't know what to tell him. I considered continuing the lie I had told Amelia, but if he found out I lied it could destroy any chance of him trusting me again. However, I didn't want to talk about my parents' divorce today. Or ever. I was conflicted as to what to do.

"I really don't want to talk about it." I settled on, hoping he wouldn't press any further. At least it wasn't a lie, but it would be something he would keep nagging me about until I told him.

"Elaine, you know you can tell me anything." He replied, with concern on his face.

"No I don't." The words came out before I could stop myself. Of course I didn't fully trust him. He broke my heart and never told me why. Though it was wrong for me to snap at him like that, I was rightfully upset.

"Elaine..." He looked down at the ground, as if he did not know what to say. His blue eyes turned a stormy gray. Nick clenched his fists, not in an aggressive way, but out of stress. Though we were trying to start again, the breakup would always leave a scar on our relationship.

"Nevermind, forget about it." I said, hoping we could change the subject.

"No, I understand how you feel. You deserve some answers." Nick said, still looking at the ground anxiously. His eyes darted back and forth at his hands, and his behavior seemed odd.

I took a deep breath and waited anxiously for him to tell me. I was finally getting the answers I had wanted for so long, but part of me was afraid to know. Afraid that he would say something that would destroy what we were trying to build.

Nick's hands were fidgeting, his eyes avoiding mine as if the words he needed to say

were written in invisible ink on his palms. The air between us crackled with tension, each passing moment heavy with unspoken truths and unresolved emotions.

Finally, Nick took a deep breath, his gaze meeting mine with a mix of regret and determination. "Elaine, I..." He began, hesitated, then continued, "I ended things between us because... because I was scared."

His admission caught me off guard, the vulnerability in his voice piercing through the walls I had built around my heart. Scared? Nick had always been the steady one, the one who exuded calm and warmth. What could possibly frighten him enough to walk away without a word?

"Scared of what?" My voice wavered slightly, a mix of curiosity and apprehension coloring my tone.

Nick's eyes held mine, searching for understanding.

"I was threatened by someone, Elaine," he confessed, his words tumbling out in a rush as if he couldn't hold them back any longer.

"They warned me to stay away from you, told me things.

.." The tension in his voice was palpable, his hands clenched into fists as if reliving a memory that haunted him.

"I didn't want you to be dragged into that mess. "

The weight of his confession settled heavily between us, the pieces of our fractured relationship finally clicking into place. My mind raced, trying to process the revelation that Nick's sudden departure wasn't born of indifference but of a desperate attempt to protect me.

"Who would threaten you over me?" I whispered, my voice barely above a breath as I reached out to touch his hand, seeking connection amidst the turmoil of emotions swirling within me.

Nick's expression darkened with a mix of guilt and determination.

"I was at a party with people I had never met before.

I got really drunk, but it was nothing like I had ever experienced before.

I think I was drugged." He paused, his eyes welling with tears.

"There was this guy, and he beat me up really badly.

Broken nose, and bruises all over. I don't remember a whole lot of it, but once I sobered up a little bit he threatened that I would pay if I didn't stay away from you.

I was a coward to believe anything he said.

He was probably some psycho jealous guy, but the way he spoke sounded like he was dead serious.

" Nick's voice quivered with a mix of shame and anguish, his vulnerability laid bare before me.

My heart twisted in my chest, a surge of anger and uncertainty. How could someone use Nick like that and manipulate him into leaving me without a word? Was he even telling the truth? Was he really drugged??

"Nick, I'm so sorry you went through that. No one should ever have to face something like that," I murmured, my fingers tightening around his hand.

He looked up at me, his eyes reflecting a mix of gratitude and regret. "I should have told you earlier, Elaine. I was so scared for myself that I ended up hurting you... I understand if you don't want to be with me."

"Nick, I'm so sorry you went through that. No one ever should." I whispered, my voice laced with sympathy and understanding. Despite the pain and confusion swirling within me, a newfound sense of empathy blossomed in my heart. Nick's struggle was real, his suffering palpable in every word he spoke.

Nick's gaze searched mine, his eyes pleading for forgiveness. He was threatened, yet he was the one asking me for forgiveness. I know something like that can really mess with a person, and I can't imagine what he went through after that.

"There is nothing to forgive." I leaned over to hug him, knocking over the board game in the process. "Crap! I messed up our game."

"It's ok." Nick said, holding me tight. I could feel wet tears fall onto my shoulder. "Thank you... thank you for understanding." He whispered.

"Have you told anyone else?" I asked tentatively, afraid prying would cause him more anguish.

Nick took in a sharp breath, and held me tighter. "No." He whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

After hugging for a while, Nick and I headed back to the couch so we could cuddle. We both held each other in silence. Nick's body heat flowed into mine and calmed my racing heart. My heart broke for him, and I worried for his safety.

"Nick..." I whispered, hoping I wouldn't startle him. "Do-do you think they are going to come for you now?" Nick getting back together with me was the exact thing she told him not to do, and there was always the chance she would follow through on her threat.

"I don't care anymore. Even if she came after me, there is nothing else she can take from me. She already took my dignity." His voice cracked, his hurt on display. "The only thing I fear is you getting hurt, but she only seemed to be after me."

"I care. I don't want you to get hurt. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if you did." I said, nuzzling my head into his chest.

Nick suddenly tensed, and grabbed my face so I could look into his eyes.

He looked erratic and scared. His face betrayed so much emotion.

This was the first time he ever talked about what happened to him.

I understand that he must me going through a flood of emotions after he let down the dam he's had closed for so long.

"Don't leave me Elaine. If you do, those monsters will be getting exactly what they want." Nick then suddenly pulled me in for a kiss.

The moment our lips met, a burst of warmth spread through me.

His kiss was urgent and needy, a silent plea for reassurance.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, trying to convey through our tangled breaths and entwined bodies that I was here to stay.

As we slowly broke apart, Nick rested his forehead against mine, his warm breath tickling my skin.

"I couldn't bear it." He whispered.

"I won't leave you, Nick," I whispered, my voice shaking with emotion. "I promise."

We sat there for a while, wrapped in each other's arms. The silence wasn't uncomfortable; it was soothing. A shared moment of peace amidst the storm wreaking havoc in our lives.

As time ticked by, I could see the tension slowly ebbing away from Nick's face. His bright blue eyes met mine, and despite everything we had been through, they were filled with an indescribable warmth.

"Elaine," he began softly, tracing patterns on my hand with his thumb.

"Yes?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. The sound of my name on his lips felt like a soft caress, a balm to the storm raging in my soul.

"I just want you to know," he paused, swallowing hard. "I...I love you." His words were simple yet sincere. They echoed in the quiet room, quickly filling every corner with his unwavering declaration.

My breath hitched in response and I blinked up at him, stunned.

It wasn't the first time Nick had told me he loved me, but after everything we had been through, this felt different.

This wasn't a confession from an infatuated teenager but from a man who had seen darkness and still chose light.

From a man who had witnessed my vulnerability and still chose love.

"I...I love you too, Nick," I stammered out, my heart pounding in my chest. Our gaze held for what seemed like an eternity.

We got lost in each other that night, forgetting about the cruel world outside. We didn't say much because our bodies said everything we needed to say - our lingering touches, stolen kisses and the warmth of our bodies pressed together.

But deep down a fear gnawed at me. Who were those people, and why were they threatening Nick?

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

I promised Nick to wait outside the gym at school on Monday, so I sat at a bench under a tree. Of course I was there super early, I wouldn't be myself if I didn't. While I waited for him I pulled out a book and started reading.

All of a sudden I felt the scar on my shoulder start to tingle, and I rubbed it to see if it would stop.

Then, I felt a swirl of foreign emotions.

It was a mix of shock, anxiety, and longing.

It hit me like a wave, and I had no clue where it came from.

I closed my book because it was impossible to read like that. When I looked up I saw him. Dominic.

Dominic. It was as if the world had turned to ice at the sound of his name in my mind, then melted under the heat of his gaze.

He was standing by the school's main entrance, looking every bit as imposing as I remembered.

His eyes met mine from across the courtyard, those icy blue orbs cutting through the morning mist like lasers.

He stood there, motionless, a strong pillar against the shifting and churning tide of students.

His dark hair caught the first rays of sunlight, setting off a halo that made him look ethereal—yet terrifyingly real.

His broad shoulders were thrown back with an air of authority, his lean frame exuding strength even from afar.

The sight of him dredged up memories best left buried, but there was something else—a pull toward him that I couldn't resist.

He didn't move or say anything. He just watched me with an intensity that made my heart pound and my scar tingle. His eyes those mesmerizing, icy blue.

I stood, not realizing what I was doing. My feet started carrying me to him against my better judgment. His eyes widened in shock—shock, yes, but there was a flash of something else too. Triumph? Desire? Maybe both. It was impossible to tell with Dominic.

As I navigated the throng of students, I collided into someone. I looked up from my daze, realizing it was Nick. His sandy hair was tousled and his brown eyes sparkled in the morning sun. He gave me a warm smile and reached out to steady me. "Hey, Elaine," he said gently, "You okay?"

I glanced behind him to see Dominic still standing there, his gaze never wavering from me. His eyes were burning now with a fiery intensity that wasn't there before, his fists clenched at his sides.

"I'm fine," I lied to Nick, forcing my voice to sound as normal as possible. Yet I knew nothing was fine anymore. With Dominic back in town, things were about to get very complicated.

"Are you sure?" Nick asked with concern etching itself across his handsome features.

"Yeah of course." I tried to swallow down my anxiety, but it carried through to my voice.

Suddenly, I felt a warm hand on my shoulder placed directly on my scar.

I felt a jolt of electricity go through my body, followed by a wave of comfort.

Somehow, this contact seemed to soothe the constant thrum of anxiety that had been my constant companion since seeing Dominic.

I turned to see him standing there just inches away from me, his hand on my shoulder. His eyes were softer now, the icy blue having receded like a wave leaving behind calm pools that showed something I hadn't seen before - vulnerability.

"Elaine," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. His gaze was intense, but it wasn't frightening. Instead, it was filled with an emotion I couldn't quite place.

"Dominic," I replied as his hand fell away from my shoulder. The absence of his touch immediately sent a pang of longing through me which made no sense. My emotions were a mess and Dominic's proximity was doing nothing to untangle them.

I looked back at Nick, who had been watching our exchange with a confused expression on his face. It was clear he didn't understand what was happening and honestly, neither did I.

"So this must be Thomas." Dominic's voice was laced with a loaded calmness as he focused his potent gaze on Nick. His eyes narrowed slightly, taking in the unsuspecting guy before him.

"Actually, it's Nick," came the slightly defensive reply from Nick as he held out his hand, flashing Dominic a polite smile. Dominic just stared at it for a moment before

looking back at Nick, not moving to return the gesture. The tension was palpable, and I felt my heart race uncomfortably.

"Heard a lot about you, Nick," Dominic continued, disregarding the extended hand. His tone gave nothing away about whether what he'd heard was good or bad. I couldn't help but feel that this was some sort of veiled warning.

Nick retracted his hand slowly and put it in his pocket, giving Dominic a cautious look. "And you are...?"

"Dominic," he answered simply. The name hovered in the air between us like a storm cloud, heavy with unsaid words and unacknowledged history.

"Right." Nick turned to me. "Elaine, let's go."

Nick's voice was soothing, yet firm, as if he were trying to protect me.

He looped his arm through mine and began to lead me away from Dominic, but I couldn't get my legs to follow.

My feet felt glued to the ground, caught in Dominic's gravitational pull.

I looked back towards him, his icy blue eyes burning into me.

"Elaine?" Nick's confused voice shook me out from my trance, making my body jolt.

"Yeah," I muttered hoarsely, "let's go." I forced myself to move, leaving Dominic behind.

Throughout the day Dominic's presence was palpable.

It was like a phantom limb; I could feel it even when he wasn't there.

Even in the midst of crowded hallways and noisy classrooms, my senses were always tuned in to him.

Each time his gaze met mine, that same tingle spread across my scar and sent shivers down my spine.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

Nick wanted to meet with me after school in the school parking lot.

I decided to wait outside of my truck, sitting on the tailgate.

I fidgeted with my hands as I waited, rubbing the band aids that were always covering the sores on my hands.

I looked across the parking lot and saw that Dominic's car was still there.

Why am I still thinking about him? I must be going insane.

Dominic made me feel electric every time I was near him.

I never feel that way around Nick. Once I had that thought, I felt immense shame. I need to stop thinking about him.

I felt a touch on my hand, and when I looked up it wasn't Nick standing next to me.

"Do you have a second?" Dominic asked, his blue eyes blazing into me.

I could feel my heart start to race. What did he want to say?

I told him to stay away from me, but he seemed to persist anyway.

Maybe my only option was to hear him out, but I was terrified of what I was going to hear.

Dominic was bad news. His outburst and delusions were bright red flags warning me to stay away.

But for some reason, everything in me called out to get closer to him.

I know it was a bad idea, and that it was possible that Nick would see us. But, I decided to listen.

"Yeah." I replied and patted a spot next to me on the tailgate. What am I doing!!!

Dominic's eyes widened in shock, and his lips curled up into a small smile.

He sat next to me, closer than an acquaintance should, but I didn't seem to mind even though I should.

Him sitting this close caused tingles all over my body that excited me.

Though I was usually anxious around him, for some reason this time I was not.

I turned and gazed into his eyes. He had dark circles under them, and a dark cloud seemed to loom over him. I had never seen him like this before, and I felt sympathy for him. He looked down at his lap and didn't say anything.

"What's wrong?" I asked softly.

He looked back up to me, and his eyes glowed gold again.

I couldn't help the gasp that left my lips when I saw it happen.

I covered my mouth immediately after. I didn't want him to know I had begun to hallucinate things.

I didn't want anyone to know in fact. Dominic's eyes returned to blue, and I took a calming deep breath.

"I'm fine." Dominic said, but his gruff voice betrayed him.

He clearly wasn't ok, and I couldn't help but feel the need to comfort him. I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze.

"It's ok, you can tell me." I said encouragingly with a small smile. Seeing people hurting always triggered the caretaker in me. Maybe it was because of the pain I went through, but I was ok with me suffering. I just couldn't stand to see others suffering. That's why I always avoided going home.

Dominic sighed, and ended up pulling me into a hug. He started to cry, practically sobbing. I hugged him back, and rubbed small circles on his back. My heart wrenched myself, and I felt like I was going to shed tears for him. But, I held back the tears. This was his time to mourn, not mine.

"I'm sorry, Elaine." He cried out, clutching me as close to him as possible.

"What are you sorry about?" I asked with a soothing voice.

Dominic just started to sob again, taking ragged breaths as if he were struggling to breathe.

"Dominic..." I whispered, feeling a deep sorrow for him. It was almost as if I could feel his emotions. A swarm of sadness, anger, and regret. It felt like a hurricane, and I got caught up in it as well. I began to cry myself, holding him tight.

"Elaine... I'm so sorry. I really fucked up." He said, his voice cracking.

"What happened?" I asked, pulling back so I could look at his face. I placed my palm on his cheek, and he leaned into my hand. He made a strange sound that sounded like purring. Though it was startling to me, I didn't pull away. I could see he needed me.

"I-I..." He paused, sucking in a deep breath. "Elaine, I..." His eyes filled with tears once again, and I could see him staring at me as if I were going to disappear.

"It's ok Dominic, I'm not going anywhere." I assured him. What am I even saying? Who am I becoming? I couldn't explain what I was feeling for Dominic, but I found myself unable to resist him.

"Elaine, I had sex with another girl." He finally said, his voice deep with regret.

It was like I was being stabbed in the chest. I was so hurt by his words, like a deep betrayal.

Why do I even care? It's not like we are together or anything.

Heck, I barely know him. I took in a ragged breath, and I covered my face with my hands. What am I even doing?

"Elaine, I regret it so much. Please believe me. I-I was just so hurt when I smelled Nick's scent on you. I was blinded with rage and I fucked up." Dominic said before pulling me into a hug again. Nick's scent? How could he smell him on me. It doesn't make any sense.

I finally started to feel regret of my own.

Didn't I do the same thing to him? I got together with Nick.

But, why did that even matter? I owed nothing to Dominic, but I couldn't help but

feel like I betrayed him.

It was like I had no control of my emotions anymore.

They were being fueled by something deep inside of me that I couldn't explain.

"I'm so sorry Dominic." I said before looking up and seeing familiar eyes meet mine across the parking lot. I suddenly jumped back from Dominic, and got off of my tailgate.

"I need to go." I stated, finally coming back to my senses. I could see Dominic's heart breaking again, and I took everything in me to stop from pulling him close again. He made a loud huff, and angrily walked away from me. I looked back to the direction I saw Nick from, but he was already gone.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

I knew I screwed up when I pulled into my driveway and saw Nick's car sitting there.

Why is he here? If anything I thought he would be so mad at me that he would stop talking to me.

I had no clue what him being here means.

But the part I was most worried about was him seeing what my home had become.

My parents knew him, but he had no idea about the divorce.

I quickly parked my truck and ran into the house.

When I stepped through the front door, I wasn't prepared for what I saw.

My mother was on the couch crying next to Nick who looked at me with wide eyes when I walked into the room.

My father was sitting across from them, and clearly something he said was enough to make my mother burst out into tears.

"Elaine, sweetheart," my father starts, standing abruptly. He's got his back to me, but in the tense line of his shoulders and the way he doesn't turn to face me, I know that something terrible has happened.

"Nick, what...?" I begin, but the words die in my throat as I look at him. His sandy blonde hair is tousled, falling into his eyes - those brown eyes that usually sparkle

with kindness. Now they're dark with worry. Despite the heaviness in the room, he gives me a weak smile.

"Your mother..." Nick begins, only to be cut off by my father.

"Has decided it would be best if she moved out," my father finishes for him tersely.

My heart drops. My knees feel weak and suddenly the house feels too small, too confining. But it's not a shock about my parents' decision. It's more about Nick being here, witnessing all this mess.

"I..." I rub the scar on my shoulder anxiously.

"It's okay, Elaine," Nick interjects softly, quickly getting up from the couch and crossing the room to me. I can feel his warmth as he stands next to me. It's comforting, yet it adds another layer of unease to my already chaotic thoughts.

"I didn't mean for you to find out this way," my father says, a touch of regret threading through his tone. He finally turns around to meet my gaze, his eyes reflecting the same turmoil I feel inside.

I want to ask him so many questions—Why now? Why let things fall apart so completely? But I swallow them all down. Instead, I look at Nick, seeking some stability in the storm that's sweeping through my life.

"Elaine," Nick says gently. He places a hand on my shoulder - not the scarred one - grounding me in a way only he can. His touch is familiar and foreign all at once, a contradiction that tugs at something deep inside me.

"I'm ok." I whispered. But the words feel like a lie. Even to me, they sound hollow, bouncing off the walls of our once happy home. Nick's eyes search mine, concern

wrinkling his brow.

"I know you're not," he says softly, his thumb brushing lightly against my arm in a comforting rhythm. The sensation sends shivers down my spine, reminding me of a gentleness I haven't felt in a while.

The room falls into an uneasy silence. My father clears his throat and my mother snuffles from her corner of the couch. I can't stand it anymore - their awkwardness, their pity. I feel trapped, the walls closing in on me.

"I need to go," I mumble suddenly, pulling away from Nick's hold and turning towards the door.

"Elaine..." Nick starts but I raise my hand to stop him.

"Not now, Nick." My voice is sharper than I intend it to be. "I... I need some time."

Without waiting for a response, I ran to my truck and slammed the door behind me.

Tires squealing, I race down the road, my heart pounding. My vision blurs as tears well up, threatening to spill over. I grip the wheel tightly, trying to keep myself grounded in the midst of all this chaos. Where am I going? I don't exactly know. Anywhere but here.

As if on autopilot, I find myself driving towards the edge of Oakwood, where the world whispers secrets among the trees. The forest has always been my sanctuary - a place where I can escape from everything and everyone, from my parents' divorce to Nick's confusing presence.

I pull into a small clearing that's dappled with sunlight filtering through the thick canopy of leaves above. The air is cool and fragrant with the scent of pine and earth.

It's quiet and peaceful here - a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me.

Utterly drained, I lean back against the driver's seat and close my eyes.

The silence wraps around me like a comforting cocoon.

Tears start to stream down my face. Of course something like that would happen.

It seemed as if the universe didn't want me to have one good thing in my life.

I thought bringing Nick into my life would help me forget about everything at home, but now that he's witnessed it all, he will always pity me for it.

I opened the door to my truck, and ran out into the woods.

Running as fast as my legs could take me, I eventually made it to the pond.

As I stood there, watching the gentle ripples on the surface of the pond, a sense of calm began to wash over me.

The forest around me hummed with life; the rustling of leaves and the distant calls of birds filled my ears.

It felt like I was shedding the weight of the world, leaving it at the edge of the woods where it couldn't reach me.

I sat down at the edge of the pond, pulling my knees up to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. The cool breeze against my skin felt like whispers of reassurance, telling me that not everything was lost. Here, in this secluded spot, I could breathe.

The sun was beginning to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink.

It was beautiful, a stark reminder of life's simple pleasures that I often overlooked in the chaos of everyday existence.

But as I watched the sun dip lower, a sudden chill ran through me—not from the evening air, but from a deep feeling that I was being watched.

I looked around me, whipping my head quickly around.

I didn't see anything, but I still couldn't shake the feeling.

I could feel the scar on my shoulder tingle.

Maybe I was having another one of my delusions.

My hand reached up to rub my scar, but before it could get there someone else's hand was placed on top of it.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, and stood so quickly that I stumbled.

Losing my balance, I fell into the pond.

My body quickly sank below the surface, and I found myself struggling to swim to the surface.

I didn't swim often, and my lack of experience was coming back to bite me.

Suddenly, I saw another body sink below the surface. Dominic.

He swam to me and grabbed me. Dominic pulled our bodies to the surface and I took a huge gasp of air. He pulled me to his chest and gave me a hug.

"Damnit Elaine, you could have drowned." He chastised and sighed.

"Thank you." I whispered. He was right, I could have very well died had he not been there. What is he doing here? Was he the one watching me?

Dominic pulled us on land, and carried me through the forest back to where my truck was parked.

His movements were swift and sure, with an animalistic grace that left me in awe.

The scent of pine and cool dirt was mingled with his own unique musk, a heady aroma that somehow managed to soothe my frayed nerves.

As he set me down gently beside my vehicle, I found myself looking up into his icy blue eyes.

They were filled with concern, the intensity of which took my breath away. A tiny part of me wondered if the tingling sensation on my scar had something to do with this man, this half-stranger who shared a past with me that was as mysterious as the darkening forest around us.

"Dominic," I start, trying to pull away from him, but he tightens his grip on me. Not hurting me, just insisting. His touch makes my skin prickle with a mix of anticipation and fear. "Why were you there?"

He takes a step back and runs a hand through his hair. "Elaine you shouldn't be out here alone." He insisted.

I sighed, but was a little angry that he was telling me what to do. My life is of no concern to him. "I can do whatever I want. Everything was fine until you showed up." I crossed my arms, their presence against my chest giving me comfort.

"What's wrong, Elaine? I felt it," he paused, taking a deep breath, his voice rough. "Your panic...your fear. It hit me like a punch to the gut."

He felt it? What does he even mean? Is he saying that he can feel my emotions? I gave him a confused look, and took a step back from him. This could have been one of his delusions, but how did he know I was panicked? And, how did he know where I was?

Dominic walked forward and placed a hand on my shoulder. A shoot of pain went through my scar, and I stumbled back, falling to the ground. I held my shoulder and let out a yelp.

"Damnit, Elaine. Shit!" Dominic bent down and picked me up off of the ground. "I'm sorry I forgot about my mark." He whispered to me.

His mark? My shoulder stopped hurting, and it was replaced by a comforting warmth.

"What the hell is happening to me?" The thought that was supposed to stay in my head ended up coming out of my mouth.

I started to cry. My life couldn't be more screwed up.

I was being distant from Dominic because of his delusions , but I was having many of my own.

Maybe we were perfect for each other after all.

What am I even thinking? Am I considering him and I as a thing?

Dominic pulled down my tailgate, and instead of placing me down, he sat down and continued to hold me on his lap. "I don't think this is the best place to tell you."

Dominic told me.

Why did he care about the location now of all times? He's been wanting to tell me this for a while, practically begging me to listen, but now he is reluctant to tell me.

"What is your problem?" I said in a shout, not meaning for it to come out so harshly.

Dominic's eyes glowed that gold color again and he growled.

He actually growled, an animalistic sound that I have never heard a human make.

My heart started to pound, and it was as if I could feel his annoyance at me.

His eyes quickly shifted back to blue, and I could tell that his annoyance had faded.

"I think it's best if we go back to my place." He said, wiping my wet hair that was on my forehead behind my ears gently. "We are both soaking wet and in the forest in the middle of the night. We need to get dry and warm."

I nodded, agreeing with him. "I'm sorry for yelling." Looking around us, I noticed that his car wasn't here. How the hell did he get here?

Dominic reached into my pockets and grabbed the keys to my truck. "I'm driving. You're too much of a wreck to drive. We are lucky you made it here unharmed in the first place." He said as if he knew what state I was in when I left my house.

He placed me in the passenger seat, and soon we were on the road.

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Most of the car ride was in silence. Dominic anxiously gripped the steering wheel, and often looked at me.

I crossed my arms across my chest as I shivered.

My clothes were soaking wet, and even Dominic turning on the heat in the car helped me to warm up.

I felt like some of my shivering could be due to my nervousness.

I placed my hands in front of the air vent, hoping the heat would warm me enough to stop shivering. Dominic reached over and turned up the heat for me.

"We are almost there, you can change into some of my clothes when we get there." Dominic announced.

It was dark out already, and I was sure my parents were worried about me. I decided that I wouldn't text them to let them know I was ok. They could worry all they want, I didn't care. Maybe they were so wrapped up in their own petty drama that they didn't care that I was gone.

I pulled my phone out of my book bag and saw I had some text messages. Unlocking my phone, I saw that I had over fifty messages from Nick.

"Texting your boyfriend, huh?" Dominic said bitterly. I could practically feel his jealousy.

"He isn't my boyfriend." I admitted. Nick and I never spoke about what we were to each other. Since nothing was official, technically I wasn't lying.

Dominic scoffed. "Oh really, does he know that?"

I didn't respond. Nick probably thought we were official. Why didn't I just say he was my boyfriend? Why would I care about what Dominic thought about it?

"So you're the kind of girl to have casual sex?"

"That's none of your business." I retorted, stung by his judgmental words. His icy blue eyes narrowed at my defiance, but he didn't respond, instead focusing on the winding road ahead. How did he know that Nick and I were intimate?

The jealousy I felt emanating from Dominic was all-encompassing, like a physical force in the compact space of the car. It filled me with a sense of unease as we drove deeper and deeper into the isolated woods.

We pulled up outside a large rustic cabin nestled deep within the forest. The only light came from the moon casting long shadows over everything, giving it an eerie beauty that made me shiver again. Dominic got out of the car first and moved swiftly to my side, opening my door for me.

As soon as I stepped out, I was hit by an overpowering scent of pine and something else, something wild and uniquely Dominic. It clung to me as I followed him up the wooden stairs and through the front door.

Dominic gestured for me to enter, and I walked through the door. Though his house looked like an old cabin on the outside, the inside was modern. A chandelier hung over the entryway and right in front of me was a staircase that led to the upper level of the house.

I followed Dominic up the stairs, knowing he was leading me to his room.

Once we were inside, he shut and locked the door behind me.

I could hear my heart pounding in my chest as we both stood in silence.

My body began to shiver again, and upon seeing this Dominic walked over to his dresser.

He pulled out a shirt and a pair of joggers.

He handed it to me and pointed to a door across the room.

"There is a bathroom in there that you can change in." He said quietly.

I nodded and made my way over there.

I closed the door behind me with a soft click. The bathroom, like the rest of Dominic's house, was surprisingly modern. Gleaming tiles lined the walls and a large shower cubicle occupied most of one side. I quickly stripped out of my wet clothes, relieved to escape their cold, clammy grasp.

Slipping into Dominic's clothes offered an unexpected comfort.

They are warm, soft and smelled just like him—wild and piney with a hint of something else that made my heart flutter.

I looked at myself in the mirror as I pulled his shirt over my head.

His clothes were admittedly too big on me, but there was an inexplicable sense of security in his oversized shirt enveloping me.

When I stepped back into his room, Dominic was

leaning against the window, staring outside with his arms folded across his strong chest. His silhouette against the moonlit night was captivating and a little intimidating.

"Feeling better?" He asked without looking away from the window.

"Yeah." I whispered. I decided to sit on his bed and cross my legs under me.

I surprisingly felt comfortable in his room, on his bed.

He kept his room very neat, but his bed was unmade.

Still feeling cold, I wrapped one of his blankets around me.

I buried my face into the soft fabric, and inhaled his scent.

Warmth spread across my body as I smelt him.

"Go ahead and make yourself at home." He said with a chuckle. I looked up and saw that he was finally away from the window and walking towards the bed.

Feeling embarrassed, I pulled my face away from the blanket. "Sorry." I whispered as my cheeks flushed red.

"Don't be." He quickly responded as he sat next to me.

The warmth of his body was like a beacon, drawing me in despite my reservations. His proximity sent jolts of electricity through me, making my heart rate spike. He just sat there silently for a moment, those icy blue eyes locked onto mine.

"You don't have to be sorry, Elaine," he said softly, his gaze never wavering. There was a strange, almost hypnotic intensity about Dominic that I found both frightening and compelling.

"I...I actually feel safe here," I admitted in a whisper, surprising myself with the truth of it.

A ghost of a smile played on his lips. "Good," he said. His tone was low and soothing, but there was something else beneath it—a hint of possessiveness or perhaps satisfaction—that made me swallow hard.

"Your clothes are comfortable," I added, hoping to steer the conversation away from the confusing emotions swirling inside me.

"I'm glad," he replied, the faint smile still playing on his lips.

"You can borrow them anytime you want to.

" His words hung in the air heavily between us, carrying an unspoken promise that made my heart flutter again.

The casual way he laid a claim on me was both unsettling and strangely reassuring.

I looked down at my lap, letting my fingers trace aimlessly over the fabric of his joggers.

I wasn't exactly sure why I was here or what this would mean for my relationship with Nick.

My thoughts drifted back to those numerous unread text messages, each one a constant reminder of how complicated this situation really was.

"Do you think about him a lot?" Dominic's deep voice cut through my thoughts like a blade of ice as he broached the subject I'd been trying so hard to avoid.

"Nick?" I asked, stalling for time. Suddenly, Dominic's room felt too small. His gaze bore into me and it felt as if he could see every thought.

"Who else would I be talking about? The non-existent Thomas that you lied to me about?" He said sarcastically.

I felt my heart drop when he mentioned my lie. Lying was not something I did often, and I felt ashamed for doing so.

"No, I don't think about him a lot..." I paused, at a loss of things to say. "T-this thing with him is relatively new."

"Oh, so you two are a thing?" He said bitterly, and I could feel a sting of betrayal coming from him.

"I-I don't know." I admitted. "But we didn't come here to talk about that."

Dominic sighed and looked down. "You're my mate." He stated with confidence.

His mate? What does that even mean? "You can't just claim me like that."

Dominic sighed and looked me in the eyes. His eyes were an icy storm, brewing with emotion. "You don't understand..."

I tried to cut in but he stopped me by saying, "Will you please just hear me out before you say anything?"

I sighed and nodded. I didn't give him much of a chance to explain himself whenever

we talked, so I decided to be quiet and just listen to him.

Dominic grabbed my hand and placed it on his cheek. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "His scent is all over you and it's driving me insane." Dominic admitted with a strained voice.

He can smell Nick on me? I was going to say something, but I remembered my promise to him and bit my tongue. Dominic continued to lean into my palm, and I found myself wanting to comfort him. I started to rub my thumb across his cheek.

Dominic sighed before pulling me into his chest. I was shocked by it, but I didn't mind. His arms wrapped around me protectively, pulling me close. His warmth was intoxicating and I let myself relax into the embrace, comforted by his strong heartbeat against my ear.

"We're werewolves, Elaine," he confessed in a whisper that vibrated through his chest and into my body.

The word hung in the air between us, heavy and undeniable. Werewolves. I should have been terrified or at least surprised, but instead, some part of me felt like it already knew.

"You're a... w-werewolf?" I stuttered out, my voice barely more than a whisper against his chest. Dominic pulled back slightly to look into my eyes. His icy blue eyes were filled with a mix of fear and hope, as if he was scared of how I'd react but hoped that I'd understand.

"Yes." He nodded, his gaze never leaving mine. The intensity of his stare made my heart race. A moment passed before he spoke again. "And you're my god-given mate."

He seemed so sure of this. I thought this was another one of his delusions, but when I looked into his eyes I felt like he was telling the truth. What is wrong with me? He is clearly insane. I shouldn't believe a word he says.

"I know you probably think I'm crazy, but I am telling the truth." His eyes glowed gold.

I jumped back when I saw them. "W-what is that?" I stuttered out.

"My eyes? That's just my wolf." He paused after seeing the confusion in my eyes. "When I look at you they glow because you're my mate."

So Dominic knew that his eyes glowed. Did that mean that I wasn't imagining it? Did it mean that he was really a werewolf? A werewolf- something out of a fairy tale book. It was definitely something hard to believe.

"I can prove it to you, but I don't want to scare you." He said while moving a piece of hair that had fallen over my eyes. Prove it? How?

"Dominic... I-I..." I had no clue what to say. Either he and I were both delusional or he was actually a werewolf.

"Elaine," Dominic murmured, cutting off my stammering words. He moved his hand up from my arm, tracing the line of my jaw tenderly with his thumb, his touch soothing as it was confusing. "You don't have to say anything right now."

"But I..." The protest died on my lips as he shook his head slowly.

"It's a lot to take in. I know." His voice was soft and for the briefest moments, his stoic facade cracked and there was a vulnerability in his icy-blue eyes that had never been there before.

My mind was racing with questions and fears. Werewolves were things of myths and legends, they didn't exist in real life. Was this a dream? Would I wake up soon?

Dominic seemed to sense my internal turmoil, his powerful arms drawing me closer to him again. The warmth radiating from him felt reassuring, calming my racing heart.

"I'll give you the time you need, Elaine," he said while rubbing my back.

I felt comforted by the action. I didn't know how to feel about all of this.

My heart wanted to believe him, but my head was screaming at me to run.

I blocked out those thoughts as I instinctively nuzzled my head into his chest.

I tried not to think of anything at the moment. All I knew was that his arms around me felt really good. Better than Nick ever made me feel. Maybe Dominic and I were destined in some sense. A broken girl and a delusional boy. A boy who had permanently made his mark on me.

"Why did you bite me?" I whispered.

"Because you're my mate. Though, I probably shouldn't have done it when I did. I just saw you talking to another boy and instinct took over." He placed a kiss on the top of my head. "I didn't want any man near you, so I marked you as mine. I'm sorry if I scared you." He whispered.

"Is that why my scar tingles every time you are near?" I asked. Maybe I shouldn't have admitted that to him.

His icy-blue gaze darkened at my question, a flicker of surprise crossing his features.

"Yes," he said after what felt like an eternity. His thumb gently traced the jagged scar on my shoulder, as if trying to erase the painful memory etched into my skin.

"All werewolves can sense their mates, especially when they're close," he began to explain, his voice taking on a solemn tone. "The mark... it's a bond between us. It binds me to you, and you to me."

"But why... Why me?" I found myself musing aloud, lost in the labyrinth of Dominic's revelations. His words spun around in my mind like a cyclone, tearing down the barriers of reality as I knew it.

Dominic seemed to ponder my question for a moment before finally voicing his answer. "I think... that's something only fate can answer," he said, his eyes mirroring the confusion that now clouded mine.

My heart pounded against my chest. I felt dizzy with all of the information being dropped on me. Everything he said explained all of the crazy things I was feeling, but it was still so hard to believe.

"What happened today, Elaine? I felt your panic and sadness and rushed to find you out in the middle of the woods." His voice was laced with concern.

I felt a swirl of emotion as he reminded me of what happened today. "M-my mom is moving out of the house." I began to cry.

Dominic placed a kiss on my head and pulled me closer into him. "Your parents are getting divorced?" He asked in a soft voice, as if he were afraid of breaking me. I nodded into his chest.

"Elaine, I'm so sorry." He whispered.

I continued to cry until exhaustion overcame me.

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I woke up to a bright room and warm arms around me. I was startled at first, but then the memories of last night reminded me of where I was. My heart rate slowed and I focused on the sound of Dominic's steady breathing.

What am I going to do about Nick? I had already betrayed him by staying here with Dominic.

Though we hadn't done anything sexual with each other, the way we laid intimately intertwined was more than what just friends should do.

I knew I should call things off with Nick, but I felt really bad about it.

If he found out about Dominic and I, he would be furious.

Then there was the situation with Dominic.

He truly believed that he was a werewolf and that I was his destined mate.

It was a ridiculous fantasy that part of me hoped was true.

There was something appealing about being destined to someone.

A bond that nothing could break. Maybe a bond strong enough to stop me from ending up in the same situation as my mother.

I could feel Dominic stirring and he pulled me closer to himself. "Good morning, little bird." He whispered into my ear.

I could feel my face blush and a small smile crept onto my lips. I thought his nickname for me was really cute, and I wondered why he wanted to call me that.

"Good morning." I whispered back.

Dominic sighed in contentment and started rubbing small circles on my stomach that made my heart flutter. The scar on my neck began to tingle, and I rubbed my finger over it.

"As much as I would love to spend all day like this, unfortunately we still have school today." Dominic said with annoyance.

I groaned in response, the mere thought of school draining the peaceful comfort from the moment. I moved to sit up, my muscles protesting after a night spent entwined with Dominic. He let me go reluctantly, his icy blue eyes watching me with a predatory intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

Dominic stood and stretched, his muscular physique slicing through the early morning sunlight streaming in through the window. Warily, I rose from the bed as well, stealing a backwards glance at the tall figure who already seemed to be lost in thoughts.

"Little bird," Dominic began, his voice gruff but not unkind. "You need to tell Nick. It's not fair to him or to us."

I grimaced, wishing I could forget about Nick for just a little while longer. But I knew Dominic was right. The conflict had been inevitable from the start; it was just a matter of time.

"I know," I replied quietly, my voice barely more than a whisper. "And I will. Today, after school." The words felt heavy on my tongue, like a confession that made

everything real. There was a pinch of melancholy in my heart, and I had to look away from Dominic's gaze.

"Good," Dominic said simply, his hand gently lifting my chin to make me look at him. "It will be best this way."

I nodded slowly, his icy blue eyes commanding me to accept the reality of the situation. "I'm going to get dressed," I mumbled, breaking away from his intense gaze.

As soon as I entered the bathroom, I leaned against the door and took a deep breath. The coolness of the tiles against my skin helped clear my mind. The decision was made, there was no turning back now. Even if Dominic just turned out to be insane, things between Nick and I would be over forever.

I pulled a black hoodie of Dominic's that he gave me over my head and tied the drawstrings of the gray joggers he gave me to make them fit.

The fabric still pooled at my feet, and I sighed as I rolled up the bottoms. Once I walked back into his room, Dominic was already dressed and held my Converse in his hands.

"I put them in the dryer so that you can wear them. I'm sorry about your clothes. I forgot to put them in the washer last night." Dominic said awkwardly.

"It's ok." I replied, pulling the shoes out of his hands. I sat down on his bed and put them on my feet.

"Little bird, I mean no offense whatsoever, but have you seen yourself in the mirror?" Dominic said softly while looking at me across the room.

I saw my reflection in the mirror across his room and saw how greasy my hair looked. I sighed and placed my hands over my face. There was no time to take a shower, so I was stuck going to school looking like a slob.

I could feel the bed dip next to me, and Dominic pulled my hands away from my face. He grabbed my chin in his hand and placed a kiss on my forehead.

"You still look beautiful. Maybe you should just pull it up today?" He suggested.

"I don't have a hair tie." I replied with hopelessness.

Dominic's brows furrowed in thought, then his face lit up. "I'm sure my mom has one. Let me go ask her."

I could feel my heart drop. His parents are here? Am I going to meet them looking like this!? I let out a deep breath and covered my face again.

"What's wrong?" Dominic asked as he stood to go.

I looked up at him with a frown. "I don't think today is the best day to meet your parents."

Dominic chuckled a little. "That's completely fine. My dad is already gone and she usually stays in the kitchen in the mornings. We can just leave without eating, but I can pick us up something on the way."

Dominic pulled his car keys out of his pocket and tossed them at me. I quickly moved to catch them, almost dropping them once I did.

He laughed as he left the room, leaving me staring after him with wide eyes. A small smile tugged at my lips, as I looked down at the keys in my hand. For some reason,

holding them made me feel a part of Dominic's life in a way I hadn't before.

Watching him disappear out of the room, I couldn't help but replay his words in my head. 'It will be best this way.' He seemed so sure, so confident about the decision we had taken. But then again, Dominic sounded certain about everything related to us, even the parts I found hard to believe.

As I waited for him, I turned my attention towards the room itself.

It was neat and minimalistic. The crisp white sheets folded meticulously at the edges of the bed and an uncluttered desk with a laptop on it.

There were no photographs or personal items lying around; instead, numerous books of varying thickness occupied most of the empty surfaces in the room.

My room back home was a lot more cluttered and messy than his.

A few moments later, Dominic returned with a black hair tie in his hand and handed it to me. "There you go," he said simply, his icy gaze locked onto mine.

I accepted the hair tie from him and quickly pulled my greasy hair into a high ponytail to keep it out of my face. Seeing myself in the mirror again, I realized Dominic was right. Somehow, despite my disheveled appearance, I did look good – maybe even better than usual.

"Let's go," Dominic said eventually, breaking our comfortable silence. His tone was filled with an authoritative sense that I recognized instantly.

I followed him downstairs, taking in everything around me with quiet curiosity. Along the hallways were pictures of him and his family.

Most of them were of a young Dominic, his icy blue eyes shining with a playful innocence that was captivating.

In a few, he was a little older, around the age when he had first shifted.

The pictures with his parents were the most startling.

His mother had the same olive skin and dark hair as Dominic, while his father was fairer with light brown hair that was almost blonde.

We walked through the hallway filled with memories, and I found myself lost in the images of Dominic's past. He stopped at the front door, waiting for me to catch up. Seeing me absorbed in the pictures, he gave a small chuckle.

"Quite the trip down memory lane," he said, his gaze softening as he looked at the pictures.

"Your family is beautiful," I responded quietly, still captivated by the images.

Dominic gave me a strange look, something unreadable flickering in his eyes before he shrugged it off and turned towards the door. "Come on, we are already late."

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Dominic sets his car purring to life again, snaking through early morning traffic towards school.

The mini-van pulled up beside us looks downright dwarfed compared to Dominic's oversized truck.

I crumble my breakfast wrapper, my fingers making an odd crunching sound against the thin foil.

Dominic reaches over and carefully plucks it from me, tossing it into an overstuffed bag of fast food wrappings.

Oakwood High School comes into sight, a modest brick building camouflaged by weeping willows.

The lawn is a vivid green, a stark contrast against the red autumn leaves that scatter across it.

Its hallways, filled with ancient lockers and the cacophonous sound of students, hold the daily chaos that I am part of.

The truck rumbles to a stop in the school's crowded parking lot as I look to Dominic. His icy blue eyes are locked onto mine, instantly drowning out the multitude of surrounding noises, and I feel that telltale prickling sensation. I turn away quickly as I blush.

Dominic's dark form unfolds from the driver's seat, his imposing figure casting a long

shadow in the early morning sun.

He takes his time approaching me, stalking forward like a predator - slow and deliberate and terrifyingly beautiful.

He shoots me a knowing look from beneath his thick lashes, icy blue eyes gleaming in direct contrast to his olive skin.

As we walk toward our first period class together, I can feel everyone's eyes on us.

A buzz of whispers fills the air, spreading like wildfire through the student body.

Dominic was definitely a hit amongst the girls, and it was probably surprising seeing him walk in with me.

The girl who never talks to anyone and hides in the film room.

Dominic and I walk to our first period class together, and we take a seat.

The teacher had already begun her lesson, and we were ten minutes late to it.

I sighed and pulled out my small leather notebook that I wrote my notes in.

I start to take notes from the powerpoint, and I can feel Dominic's eyes on me the entire time.

I look at him and squint my eyes in warning. I then glance at the powerpoint to further instruct him on how to behave in class. He made a loud sigh and sat back as he looked at the powerpoint. I smirked in satisfaction and continued taking notes.

Once the class was over, I could feel Dominic grab my hand. It caused tingles to

spread all over my body, especially in my mark.

"I can walk you to your next class." Dominic stated, his thumb rubbing over the back of my hand.

I shook my head. "Amelia and I usually walk together, but thanks."

Dominic made a loud sigh, and looked as if he wasn't going to leave without me. I ignored his protest and walked to the back of the class, where Amelia sat. She still had a mess of her stuff on her desk, and I helped her to gather her things. When I looked back, Dominic was gone.

As she stood, she gave me a bewildered glance. "What the hell was that? You and Dominic were both late to class, and he even grabbed your hand."

I blink. "What? Oh, it's nothing," I lie, shrugging nonchalantly. Amelia squints at me, her piercing dark-brown eyes probing for the truth.

"I didn't ask if it was something, Elaine. I asked what it was." She retorts sharply, her usual wit in full display. Her curly black hair is tossed over one shoulder as she focuses her attention on me, her concern evident.

"Amelia..." I begin, a warning lacing my voice. Walking away from Dominic had been hard enough; explaining our peculiar relationship to Amelia feels like stepping on a landmine.

"Elaine," she echoes back, refusing to back down. "You've been acting weird all summer, and this? This is just the cherry on top."

I glance back at the now empty seat where Dominic sat earlier and sigh. I feel a tug of guilt for not telling Amelia anything about the strange goings-on preoccupying my

life.

I sigh and shake my head. "I don't want to talk about it right now."

"What about Nick? I thought you two were a thing. He even came up to me asking if I knew where you were. He said that you fled your house yesterday and never returned." She said quickly with accusation. "When are you going to talk about it? It seems like you've been ignoring me for months."

Another sigh escaped my lips, and I decided that I finally needed to tell Amelia what was going on. "Can we talk after school, I can come over to your house."

"Ok." Amelia said, satisfied.

Once I stepped into the hallway I remembered that my truck wasn't at school. It still sat in the secluded spot in the forest.

"Is it ok if I ride with you? My truck isn't here." I asked quickly.

Amelia gave me a raised eyebrow. "Sure..."

I left before she could ask me any more questions. I practically ran to my Latin class to avoid seeing anyone. My social battery was already completely drained and it was only the morning.

Right before I could walk into class, I could feel someone pulling on my hood. I looked back and saw Nick before me. I took a ragged breath as anxiety and panic flooded me. I wasn't expecting to have to do this now. What should I even tell him?

Nick took my face between his hands and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. "Thank goodness you're ok. I was worried sick."

Nick looked me up and down and took in what I was wearing. A blush spread across my face as I remembered that I was in Dominic's clothes. Crap.

"Elaine... whose clothes are you wearing?" Nick asked sternly.

"Oh it's just a friend's. I spent the night over at their house after what happened yesterday." The lie quickly escaped my lips before I knew what I was doing.

"A male friend?" Nick asked with a little jealous laced in his voice.

"Yeah..." I paused, afraid of telling the truth. "I'm sorry I fled yesterday. All of that was a lot to process, and I didn't really want you to find out yet." I said to change the subject.

Nick sighed and pulled me into his arms. I stood stiff, not knowing what to do. Pushing him back would have been the right thing to do, but my heart was still conflicted.

"I wish you could have told me... Elaine, I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were going through all of that." He said with compassion.

All of a sudden I could hear a growl coming behind us. My heart froze as I realized who it was. Dominic pulled my bookbag and dragged me to his side. He practically radiated with anger.

"Elaine, what's going on here?" Dominic asked in a low voice.

In front of me, Nick looked at me with a look of confusion and betrayal. "She's my girlfriend."

Nope. I'm not doing this. I ran away from them and into the classroom. Neither of

them followed after me. I quickly sat at my desk and put my head down. My heart raced in my chest, and I took deep breaths to try to calm down.

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four. I continued this until I had calmed down enough to focus on the class.

Going to Amelia's house was an amazing plan. At least I would be able to avoid Dominic and Nick for the rest of the day. Crap. I have Anatomy with Dominic. I was instantly filled with dread again.

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I was definitely the kind of person to run away from things. To block painful memories from entering my mind. My daydreams were always better than reality. I started to daydream about going to college far away and starting my life over.

Thinking back on last night, everything Dominic said was completely unreal.

Though the connection I felt to him was definitely real, he was still clearly delusional.

He truly believed he was a werewolf. I knew that couldn't possibly be true.

And he thought we were mates? Was he just trying to manipulate me so I would be under his thumb?

But then I thought about the scar on my shoulder, and the real sensations I felt in it.

But was it really real? Then there were Dominic's glowing eyes.

He seemed to understand why it was happening, but it could just be another trick.

I decided that it all was my mind playing tricks on me.

Maybe my situation at home has caused so much stress that I started hallucinating. Are we both turning schizophrenic?

I am going to drop out. Tomorrow. I will fill out the paperwork tomorrow. Maybe my parents would let me take classes online. Maybe I could move in with my sister to get as far away from Oakwood as possible. Maybe I could escape that situation I was in.

My Latin class finally began, and I let my teacher's voice drown out all of the thoughts in my head. Latin was safe, predictable. Words and their meanings didn't change; they stayed the same, constant. Definitions. Nominatives. A break from the chaos outside of this classroom.

The bell rang, startling me out of my Latin-induced trance. I gathered my things slowly, still shaken from the decision I'd just made... to leave everything behind.

As I walked down the hall, students rushing past me in a blur of colors and chatter, Dominic appeared before me. His imposing presence and icy blue eyes were suddenly the only things visible in my entire universe. He leaned against a locker casually but his tense muscles gave away his unease.

"Elaine," he said in his usual authoritative tone, his gaze softening only slightly as it met mine.

Nope. Not doing this. I ran. I ran through the hallways to get to my next class.

I could hear Dominic following behind me, and I realized I needed to find a better escape plan.

I ducked into the girl's bathroom, the one place Dominic was not allowed to go.

I went to the far side of the bathroom and sat on the ground.

"Elaine!" I could hear Dominic calling out to me in an upset tone.

How long is he going to stay out there? There was no way I was leaving that bathroom. I would have to miss statistics, but it didn't really matter since I would be dropping out. I tried to think of a plan for the rest of the day. I couldn't hide in the bathroom forever.

Before I could form a coherent plan, I felt a sudden wave of emotions that weren't my own.

Frustration, concern... and was that... fear?

I realized with a start that they were Dominic's.

I wasn't sure how or why, but I felt his emotions as if they were mine.

At that point, I didn't care how or why. All I cared about was getting away.

"Elaine," he pleaded from outside the door, his voice strained. "Please, we need to talk."

His words echoed in my head, matching the pulse of anxiety I could feel from him. But my decision was made. As long as he believed he was a werewolf and we were meant to be together forever because we are... mates? No. I couldn't deal with that.

I rummaged through my backpack until I found my headphones and plugged them into my phone. Heavy metal filled my ears, drowning out his voice and pulling me away from the turmoil of his feelings. The constant screaming numbed my mind and put me into a trance.

Hours passed or maybe it was just minutes—I wasn't sure. I looked at my watch and saw it was the end of the school day. I opened up the Uber app on my phone. The driver could take me to my truck, and then I would finally be free.

If Dominic was still waiting outside of the bathroom, I could try to run again. However, it wasn't a foolproof method. He was definitely more fit than me, and could probably out run me pretty quickly.

I peeked outside of the bathroom, and saw that he was no longer standing there. I took a sigh of relief, and quickly headed outside to catch my Uber

Why did I run away? It felt like a never ending cycle.

Why did I want so desperately the things Dominic said to be true?

A fated mate. Something stable, pre-decided.

A decision I didn't make, Because if I made the decision, I wouldn't trust it.

But, if we were actually mates, would I trust that decision as well.

My head spins with all these questions, and I start feeling that I am going to pass out.

I pull my truck over to the side of the road, and I rest my head on the steering wheel.

There seemed to be no good solution for any of my problems. Staying meant being stalked by a hot lunatic and listening to my parents' screaming matches. Leaving meant starting all over in a new place... and leaving Amelia. I covered my face with my hands and began to cry.

I'm not someone to cry often. I usually let the emotions stay inside, believing that letting them out would cause them to become more real.

But, ever since the school year started, crying became an almost daily occurrence.

Everything was becoming too real... even my own delusions.

I didn't know what was real anymore. I couldn't trust anyone or anything.

What could I do to end all this suffering?

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I wanted to die. That was the only viable solution. But, could I do it? I had to do it.

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I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Pathetic. I looked already dead, so doing this wouldn't be hard. It would just be a long sleep. A long sleep. One that I wouldn't wake from.

I looked down at the counter. All of my mother's prescription medications laid out in front of me. Ten full bottles. Enough to get the job done.

I picked up one bottle, hands shaking. I opened it, and stared at the white pills inside. The white looked like heavenly light, but would I even be going to heaven? I couldn't think about it. I couldn't think about anything that would keep me from doing this.

I shook half the bottle into my hand and immediately tipped it back into my mouth. I swallowed it down with a gulp of water, and followed it with the second half of the bottle. The medication was either an opioid or a seizure medication. I honestly didn't care, as long as it got the job done.

I picked up another bottle, and unscrewed the top. Blue capsules this time. Lord knows what they are. This time I dumped the entire bottle in my mouth. Almost choked on the water I used to swallow them down.

"What the fuck are you doing!" Dominic screamed, then ran into the bathroom. How did he get into my house? How did he get through my locked bedroom door? Dominic used his arm to knock all of the bottles on the counter onto the floor. "Throw up that shit now, or I'll make you myself." He growled.

"No." I whispered. Was what I swallowed enough to do the job? What's going to happen from here?

"Stop being an idiot, Elaine! You can't die, I won't let that happen." Dominic said as he grabbed me by the throat forcefully.

"Just leave me alone, you freak!" I screamed at him while I try to push him away.

Dominic pushed me up against the wall and pressed his body firmly against mine. I tried to scream, but he covered my mouth with his hand before I got the chance to do so. I'm stuck. Or am I? I noticed that I still had enough room between him and my legs, so I decided to knee him in the crotch.

"Shit!" Dominic yelled, but he did not falter. He still had me firmly pressed against the wall. "I didn't want to have to do this."

Dominic proceeded to force my jaw open with one of his hands, and used his other hand to stick his fingers far down my throat.

My gag reflex kicked in, and I threw up all over him.

Some of the pills were dissolved, and some of them were still whole.

What's going to happen now? What is Dominic going to do to me?

Dominic started to gag, and backed away from me. He then proceeded to throw up all over the floor. Seeing his throw up mixed with my throw up made me throw up even more. It was a complete mess, and I wondered what the scene looked like to him. Did I look like a pathetic mess to him? Probably.

"Damn it, Elaine!" Dominic peeled off his vomit covered shirt and threw it on the ground to cover the mess.

"This is so fucked... holy shit..." Dominic grabbed one of the hand towels in the

bathroom and wetted it in the sink.

Before cleaning himself up, he came over to me and cleaned the vomit off of my face.

"Why are you here?" I asked in barely a whisper.

I finally looked into his eyes, and the icy blue bore into my soul.

Dominic looked absolutely wrecked, as if he were hanging on by a thread.

They flashed that golden color, and this time I knew for a fact it was real.

What he said to me was real. He was a werewolf.

Though I haven't seen it with my eyes yet, for some reason at that moment I knew it was real.

I also knew that I was being the most selfish person in the world.

"What are you talking about? You ran and hid from me at school, and after school when I looked for you I couldn't find you anywhere. I was worried sick... and I didn't imagine I would ever find you like this." His voice cracked, and tears streamed down Dominic's face. "What the hell, Elaine?"

I started to cry as well. I almost killed myself, and doing so would have shattered him in the process. It would have shattered Amelia. My parents. I was the most selfish person alive.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." I said over and over. Dominic wrapped his arms around me, and held me close to him.

"Elaine, I need you. You can't leave me..." Dominic cried. My heart shattered.

Suddenly, I started feeling really dizzy and drowsy.

"Dominic... I feel really weird..." I said in a slurred panicked voice. My eyes could barely stay open.

"Elaine, don't shut your eyes... stay with me." Dominic shouted.

I tried, but the drowsiness eventually won.

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The light burned. I strained to keep my eyes open, waiting for something, anything to come into focus. I felt so drowsy, but there was something out there I wanted. I needed.

"Dominic..."?? The words escaped me.

The world finally came back into focus. I blinked, and the blurry white light transformed into a hospital room.

My mother and father sat on opposite sides of the room, and had their eyes on me.

Upon hearing my words, Dominic rushed to my side and placed his hands on either side of my face.

His eyes had dark circles under them, and tears started to well in them.

Stray pieces of hair stuck to his forehead, and he was wearing one of my oversized t-shirts, which was tight on him.

He looked like a complete wreck, but I never saw him look so handsome.

"Oh, Elaine..." Dominic whispered, rubbing my cheek lovingly with one of his thumbs. "I was so worried."

My parents joined to stand around me, both of them had tears streaming down their faces. My father squeezed my ankle lovingly.

"Turkey-butt, I'm so glad to see those gorgeous eyes of yours open." My father said with a smile.

"Why didn't you tell us what was going on?" My mother shouted in frustration.

"Will you just shut the hell up? She just woke up and you're already yelling at her!" My father chided my mother.

"I-" No words could come to me. I was so overwhelmed by everything that was going on that my mind just shut down, went blank.

My eyes drifted over to Dominic, and his eyes were glowing that gold color- was that his wolf eyes?

Dominic's eyes quickly flicked over to my parents and gave them a deadly glare.

"If you can't get along for her sake right now, you better leave." Dominic said in a deep, commanding voice, leaving no room for rebuttal.

My parents both gave each other a glance, then looked down at me. Dominic seemed to not even care they were standing there watching as he lovingly caressed my face.

"Elaine... what-why? Why?" Dominic asked with tears welling in his eyes.

I didn't know what to say to him. How can one explain the desire to not exist anymore? The overwhelming need to find a solution to the storm in my head. However, I was glad he stopped me. Saved me. Even though I may have been insane to believe it, I was his mate. I needed to live for him.

"Elaine?" Dominic pressed.

"It's all just too much." I admitted. Anxiety crept over me as I replayed the scene of my suicide attempt. I was so desperate for a release... a break from the overwhelm. The overwhelm of my parents' divorce. From my mom's addiction. From the intense loneliness I felt.

"Why didn't you say anything? Why did you run from me?" Dominic's voice cracked. He looked so hurt, and it twisted my heart and pained my soul. I was such a fool. I failed him. I failed everyone.

"I didn't trust you. I thought you were insane." I finally revealed the truth to him.

Dominic's face dropped, and he turned away from me. He took in deep breaths, seeming to try and calm himself. His breaths seemed ragged, and he clenched his fists. It was clear that my words hurt him, but I couldn't find it in myself to apologize. I just merely stated the truth.

"Do you still believe that? Believe that I am an insane person unworthy of trust?" Dominic said in a strained voice laced with hurt.

"No... I believe you now. You saved my life.

" I looked up at him with glassy eyes, my emotions finally processing.

But did I really believe him, or was I only saying that to make him feel better?

Feel understood. The idea of paranormal creatures existing in this world was a reality I don't think I could truly understand.

Dominic seemed to perk up after my words, a wash of calm spreading over his features.

His icy blue eyes turned golden again, and I couldn't help but stare into them.

They glowed with an otherworldly brilliance, and I wanted nothing more than to drown in them.

His eyes grew closer to mine as he leaned forward, hovering his face just over mine.

I dropped my eyes to where his lips were, and they were slightly parted.

Suddenly, he pressed his forehead against mine and captured my lips in a kiss.

I've never felt so much passion in my life before. The electricity between us grew even greater than it ever had before. Though Dominic kissed me slowly, it felt as if he was consuming my soul. Before I knew it, he forcefully pushed his tongue into my mouth, and we were full-blown making out.

A throat clearing in the background broke us both out of our trance and reminded us that we were still in a hospital room.

With my parents watching. Dominic pulled back from me, but still kept a hand on my arm, refusing to let me go.

Once he cleared my sight, I saw a nurse standing in front of my bed.

Her face looked grim, and soon a middle-aged male doctor entered the room behind her.

"Hello Elaine, I am Dr. Pittman. I have been the doctor in charge of your stay here thus far.

" He paused and came to stand on the side of me opposite of Dominic.

He pulled out a clipboard and wrote down my vitals that were displayed on the monitor.

"I am glad to see you awake Elaine. How are you feeling? "

His question jarred me a little. I hadn't once considered how I was feeling since I had woken up. Now that I thought about it, I still was feeling a little fuzzy in the head from all of the medication I had swallowed earlier. Or was that from Dominic's kiss?

"I'm doing fine." I replied hesitantly.

The doctor gave a questioning look to my response as if he didn't believe it, but he did not comment on it. Dr. Pittman took in the presence of everyone in the room and let his eyes rest on my parents.

"You are Mr and Mrs. Hayes I assume?" Dr. Pittman addressed them. My parents both silently nodded, but I could see my mothers face slightly fall. The doctor then turned to Dominic. "And who are you, young man?"

Dominic stood up straight, and seemed to size up the doctor. I wondered what caused him to have that reaction. Maybe he was trying to protect me in his own weird way?

"I'm her boyfriend." He said simply, but his deep voice carried a possessive edge.

My father let out a chuckle. "So we finally figured out who this mystery guy is."

My mother's response was much different. "Isn't Nick your boyfriend? Have you been cheating on that poor boy?" My mother chided me.

Dominic stiffened up and let out a slight growl of frustration. I stiffened up as well. Dominic and I have yet to discuss the whole situation with Nick, and I could feel the

tension in the air.

"Mrs. Hayes, we are here to discuss your daughter's health, not her dating life." Dr. Pittman firmly corrected my mother, putting her in her place.

My mother let out a slight huff of anger, but did not say anything further.

Dominic looked down at my arm and possessively traced his fingers down my arm before he interlocks his fingers with mine.

I let out a sigh of annoyance. It seemed as if everyone in the room were more concerned with drama than what I was actually going through.

Dr. Pittman looked down at me and gave me a strained smile, showing sympathy towards the situation I was in.

"So Elaine..." The doctor said loudly, getting the attention of everyone in the room.

"You were taken to the emergency room after you attempted an overdose.

When you came into my care you had passed out from the effects of the medication you had taken.

" The doctor then gestured towards Dominic.

"Thanks to the effort of this young man, the amount of medication in your system was not enough to kill you.

However, we still went ahead and pumped out your stomach as a precautionary measure. "

I winced slightly, remembering Dominic sticking his hand down my throat so I would vomit out the pills I had swallowed. That was probably why he was wearing one of my shirts now. His shirt was probably still covered in vomit, sitting on my bathroom floor.

The nurse, a young woman probably in her thirties, came over and adjusted my IV drip. She attached a new bag of fluids as the doctor walked over to my parents with a clipboard in hand.

"So, Mr. and Mrs. Hayes, we will be transferring your daughter to a psychiatric facility as soon as we find an opening..." Dr. Puttman announced.

"You mean like a mental hospital?" My father asked the doctor, his face turning pale.

"Yes... because of her attempt, we are legally obligated to send her to one to get her stabilized..." The doctor explained in a calm voice.

Before I even had a chance to process the fact that I was going to a mental hospital, Dominic erupted in anger.

"Like hell you will! She is not going anywhere!" Dominic lashed out with a growl.

"Young man, settle down..." Dr. Puttman said in an attempt to calm him; however, this only seemed to anger Dominic more.

"Elaine is not going and that's final." Dominic growled while standing beside me. I tried squeezing his hand in an attempt to calm him, but he just squeezed my hand more, showing he wasn't going to budge.

My father walked over to Dominic's side and placed a hand on his shoulder, but he just brushed him off. Dominic was standing his ground, and it was clear that he was

not leaving without a fight. My heart raced with anxiety over the situation, and I just wanted to hide.

The doctor took a step towards Dominic. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He said firmly.

Dominic was about to say something, but I didn't give him a chance. "Stop! Just stop." I shouted in frustration.

Dominic looked at me with frantic, crazed eyes. "Elaine... you can't... I... I don't want to leave your side."

Though I understood his side of things, I knew that there was no stopping me going to the mental hospital. Though I personally would rather go home and be held by Dominic, I had no choice in the matter.

"I'll call you every day I'm there..." I reassured him, but he just panicked even more.

"What do you mean? Are you just going to accept this?" Dominic asked in an accusatory way.

Before I knew it, two security guards were grabbing Dominic by the arms and pulling him away from my side.

Dominic started shouting, and even tried to take a swing at one of them.

They quickly apprehended him and escorted him out of the room.

As soon as he was out of sight, I felt as if I could not breathe.

It was just my parents, the doctor, and I in the room.

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Dr. Puttman left the room soon after, saying that it might be a while before they find a place with an opening.

That left my mother, father, and I in a room by ourselves.

However, due to the nature of my hospitalization, a nurse was required to sit near the room and keep watch to ensure I didn't... well try anything.

My parents sat on opposite sides of the room, both brooding.

I thought Dominic was the ultimate brooder, but my immature parents even had him beat.

My mother made sighing noises quite frequently even though no one was saying anything to upset her.

Heck we were not saying anything at all.

I didn't want to talk to them. Talking to them would mean more fighting.

Though it was hard to admit it, I wished my mother weren't in the room.

If she weren't in the room, then I could actually talk to my father without her butting in.

She always contradicted what I said, or chided me for any behaviors she deems wrong.

Always nagging, always complaining, always drunk.

I could go on and on with the reasons I didn't want my mother to be around during this emotional time.

My dad wouldn't be like this if my mother were not here.

He wouldn't be sighing, dissociating. He would be right by my side. Making jokes and trying to cheer me up.

But instead, I was lonely. I was scared.

I was angry. I didn't want to be the strong one, but I had to be.

I had to suck in my tears so my parents didn't start fighting over who did this to me.

I didn't know how long I could suck in my tears.

I didn't know how long I could keep up this act.

I just wished that I would be able to go to the mental hospital soon. Maybe I could let out my tears then.

Suddenly, a group of four people walked into the room carrying a gurney.

My heart rate spiked as I took in the scene before me.

Dr. Puttman talked to the one female and two male paramedics that walked into the room.

My parents stood up and looked at each other in confusion.

Dr. Puttman walked over to us and gave us a comforting smile.

"Miss Hayes, we are about to transfer you to a facility." He said while the paramedics lowered the gurney.

"Um, I can walk." I said, eying the gurney.

"It's standard protocol to make sure you are safe on the trip there." Dr. Puttman explained.

My mother scoffed and looked at him with accusatory eyes. "Just another way to rack up the bill we're about to be sent."

That woman actually had the audacity to talk about money in a time like this. The paramedics ignored my mother's comment and moved efficiently, preparing to transfer me to the gurney. One of them, a tall man with kind eyes, stepped forward.

"We'll help you get settled, Elaine. It's just a precaution," he said gently.

I nodded, though my hands trembled as I pushed back the thin hospital blanket. The IV in my arm tugged slightly, a reminder of the fragile state I was in. My father rushed to my side, his face etched with worry.

"Let me help you, turkey-butt," he murmured, using the childhood nickname that usually brought me comfort. But now, it only made my throat tighten with unshed tears.

As the paramedics guided me onto the gurney, my mother crossed her arms and glared at Dr. Pittman. "How long will she be there?" she demanded.

"That depends on her progress," the doctor replied calmly. "The facility will evaluate

her and determine the best course of treatment."

My mother huffed, but my father's grip on my hand tightened. "We'll be there as soon as visiting hours allow," he promised, his voice steady despite the fear in his eyes.

I wanted to tell him not to bother—that I'd be fine on my own—but the words stuck in my throat. The truth was, I was terrified. The thought of being locked away, surrounded by strangers, made my chest ache. But the alternative—facing the chaos of my life without any help—was even worse.

The paramedics secured the straps around me, not tight enough to restrain but enough to keep me safe during the ride.

As they wheeled me out of the room, I caught a glimpse of Dominic standing in the hallway, his face pale and his fists clenched.

His icy blue eyes locked onto mine, filled with a mix of anger and helplessness.

The security guards hovered nearby, ready to intervene if he tried anything.

"Dominic," I whispered, but the gurney was already moving, carrying me away from him. His growl of frustration echoed down the hall, followed by the sound of a fist hitting the wall.

The ride to the facility was a blur of fluorescent lights and hushed voices.

I stared at the ceiling of the ambulance, my mind numb.

The paramedics spoke in low tones, their words blending into white noise.

All I could think about was Dominic's face—the way his eyes had glowed gold, the

way he'd kissed me as if the world were ending.

When we arrived, the facility was nothing like I'd imagined. It wasn't the cold, sterile place from movies; instead, it had warm lighting and soft colors, like a cross between a hospital and a dorm. A nurse greeted me with a gentle smile.

"Welcome, Elaine. We're here to help you," she said, guiding me inside.

The doors closed behind me, sealing me off from the outside world. For the first time in days, I let myself cry. The tears came silently at first, then in great, heaving sobs. The nurse didn't rush me—she just stood by, offering tissues and a quiet presence.

As I wiped my face, I realized something: I didn't want to die. Not really. I just wanted the pain to stop. And maybe, just maybe, this place could help me find a way to make that happen.

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The first few days at the facility passed in a haze of therapy sessions, group discussions, and restless nights.

The staff was kind but firm, encouraging me to talk about what had led me here.

I avoided mentioning Dominic or the werewolf bond—those were secrets too strange to share.

Instead, I focused on my parents' divorce, my mother's drinking, the suffocating loneliness.

On the third day, during visiting hours, my father arrived alone. He looked exhausted, his usual cheerful demeanor dimmed. "Your mother... she's not ready to see you yet," he admitted, rubbing his temples. "But she's getting help too. We both are."

I nodded, too tired to feel angry. "What about Dominic?" I asked, my voice barely audible.

My father sighed. "That boy's been camped outside the hospital since you left.

Security had to drag him out twice." He shook his head, but there was a hint of respect in his eyes. "He cares about you, Elaine. A lot."

My chest ached at the thought of Dominic waiting, worrying. I missed him—his warmth, his protectiveness, even his growls. But I also knew I needed this time to heal, to figure out who I was without the weight of everyone else's expectations.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, the nurse handed me a small envelope. "This came for you," she said softly.

Inside was a single sheet of paper, covered in Dominic's messy handwriting:

Elaine,

I'm sorry. For everything. I should've been there for you sooner. I should've made you believe me.

I'll wait as long as it takes. You're my mate, and that means forever.

—Dominic

I pressed the letter to my chest, tears welling up again. For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone. And that was enough to keep me going.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of muffled sobbing from the bed next to mine. My roommate, a girl named Lacey with hollow cheeks and wild, unbrushed hair, was curled into a ball, rocking back and forth. She clutched a stuffed rabbit to her chest, whispering to it like a child.

"Hey," I said softly, sitting up. "Are you okay?"

Lacey's head snapped toward me, her bloodshot eyes wide. "They're in the walls," she hissed. "They whisper at night. You'll hear them too."

A chill ran down my spine. Before I could respond, the door swung open, and a nurse strode in with a tray of morning meds. "Lacey, time for your medication," she said brightly, as if this were a normal hospital and not a place where people screamed in their sleep.

Lacey recoiled. "No! They're poison! They want to silence me!" She scrambled backward, knocking over her water cup. The nurse sighed, motioning for an orderly.

I swallowed my own pill without protest, but my hands shook. This is where I belong now, I thought bitterly. With the broken ones.

Group therapy was worse.

We sat in a circle—twelve of us, all girls—while a therapist named Dr. Chen guided the discussion. Most of the patients stared at the floor, but one girl, Rachel, couldn't stop talking.

"My boyfriend is a demon," Rachel announced, picking at her chipped nail polish. "He steals my thoughts when I sleep. That's why I cut my hair off—to confuse him." She grinned, running a hand through her uneven buzzcut.

A few girls giggled nervously. I clenched my fists in my lap. This is insane. I don't belong here.

Then Rachel's gaze landed on me. "You're new," she said, tilting her head. "Who hurt you?"

The room went silent.

My throat tightened. "No one. I—I hurt myself."

Rachel's grin widened. "Liar. I can see it in your eyes. You're running from something." She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Or someone."

A cold sweat broke out on my skin. How does she know?

Dr. Chen cleared her throat. "Rachel, let's stay on topic."

But Rachel kept staring at me, unblinking. "You'll tell us the truth eventually. We always do."

That night, the screams started again.

Somewhere down the hall, a girl wailed like a wounded animal. Lacey whimpered into her pillow, muttering about the voices. I pulled my blanket over my head, trying to block it out.

Then—a scratch at the door.

I froze.

Slowly, the door creaked open. A shadow slipped inside.

"Elaine," a voice whispered.

My heart stopped. Dominic?

But when I sat up, it wasn't him. It was Rachel.

She stood at the foot of my bed, her eyes glinting in the dim light. "You're dreaming about him, aren't you?" she murmured. "The one with the gold eyes."

My blood turned to ice. "H-How do you—"

Rachel pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh. The walls listen." Then, with a eerie smile, she turned and vanished into the hallway.

I didn't sleep the rest of the night.

The next morning, I demanded to see the head psychiatrist.

"I don't belong here," I said, my voice trembling. "I'm not like them. I just—I made a mistake."

Dr. Carter steepled his fingers. "Elaine, suicidal ideation isn't a mistake. It's a symptom. And Rachel? She's schizophrenic. She doesn't know what she's saying."

"But she knew about—" I bit my tongue. About Dominic's eyes. About the bond.

Dr. Carter sighed. "Coincidence. Or projection. But not supernatural."

I wanted to scream. You don't understand! None of you do! But then I remembered Dominic's letter. I'll wait as long as it takes. So I swallowed my rage and nodded.

Because the truth was, maybe I did belong here. At least until I figured out what was real—and what was just another kind of madness.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

The days in the mental facility blurred together, each one indistinguishable from the last. Therapy sessions, medication rounds, and restless nights filled with distant screams became my new routine.

Rachel's words haunted me, replaying in my mind like a broken record.

How could she have known about Dominic's eyes?

I tried to convince myself it was just a coincidence - that she'd picked up on my reaction when she mentioned gold. But the knowing glint in her stare suggested something deeper, something unsettling.

Lacey, my fragile roommate, had transitioned from constant weeping to silent observation.

She spent hours tracing the cracks in the walls with skeletal fingers, humming tuneless melodies that set my teeth on edge.

Sometimes, when she caught me watching, she'd flash a slow, unnerving smile that made the hair on my arms stand up.

"They're coming for you," she whispered one night, her voice disturbingly calm. When I asked who she meant, she simply continued smiling, lost in her own fractured reality.

Visiting hours were a special kind of torture. My father came faithfully every other day, his face growing more haggard with each visit. My mother's absence spoke

volumes.

"She's not ready," Dad would mutter, avoiding my eyes. I stopped asking after the third time.

When Amelia visited, her usual vibrant energy seemed muted by the sterile hospital environment. She took one look around the common room - at Rachel giggling to herself in the corner, at Lacey rocking rhythmically in her chair - and her grip on my hand turned vice-like.

"Jesus, Elaine," she breathed, her voice thick with horror. "This place is..." She trailed off, but I understood. I forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to my own ears.

"You get used to it," I lied.

Her expression turned serious. "Dominic's been texting me constantly. He's going out of his mind trying to see you." The mention of his name sent a jolt through me.

"Tell him I'm okay," I said automatically. Amelia raised an eyebrow.

"You're a terrible liar," she pointed out, and for the first time in days, I felt something resembling a genuine smile tug at my lips.

Then, on the seventh day, everything changed.

I was sitting in the common room, absently flipping through a dog-eared magazine, when I felt it - a shift in the air, a sudden tension that rippled through the room.

Patients lifted their heads, conversations died mid-sentence.

Following their gaze, I looked up to see Dominic standing in the doorway, his broad

frame filling the space.

He looked different - paler, sharper, like a blade honed to a dangerous edge. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his jaw was clenched so tightly I could see the muscle jumping. When his piercing blue gaze found me, something primal in my chest stirred to life.

The orderly, a burly man named Greg, cleared his throat. "Elaine? You've got a visitor."

From across the room, Rachel let out a low, knowing chuckle. "Told you," she singsonged. Dominic's head snapped toward her, and for one terrifying second, his eyes flashed gold before returning to blue. Rachel's smirk vanished instantly, her face going pale as she shrank back in her chair.

Greg, oblivious to the exchange, gestured toward the small visitation room. "Thirty minutes," he told Dominic sternly. "And no physical contact."

The moment the door closed behind us, Dominic's carefully maintained control shattered. "What the hell is this place?" he growled, pacing the tiny room like a caged predator. "They've got you locked up with dangerous—"

"Dominic, stop." I reached for his arm, and the second our skin made contact, electricity crackled between us. His scent - pine and rain and something wild - enveloped me, making my head spin. I swayed on my feet, and in an instant, his strong hands were at my waist, steadying me.

His breath came in ragged bursts. "You're not safe here."

I pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. "I'm not safe anywhere."

The truth of my words hung between us. His expression darkened. "Because of me," he stated flatly. I didn't deny it.

For a long moment, we simply stared at each other, the weight of everything unsaid pressing down on us. Then, with aching tenderness, Dominic reached up and brushed his thumb over the scar on my shoulder - his mark. A shudder ran through him at the contact.

When he spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper. "I can get you out."

My breath caught. "What?"

"Tonight," he murmured, leaning close enough that his lips nearly brushed my ear. "Meet me by the fire exit at midnight."

I gaped at him. "Are you insane? They'll call the police—"

"I don't care." His grip on my arms tightened almost painfully. "You're mine, Elaine. And I'm not leaving you here."

The door handle rattled, Greg's voice calling through the wood: "Time's up."

Dominic's eyes burned into mine, golden flecks appearing in the blue as his wolf surged forward. One last, desperate plea.

"Choose."

Then the door opened, and he was gone.

That night, as the facility settled into an uneasy quiet, I lay stiffly in bed, staring at the water-stained ceiling.

Lacey's voice slithered through the darkness. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

I didn't answer. She giggled, the sound sending ice down my spine. "He's not what you think he is."

My pulse spiked. "What do you mean?"

But Lacey simply rolled over, her eerie humming filling the room once more. Outside, a tree branch scraped against the window - the sound unnervingly like claws dragging across glass.

Like something waiting.

Watching.

Hungry.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

The clock on the wall ticked louder with every passing second. 11:47 PM.

I lay perfectly still, listening to Lacey's slow, even breaths. The facility was eerily quiet—no screams tonight, just the occasional shuffle of orderlies making their rounds. My heart pounded so hard I was sure it would wake her.

Thirteen minutes.

I'd spent the last three hours debating Dominic's offer.

Part of me knew this was insane—breaking out of a psychiatric facility, running from the one place that was supposed to help me.

But the other part, the part that had spent days listening to Rachel's whispers and Lacey's mad humming, knew I couldn't stay.

Not when every shadow in this place felt like it was watching me.

Five minutes.

I slipped out of bed, my bare feet silent against the cold linoleum. My hands trembled as I pulled on the hoodie I'd stolen from the lost and found—dark gray, nondescript. Perfect for hiding.

Lacey's voice cut through the dark.

"You'll regret it."

I froze. She was sitting up in bed, her hollow eyes gleaming in the dim emergency light.

"Go back to sleep, Lacey," I whispered.

She tilted her head, her grin stretching too wide. "He's not just a wolf, you know."

My blood turned to ice. How does she—

A knock at the door made us both jump.

"Elaine?" A nurse's voice. "You awake?"

I dove back into bed just as the door cracked open. A flashlight beam swept across the room. I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing my breathing to slow. After an eternity, the door clicked shut. I waited. Counted to sixty. Then, moving like a ghost, I crept to the door and peered into the hallway.

Empty.

The fire exit was at the end of the hall, past the nurses' station. I could see the red glow of the EXIT sign from here. But Greg was slumped in a chair at the desk, flipping through a magazine.

Damn it.

Then—

CRASH.

A sound like shattering glass echoed from the common room. Greg shot to his feet

and hurried toward the noise.

Now.

I bolted down the hall, my socked feet slipping on the polished floor. The fire exit loomed ahead, its alarm disabled—had Dominic done that?—and then I was shoving through the door into the freezing night.

The cold air hit me like a slap. Moonlight spilled over the empty parking lot, illuminating the chain-link fence at the edge of the property. And there, leaning against it with his arms crossed, was Dominic.

His head snapped up when he saw me. In three long strides, he was at my side, his hands gripping my shoulders.

"You came," he breathed, like he hadn't been sure I would.

I swallowed hard. "What was that noise inside?"

His lips curled in a faint smirk. "Distraction."

Before I could ask what he meant, a howl cut through the night—long, low, and close. Too close to be a dog. Dominic went rigid. His eyes flashed gold.

"We need to go. Now." He grabbed my hand and yanked me toward the trees. Behind us, the facility's alarms blared to life. And then, from somewhere in the dark, another howl answered.

Closer this time.

Hungrier.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:48 pm

The moment my bare feet hit the damp forest floor, reality crashed over me like a wave.

I was outside. Free. The cold night air stung my lungs as I sucked in desperate breaths, my fingers still interlaced with Dominic's as we sprinted into the trees.

Behind us, the wail of the facility's alarms faded into the distance, replaced by something far more primal—the haunting chorus of howls that seemed to come from every direction at once.

Dominic moved like a shadow beside me, his grip unrelenting.

Moonlight filtered through the dense canopy above, casting jagged patterns across his face.

His eyes—those impossible, glowing eyes—darted through the darkness, scanning for threats.

Every muscle in his body was coiled tight, ready to spring.

"Faster," he growled, tugging me forward as my socked feet slipped on wet leaves.

I stumbled, my toes catching on an exposed root, but Dominic caught me before I could fall. His hands were scorching hot against my chilled skin, his breath coming in short, controlled bursts. Even now, running for our lives, he moved with that unnatural grace—like his body wasn't entirely human.

The howls came again, closer this time. A shiver ran down my spine. They didn't sound like any animal I'd ever heard. There was something wrong with them—something that made the primal part of my brain scream danger.

"Dominic," I gasped, my voice barely above a whisper. "What are they?"

His jaw clenched. "Rogues."

Before I could ask what that meant, a twig snapped to our left.

Dominic reacted instantly. He shoved me behind him, his body a solid wall between me and whatever lurked in the shadows. A low growl rumbled in his chest, so deep I felt it vibrate through me.

Then—movement.

A figure lunged from the underbrush, too fast to be human. Moonlight glinted off yellowed teeth and wild, bloodshot eyes. It—he—was naked, his skin stretched too tight over wiry muscle, his limbs elongated in a way that made my stomach turn.

Dominic met him mid-air.

The impact sent them both crashing into the dirt, a tangle of snarls and snapping teeth.

I stumbled back, my heart hammering so hard I thought it might burst. Dominic moved with terrifying precision—every strike calculated, every dodge effortless.

But the rogue was fast. His fingers ended in jagged, blackened claws that raked across Dominic's shoulder, drawing blood.

The scent of copper filled the air.

Something inside me shifted.

A surge of adrenaline, of rage, burned through my veins.

Before I could think, I grabbed a fallen branch and swung with all my strength.

The wood connected with the rogue's skull with a sickening crack.

He howled, clutching his head as he staggered back.

Dominic didn't hesitate. He lunged, his hand closing around the rogue's throat, and slammed him into a tree.

The sound of splintering bark echoed through the forest.

"Run," Dominic snarled at me, his voice distorted—deeper, rougher. More animal than man.

I didn't argue.

We crashed through the underbrush, leaves and branches whipping at my exposed skin.

The rogues' howls multiplied, surrounding us.

Three. Four. Maybe more. They moved like ghosts through the trees, their gaunt forms flickering at the edges of my vision.

Dominic's breath was ragged beside me. Blood dripped from his shoulder, painting

the forest floor in dark droplets.

"River," he panted. "Ahead. We can lose them there."

The ground sloped sharply downward, the trees thinning to reveal a wide, rushing river. Moonlight danced across its surface, the current strong enough to churn white foam around jagged rocks.

Dominic didn't slow. He dragged me into the icy water without hesitation, his arm locking around my waist as the current seized us. The shock of the cold stole my breath. I gasped, my limbs locking up as the water dragged us under.

For one terrifying second, the world disappeared.

Then Dominic's grip tightened, hauling me back to the surface. "Hold on to me," he ordered, his voice barely audible over the roar of the water.

I clung to him like a lifeline, my fingers digging into his shoulders as the river carried us downstream. Behind us, furious snarls erupted on the bank—but they didn't follow.

The rogues hated the water.

We washed up on the opposite shore half a mile downstream, coughing and shivering. Dominic dragged me onto the rocks, his hands frantic as they roamed over my body, checking for injuries. His touch left trails of fire in its wake, his skin impossibly warm despite the freezing water.

"Are you hurt?" His voice was rough with worry. "Look at me."

I was shaking too hard to speak. The adrenaline was fading, leaving behind the

crushing weight of what we'd just done. I'm a fugitive now. The thought should have terrified me. But all I could focus on was the way Dominic's hands trembled against my skin—like he was the one afraid of losing me.

His eyes searched mine, golden flecks swirling in the blue. Then, with a muttered curse, he stripped off his soaked shirt—when had he lost the jacket?—and wrapped it around my shoulders. The fabric was heavy with water, but his scent clung to it—pine and rain and something wild. Something him.

"They were wolves," I whispered. My teeth chattered. "But not like you."

Dominic's jaw tightened. He cupped my face, his thumb brushing away river water—or tears. "Rogues don't have packs. Don't have control." A shadow crossed his face. "They're what happens when a wolf loses themselves to the animal. No humanity left. Just... hunger."

And they've been tracking me for weeks.

He didn't say it. He didn't have to.

I swallowed hard. "Where do we go now?"

Dominic exhaled sharply, his breath warm against my chilled skin. "Somewhere safe."

But as we stumbled into the trees, my legs numb and my mind reeling, I couldn't shake Lacey's words.

He's not just a wolf.

And the rogues hadn't been chasing me.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

The forest grew denser as we climbed, the trees twisting into gnarled sentinels that seemed to lean in as we passed.

Dominic moved with quiet authority ahead of me, his bare shoulders tense beneath the moonlight.

He hadn't spoken since the river - just kept his grip firm on my hand as he led me deeper into territory that clearly belonged to his pack.

I could feel the change in the air before I saw it.

The forest itself seemed to breathe differently here, the very earth humming with a primal energy that made the hair on my arms stand up.

My shredded socks offered no protection from the rough terrain, but Dominic's steady presence kept me moving forward despite the burning in my legs.

"Almost there," he murmured, sensing my fatigue.

The trees suddenly parted to reveal a sprawling compound nestled in the mountain's embrace.

Wood and stone cabins formed a loose circle around a central fire pit, their windows glowing with warm light against the deepening night.

Figures moved between them - all impossibly graceful, their movements too fluid to be entirely human.

Dominic's fingers tightened around mine. "Stay close to me."

We hadn't taken three steps into the clearing when the crowd parted and a massive figure emerged.

Even without introduction, I knew - this was the Alpha.

He stood half a head taller than Dominic, his dark hair streaked with silver at the temples, his presence commanding immediate silence from the gathered pack.

"Dominic." His voice rumbled like distant thunder. "You were told not to return until you controlled your wolf."

Every muscle in Dominic's body tensed, but he held his ground. "I found her, Father."

The Alpha's piercing gaze locked onto me, his nostrils flaring slightly as he scented the air between us. When his eyes dropped to the scar on my shoulder - Dominic's mark - something unreadable flashed across his stern features.

Murmurs spread through the crowd like wildfire. A dark-haired woman stepped forward, her amber eyes burning with disapproval.

"You marked a human?" Her lip curled. "And brought her here?"

Dominic moved so quickly I barely registered it, placing himself squarely between me and the woman. A growl vibrated from his chest, low and dangerous. "She's under my protection, Liana."

The Alpha held up a hand, silencing them both. When he spoke again, his words were measured. "You don't understand what you've done, boy. That mark is a beacon." He turned to me, his golden eyes boring into mine. "Your blood calls to them."

A chill ran down my spine. "What do you mean?"

The Alpha exhaled sharply through his nose. "You carry the dormant gene of the first shifters. The rogues can smell it - that's why they're hunting you now, after all these years." He glanced at Dominic. "And your son's mark on her shoulder? It's like lighting a signal fire."

Dominic went rigid beside me. "That's impossible. The original bloodlines died out generations ago."

"Not all of them," the Alpha countered. He stepped closer to me, his voice dropping. "Your mother's family - the Hayeses. They were keepers of the old blood. She never told you?"

Fragmented memories surfaced - my mother's strange rituals during full moons, the way she'd always seem to know when storms were coming, her whispered arguments with my father about "the family legacy." Things I'd dismissed as eccentricities now took on terrifying new meaning.

A howl shattered the night's silence - much closer than before. The entire pack tensed as one, their attention snapping toward the tree line.

The Alpha's jaw clenched. "They've caught your scent." He turned to Dominic, his expression grim. "And they won't stop until they claim what your mark has awakened in her blood."

Dominic's grip on my hand turned crushing. "I'll die before I let them touch her."

For the first time, something like pride flickered in the Alpha's eyes. "You may have to."

Another howl answered the first, then another - until the night echoed with their terrible chorus. The hunt was on, and I was the prize. The Alpha's words hung in the air like a death sentence. I stared at him, my mouth dry, my pulse pounding in my ears.

"What do you mean, dormant gene?" I managed to ask.

The Alpha - Dominic's father - studied me with those unnerving golden eyes.

"Not all humans are simply human," he said, his voice taking on the cadence of an old story.

"Some bloodlines carry remnants of the first shifters - those who walked as both man and beast before the great divide. Your family is one of them."

Dominic stepped closer to me, his warmth at my back. "The original shifter blood was diluted over centuries," he explained, his voice tight. "But it never completely disappeared. Just... slept."

The Alpha nodded. "Until now. Until my son's mark awakened what was dormant in you." His gaze flicked to the scar on my shoulder. "That bite didn't just claim you as his mate - it triggered a transformation your blood was always meant to undergo."

I swayed on my feet, the world tilting dangerously. Dominic's arm came around my waist, steadying me.

"She needs to sit down," he growled at his father.

We were ushered into the largest cabin, where the firelight revealed walls covered in what looked like generations of family history - photographs mixed with ancient-looking scrolls. The Alpha poured me a drink that burned going down but steadied

my nerves.

"The rogues," I said, wiping my mouth. "Why do they want me?"

The Alpha's expression darkened. "Rogues are outcasts - wolves who've lost themselves to the beast. They're drawn to the old blood like moths to flame. Your awakened gene..." He hesitated, exchanging a glance with Dominic. "It could stabilize them. Give them back what they've lost."

"Or make them stronger," Dominic added grimly. "Strong enough to challenge entire packs."

A new wave of understanding crashed over me. That's why they'd been tracking Dominic - they'd smelled his mark on me, recognized what it meant. I wasn't just some random human he'd claimed. I was a key. A prize.

Dominic's hand found mine under the table, his grip firm. "We'll protect you," he vowed. But his father's silence spoke volumes.

The Alpha finally sighed. "The full moon is in three nights. That's when the pull will be strongest - when your blood will call to them loudest." He looked at his son. "We can hide her. Or..."

"Or we complete the transformation," Dominic finished, his voice rough.

My head snapped up. "What transformation?"

The Alpha leaned forward. "The one your blood has been waiting for. The reason the rogues can sense you." He tapped the table between us. "That dormant gene? It's not just a marker in your DNA. It's potential. The potential to become one of us."

The fire crackled in the sudden silence.

Outside, the wind carried another distant howl - a reminder that time was running out.

I looked at Dominic, seeing the conflict in his eyes.

He'd known. Maybe not completely, but he'd sensed what I was from the beginning.

That's why his wolf had claimed me so fiercely.

Not just because I was his mate. But because I was meant to be his equal.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

Dominic's dad, who I learned was named Garmon, was the Alpha of the pack.

Dominic's mother, Liana, was the Luna. The Luna was the Alpha's mate apparently, and is also revered in the pack as its mother.

Dominic and his parents sat down with me the past hour trying to explain the world of the werewolves.

I learned about the hierarchy structure, mating rituals, and last of all, transformations.

I had yet to see anyone transform, so Dominic decided it was time. His parents stayed in the cabin we talked in while Dominic and I stepped outside. I could feel myself get nauseous as I feared what I was about to see.

"Elaine, we don't have to do this right now. I know you've been through a lot today. Hell, I broke you out of the mental hospital not too long ago." Dominic squeezed my hand as a comforting gesture.

"It's fine, I need to get this over with. But before you switch, I need you to answer a question for me."

"What question?" Dominic had a weird look on his face that I couldn't quite place.

"How long have the rouges been trailing me?" I asked with a serious expression on my face.

Dominic looked away. "Too long. I should have done something sooner."

"What does 'too long' mean?" I pressed.

"Since your junior year." He let out a sigh. "Please forgive me. It was just too painful to be around you when Nick's scent was all over you."

I dated Nick most of my junior year, save for the last two weeks, and Dominic had shown up only after we broke up. I understood, but I was curious why he was unwilling to do anything until now. It's been over a year that I have been followed.

"I had no idea about the bloodline thing until now.

I just thought they were trailing you because you had the scent of an Alpha's mark on you.

I thought that by staying away you would be safe.

" Dominic had a tortured look in his gaze, almost as if he were beating himself up over this fact.

"I probably should have told my parents who you were, but I was afraid that they would judge me for having a human as my mate. "

"I completely understand all of it." I leaned forward and kissed him.

Our kiss began slow at first, but it slowly became more and more passionate.

He kissed me like a man who bordered on obsession, which he probably did.

All I knew was that having our tongues intertwined felt right.

More right than any other kiss I'd had before.

Dominic only broke the kiss when we needed a break to gasp for air.

"Let me show you my wolf. He's dying to meet his mate." Dominic took a hold of my hand and kissed it before backing away from me.

This was actually happening. The moment Dominic stepped back, the air around him seemed to shimmer.

His golden eyes locked onto mine as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, letting it fall to the forest floor.

Moonlight painted his bare chest in silver, highlighting every taut muscle, every scar that told stories I had yet to learn.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured, his voice already rougher, deeper.

I wasn't. Not exactly. But my heart hammered against my ribs like a trapped bird as I watched his body begin to change.

It started with his hands—his fingers elongating, claws pushing through the tips as bones cracked and reformed.

A gasp escaped me, but Dominic didn't flinch.

His shoulders rolled, muscles shifting beneath his skin like liquid.

His spine arched, and I heard the sickening pop of joints realigning.

Then came the fur—dark as midnight, sprouting across his body in waves.

His face contorted, his jaw lengthening into a muzzle, teeth sharpening into fangs.

The sounds were awful—wet, cracking, wrong—but Dominic's eyes never left mine.

Those golden eyes, full of fire and devotion, remained his even as the rest of him became something else entirely.

And then—

A wolf stood before me.

Not just any wolf. Dominic's wolf.

He was massive, his shoulders nearly level with my chest, his fur thick and gleaming under the moonlight. His ears twitched, listening to my shaky breaths, and when he took a step forward, it was with the same quiet confidence Dominic always carried.

I should have been terrified.

But all I felt was recognition.

Slowly, I reached out. His wolf exhaled through his nose, warm breath ghosting over my fingers before I even touched him. Then— My fingertips brushed his muzzle.

A spark shot through me, lighting up every nerve ending.

The scar on my shoulder burned, and for a split second, I felt him—not just his fur under my hand, but him.

His thoughts. His emotions. The way his wolf had waited for this moment, for me, for years.

A whine built in his throat, and he pressed his forehead against my chest, nuzzling

into me like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

I laughed, breathless, sinking my fingers into his fur. "I see you," I whispered.

A rustle in the trees made us both stiffen.

Dominic's wolf whipped around, a snarl ripping from his throat as he positioned himself between me and the darkness beyond. His ears flattened against his skull, his body coiled to attack.

But it wasn't rogues.

It was the pack.

Dozens of wolves emerged from the shadows, their eyes glowing in the night. At the front stood the largest—Garmon, in his wolf form, his silver-tipped fur marking him as Alpha. Beside him, Liana watched me with keen, intelligent eyes.

They'd seen everything.

And now, they knew.

Dominic's wolf turned back to me, nudging my hand with his nose before stepping forward to face his father. The two wolves locked eyes, some silent conversation passing between them. Then, slowly, Garmon dipped his head—not in submission, but in acknowledgment.

Liana stepped forward next, her wolf smaller but no less regal. She sniffed the air around me, then huffed, almost approvingly, before brushing her flank against mine in a gesture that felt strangely like acceptance.

Dominic shifted back in a blur of motion, his human form returning as quickly as it had left. He was breathing hard, sweat glistening on his skin, but his eyes burned with triumph.

"They recognize you," he said, his voice rough from the shift. "As my mate. As part of the pack."

A howl cut through the night—closer this time.

Dominic's smile faded. "But the rogues won't care about pack law." He pulled me against him, his lips brushing my ear. "And the moon is rising."

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

I never imagined that I would be on the run from rogue werewolves.

I never imagined that I could actually be a werewolf myself.

It was a strange feeling, knowing there's been a beast inside of me this entire time that I haven't been able to access.

Was that the reason why I was allergic to silver?

The reason why it burned when in contact with my skin?

Dominic stayed by my side while we were inside the pack house. Everyone surrounded me, waiting for the moment of my first transformation. Dominic was certain that it was about to happen, but I wasn't. What if my wolf got stage fright? What if I got stage fright?

But then I felt something scratching underneath the surface.

A presence I had never experienced before.

It was a weak presence, barely there. I focused my attention on it, trying to tap into whatever was there.

However, I could never get close to it. It was as if something was blocking me out.

I stood there for minutes, probably looking stupid to the onlookers.

"Elaine, focus." Dominic whispered to me as he rubbed my back in a comforting gesture.

Him saying that did not help. In fact, it made it harder for me to focus because it sparked more anxiety from me. I just stood there staring at the ground with my mind racing. Why wasn't it happening? What if it wouldn't happen? What if they were wrong?

"I am going to force her shift." Dominic's father announced.

"No the hell you're not." Dominic immediately growled.

Garmon started walking towards me, and that prompted another growl from Dominic. I had absolutely no clue what was going on. Why was Dominic so angry? Forcing my shift? How could Garmon do that?

"Son, step aside." Garmon demanded.

"No. I won't let you hurt her." Dominic blocked me with his body.

"Hurt me?" I asked.

"It will only hurt a little-" Garmon started before Dominic interrupted.

"I won't let you hurt my mate at all!" Dominic shouted.

"It's necessary." Garmon retorted.

"It might not even work. You're not officially her Alpha." Dominic countered.

Their conversation confused me to no end. I hated that Dominic was making all of the

decisions for me. This is my body, I should decide what happens to it. Even though I had no idea about what forcing my shift would entail, I made up my mind.

"Go ahead and do it, Mr. Kane." I push Dominic to the side and begin to walk towards Garmon.

"Elaine." Dominic growled.

I didn't look back at him. He was just being overprotective.

Though it was kind of endearing, it was also overbearing especially at this moment.

I trusted that Garmon knew what was best to do, so Dominic would just have to deal with it.

Once I was in front of Garmon, I waited for him to make the next move.

He stepped closer and made eye contact with me.

"Shift." He growled in a tone that blared through my head. It was so loud that I dropped to my knees, clutching my head. That's when the pain started.

It felt like every bone in my body was breaking.

Everything hurt and I could feel my body begin to change.

It felt like the pain lasted for hours, and when it was overwith, all I saw was black.

I could hear the murmur of voices around me that seemed to be in a panic, but I couldn't make out any words.

I felt so weak. I tried to move but my muscles wouldn't budge.

Why couldn't I see or move? Did something go wrong?

Hey Everyone! I'm sorry this part took so long to come out. When I first started this story, I was unemployed. However, now I have two jobs, so I have a lot on my plate. Ideally I'll be posting a new chapter every week, but please have some patience with me as I am very busy.

The next part will be in Dominic's point of view and I am very excited to share it with you guys!

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

My mate. My precious little mate laid before me in her wolf form, but something was terribly wrong. Her wolf was way too small. The fur on her body was patchy, and her bones looked malformed. The wolf looked sickly, and it broke my heart in a million pieces. Even her eyes were disfigured.

What happened to her wolf? Why was she so damaged? Was it from years of not shifting into her wolf, or was it something more. I looked to my father, distressed. I needed his advice. His thoughts. He was the only one I trusted to figure this out.

The scent of my mate's blood filled the air, sharp and metallic, as her fragile wolf form collapsed onto the stone floor.

Her ribs protruded beneath patchy fur, her breathing shallow and uneven.

Every instinct in me screamed to gather her into my arms, to shield her from the horrified stares of the pack.

But I couldn't move.

Because what lay before me wasn't just a weak first shift.

It was a broken one.

"Father," I choked out, my voice raw.

Garmon stepped forward, his Alpha aura pressing down on the clearing as he examined Elaine's wolf. His golden eyes darkened with something I'd never seen in

him before—dread.

"This isn't from dormancy," he murmured, running a careful hand over Elaine's malformed shoulder. Her wolf whimpered at the touch, her disfigured eyes—one gold, one still hazel—squeezing shut.

Liana pushed through the crowd, her healer's instincts taking over. She pressed her palm to Elaine's chest, then recoiled with a hiss. "Silver."

The word hit me like a bullet.

"No," I snarled, dropping to my knees beside my mate. "That's impossible. She's never—"

Then I remembered.

The way Elaine had flinched when her grandmother's silver locket brushed her skin. The blistering rash she'd gotten from a friend's bracelet. The allergy her human doctors had dismissed as a quirk.

Not an allergy.

Poisoning.

Someone had been dosing her with silver. Slowly. Systematically. For years.

Rage burned through my veins, my vision tinting red. I turned to my father, my wolf surging to the surface. "Who would do this?"

Garmon's gaze flickered to the tree line—where the rogue's howls still echoed. "Someone who knew what she was."

A growl ripped from my throat. The rogues hadn't just been tracking her.

They'd been waiting.

Waiting for her wolf to wither. Waiting for her to be weak enough to take.

Elaine's wolf let out a pained whine, her skeletal body trembling. I gently gathered her into my arms, my heart shattering as she instinctively nuzzled into my chest. Even like this—broken, hurting—she sought comfort from me.

Liana pressed a vial of dark liquid into my hand. "Mountain ash and wolfsbane," she said quietly. "It'll counteract the silver long enough for her to shift back."

I tipped the brew between Elaine's jaws, stroking her throat to help her swallow. Her breathing eased slightly, but her wolf form didn't change.

"She's too weak to reverse it," Liana admitted.

I clenched my jaw. "Then we do it for her."

Before anyone could stop me, I sank my teeth into the scruff of Elaine's neck—right where an Alpha forces a submission. Her wolf went limp in my arms as I poured every ounce of my strength into her, commanding her body to obey.

Shift back.

For one terrible second, nothing happened.

Then—

A scream.

Elaine's human form writhed in my grip as bones snapped back into place, her patchy fur receding into skin. When it was over, she collapsed against me, her body slick with sweat, her breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Her eyes fluttered open—hazel, thank the moon—and found mine. "D-Dominic?"

I crushed her to my chest, my voice breaking. "I've got you, little wolf."

Over her shoulder, my father's face was grim. "The rogues will come for her again. Now that they've scented her weakness—"

"Let them try," I snarled.

Because I would tear apart anyone who'd hurt her.

Elaine

I didn't know how long I lay there, shivering and broken, half-human, half-wolf, suspended between two selves I no longer understood. My body ached in ways I didn't think possible—down to my soul. Every breath felt borrowed.

Dominic sat beside me, his hands trembling as he cradled my face. The glow in his golden eyes was fading now, replaced by something gentler. Something afraid.

"I'm here," he whispered, brushing damp hair from my cheeks. "I'm here, little wolf."

My voice was a rasp, barely audible. "I can't feel her."

Dominic froze.

"My wolf. She's... silent." The words scraped out like gravel. "Is she gone?"

"No," Dominic said fiercely. "She's just hurt. She needs time. But she's still there. I swear it."

I wanted to believe him. But the silence inside me was absolute.

Liana came to kneel at my side, her face grim but determined. "We'll get her strength back," she said. "But you need rest. You're lucky we stopped it when we did."

"Stopped what?" I asked.

Her eyes met Dominic's, and then Garmon's. Silence passed between them, heavy and loaded. Finally, Garmon knelt down, leveling his gaze with mine.

"Someone has been feeding you silver. Slowly. Over years."

I blinked. "No. That can't be—"

"The rash on your wrist," Dominic said softly. "The one you thought was from that bracelet."

The memory hit me like a truck. The itching. The burning. My friend laughed it off. "But that was years ago—"

"Which means this has been going on for years," Liana finished. "And that's what nearly killed your wolf. But I think the poisoning is more than just the bracelet."

A scream built in my throat, but it never left. I swallowed it down. Along with the realization. Someone had wanted this. Someone had wanted me weak. Vulnerable. Easy to take. The rogues hadn't just come for me randomly. They had waited.

I forced myself to sit up, and though the pain was staggering, I needed to move. Needed to feel like I still had control of something.

Dominic wrapped his arms around me the moment I started to sway. "You need to lie down."

"No," I said hoarsely. "I need to know who did this."

"We'll find out," he promised. His voice held a razor edge. "And when we do..."

"You're not killing anyone for me," I whispered.

"Try and stop me," he growled.

Behind us, the pack shifted uneasily. Garmon stood and turned to them, his voice carrying across the clearing.

"She is one of us. Marked. Claimed. Fated."

Murmurs. Some shocked. Some angry.

"She's human," someone muttered.

"She's more than that now," Garmon replied. "She survived her first shift under silver poisoning. That's strength we cannot ignore."

Dominic helped me to my feet, his hand gripping mine like a lifeline. "You don't have to stand, you know."

"I do," I said. "Because I'm not going to let whoever did this win."

And though my knees trembled and the forest spun around me, I took my first step forward.

Dominic

Elaine slept for nearly twenty hours.

Liana and I took turns sitting by her side in the cabin we had moved her to—far from the others, far from the judging eyes of the older wolves who still didn't understand what she meant to me. What she was to this pack now.

She murmured in her sleep, always my name. Sometimes she cried out. Once, she whispered something about the cold, and I wrapped her in every blanket I could find. Watching her like that—so small, so quiet—it broke something in me I didn't know I still had.

I'd never felt powerless before.

Not until now.

"She's healing," Liana said gently as she entered with fresh bandages and a mug of something herbal. "The poison's nearly gone. Her wolf will wake."

I nodded. "But when she does... what then?"

"She'll remember what it felt like. To shift. To burn." Liana met my gaze. "But she'll also remember who carried her through it."

I stared at Elaine's sleeping form. The scar I gave her still marked her shoulder, but it looked different now—less like a wound, more like a sigil. A bond. My mark.

"Dominic," Liana said, lowering her voice, "I found something in her belongings."

I tensed. "What?"

She handed me a small piece of paper. A note, folded crisply. I recognized the handwriting instantly.

It was Nick's.

I opened it.

She's not safe with you. You're not what she needs. She'll never belong in your world, Dominic. But she still belongs in mine. I'm taking her back.

My vision blurred. The edges of the note crumpled in my grip.

"He was in her house," I growled.

Liana nodded grimly. "I picked up his scent. Mixed with silver."

That was all the confirmation I needed. I stood, my bones humming with fury, and looked down at Elaine. I didn't want to leave her, but I couldn't let this go.

"I'll find him," I said.

"Be careful," Liana warned. "He's not working alone."

I paused at the door, one final glance back at the girl who changed everything. "I've let him hurt her enough. Never again." As I shifted into my wolf form and took off into the forest, the wind at my back and vengeance burning in my chest, only one thought stayed with me:

No one takes her from me and lives.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

I woke slowly, like my body was trying to shield me from returning to the real world.

At first, I wasn't even sure where I was.

The scent of cedar filled the room, and sunlight filtered through gauzy curtains, catching in the dust motes that danced in the air.

I was warm, cocooned in soft blankets. Alone. My heart sank. No Dominic.

I sat up carefully, every muscle aching like I'd run a marathon in my sleep. The soreness was deep, threaded through my bones like I'd been broken and stitched back together again. But somewhere inside that pain... I felt her. Faint, but present. My wolf.

It was like hearing a familiar voice in a distant room—comforting and fragile, but real. The silence I'd feared was gone. She wasn't gone. Just recovering. Like me. I closed my eyes for a moment, pressing my hand over my chest. We'd made it.

The door creaked open. I looked up, half-hoping it would be him—but it was Liana. Her hair was pulled into a loose braid, and her eyes scanned me quickly, as if trying to assess whether I was truly awake or just drifting in and out again.

"You're up," she said softly. "Thank God."

"Where is Dominic?" I asked, my voice cracking.

She hesitated. "He left."

My heart jumped. "What do you mean left?"

"He found something. A note in your things. From Nick."

The name hit me like a slap. "What did it say?"

"That he doesn't think you're safe with Dominic. That he's 'taking you back.'" Her mouth twisted in distaste. "And his scent was mixed with silver."

I felt like the floor dropped out from under me. "So Dominic just ran off?"

"No," Liana said. "He's tracking him. Before anything worse can happen."

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and tried to stand. Pain flared, but I forced myself upright. "He shouldn't have gone alone."

"You're not strong enough yet."

"I don't care." My breath caught. "If something happens to him—"

"You think he'd want something to happen to you?" she interrupted. "You almost died, Elaine. He saw that. He carried you, held you when you blacked out, and didn't sleep for two days."

I looked away, throat tight.

"He left because he knew he had to protect you," Liana continued, softer now. "That's the only reason. Not because he doesn't care."

I nodded slowly, though the ache in my chest refused to loosen. "Still. I can't stay here."

"Then I'm coming with you," she said simply.

I blinked at her. "What?"

"You're not going alone, either. If we do this, we do it smart."

I looked at her—this woman who once terrified me with her sharp tongue and blunt honesty—and I realized I was lucky she'd stayed.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

Because no matter how much pain still clung to my bones, I knew I wasn't going to sit in that room while Dominic faced whatever darkness Nick had dragged into our lives.

Not again. Not without me.

Dominic

The scent trail was sharp—too sharp.

Nick wasn't even trying to cover his tracks. Either he was careless... or confident. That was dangerous. And insulting.

The forest blurred around me as I ran, paws pounding against damp earth, each breath pulling more of his scent into my lungs. He was close. Tauntingly close.

He wanted me to find him.

When I reached the clearing, I shifted back without slowing, my body reforming mid-stride, rage still simmering beneath my skin. There, in the middle of the open space, stood Nick. Same cocky grin. Same easy posture. But his eyes—those were different now.

Harder. Hungrier.

"I was starting to think you wouldn't show," he said casually, as if we were old friends meeting for drinks.

"You left her a note," I growled.

He shrugged. "Didn't think you'd be the one to read it."

"You knew I would." I took a step closer. "That was the point."

Nick's smile didn't falter, but his hand shifted slightly, reaching behind him—toward something. "She doesn't belong with you."

"You don't get to decide that."

"She was mine first."

"You never had her," I said coldly. "You controlled her. Broke her down. That's not love. That's fear."

The wind stirred the leaves around us. Birds had gone silent. Even the trees seemed to hold their breath.

Nick's eyes darkened. "And you think you're any different? You marked her. You dragged her into a world she didn't ask for."

"She didn't ask to be hunted either," I said. "But here we are."

He let out a bitter laugh. "You think she chose you? She doesn't even know who she is. She doesn't know what she's capable of."

"Neither do you."

He moved fast—faster than I expected. But rage makes people sloppy. I ducked under the swing of his blade—silver—and slammed my shoulder into his ribs, sending him flying. He hit a tree with a sickening crack but managed to roll to his feet.

"She'll never stay with you," he spat, blood on his teeth. "You think she wants to become a monster?"

I stared him down, voice low and deadly. "She's stronger than both of us. And she's not yours to speak for."

A twig snapped behind me.

I didn't turn.

Because I already knew the scent.

Elaine.

"You should have stayed behind," I said without looking.

Her voice was steady. "I wasn't going to let you fight alone."

Nick's eyes flicked between us, something unreadable crossing his face.

"Cute," he sneered. "You think you're some fairytale couple."

Elaine stepped beside me, her chin high despite the tremble in her legs. "No," she said. "We're mates. A couple chosen by the moon goddess. We're more than just a fairytale couple."

And before Nick could say another word, I shifted again—bone, blood, fury—and lunged.

Nick wasn't ready. His blade swung wide, too slow, too human. I collided with him mid-shift, my wolf form crashing into his chest and sending us both tumbling across the clearing. Dirt flew. Bones cracked. I felt the pop of his shoulder dislocating under my weight.

But still—he fought.

I didn't give him time to recover. My jaws snapped inches from his face, teeth grazing skin, a warning buried in bloodlust. One wrong move and I'd rip his throat out. I wanted to. God, I wanted to.

But then—

"Dominic." Elaine's voice.

It pierced through the haze, steadied the fury in my chest.

I growled, low and guttural, but I backed off, just enough to let him breathe. He rolled onto his back, wheezing, eyes wide with a mix of pain and hatred.

"You think this ends with me?" he spat. "There are others. I'm not the only one who wants her out of your pack."

Elaine stepped forward. "Who else?"

Nick chuckled, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth. "You'll see. You always were good at attracting the wrong kind of attention."

Dominic shifted back, crouching over him, eyes cold.

"You come near her again," he said, "and I will make sure no one finds your body."

Nick coughed but didn't answer.

Elaine stood beside me, her hand brushing mine, grounding me.

"I should kill him," I said, not to her, not to anyone—just out loud, the truth falling into the air.

Elaine looked at Nick, then at me. "You're not like him."

Her voice didn't tremble. She wasn't pleading. She was reminding me who I was.

And that was the only reason I stepped away.

My mother then emerged from the trees moments later, a rope in hand and that no-nonsense glare she wore like armor.

"You didn't think we'd let him walk away, did you?" she asked dryly.

Elaine shook her head. "No. But I think we've already done what matters."

"What's that?" Liana asked.

"We reminded him," she said, her voice firm, "that I'm not his to hurt anymore."

Nick didn't speak again as Liana bound his hands and dragged him toward the edge of the trees, where the others waited to take him back for questioning. When he was gone, and it was just the three of us, I turned to Elaine.

"I'm sorry I left you."

She looked at me, at the man who had carried her through fire and fury and still somehow saw me as someone worth saving.

"You did," she said. "And I followed. We fight together."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:49 pm

I didn't want to be there. The barn was cold, dimly lit, and smelled of blood and sweat. Liana's wolves had turned it into a makeshift holding space—nothing permanent, just enough to keep Nick alive until we figured out what to do with him.

He was tied to a chair in the center of the room, wrists bound, ankles lashed to the floorboards. His face was bruised, his lip split, but he still had that same look in his eyes. Smug. Like he knew something the rest of us didn't.

Dominic stood against the wall, arms crossed, silent. Watching me. Because this was my choice.

"Tell me who helped you," I said, voice calm, colder than I'd expected.

Nick smirked. "You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

He leaned forward as far as the restraints would allow. "You were always so trusting. Sweet Elaine. Little good girl, always doing what she was told."

"Nick—"

"It wasn't hard," he continued. "A few pills slipped into your tea. Creamer laced with silver powder. The necklace your mother gave you for your birthday—the one you only wore for a few weeks before getting that rash."

My blood ran cold. No. No.

"I never told you about the necklace," I whispered.

He grinned wider. "You didn't have to."

Liana stepped closer, voice sharp. "Who gave it to you? Who supplied the silver?"

Nick didn't answer right away. His jaw tensed, and for the first time, he looked a little less smug.

"I'm not the monster here," he said. "She wanted it done. I just... made sure it worked."

"Who wanted it done?" I pressed, heart hammering.

He looked at me then, really looked. And in that moment, I knew. Before he even said it.

"Your mother," he said. "She thought she was protecting you. Thought if she weakened you enough, you'd never shift. Never leave her. Never become... this."

Silence fell. My hands were shaking.

"No," I said, but even I didn't believe it.

"She paid me to watch you," he went on. "Said you were getting too close to things you didn't understand. That you were losing control. But what she really meant... was that she was losing you."

I couldn't breathe. The air in the barn felt thick, choking. Dominic was at my side in an instant, his hand resting gently on my arm, grounding me.

"Elaine," he said softly, "you don't have to—"

"No." I swallowed hard. "I do."

I stepped closer to Nick, my voice steady despite the storm inside me.

"You don't get to break me again. And neither does she."

He smiled faintly. "She already has."

"No," I said. "She tried. But I'm still standing."

Nick looked away, for once, without a retort.

As we left the barn, Liana turned to Dominic. "What do we do now?"

He didn't answer. Because we all knew. We'd won the battle. But the war? It had just come home.

Elaine

I didn't speak as we walked away from the barn. The cold night air wrapped around me, but it couldn't touch the storm brewing beneath my skin. My mother. She had done this to me. She hadn't just ignored me, abandoned me emotionally—she had poisoned me. Intentionally. Slowly. For years.

The wind stirred the trees overhead, but all I could hear was the pounding of my own heart. Dominic kept glancing at me, his hand hovering near mine like he wasn't sure if I'd let him hold it. I didn't know if I would either.

We reached the edge of the woods before I stopped walking. My feet sank slightly into the damp soil, and I just stood there, staring at nothing. The sky above was painted in stars, too bright, too beautiful for a night like this.

"She's not coming back from this," I said, voice brittle. "There's no repairing this."

"No," Dominic said softly, stepping closer. "But you can."

I shook my head. "You don't get it. She was the one person I thought would never... I mean, she was awful, but I never thought she would actually want to break me."

Dominic reached out then, wrapping his arms around me from behind. I didn't resist. I didn't lean in either.

"She was afraid," he murmured into my hair. "Afraid of what you were becoming. Of losing control. People do terrible things when they're scared."

"That doesn't make it okay."

"No. It doesn't."

The silence that followed was heavy and suffocating. I pulled away gently, needing space. I felt like I was made of glass—any sudden touch might shatter me.

"I need to see her," I said suddenly.

Dominic's eyes narrowed. "Elaine—"

"I need to look her in the face. I need to hear her say it. I need her to admit what she did to me."

He looked like he wanted to argue, but then he sighed. "Okay. Then we'll go together."

The house was dark when we pulled up. My childhood home looked smaller than I remembered, the shadows stretching across the lawn like claws. I sat in the truck for a long time before I opened the door.

Dominic didn't follow me to the porch, but I felt his presence behind me, steady and silent. I rang the doorbell with a hand that barely stopped shaking.

Footsteps. Then the door creaked open.

My mother looked like she hadn't slept in days. Her makeup was smudged, her eyes hollow. She froze when she saw me.

"Elaine..."

"Hi, Mom." I stepped inside without waiting for her to invite me. The air smelled like

lavender and regret.

We stood in the foyer like strangers. I didn't want to sit. I didn't want tea or small talk or apologies. I wanted the truth.

"You poisoned me," I said. "Just say it."

Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

"I want to hear you say it."

Her shoulders slumped. She turned away, walking into the kitchen like her legs had turned to lead. I followed.

"I did it for you," she whispered. "I did it because I was scared."

I didn't move. "Scared of what?"

She turned to me, eyes filled with something I couldn't quite name. "Scared of who you'd become. Scared of the world you were being pulled into. You were changing. You were slipping away from me. I didn't want you in the world I escaped from."

"So you thought weakening me would stop it?" My voice cracked. "You thought making me sick would bring me back to you?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I thought it would protect you."

The silence was louder than anything she could have said. I felt like a puppet with my strings cut.

"You don't get to be in my life anymore," I said, finally. "You don't get to be my mother after this."

She didn't fight me. She didn't beg. Maybe she knew there was nothing she could say. She was a drunk and all the memories of her in my life were bad ones. I know it was cruel, but I knew deep down in my heart that I wasn't losing much.

I turned and walked out of the house.

Dominic was waiting on the porch. I didn't say anything as I passed him, but this time when he reached for my hand, I didn't pull away.

I let him hold it.

And for the first time since everything fell apart, I didn't feel like I was alone.