

Willow Scarlett

# JAGGED ROCK



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## JAGGED ROCK

**By Willow Scarlett**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# JAGGED ROCK

By Willow Scarlett

## Photo Description

Photo 1: A young man with tattoos and short hair looks away from the camera, dressed in black pants low enough to show underwear, and a black leather hooded jacket open to show his well-defined chest.

Photo 2: A tattooed and well-defined young man with diamond stud earrings looks at the camera, posed shirtless on a chair.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Meet Will and Connor.*

[Photo Description 1]

*Will: So, a couple things. I'm a werewolf. I met my mate back in middle school, at the time I didn't quite understand why I was so drawn to Connor, why I was so protective of him and couldn't stand being apart. Now that we're older I get it. I feel like a guardian angel sometimes, making sure he's never hurt and always happy. The thing is, he has no idea that werewolves exist, let alone his best friend is one. Man, I'm not looking forward to that conversation or the fact that eventually (soon) I'm gonna have to bite him and claim him (that part I'll admit I'm excited for :)).*

[Photo Description 2]

*Connor: Hi, I'm Connor, I'm known to be kinda shy. Let's see, I'm in a band, I drum. I'm a freshman and share a dorm with my best friend Will. We've basically been inseparable since middle school. Will sings for our band and is amazing. He's always been there for me, from the second I moved to our hometown all those years ago, he took me under his wing. The problem? I'm so totally in love with him. I'm so not looking forward to that conversation, but I feel like the time's coming to tell him, before someone else grabs him up.*

*\* These shifters can be born (Will) or turned (Connor) and have one true mate for life (no ménage!) I would love to have the conversation where Will tells Connor he needs to bite him to have some humor :)*

*\*\* Also, Will knowing that Connor is his mate since middle school absolutely would not have hooked up with anyone else ever, Connor is super shy and in love with Will, so yes they are both virgins :)*

*Sincerely,*

*Carey*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** college, first time, friends to lovers, musicians/rock stars, shifters, soulmates/bonded, tattoos

**Word Count:** 96,981

# **JAGGED ROCK**

**By Willow Scarlett**

## Chapter One

### *Connor*

We could never decide on a name, but that was fine. We were always just “the band” to me. No matter what name we played under, people would be chanting it by the end of the night.

We’d gotten together at high school back in Layton but only started playing gigs when we got to college. We played a fast jazz-rock fusion that got called “progressive” a lot. Each member had their own different taste and sound and played in their own direction—it should clash but somehow it turned out weirdly beautiful.

We got more attention than any college rock band I knew, and I gave Will all the credit. He was an amazing singer and had the charisma of a stadium full of rock stars.

It was the last song of the night, and Will was flirting with the whole crowd, like usual. He wore his signature black-leather jacket over a bare chest to show off his runner’s body and the roses tattooed up his side. In this song, we each had a solo, and Will would go around the stage introducing each of us. I kept up a steady beat as we all took our turns.

“Chop, fastest hands in the North!” Will called into his microphone. Chop’s hands blurred on the frets as she made her electric guitar sing. She leaned against Will, back-to-back. Then the two of them bent their knees and lowered toward the ground in a trust exercise that was always mentioned in reviews of the gig. Chop kept up the furious, complicated playing the whole way down to the ground and the whole way back up. Then she ended in a wail of strings as she bowed, and Will called out her name again. “Chop!”

Chop stepped back so our second guitarist, Liv, could take center stage. She launched into her own solo as Will called, “Liv, guitar genius! She’s doing this improv and unique, just for you!” Will had never said it aloud but we all knew that he gave Liv longer for her solo because she was often overlooked in the band. She dressed femme to Chop’s attention-grabbing punk chic and played rhythm guitar to Chop’s fancy finger work. People often assumed she was a less talented player or just in the band as a pretty face.

But Liv was a creative genius who drank up any kind of music she could get her hands on and was constantly composing and experimenting. She was the



compositional core of the band and watching her get into her groove was awe-inspiring. When I'd been a shy drummer dreaming of joining a jazz band, it was creativity like Liv's I'd dreamed of.

She finished her solo. "Liv!" Will called again, raising his arms in front of the adoring crowd.

"Matt! That's his bass you feel deep down in your belly!" Matt had a mop of unruly curls which made him look like a clown. He stepped center stage and started dancing with his bass, lifting his legs up and bouncing his curls around as he strummed out a booming rhythm. Will threw his arms out and danced beside him, the two of them jerking around like marionettes. Will hammed it up for the crowd, but Matt danced out of pure joy at being on stage. When Will raised the microphone again, he was a little breathless. "Matt!"

I was the last, and as Will swooped toward me, I got a twist in my belly like I did every time. I loved being on stage with the band, but I hated being the center of attention. The lights focused on me, and I ducked my head, trying not to panic. The whole crowd was watching me. I squeezed my eyes shut and kept my hands steady on the sticks.

"Connor, backbone of the band!" Will called. He leaned in close to my kit, so close that I had to look at him. He was grinning wide and winked as he caught my eye. And, just like every other time, my nerves faded as I remembered that I wasn't alone in front of the crowd: it was me and Will, together, in front of the crowd.

I launched into an extended drum roll, the kind of complicated mess I used to practice in secret because my teacher had told me no one would ever be interested in hearing it. I kept the same time I'd been keeping for the whole song but splintered it in half, quarters, eighths, sixteenths; moving faster and faster as my hands glided around the kit and I pumped my double-kick on the bass like a madman. I let every drum have its chance to sing, then ended on the cow bell—my signature. It always got a laugh.

I paused when I finished, a few moments when the whole band fell silent. In that pause, I looked at Will again. His hand was hooked over my crash stand so he could lean in and close the world out until it was just us. He winked and stuck his tongue out a little, holding the microphone away so only I would hear him murmur, "You're great, Con."

I knew it was just for my morale. But still, his voice echoed inside me, and my stomach gave a flip that wasn't stage nerves. And just like every other time,

I zoomed in on his lips and the sweet, kissable curve of his smile. And, just like every time, I had to remind myself, *He's your best friend! Stop staring at him!*

Will wiggled his eyebrows and gave a dirty, low laugh like we were in on a joke together. Only we weren't, and the joke was on me. I couldn't look away from his deep brown eyes, and I couldn't keep my thoughts from spiraling into the gutter.

He winked again, turning my insides to mush before he stood up and spread his arms and called into his microphone, "Connor!"

I started playing again and let my thoughts melt into the music and think of nothing but the beat before the end of the performance. I didn't let myself sneak peeks at Will hamming it up for the crowd, and I didn't check to see if he was grinning back at me like he always did. I was here to play music and not to gawk at Will.

After we finished and the lights went down on the stage, we all walked off into the room behind the stage. "Okay," Will said. "Let's hang here for exactly three minutes to give the illusion that we actually have roadies to do our dirty work." We fell into a loose circle, and Will grinned around at us. "Great gig tonight. You hear how the crowd screamed? We're just getting better and better."

"Maybe the drink specials are getting better," Chop suggested. "Drunk crowd's a good crowd."

Will nudged her shoulder playfully. "Don't act like you didn't see the girls in the pit wearing 'CHOP ROCKS' T-shirts. We all kicked ass tonight."

After a few minutes, we went back on stage. The bar was still loud, but the area in front of the stage had cleared except for a few people dancing to the house music. We were the last band of the night, so we had the stage to ourselves and the luxury of packing up properly. Chop and Liv quickly got their guitars and equipment out to Chop's van as Will went around pulling up tape and rolling up cables like he was more roadie than lead singer.

I checked all my drums, re-tuning them and listening closely, running my hands over the skins to check for weak spots. The tiny dorm room I shared with Will had strict noise policies and I had to store my kit in a music studio with restricted access, so I was paranoid about looking after my gear after a gig. It was a nightmare to imagine finding something was wrong and not having time to fix it before going on stage. I did everything I could to keep my performance perfect.

I was on my knees, kneeling behind my kit as I looked it over. I heard Will say, "I saw you, you know."

For a moment, I thought he was talking to me, and I was confused, then mortified wondering if he'd caught me staring at him and figured out my secret feelings for him. But it was Matt who replied. "Saw me what?"

"Flirting with the boy in the *Star Trek* hoodie."

"I wasn't flirting."

I grinned. Matt sounded so adorably guilty. I thought about peeking over the drums to see if he was hiding his face under his hair like he did whenever we caught him sneaking snacks from Will's supply.

I'd never seen Matt with anyone and he'd never talked about anyone romantically. He'd come out in high school and been mercilessly mocked by Will's cousin Joseph, before Will put a stop to that. I wouldn't be surprised if Matt had been traumatized out of dating for the rest of his life—it had been terrifying for me to watch, and I hadn't even been friends with him back then. Joseph's bullying was one of the reasons why I'd never got around to coming out—that, and the fact that the man I was gay for was also my best friend.

I was glad Matt was showing an interest in someone. But I was also glad that I was behind my drum kit, so I didn't have to talk to him and offer advice. I had nothing useful to contribute at all—I'd never even been kissed.

Will was saying, "Yeah, you were flirting. I saw all those slow glances and lingering smiles." His voice was teasing but it dropped down to that low purr that swept down my spine like a gentle caress. "Plus I saw the way you kept lowering your guitar strap until you were playing from the hip. I've played that bass, remember? I know how it feels."

I flushed and was glad I was hidden from sight. I remembered the practice Will was talking about, how he'd taken Matt's bass and tried to strum out a few chords. He'd been laughing until all of a sudden he wasn't, he was just grinning that slow, sexy Will grin. "Feels good, man," he'd said. "Feels *real* good." From that day onward he'd nicknamed Matt's bass "The Boner Machine". I tried not to risk thinking about that day too often in case my thoughts were obvious on my face.

But Will dragged the memory into the light as he laughed with Matt, saying, "I've felt it vibrate on my hip. I don't know how you *don't* flirt with the crowd every time you play that thing."

“I wasn’t flirting,” Matt repeated. “Not like you do.” He didn’t sound defensive. At a guess, I’d say he was grinning, coaxed into talking with Will about things he usually wouldn’t because that was just the power of Will.

“It’s cool, man. You had to know you were flirting. You were making eyes at Star Trek Boy and leaning in closer to him, smiling and winking.” Will’s voice dropped lower with a hint of gravel. “You were practically having sex with him.”

Matt choked. “If that’s all it takes, you and Connor were doing it on stage.”

Will was suddenly looming over me, leaning on my crash cymbal like he leaned on his microphone stand and looking down on me like I was one of his screaming fans. I hadn’t even known for sure that he knew I was there. “What do you think?”

“About what?” I stalled for time.

“Are you and me doing it?” His dark eyes glittered, catching the low bar light, but his brows and lashes were inky black. He grinned at me with one eyebrow raised, leaning over me all charisma and accidental flirtation. My mouth and throat went dry.

I licked my lips. “I think I’d notice?”

In the blink of an eye, Will was back to his usual joking self, shrugging off his dripping sex appeal like it had never been there. “It’s cool,” he said to Matt. “He was eyeing you too. You want me to track him down, get his number for you?”

“No, that’s fine,” Matt said quickly. I heard this as he walked off the stage. Then he stopped and called over his shoulder, “Thanks. For the offer.”

“Anytime,” Will laughed. He came and leaned on my ride cymbal, hooking his hands around the stand and resting his chin on the cool metal. “How’s it going?”

“Nearly done.”

“Cool. Give me something to carry?”

Before I could respond, some more people climbed onto the stage. Girls, two pairs of tan UGG boots I could see around my bass drum. One of the girls giggled, and the other said, “You were really good.”

“Thanks,” Will replied. All professional. “We practice a lot.”

“You were really, really good.” The fan placed the emphasis on the word, dragging it out. Her southern drawl showed she was from out of state, probably up for college. I wondered if she knew Will was a freshman, or if that would matter—lead singer of the band was probably still brag-worthy, even if he was freshly eighteen.

“Yeah. We practice really, really a lot,” Will said, mimicking her tone.

The one who'd been giggling stopped long enough to say, “She means you're hot.”

“It's just the jacket,” Will said calmly. He was dragging a fingernail across my ride cymbal over and over. I glanced up, and he was looking down at me. He gave a wink and a little half-smile.

“I could buy you a drink?” one of the girls offered.

The other chimed in with, “Or I could.”

“Thanks,” Will said smoothly. “But I've got plans for tonight. Here, take this though.”

I had my own little fan club, mostly studious Engineering or Physics majors who talked about music as math. I attracted the kind of fans who went home and blogged. But Will had the kind of fans who wore tight T-shirts and came backstage to flirt. He'd handed them something, but I didn't see what it was. They seemed happy with it, though. His number? I carefully packed the drum stands away in their bag and tried not to think about it.

I shared a dorm room with Will, and I lived in fear of the day I'd come home and find him *with* someone. It hadn't happened yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time. He was charming and hot, and he had fans throwing themselves at him. One of them would grab him up, and I'd be the loser, third wheel roommate, grinning and bearing it as he politely asked me to vacate the dorm to give him time alone with them.

I didn't look at Will as we packed my drums away in Chop's van. We met the band in the back room where they were unwinding on the couches. Liv had her phone out, playing a new band she was excited about, a glam folk act from Boston she'd introduced me to last week. Chop had her arms over the back of the couch, and Matt had his head resting on her shoulder—on anyone else it might have looked like he was making the moves, but Matt was like a little brother to all of us. Will leaned over the couch behind Liv. “Who is this? They're good.”

“You think so? They’re coming up for a gig at The Cabooze in a few weeks.”

“I’ll get us tickets,” Will said, glancing around to see that we all agreed. “I’ll ask if they’ve got enough supporting acts and volunteer us if they don’t.”

I dropped onto the couch beside Matt. I sneaked a glance at Will who was still leaning over the couch. He was going through an obsession with fingerless gloves, the kind that bike messengers or professional drivers wore, thin stylish leather rather than anything that made sense for the Minnesota cold. When he was wearing those gloves he exaggerated every movement of his hands to show them off. It would have been funny if it wasn’t a tortuous tease. He was scrolling through something on Liv’s phone, asking her a question, but all I could think of was how good it would feel to have those strong hands running down my body.

I couldn’t get my head into the right place. I was always a mess after a gig, all the adrenaline and nerves leaving me a wreck. It was a massive high and a sudden crash. In an hour or so, I would be feeling great again, but until then I was twitchy and miserable and struggling not to obsess over my secret, unrequited love.

So I got up and went to the window. It was always locked but I tried the latches anyway—a blast of cold air might be just what I needed then.

“You okay?” Will was suddenly behind me. “You need anything?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.” Maybe I wasn’t as good at faking a smile as I thought I was. Then again, Will had been my best friend since I was twelve and he knew my moods better than anyone.

Will wrapped his arms around my waist, enveloping me in his scent of leather and post-performance musk. His body was impossibly warm through the jacket and so comfortable around me. His chest was firm and his arms strong, such a contrast to Matt’s pliable boneless cuddling. For a moment, I imagined Will and I were a couple, that any moment he was going to tilt my head back and run his lips and stubble down the sensitive line of my neck. I realized I’d unconsciously tilted my head to give him access to my neck, and that was what made me flinch and pull away.

Will let go at once, chuckling. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and grinned at me. “I’m all sweaty, right? Gross. I get it.”

You don’t get it. If you did, you wouldn’t be standing there with your jacket open and your abs all tight and hard and your skin all warm and beautiful and...

I looked out at the night, the sky lightened by city lights and swirling with snow. A blast of cold air was definitely what I needed. And the courage to tell Will how I felt. And a giant hole to sink into when I told him how I felt and he just stared at me like I was insane. "I wish this window opened."

"I can go ask for the key? Simon at the bar must have it."

"No, that's fine." I shook my head. Then, unbidden, the words popped out, "So what are your plans? You told your fans you had plans?"

"Same plans I have every night, Brains," he enthusiastically misquoted a cartoon. "Drink disgustingly sweet milky drinks with you and watch bad TV with the band."

"What's going on?" Matt called from the couch.

"I think Will gave some of the fans his number," I said. The words were ashes in my mouth, but I managed to wink like it was all a big joke.

"Oooh!" Liv sat up straighter, grinning as she started another track on her phone. "Will, you player."

Will was grinning too. "Come on. I gave her our business card with the web address on it—she kept saying she liked the band, maybe she can buy our music." He tapped his chin on Chop's head. "I love you guys. Stop trying to offload me on the fans." He glanced up at me. "I know you love me too." He was grinning like we were co-conspirators, but his smile made butterflies dance in my stomach.

I smiled like nothing was wrong but looked away as quickly as I politely could.

I had to tell him. I couldn't go on like this. Someone was going to catch his eye and grab him up and I'd hate myself for never letting him know how I felt. It would probably be the end of me, but I had to tell him.

\*\*\*\*

My family moved around a lot when I was young, and I never quite knew why. Like moving to Minnesota—it was meant to be for Dad's job, but he complained about the new job being admin rather than out in the forest like he wanted. But we moved anyway.

I had the kind of parents I couldn't wait to grow up and get away from. My whole childhood felt like I was waiting, every moment was a countdown until my real life began.

Mom was a teacher, and she pushed me academically. Dad was ex-army and an avid hunter. Every morning before school I'd be woken up early to exercise and train, every night was spent studying and doing homework, and the weekends fishing and hunting. We'd always moved around a lot, never staying anywhere for more than two years. I was busy at home and never long at any one school. Add to that my natural shyness and I was one lonely kid.

So when Will said he'd visit me after school, I didn't believe it. "My parents are really strict," I told him. "No friends allowed." Will hung out with me every day at school, integrating me into his friend group and always sitting beside me. For the first time in my life, I had a close friend. But that stopped at the final bell, when I went back to being the son that neither of my parents seemed to like.

So the first time he came over, I wasn't expecting it. It was two months after I'd moved to Layton. I was at the kitchen table doing homework while Mom made dinner. Dad was in the living room so when there was a knock on the door, he answered it. I heard the boom of his voice and the quiet tone of someone else, but I didn't realize who it was until Dad walked into the kitchen.

"This is Connor's friend William Flight," he announced. Mom looked shocked because we never had guests around. She stood there staring at Will and Dad in surprise.

Will stepped forward, holding out a huge metal dish with a glass lid. "Tuna casserole. I made it myself." He held out the dish, and Mom took it automatically.

"I've invited William to join us for dinner," Dad said. He had a horrible fake baritone he used when he wanted to impress people.

"I'm terribly sorry," Will said politely. "I know it's poor manners to arrive unannounced like this, but my parents were urgently called out and Connor's such a good friend."

"Of course. From school?" Mom offered. She was staring.

I was staring, too. I'd only ever seen Will in his school uniform, clean and new but worn baggy, which was the fashion at the time. I was sitting at the table in my own uniform, which I wore morning to night, except when I was in my workout or hiking clothes. But Will was wearing dark dress pants and a white shirt with his hair brushed neat and parted at the side. He looked like he was going to a job interview.



Will nodded. "He's the best student in class, everyone says so."

"He should be the best in school," Dad said. I wished he wouldn't, but it was like an automated reply, someone complimented me, and Dad had to rebut.

I cringed and looked away. Dad pulled out a seat across from me, and Will sat down. My parents went into the other room, and I heard them whispering. I hoped it wasn't about Will, but I knew it had to be, and that he had to know they were talking about him. I felt too embarrassed to say anything, but I had to rally for the sake of distracting him. "I can't believe you're here."

"You don't want me here?"

"No, I do. I just... How'd you make them let you in?"

"It's the name." Will leaned over the table, eyes glittering as all the preppy manners disappeared. "Flight. My family owns this town. My name opens doors."

I couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. I drummed my pen on my book nervously. I was glad he was there, but I didn't want him to think badly of me. "You're really that rich?" I blurted out. Followed by a silent, *And you want to hang out at my house?*

"Yeah," Will shrugged. Then like that didn't even matter he ducked his head and whispered conspiratorially, "You want to know something funny?"

"Sure."

"My name's not even William. I just say that to sound posher. I'm Will, and my brother's Dave. Not David. Just Will and Dave. Funny, huh?"

"I guess."

"I just had to impress your parents enough to get in the door. Because when I'm in, I'm laughing. Give me ten minutes and I'll charm the pants off anyone."

I believed it. "And you made casserole?"

"I also brought candy," he whispered. "We can ditch for pizza later if you want."

"I didn't even know you cooked."

"I don't. I mean, I can. You just get things and cook them, right? That's not so hard. And casserole's easy. I don't like it, though. Hate fish."

"So why'd you make it if you don't like it?"

“It’s good for you. It puts hair on your chest.”

I blinked. “You don’t even have hair on your chest.”

“Yeah, because I don’t eat enough tuna casserole.” He rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out.

He was right, though. After one dinner with my parents, he had them eating out of his hand. At school, he was always loud and cracking dirty jokes or pulling pranks that would have got anyone else kicked out of class. But in front of my parents, he became this painfully polite young man with a repertoire of family-friendly anecdotes. He somehow wheedled his way into my family life, eating dinner with us several nights a week and studying quietly beside me at the table—until my parents left the room, when in an instant he’d revert to the cocky smart-ass I knew from school.

My mom was strict and didn’t seem to care about much except her work. But Dad was always on my case and some of that showed when Will was around, when he’d interrogate Will or criticize anything he saw as not suitably masculine for a friend of his son’s—like constantly ribbing him about his meticulously groomed hair. But Will just took it in his stride, not showing any sign of being offended. And if Dad had a go at me in front of him then Will would step in with a joke or remark to turn the tide of my dad’s anger. With Will around, I suddenly felt safer at home as well as more popular at school.

My dad was a big hunter and they bonded over that, talking about the mountains and surrounding forest. Will didn’t seem as interested in hunting, he had a lot of stories about just running or hiking in the woods. But he did have his fair share of stories about hunting moose and deer.

“Have you ever shot a wolf?” Dad asked one night.

“Only with a camera,” he said firmly. I knew his parents were wildlife photographers, but I’d never seen their photos.

“They’re easy to track and hard to catch. I’ve shot one before, but it’s impossible to get a license here.”

Will nodded, but turned to my mother and changed the conversation. I could see on his face that something was wrong, that he was angry about something. But he didn’t say anything and the moment passed.

The time that he did actually have a fight with my dad was over running.

Dad made me train a lot to keep up an impossibly high fitness standard. He had dreams of me being army elite like he’d been. I hated it. It was like he was

constantly trying to beat me into a macho clone of himself. Sometimes I wondered if he tried so hard because he suspected that I was gay, and he was trying to exercise it out of me.

Will started joining in when we were training, and that made things better. Dad wasn't as mean to me in front of Will. Until one day at the running track near my house, when they both pushed things too far.

At first, it went okay. Dad stayed on the sidelines and just yelled a little. But after a while, he just slid back into usual like it was a habit he couldn't break, yelling at me that I was worthless and had poor form. I kept my head down and didn't look at Will. "Ignore him. It's just old army talking. He's used to yelling at everyone."

"I don't like it," Will said. His voice was calm and even, despite the distance we'd run already. "Do you like it?"

"It's okay," I muttered. Then, "No."

The next instant, Will had disappeared from my side. He was jogging over to Dad. I bit my lip, wanting to call him back and tell him I'd changed my mind. I didn't want him to get hurt. Not that I'd ever seen Dad hit anyone. But he'd threatened to often enough, and Will had that way of playfully pushing people around, which Dad might not take as just playful.

"You want to come join us?" Will called. "Come on, show us how it's done."

Even that was too much. I cringed, hoping Will would stop. But he kept talking, goading. His back was to me, but I could see him moving about as he made jokes and tried to playfully beg Dad into joining us.

And then an amazing thing happened. Dad laughed. In all the years of my memory, I'd never heard him do more than bark ironically. But he laughed and unzipped his jacket, threw it to the ground and jogged slowly onto the track. I couldn't believe it. Will had actually got to him!

Dad started off steady enough, but soon he was clearly trying to outdo Will. Will just jogged beside him, not looking phased as they ran loop after loop of the track. Will stayed just a pace or two in front of Dad, and I could see how much that was getting to him, how his face got redder and redder as he tried to outrun my friend. I stood in the patch of grass in the center of the track, silently watching, swapping places with Dad for once.

I heard Dad say, "You're good." His voice was strained and his breathing uneven.

“You’re not. Is that all you’ve got? You call that running?”

Will’s words were so unlike him that I thought I’d misheard. But I hadn’t judging by Dad’s reaction. “You little punk,” he growled.

“You want to prove me wrong, old man? Show me what you’ve got. I could beat you running backward.” It was something Dad said all the time, and I hated hearing it coming from Will’s mouth.

I didn’t understand it. Will wasn’t mean. He was the opposite of mean, everyone’s friend.

“Shut up,” Dad growled. “I’m warning you.”

“Yeah? What are you warning me against? You’re going to hurt me? Try and catch me.” Will darted forward. Then he actually started running backward, loose shorts flapping. “Come on, prove you’re not useless.”

Dad lunged, and tripped, and fell flat on his face. I started running toward him, and Will stopped. For a sickening moment, I thought Will was going to kick him while he was down, but then I heard him asking if Dad was okay. In reply, he got a growl, “Back off, don’t touch me, you little brat!”

“You see how it feels?” Will said calmly. “It doesn’t matter how good you are, it’s never okay to treat someone else like they’re worthless. Connor doesn’t need that.”

“Don’t tell me how to raise my kid.”

“My parents always treated me with respect, and now I can outrun you. Let him learn to love it, and don’t yell at him until he learns to hate running.”

I’d reached them by then. Will held out a hand to Dad who ignored it and stood up on his own. I was standing just behind Dad, and I wasn’t sure if he could see me or not.

“Connor’s just fine,” he growled. “He’s better than I was at his age. That boy’s going far. And he’s getting there on raw talent, not money like an entitled brat.”

“I know. But it wouldn’t hurt if you told him that once in a while.” His eyes flicked to mine, and Dad followed his gaze, turning and noticing me. Will said, “Think about it, next time you’re yelling at your son.”

“It gets the results.” Dad’s voice was still laced with anger, but at least he’d lowered it below shouting.

"In the army, maybe. But Connor never signed up for that. Kindness works just as well."

"Just leave it," I muttered. They were both looking at me, and the anger in the air was nearly tangible. I didn't want to be the source of it.

"That's enough for today," Dad said quietly. He walked off the track, and I didn't follow.

"I hope that helps," Will said. He smiled at me, back to his usual charm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I frowned. "That was gross. Seeing you like that. Acting like him."

"Giving him a taste of his own medicine."

"I get that. But still. The way you get all excited when you talk about hunting after dinner? It's like you're sometimes a completely different person, and I don't like it."

"I need to get along with your parents or I won't be able to keep visiting."

"Yeah. I get that. But it's like you're almost too good at pretending to be a mean prick."

Will winced. I wondered if he was going over his behavior to figure out what I meant—or maybe if I was the only one who'd spoken to him like that, actually faced down the cool rich kid. He just looked at me for a few seconds. And then his shoulders sagged, and he said, "I'm sorry."

I wasn't even sure if he should be apologizing. "That's okay. You were only looking out for me."

"I can be dramatic when I want to get my point across. Plus I'm kind of new to this whole thing."

"What thing?"

Will hesitated a moment. Then he said, "Friendship."

I laughed, but the most popular kid in school just kept standing there looking dejected.

That day was the last I ever saw him yell at someone, not counting sports of course. He stopped talking about hunting, as well. Maybe because Dad wasn't around as much—he seemed to be keeping his distance from Will, almost scared of him but maybe just embarrassed. As little as I liked seeing Will acting

like a drill sergeant that day on the track, I had to admit it worked. I joined the track team with Will and we trained with them three nights a week and that seemed enough for Dad. He stopped asking me to do PT. And other nights, Will would sit at the kitchen table with me late into the night, focusing quietly on homework whenever Mom was within earshot so she was satisfied.

From the moment he came into my life, I realized things would change, but I didn't realize how much. Will took me under his wing and looked out for me, every day.

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## Chapter Two

*Will*

It took me exactly two years to put a name to what I was feeling for Connor.

I loved spending time with him, so much so that it felt like I *had* to be around him. Passing notes in class, sitting beside him at lunch, picking him first so he'd always be on my sports team. I even buckled down and studied at his house because it meant more hours with him. I was protective of him, too, and made sure no one hurt him or made him unhappy.

I was fourteen when I started getting more than the occasional fantasy about him. My hormones kicked into crazy overdrive like I was a radio constantly playing dirty songs. And the station I was tuned into was purely Connor. I couldn't get him out of my head, and I couldn't stand to be away from him. And it wasn't just sexy stuff, either. I fantasized about growing old with him, building a life with him, leading the pack with him at my side. I was obsessed with what his wolf form would look like, what it would be like to run beside him through the trees. I dreamed so vividly of sleeping beside him that I could almost catch the scent of him when I woke.

I started obsessing about biting him. I thought about it all the time. It was worse when we hugged because that emphasized how perfectly my head fit against his neck. I had to keep myself from opening my mouth just to feel the sweet pressure of his skin against my teeth. Just one bite and he'd be mine forever.

I'd never even thought about turning a human before. And that's what made me realize: Connor wasn't just my friend. He was my mate.

As soon as I realized, it was so blindingly obvious. All of my weird reactions clicked into place, and I was breathless with wondering how I hadn't realized it sooner. Maybe because I'd never thought my mate would be a human—or that he'd be a guy. But by that point, I was so in love with Connor that I didn't care if that meant I was gay. As long as I had Connor I'd be happy.

I told my parents almost as soon as I figured it out. I announced it one night when we were sitting at the table. "Mom, Dad. I've found my mate."

"That's wonderful," Dad breathed. "So soon. You'll be a strong pack leader, I always knew it."

"I don't understand," Mom frowned. "No one's new to the pack. How did you meet her?"

It was more or less what I was hoping for—there was a big part of me that loved making a scene. "He's from out of state but his family moved here. It's like you said about you and Dad: The mating bond is like fate dragging us together."

My parents fell silent. I made a big show out of smiling at each of them in turn.

"I don't understand," Dad said.

"He?" Mom murmured.

"Connor," I said. "That boy I visit all the time."

"That human boy?" Mom's voice rose.

"Yeah, that's the one. The one with the eyes like clear water and the ass like—"

"Werewolves can't be gay," Mom cut in. "You must be confused."

"I don't think I'm confused about Connor being a boy," I said calmly. "He told me so himself."

"Werewolves can't be gay," Mom repeated.

To my surprise, it was my dad who answered. "Maybe they can be," he said slowly. Mom and I both stared at him. But he didn't elaborate on the comment. He just asked me, "Are you sure?"

"Of course," I said confidently.

At the same time, my mom said, "Of course he isn't sure."

I frowned at her. "This isn't a game, Mom. I know what I feel."

"You're young."

"Nearly of age." Fifteen was when a werewolf came of age. "This isn't puppy love and it's not a summer fling."

The two of them exchanged a grim look. My dad began, "Will—"

"You can go ahead and act happy for me anytime," I cut in. I'd gone from being amused at their surprise to actually being a little offended.

They exchanged another look. Then Dad said, "So let's say you've found your mate. What are you going to do next?"



“Bite him. Claim him. Take charge of the pack.” Simple.

“Can we meet him first?” Mom asked. “Before you run off making rash decisions you can’t take back?”

I frowned. How could they think I could mistake something as huge as the mating bond? Even sitting there at the table I could feel Connor like a magnet tugging at me. “I want to take him to one of our cabins and let him get to know the mountains. You can meet him then?”

“You know who else should meet him? Bren.” Bren was my uncle, the pack’s omega. He worked as a vet in the local clinic. He was ten years older than me, but I’d been bossing him around since I was tiny. I knew he was an expert on werewolves, he’d done a lot of training and research and was kind of like a walking library for the pack. He was a big guy with an even bigger heart and an easy smile. I didn’t care that he was an omega, Bren was my favorite member of the pack.

Dad went on, “He knows all about mating bonds.” Dad said it kindly, but a moment later he swapped another look with my mom which showed quite clearly that they still didn’t believe me.

“Okay, sure.” I knew what I was feeling and it didn’t matter if they wanted more people to confirm it.

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*Connor*

The first time I met Will’s parents, and the first time I went up into the mountains, was in junior high. I figured I was going to hate it—I’d never liked the wilderness when Dad had taken me hunting. But Will talked about the mountains with this kind of infectious excitement, which I couldn’t resist.

His parents came around to my house to pick me up, driving up in a shiny, dark green car that looked fresh off the lot. I waited in the hall for them with a bag of clothes over my shoulder, peeking out the window to give myself maximum time to worry about how well-dressed and sleek his parents were and how many embarrassing things my parents could think of to say to them.

But my parents were polite, perhaps terrified into it by how stern and efficient Will’s parents were. They both stood tall with backs poker-straight and business casual outfits looking like they’d just walked out of a catalog. I opened the door for them, and Will stepped in smoothly to introduce us.

“Mom, Dad. Connor.” He stepped into the doorway and threw his arm around me, pulling me into his chest. He’d had another growth spurt, and I was still waiting for mine, so I could fit under his armpit, and Will seemed to want to show this off as often as he could.

His mom was wearing gloves, smooth pale leather. She took one off before holding her hand out to me. “Connor,” she said. “Pleased to meet you at last.”

“Mrs. Flight,” I stammered. She was tall and dark with Will’s deep brown eyes. She wasn’t smiling. Her gaze flicked over me from head to toe then she raised an eyebrow meaningfully at Will.

Will’s dad wasn’t much friendlier. He smiled when he shook my hand, but it was a restrained smile, and it faded as he glanced between me and Will like he was trying to figure out how his son had come to be friends with me. Mr. Flight had his son’s delicate nose and sharp cheekbones. But neither of the Flight’s had anything like Will’s life and energy.

We drove through town and into the edge of the forest. Will’s parents asked me questions, about school and drumming and my plans for the future. I wanted so badly to impress them that I knew it was impossible, and of course that just made it worse. I got all shy and mumbled one-word answers into my lap, bunching my hands into anxious fists on my bag whenever they asked me to repeat myself. I was glad when the journey was over—even though that meant we were at Will’s house, which was intimidating, enormous and well-kept.

“So here’s our humble abode,” Will said. I figured he was being sarcastic: It was easily twice the size of mine.

“It’s huge.”

“Yeah, people tell me that all the time,” he laughed. “Come on, my room’s upstairs.”

We passed a living room that was half the size of my house. There were people in there, sitting in chairs and talking in low voices. Will took me in to introduce me to them. They were members of his extended family; two aunts, three uncles and a cousin. I recognized most of their faces from around town including a couple of store owners.

The room had sliding glass doors for an entire wall. Outside, the dusk forest was visible. There were photos everywhere, huge shots of trees and wildlife, which hung in simple pine frames like more windows out into the forest.

“What do you think?” Will called over his shoulder as he led us up the stairs.

“I feel like I’m inside a giant tree.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “We’re real into nature.” He paused in front of the window on the stairs’ landing. Together we looked out at the trees gilded by the setting sun.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“I know.” Will grinned like the compliment on his house had been on something he personally made. “One day all of this will be mine.”

“Or Dave’s? Your brother’s older, right?” I didn’t know much about Will’s brother, just that he’d gone out of state.

“Yeah, he’s five years older. But I’ll get all the land.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this is my home.” He shrugged. “Dave’s going to inherit money. He can travel or whatever. But I get the land. I’m going to live in Jagged Rock for the rest of my life.”

“You say that now, but maybe when you grow up—”

“Nope. These mountains are in my soul.” He thumped his chest dramatically. He was grinning, but he talked with even more confidence than usual. “I’ve always known exactly who I am and what I want. And it’s these mountains, all the way.”

I nodded, at a loss for how to reply to that. I couldn’t even imagine having that kind of certainty in my future. Maybe that only came with growing up in a small-town.

“The land we own is amazing,” Will went on. “We’ve got all these cabins in the forest. Officially, they’re for tourists and trappers and stuff, but practically no one uses them.”

“Because of the cold?”

“Pretty much,” he laughed. “People say that most of the year you’d have to be crazy to go up into the mountains. Which makes my family crazy, I guess, because there’s nothing more beautiful than the mountains in winter.” He tapped the window. “Folks in town say we’re crazy for having all the glass in this house, too.”

"It's definitely beautiful," I agreed. Inside, I was wondering if the people in town weren't right about the Flights being crazy. The view was beautiful, yes, but the house was *cold*.

Will's room was under the roof so the whole ceiling slanted. There was a king-sized bed with crisp linens and blankets piled up at the foot and a huge wooden wardrobe like a Narnian entrance. There was a skylight set into the slanting roof, and a leather couch pushed so close to it that it was amazing Will could sit in it without knocking his head.

Most of the room was dedicated to wood projects. There was a workstation—benches lining one wall with wood scraps and tools on them, some big machinery, which might have been a lathe and a few electrical saws, and racks of tools. There was wood all over the floor, from uncut logs to piles of carved sculptures. The smell of freshly cut wood permeated the room and reinforced the feeling that we were inside a forest.

"Wow," I breathed.

"You don't like it?" Will was hovering anxiously beside me.

"No, I like it. It's just... You really like wood."

"Yeah. I like to be always carving something. I used to whittle in class, but the teachers kept taking my knives off me."

"Really?" The rack of tools looked like something from a torture chamber. I wondered how my mom would have reacted if one of her students had brought a knife like that to school. She'd have him arrested, probably.

I gestured toward one of the piles of carvings. "Do you mind if I look?"

"I'd love it. You can take some, if you want. Or I can carve you something."

I got onto my knees to sift through the sculptures. Most of them were hand-sized or smaller. Animals, mostly. Some flower and leaf shapes. The proportions were good and the carving didn't look messy, but the wood felt rough. "These are great. You don't varnish them or anything?"

"Nah. I like to carve fallen wood from the forest and leave it as natural as possible. Help yourself to any you want."

I picked out a fox the size of my finger. I held it up to show Will, but then I lost my train of thought completely. I'd just seen the back wall for the first time. I physically recoiled. "Whoa."

"You don't like wolves?" Will asked hastily. "I'll take them down."

“No, no,” I said quickly. “That’s just a lot of wolves.”

There was the door we’d entered through and the rest of the wall was lined with unframed photographs of wolves, floor to ceiling. The photographs were so crisp and clear it was like there was no wall and I was just looking straight out into a snowy forest scene, lean trunks and fresh snow. And *wolves*. There had to be more than twenty. Wolves playing and wolves sleeping huddled together, wolves just standing around or facing into the camera.

“That’s a lot of wolves,” I said again. I could just faintly see joins between the photos but otherwise it was like a single panoramic shot of a forest, filled with wolves.

All the wolves were variations on gray, but I was amazed how much variation there was, pale gray to one nearly black. But there was one wolf that caught my eye. It was the only wolf with color, but that wasn’t the reason it kept catching my eye. It was never looking straight at the camera but there was something about the way it held its head, or maybe something in its pose. It kept catching my attention so even if I looked where Will was pointing my eyes would still stray back to that one wolf. It was pale gray with a dark stripe down its back but reddish fur along its shoulders and legs. “I didn’t know there were groups so large.”

“Packs. There’s not. It’s actually seven wolves, just lots of photos superimposed together so each one’s there three times. See?” He pointed to a wolf with a dark muzzle and a white teardrop shape under one eye. “Look at the mark on this one’s mask. You can see it’s the same wolf here, and here.” He pointed out the wolf in different positions around the photo, lying flat on its belly or walking around with its head hunched down. “That’s the omega. You know about wolf social structures?”

“A little. Omegas are the runts, and an alpha’s the leader.”

Will shook his head. “Omega’s more about personality than size. The omega doesn’t have to be weak, or small. This omega’s actually bigger than the alpha, see? This one’s the alpha.” He walked along the wall, pointing out a wolf with dark fur.

“What about this one? It’s my favorite.” I pointed out the reddish wolf.

Will just looked at me for a few moments. Then a grin spread over his face. “That’s my favorite too,” he said. “It’s the young alpha. It’s going to grow into the head of the pack.”

“How do they pick the leader?”

“No one picks the alpha, it’s all nature. Wolves all have natural tendencies, which you can tell from the moment they’re born. Alphas are obvious, they walk and hold their head in a certain way and they don’t take slack from anyone. You know they’ll have to lead the pack or leave to start their own pack somewhere else. With omegas you can guess but it’s not for certain, it’s more dependent on the social structure of the whole pack. With all the others—betas, anything else, the exact role is changed depending on the hierarchy of the pack. Like this one is close to the bottom of the ranking, but if he were in a different pack he might have been a beta.”

I looked at the wolf Will was pointing out in the photo. “How do you know so much?”

“I’ve spent a lot of time with the pack to get these photos.”

“You took these photos? How’d you get that close without them eating you?”

He grinned. “That’s good, you think they’re dangerous. You have to think that, if you’re going into the forest with them. Better careful than dinner.”

“Is this meant to make me want to go camping? I no longer want to leave this house.”

Will laughed. “You don’t have to worry. I’m serious. Wolves will prey on whatever’s the best to eat, and we make sure that’s not humans. You don’t have to worry about camping.” He leaned up against the door frame. “About the camping. I’ve got something to ask you.”

“Yeah?”

“I said we’d go camping with my parents, right?”

I nodded. I thought of the room full of people downstairs and wondered if I was going to be going on a trip with the entire Flight family.

But Will said, “How about we just take dirt bikes up to one of my family’s cabins? Just the two of us. There are cabins with working water and everything. I know you hate camping.”

“Are your parents okay with that?”

“Yeah. I kinda told them that’s what we’d be doing. I know, I should have asked you first.” He was looking guilty. “We can ask your parents, if you’re worried?”

“Please don’t ask my parents,” I laughed. “They’d say no. Real working water, you said?” It was getting darker outside, but the forest suddenly seemed a lot brighter.

“We can get totally wasted if you want, or eat junk food and play video games. Anything you feel like.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Gone up to the cabins? Of course! I practically live up there over the summer.”

“I mean, with someone else?”

“Just Dave. Never a friend.” He ducked his head and blinked rapidly at me, perhaps trying to make a show of coyly batting his eyelashes. “You’ll be my first.”

I looked away and focused on the wolf photos, my mouth too dry to form a reply. He was joking! I knew he was joking. The idea of us being together like *that* was a joke. It was just plain embarrassing to get so worked up over it.

“Hey, I’m just goofing around,” Will said—as if that weren’t painfully obvious. He rested a hand on my elbow. He was so tall and solid beside me. “We can do whatever you want. We can drive back into town if that makes you more comfortable, or hang out with my parents if that’s what you want. I’m open to anything, even board games. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot or anything.”

I laughed and shook my head. “It’s not that. The cabins sound great.” I stepped away from him, breaking the contact. Every time he touched me I was afraid he’d realize how much I liked being touched. He’d hug me or wrap an arm around me and it felt great, then I’d panic and have to pull away. He was touchy-feely with everyone, and I didn’t want to be the loser who took it personally. I didn’t want to lose our friendship because of my attraction to him.

To cover the awkward pause, I said, “I’ve never been on a dirt bike.”

“For real?” He laughed in delight. “I’ll show you after dinner. They’re easy to get used to.”

I helped Will lay the settings for dinner. His family seemed to have disappeared except one uncle who was staying for dinner.

Will’s uncle Bren had an icebox with steaks in it, lean and juicy and clearly not store-bought. He cooked them in pans on the stove, keeping an eye on them like a mother bird watching her chicks only with more sprinklings of seasoning.

Bren was the opposite of Will's parents—friendly and approachable, casually dressed in worn work clothes. He was even more out-of-place in the elegant house than I was. He told me he was a vet, but he also told me he'd killed the animals for the dinner, so I hoped he wasn't the kind of vet who only worked with cats and dogs.

The dining room table looked like a tree trunk sliced in half then polished, complete with tree rings and curving rough bark on the underside. Will sat beside me with Bren on the other side, the three of us facing Will's parents. As well as the steak, the table was spread with greens and boiled baby potatoes, multi-colored salads and a small dish of anonymous sliced meat. Will wiggled the plate as he was putting it down. "Like rabbit? Thumper's not everyone's favorite food."

"Rabbit's fine," I laughed.

Will's parents had disappeared into the bowels of the house but reappeared in time for dinner—dressed in different clothes, which was even more off-putting for me. The food was all delicious and there was a lot of it, but I didn't get the feeling the family was trying to show off for me.

"This food is amazing, thank you," I said.

"All fresh from the garden," Bren said happily. Bren's smile was almost like Will's—I could see the family resemblance there, even though he didn't have Will's cocky charm. "So Will tells us you want to be an architect?"

"That's correct."

"Are you planning on studying out of state?"

"I don't know, I haven't really thought about it yet. Probably, though. I've only been here three years."

"So Layton isn't home for you?"

That was an odd one. I chewed on a mouthful of steak while I figured out how to answer it. "As much as anywhere is, I suppose." I was leaning forward to talk to Bren, but I glanced at Will's parents. They were exchanging a look that I didn't like. But what was I supposed to say, how could I answer a question like that?

"Connor hasn't really been up in the mountains yet," Will said. He grinned at me and nudged my shoulder. "You just wait. You'll love it. You'll never want to leave."



“Yeah?”

Will's mother said, “Will's very attached to this land.”

I nodded. “I can see that.”

Will said suddenly, “Connor liked the photos in my room.”

“And the ones down here,” I added. “They're all beautiful.” The room we were sitting in had more wolves, half-lit shots of wolves baring their teeth or pulling apart carcasses. They were beautiful but terrifying. I kept my head down so I wouldn't be put off my meal. I was glad the photos in Will's room were of wolves at peace because these candid shots of predators were going to give me nightmares.

“You like wolves?” Will's father asked.

“I've never been close to one, only seen them when I've been out hunting.”

“But you've never shot one?” he asked sharply.

“Never. I wouldn't want to.” I shook my head, glad it was true because I didn't think I could lie and keep a straight face under their scrutiny.

Mrs. Flight said, “That's good. We're very pro-wolf in this household. We believe wolves have as much right to safety and survival as humans—if not more, because they're endangered and humans aren't.”

I nodded. What could I say to that?

“Our family has been very active in protecting wolves,” she pressed on. “You know it's illegal to hunt wolves in Jagged Rock Mountains? That's mostly thanks to the Flight family. We can consistently prove that the wolves are not a threat to humans or livestock. As they're also endangered, there hasn't been a wolf hunting license granted for this forest in the last ten years. Shooting's a terrible way to deal with overpopulation of wolves because it damages the essential social structure of the pack. They're intensely social animals.”

I nodded. At least now I understood where Will got his interest in wolves from.

After dinner, he led me outside and onto a trail between the trees. It was a short walk in the evening gloom before we reached an area of rocky ground where the trees were sparse. There was a shed and, inside, a series of mud-splattered two-wheel farm bikes. There were also lights all around the clearing,

bulbs in cages wired to the trees. When Will flicked a switch, the whole clearing lit up. He grinned at me, wheeling one of the bikes out. "Time for some practice."

It was fun, and much less scary than dinner with his parents. We started with brakes and moving slowly with my feet on the ground like learning to ride a push bike. After a couple of hours, I could confidently circle the clearing including a series of rocky ridges on the outskirts. Will was delighted, running around after me and making jokes.

We wheeled the bike back into the shed. Will's eyes glittered when he was excited, and it was so beautiful it was hard to look at, even though I treasured every glimpse. He tapped the handlebars of the bike. "Fun, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

"So you're feeling all right? I feel like you've been on edge tonight."

"I have," I admitted. "Your house is intimidating. Your parents, too."

"Yeah, they're scary. They're cool like me but without my nice gene, huh?" He leaned on the wall of the shed and crossed his arms. "Seriously, though. I think you're great. My parents are going to see that and they're going to love you like I do. And if they don't, then they don't deserve you. Just think of that and you'll be able to relax."

"I can't think like that, because I'm not a total narcissist like you," I laughed. But I filed his words away in my head to keep me warm on bad days. *They're going to love you like I do. And if they don't, they don't deserve you.* Who said that kind of stuff? "You sound like a Valentine's card."

"Yeah, except I mean what I say. Those cards will lie to you just to get your pants off. But I mean every word." He nudged me with his shoulder, wagging his eyebrows. "Come on, I've got to turn the lights off."

I left the shed, and Will killed the flood lamps. Darkness dropped onto the clearing so fast I wasn't sure my eyes were even open. I blinked rapidly, looking around, but I couldn't even see the silhouette of the shed behind me. I craned my head up to see the stars and the wisps of clouds, the spiky outlines of trees poking into the sky. For a moment, I imagined I was at the bottom of a deep pool, looking up at light from the depth of inky blackness.

There was a rustling, shuffling sound, and I jumped, spinning around, losing my bearings and balling my fists to face off against something I couldn't see coming at me from who-knew-where.

“Hey.” Will’s husky whisper was right in front of me. “It’s okay. It’s just me. I’m right here.”

His hand touched my elbow gently. I relaxed my fists and tried to release the tension from my shoulders. “I wasn’t scared.”

“Yeah? Looked like you were going to punch me out.”

“You might have been a bear or a psycho killer or something,” I muttered. I felt ashamed of my boxing reflex. Dad had sneaked up on me enough in the night as a “test” that I’d gotten used to being constantly ready to defend myself. I couldn’t believe that Will had been able to see that, though. My eyes were adjusting to the dark but not enough to see Will as more than a patch of darkness beside me. And he had been able to see my raised fists. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s good. Fighting instincts. Probably better to run than punch a bear, though.”

“I just don’t want to get lost.”

“Hey. You’re with me. You won’t get lost—I have an excellent sense of direction. Here.” He tugged at my elbow, and I let him guide me.

He led me back to his house, guiding me steadily on the path so I didn’t trip or walk into anything even though it was still cellar-dark. After a few yards, I gave up trying to see the path and I kept my eyes on the stars above. I was on the ocean floor, but I wasn’t alone; I had Will beside me, and it was just the two of us in the world.

Back at the house, I had the second turn taking a shower. I came out to find Will flopped on the end of his bed. He was sprawled shirtless on his back wearing a pair of long thermal underwear with one leg trailing on the ground. I would have had quite a view of his junk if he hadn’t also been wearing a pair of sweatpants over his long johns, the waistband low on his hips and the legs cut off and frayed around his thighs.

There weren’t many guys who could make track pants *or* long johns look cool. It was just my luck I was best friends with the guy who could rock both at once.

“Ready for bed?” he asked without looking up.

“Yeah. So we’re sharing or...?”

“I was going to sleep on the couch, but I’m cool with whatever you want.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Will sat up, grinning at me. His chest was well-defined and a glowing creamy gold, completely hairless and blemish-free. I tried not to stare at his nipples or the V of his hips disappearing into his thermals.

He leaned forward, smirking at me from under his eyebrows. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I nodded mutely.

"I always sleep on the couch. It's what I do. I haven't even had sheets on that bed for months. Weird, right?"

"I've heard weirder things." Like kids telling their families to breed animals to feed to wolves?

"So I can sleep on the couch, no problem. Or the bed's big enough for two. Which would you prefer?"

Was that some kind of test? I busied myself with my bag so I wouldn't have to meet his eyes. Of course I wanted the bed. He was so physical all the time, I thought he'd probably be a hugger. I wanted to be pressed up against that perfect chest. But I wanted to be *held* and to feel safe and special. But how could I say that without admitting I was totally queer for him? He gave me so much attention and always seemed to want to be around me. That would all disappear if he found out I actually felt *that* way about him.

So I mumbled, "You can stay on the couch. If that's more comfortable for you."

"The electric blanket's on so it should be nice and toasty for you." He patted the bed then climbed off it. He dropped down onto the couch and immediately got up again, twisting around so he was sitting on the arm with his legs dangling over. "You ever have sleepovers when you were a kid?"

"No. My parents wouldn't allow it." Also I had no friends.

"I used to have Joseph and some of the other guys over all the time. It was great. The best part was telling scary stories."

"I hate scary stories. Sorry," I added.

Will grabbed the end of his couch and dragged the whole thing across the floor. It groaned and complained on the hardwood floor, and I actually closed my eyes to keep from seeing if it scratched the beautiful floor. He pushed it up against the wall so it was within an arm's reach of my bed, then he sat down facing me and leaned forward. "Come on. You don't like monsters?"

“Is it okay if I say no?”

“Of course.”

“Then no. I hate monsters. I’m kind of still afraid of them. Those photos in the dining room will probably give me nightmares, and if I think about it too much I’m going to be scared that there’s a pack of wolves under the bed who’ll bite my ankles the moment I put my feet on the floor.”

Will was silent long enough that I thought I’d pushed things too far and confessed one embarrassing secret too many. Finally he said, “I didn’t know that.”

“Army dad didn’t help much,” I admitted. “He used to burst into my room at night and punch me awake as a training exercise.”

“What an ass. Now I wish I’d yelled at him harder. Look, I promise I won’t punch you while you’re sleeping, okay? Ever.”

“You’re a good friend,” I laughed.

“I know.” After a few minutes he asked, “So you really don’t know what you’re doing when you finish school?”

“I really don’t. My parents want such different things for me, and I don’t want to just be their puppet. But I don’t even know what I want for myself.”

“Architecture, and drumming,” Will said decisively. “Those are the things you love, so that’s your life. The rest is just details.”

“Like colleges and jobs? Those are pretty big details,” I laughed.

“Just details,” he repeated.

I grinned. It was a little weird how he seemed to know exactly what he wanted from life. But even though it was weird, I was jealous. “I wish I had your confidence. I hate being shy.” In the darkness, I felt anonymous. I said without thinking, “Sometimes, I worry that I’m going to miss out on something great because I was too shy to take a risk.”

“Like leaving to go to college?”

“Yeah.” That wasn’t what I meant at all. I cared less about college than I did about my impossible crush.

“What if I was with you?”

“What?” My heart skipped a beat as I tried to figure out what he was offering.

“I’ve got confidence for both of us. What if I do stuff with you? Apply for colleges, move, whatever. You won’t have to be shy because you’ll have me there with you.”

“I thought you wanted to stay here?”

“I do. This is my home. But it won’t hurt to leave for a while. That’s what friends are for, right? How’s that sound?”

I bit my lip. “Pretty good, actually.”

“Then it’s a deal. Wherever you go, I go too.”

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## Chapter Three

The next day, Will outfitted me in one of his brother's old leather jackets and rubber pants and helmet. The jacket and helmet fit, but the pants were so comically large that I started picturing Will's brother as Slenderman. Then I realized that I didn't have any idea what Dave looked like because, for all the photos hung in the house, there were none of the Flight family. I guess Will wasn't kidding when he said wildlife was their life.

Will told me the cabin we were going to was one of the most accessible. After an hour and a half on the dirt bike on bumpy roads, my kidneys were mush, and my arms felt like they were made of rubber, and I dreaded finding out what an inaccessible cabin was.

I changed my tune when I actually saw the cabin. I swung around a bend to find Will parked, and I stopped beside him, concentrating on braking correctly and not slipping on the icy path. It was only then that I looked up and actually took in my surroundings. We were stopped on a flat patch of land just above a gorgeous old-fashioned log house. It was set on sloping land, in a snow-covered circle surrounded by trees. It looked like a postcard.

"It's like a gingerbread castle, right?" Will said. He'd pulled his helmet off, and he looked artistically tousled.

I took my helmet off as well, suspecting I looked like a porcupine. For the first time, I was glad of the embarrassing military cut my dad insisted on—less hair meant less hat hair. "It's amazing. We get to stay here?"

"Yep. See why I love it?"

We stored the bikes in a covered shed beside the road, and Will led the way to the cabin. There was a wooden porch running around the front and both sides, covered to keep the worst of the snow out. I could imagine it being like a paradise in the summer, here in the silence of the trees. Right now, the cabin looked lonely and isolated, dark and abandoned.

The snow was pristine except for animal tracks—rabbit and fox. Will pointed out a broad expanse of clear snow between us and the porch. "I always think snow like that is tailor-made for me, you know?"

I started laughing. "No, I don't know, you narcissist. What do you want a patch of snow for?"

He winked and lowered his helmet and pack to the ground. The next moment, he made a running dive and slid face-first in the snow, leaving a long trail behind him like the wake behind a boat. He rolled over onto his back, laughing. "My snow!"

"You're crazy!" But I followed him, shrugging off my gear and diving into the snow. It wasn't as deep as I wanted, and I landed hard and got winded, but wasn't hurt.

"Our snow!" Will called in delight. "No one else has ever touched this snow but us. We're pioneers!"

I watched Will happily burying his face in the snow, shaking his head like an excited dog. I couldn't help laughing "Snow's water so at some point all of this has probably been someone's pee," I said.

Will spat out a mouthful. "Oh man, thanks for the visual."

"You're welcome," I laughed. I balled up a handful, clumsy in my biking gloves, and threw it gently at Will's face.

He ducked into the snow and came up laughing but covered in more snow than if I'd managed to hit him. "Oh, is that a challenge?" he roared. He started forming a ball, but I was already ready with another of my own.

Playing around evolved into full-scale war then back into messing around. By the time we dragged our packs onto the cabin porch, there wasn't an inch of pristine snow anymore. We'd managed to turn the scenic getaway into a cabin alone in a sea of trampled slush. It was totally worth it.

Inside the cabin was a single room, a wood-burning stove equipped with an array of pots and pans, shelves of non-perishables, two beds and a table. The rest of the space was filled with book shelves. There were board games and wooden carvings on the shelves, but otherwise it was all books. "I hadn't realized there'd be so much reading material," I said, scanning the shelves. Mostly non-fiction, some classic novels.

"I knew you'd like that." Will was on his hands and knees, feeding kindling into the stove. "I've just got to grab some firewood. I'll be right back."

"Do you want a hand?"

"Nah, there's a pile around back. You make yourself at home."

I did, settling onto one of the beds with a thick scrapbook filled with handwritten notes and newspaper clippings about the forest. I got so absorbed in reading that I hardly noticed when Will came back in.



When the stove was lit and the door was closed, the cabin warmed up. Will bustled about unpacking both our bags, lining things up at the end of the beds and beating the blankets. After a while it was actually quite cozy. He brought me a mug of caramel-sweetened cocoa. "If you want to take your jacket off I can bring you a shrug my cousin knitted? Really warm."

I sipped the sweet, creamy drink and laid my book down. "I'm sorry. I've just been sitting here reading. I'm a terrible guest."

"This is more or less what I planned, actually," he laughed. He lay on his back at the foot of my bed, crossing his arms behind his head to stare up at the ceiling slats. "I reckon you need a break. I'll make us some bacon and eggs on toast, then later we can walk down to the lakes. How does that sound?"

"More or less like heaven," I laughed. I tapped the cover of my book. "Who left all of these here?"

"Tourists or travelers. Before that, generations of Flights. This one's been here over a hundred years."

"I know, I read that." The scrapbook had been very interesting. "There are trails lined with cabins like this one, all through the forest." There was a map, with our cabin circled in pen. The forest was vast and our cabin was so small.

"Yep. It's amazing. We can follow one of those trails, if you want. Or all of them, make a project of it. One of my cousins hikes every trail every year, it takes all his spare time but he loves it. He's a real arrogant snot telling everyone about it, too," he added thoughtfully.

"I'll think about it," I laughed.

Later that day, we bundled up warm and locked the cabin to head out into the cold. I was terrified of getting lost, but Will showed me the GPS unit and compass on his phone, plus the series of markers nailed to trees along the paths. We followed a narrow track winding down between trees to lead us in a circle around two small lakes, frozen-over but still pretty. We were high enough in the mountains that the views glimpsed through occasional gaps were breathtaking.

The views were nothing on Will's excitement. From the moment we left the cabin, he was like a new puppy, running backward and forward and skipping, running up to trees to try and barrel roll off their trunks, stopping to make snow angels or snowballs. He was truly delighted to be out in the mountain air and his joy was infectious. I found myself laughing and playing along, feeling like a

kid again as I thought about absolutely nothing but the next snowball or next small adventure.

At nightfall, we sat out on the porch on wooden chairs with worn and faded cushions. I curled up with a book on log cabins. Will had his legs up on the porch railing as he whittled away at a small piece of wood. He hummed while he worked, and when I glanced up at him after a while, he stopped. "Sorry. I can't seem to shut up. Is that annoying you?"

"No. You hum well."

"Anyone can hum well, it's humming," he laughed.

"Not everyone can hum that well. You can hold a tune."

"I'll trust you if you tell me I'm talented, you're a musician," he said with a wink. "I'll tell you what though—I've always thought I could be a singer."

"Yeah?" He had the attitude for it, that was sure.

"Wanna hear?"

"Of course!"

Will didn't stop whittling as he burst into song, belting out the chorus to a pop hit. His voice was actually really good. I'd always liked the sound of his voice when he talked, even though he had that Minnesota nearly-Canadian accent. But when he sang, his voice reached right into my soul. I couldn't help bursting out, "You're really great!"

"Not good enough," he said with a shrug. "If I was really good you'd sing along."

"I don't sing."

"Really? What about now?" He burst into another song. I laughed but shook my head and didn't join in.

Will kept trying, picking songs like a juke box of radio hits. His voice was clear and beautiful in the chill forest air.

When the wolves started howling, I nearly thought they were singing with him. At the first howl, I sat up, grabbing the arms of my chair and looking around. "That sounds really close."

"It is close. We're safe though," he added quickly. "That's that pack I took photos of, the ones in my bedroom? This is their territory."

I'd heard the howl in the mountains before but not this close. It seemed to reverberate through the forest, voices picking it up or dropping it. It was coming from all around us. I sat very still and listened.

"You want to hear something really cool?" Will asked quietly. When I nodded, he put down his knife and wood and leaned over the railings. He tilted his head toward the moon and let loose a howl that blended beautifully with the one to our right. There was a silence, and Will did it again. Then another silence, and the howl picked up on our right again. "They're close," he repeated. "And coming closer. Just past that first lake, I think."

"Were you really communicating with them, or just singing without words?"

"Kind of both," Will laughed. "You pick stuff up when you're around them all the time. For the record, you're not meant to do what I just did. You can confuse the wolves. But I know what I'm doing, and I'm good."

I smiled at Will's usual confidence, but I couldn't deny that I was impressed. "Could you tell them to come here? Your wolf pack, I mean. The ones from your photos."

"You want to meet them?" Will was as excited as he'd been on the trail earlier, his eyes getting wide and his whole body vibrating with excitement.

"Well, you said they're safe right? Of course I'd love to meet them."

"Cool!" Will leaned well over the railing and let out another howl. I wondered if he leaned over the railing to try and protect my ears from the sound—it was loud. He paused and listened as a howl went up beside us again, voices twining together. Then he nodded at me. "They're coming."

I nodded, feeling a thrill of either excitement or fear.

"You want me to teach you?"

"I've done wolf howls at school and stuff."

"Not real ones though, not like I have," Will stepped closer, grinning mischievously at me while the bare bulb gave him a halo. "I'll teach you a special howl, just for you."

"All right then."

Will had me stand up and start quietly, tilting my head all the way back and relaxing my vocal cords. I thought he'd just been messing around, but he took it

very seriously, making me do it again and again to give minute changes in pitch.

"It's like learning another language," he said, leaning close to concentrate. "You have to get it just right or you'll get laughed at."

"Only I won't be laughed at, I'll be eaten," I joked.

Will looked grim, taking it seriously. "I'm teaching you to say that you're my friend and you're not here to hurt anyone. If you do it right, you'll have wolves for friends. They can guide you back to the path if you ever get lost. That's if you're here alone. If you're here with me you won't ever be lost, and if we get separated I'll find you."

I practiced until Will was satisfied with my pitch. Then he made me do it louder, and louder. "Come on, you're talking to all the wolves around. There's a lot of empty space between them, and you've got to be louder than all the sounds of prey in the night. Think of yourself as a king talking to his subjects."

"I can't even imagine that," I said. Then I laughed at how scratchy my voice came out. "You've worn me out."

"Yeah. But I got to hear you sing." He smiled gently. I leaned on the railing beside him and grinned like an idiot. The howl was kind of like a song. A loud, painful song. He nudged my shoulder. "You remember that howl. It will bring you help. You won't ever have to be worried about being lost, or injured, or alone in this forest."

"You said I'm telling the wolves I'm your friend?"

Will hesitated for just a moment. "Yeah."

"Why would they care?"

"Pack thing. Social structure is a really important part of the howl."

"But I mean, is it like all the wolves would know you or something? Like you're their friend?"

"I am. And I can prove it. Look," he nodded over my shoulder.

The light from the cabin cast a semi-circle on the churned snow but beyond that the forest was gloomy. To my right, a pair of wolves was standing just within the range of the light. "Wow," I breathed.

"Yeah," Will said. "They're beautiful. The deer are beautiful in this forest, and the foxes, even the rabbits have extreme grace. But there's nothing like a wolf."

“This is your pack?” I tried to recognize them from the pictures but wolves more or less looked like wolves. I hazarded a guess based on mask color. “That’s the alpha?”

“That’s right. And her mate.” Will looked chuffed. “You want to meet them?”

“Sure.”

I had no idea what I was agreeing to. But as soon as I said it, the wolves came forward into the light as if they could understand what we were saying.

I gasped. “They’re huge. I didn’t know they’d be that big. I thought they’d be like dogs, not bears.”

“Yeah, these ones are actually big for wolves. Like how some breeds of dog are bigger than others?”

“Then these are Saint Bernard wolves,” I mumbled. “Built for the snow and the size of ponies.”

Will wrapped his arm around my waist so his chest was against my shoulder. “You’re safe,” he whispered into my hair.

The wolves came right up to the railing. They really were huge. Their fur was glossy and clean and their yellow eyes were wise and cold. “Beautiful.”

“You should tilt your head to the side,” Will said. His voice was low, and I felt it rumbling in his chest, vibrating down my back. I shivered. “Show them your neck. It’s a sign of respect.”

“I’ll show them respect when they earn it,” I whispered. Will wasn’t showing off his neck, it sounded less like respect and more like submission. I didn’t want to make myself one step closer to lunch meat.

“They earn it by being giant predators with sharp teeth.” But Will sounded amused.

I kept my eyes fixed on the wolf closest to me, the alpha with her dark fur. I could reach out and touch her, she was that close. “I know how to fight,” I said in bravado.

“You hear that?” Will laughed. “Connor’s not afraid of you.”

As if on cue, the alpha rose up and put her front paws on the railing in front of me. Stretched out like that I thought she was easily the same height as me if we’d both been standing on the ground. As it was, I was looking down into her

mouth. And she bared her fangs, letting out a low growl. There were pieces of raw meat caught in her teeth.

I took an involuntary step back, and Will's arm tightened around me. "You're safe," he whispered. "We could go inside?"

"I'm fine." I kept my eyes on the wolf and, feeling like an idiot, twisted my head and tilted my shoulder down so the length of my neck was bared. *Please don't think I look tasty, please don't think I look tasty...* Even facing the threat of the Saint Bernard wolves my thoughts were still on Will's chest, strong and firm against the back of my head, and how his arm around me felt like armor keeping me safe.

The wolf dropped back onto the snow, letting out a snort that sounded smug.

Will squeezed me. "You're very brave. You want to touch them?"

"If you do." I couldn't very well say no right after he'd told me how brave I was.

Will let me go and dropped to his knees. He leaned under the railing and held out a hand. The wolf that wasn't the alpha came right up to us, leaning against the patio so Will could scratch behind its ears.

"I can't believe you're doing that."

"It feels nice. He likes it. See?" The wolf's eyes were lazily half-closed. "Like having a back rub."

I knelt beside him and touched the wolf's back, fingers trembling. Will coaxed me, "That's right." He put his hand over mine and guided my fingers to a spot low on the wolf's neck where a collar would have been on a dog. I scratched at it and the wolf let out a low groan and leaned closer like he was trying to wiggle up the side of the porch.

"They're so huge," I whispered again. "Where are the rest of the pack? That pretty red one? Are they here?"

"I can't hear them. This one's the alpha's mate. When the alpha picks a mate it's made top of the social chain like the alpha. The alpha pair are almost always the only ones in the pack who are allowed to mate. I've always thought that seemed kind of cruel, all the others miss out on love because they weren't born an alpha or picked by the alpha."

"That's just nature," I said. "Besides, I'd rather be a wolf than a bee. Only one out of millions gets to mate. I don't like those odds."

“You’re right, I never thought of that,” Will laughed. He looked at me as we squatted there on the porch in front of a pair of wolves. “You’re happy?”

“Really happy,” I agreed. “If tomorrow’s the same as today I’ll be sold on this forest.”

He grinned, cocky and gorgeous. “Tomorrow will be better than today. I’ll make sure of it.”

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## Chapter Four

### *Will*

Werewolves came of age at fifteen, and it was traditional that they took a year off to do anything they wanted. The idea was it shaped the kind of werewolf you'd grow into, and gave you a chance to explore your interests. Like my brother Dave had left for California to explore his love of tattooing and not freezing his ass off, and hadn't looked back after his year was up. And my mom had chosen to spend her year leading my grandparents' pack, and two years later, they'd handed the reins over to her.

I wanted to bite Connor and spend a year rolling around in the snow with him as a wolf and in the bed with him as a human. But I didn't think he was ready for that—he was living in the shadow of his parents, still shy and scared like a wounded puppy. I didn't think he was ready to find out about werewolves. I'd tested him out, introducing him to my parents in wolf form and talking to him a bit about wolves. He obviously liked wolves. And when he'd seen pictures of me in my wolf form, standing out with my reddish fur, he seemed to like it. But liking wolves wasn't the same as liking werewolves, so I didn't want to push things.

Then there was the fact that I wanted him as more than a friend. All around us, the kids at school were getting interested in sex, but Connor just kept his eyes on his text books and played his drums. I hadn't seen him show an interest in anyone, guy or girl; though I was half-convinced that was because the options in our town was too country bumpkin for his out-of-state tastes. I'd looked at myself in the mirror enough to figure that I could charm the pants off anyone, even a straight guy. But I couldn't even think about making a move on Connor until I knew he was good and ready.

So for my fifteenth year, I gave into my other interest—wolves. I kept going to school and track meets because I wanted to be around Connor, but at night and on the weekends I ran with the wolves. Werewolves are species punks who stick to their own and don't integrate with humans or wolves. I didn't know much about wolves beyond where they overlapped with werewolves or what a hunter would know.

But that year, I ran with the wolves. I started with the territory nearest my house and got to know that pack, their habits and personalities and social structure, their wants and needs. Then I moved on to the next territory, and the



next. I memorized the wolves and learned to hear their voices on the howl so I could talk to them as easily as talking to a person on the phone. I got to know wolves.

I'd always been passionate about maintaining a healthy wolf population in the mountains. A large part of that was keeping wolves and humans apart. Territories near the edge of the forest were most risky because humans lived and kept cattle there. I talked to those wolves about avoiding livestock and even went as far as to introduce them to the local guard dogs and try to open communication between them. I figured if wolves understood the importance of staying away from certain areas or eating certain animals, and if they knew where those animals and areas were, I could keep them from getting hurt.

I'd always been skilled at picking up on emotions, but out there in the deep forest of Jagged Rock Mountains I honed my senses. I practiced on wolves and at night, when that week's wolf pack slept around me, I practiced on the forest. I listened to all the creatures and insects and the movements of the trees and snow. I reached out further and further away from myself until it was like my senses were a map of the world around me, as big and real as the world itself.

I practiced on Connor, too. I learned to sense the tiniest shift toward sadness like the smell before rain so I could always keep him happy. I learned exactly how much I could give in to my need to touch him. I could nudge his shoulder or ruffle his hair, rest a hand on his arm or hug him and he'd let out waves of comfort and happiness. But if I pushed things too far it was like he was shutting down, and he'd send out alarm bells of fear and anxiety that hurt my stomach. I thought it was probably to do with his parents who kept him at arm's distance so he hadn't grown up being physical like I had. But whatever the cause, I wasn't going to push it.

The worst part of that year was the summer holidays. Connor's parents went out of state and insisted on taking him with them, even when I got my parents to join in on begging him to stay with us. It was three months of loneliness and aching longing. I'd fall asleep with him on the phone just to hear the sound of his breathing. We emailed and even used old-fashioned snail mail. Connor updated me with the new bands he was enjoying—branching out from jazz to listen to country and rap and metal, racing through musical genres. I'd listen to every song he sent me, and we'd often listen together, laughing and commenting like we were sitting around a CD player together even though we were many miles apart. He'd show me what he was learning on the drums and

sometimes, when he was at his happiest and didn't think I was listening too closely, he'd sing along with me.

I knew he was my mate. I didn't know how mates worked, how all that "coincidence so huge it looked like fate" stuff worked. But in those long months, when I wanted nothing more than Connor running beside me, it didn't feel like some outside force pushing us together. It felt like I was in love and wouldn't be happy until the love of my life was back in my life.

I took my dad's advice and talked to my uncle Bren about mates. Bren worked as a vet and lived on a farm with some more of my family. I rode up there one day and found him in the horse paddock. "Got time to talk?" I asked. "My dad said you knew a lot about mating bonds."

His smile faded a little. "I do know a lot. You want to know how to do it?"

"I pretty much just bite my mate, right? And it has to be at the full moon? Then he'll feel the bond?"

"Pretty much. You're an alpha's kid so your bite can turn humans into werewolves. Is that all you wanted to know?"

I shook my head. "I can follow you, and we can talk while you work, if that's okay? I can ride a horse."

He nodded. I helped him saddle up two of the horses, and we set out across the paddocks. As we rode he said, "You want to claim Connor."

"Yes. What do you think of him?"

"You really want to know?" Bren was genuinely surprised.

"Of course. That's why I asked."

He shook his head slowly. "If you don't mind me saying, that is not something your mom would ever ask me. You're one weird alpha."

I snorted. "You're an omega. Does that mean your opinion doesn't matter?"

"It kinda does." Bren was still looking at me sideways. "You're unusually sensitive for an alpha."

I recoiled. "You mean weak?"

"No, no." He held out a soothing hand. "I mean empathetic. You're caring. I've heard it on the howl—the wolves talk about you treating them well."

"Because I'm a werewolf. Looking after wolves is one of our duties, right? We're protectors."

"I agree. But not everyone thinks so." Bren shook his head slowly. "The wolves like you a lot."

"You still haven't told me what you think of Connor." I was going to claim him no matter what; he was my mate. But I wanted a werewolf to tell me what they thought of him—my parents' cold disinterest didn't help.

"I like him a lot. I'm not just saying that. He's clever and quick. He seems shy, but he's not a pushover. He talks you down, which is frankly amazing. I've seen how you've changed since you met him, so I know he's great for you."

I smiled with delight. "You think so?"

But Bren wasn't smiling. "I just don't know if you're good for him."

"What do you mean? I know his life has gotten better since we met. I'm like a guardian angel."

"I don't doubt that," Bren said quickly. Then he sighed. "You know what the mating bond is?"

"It's a connection between werewolves. It ties them together forever, like marriage but more so. Their power is united."

"Yeah. But it's also like a love potion. You can't fight it."

"I wouldn't want to."

"But Connor might." Bren dismounted to walk along a fence, and I kept pace with him from my horse. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I do."

"Right now he's a human. He can't feel the mating bond. But the moment you bite him it's going to take him over, like a drug. It will wipe out any of his human emotions that contradict it. Say he hates your guts, that's going to disappear the moment you bite him. Or if he's in love with someone else, or if he's straight, or if he's not interested in settling down—that will all disappear. He'll be joined to you, forever. Is that something you're okay with?"

"Oh." I'd never thought of it like that. I felt sick.

"What does he want to do in the future? College, a career?"

"Maybe college. I told him we'd do whatever he wanted after we finished school."

"Forget it. His plans will disappear; he'll just want to be your mate. Does he want to travel?"

"I don't know." I didn't, so it didn't occur to me anyone else would. "Maybe."

"He can't. He's tied to this town forever."

I blinked. I felt dizzy, as much from the abrupt way the usually-calm Bren was talking as from the words themselves. Mom had talked about how important it was that my mate love Layton and Jagged Rock, but I hadn't realized this was what she was getting at. I'd be tying him to one place forever?

"The mating bond is a love potion, and it's also a collar and a leash," Bren went on. "When you bite your mate you'll link him to your pack and your territory as well as to you."

"I didn't realize."

"I know. I know you didn't. That's the only way that someone as nice as you could be grinning at the idea of biting his mate."

I grimaced. Because I still wanted to. My teeth itched for the feel of his skin, and I couldn't erase the idea that it would be heavenly to spend a life beside him at any cost. What kind of monster did that make me?

"What are you going to do?" Bren asked quietly.

"Not bite him. Of course not. If biting him means forcing him to love me against his will I'd..." I fought against the nausea in my stomach. "I'd rather die."

"The mating bond isn't love, it's a connection. An alpha and the person who best suits that alpha, uniting to make a strong team. Your mate will be tied to you but that doesn't mean he'll love you."

"That's even worse, isn't it? Like being married to someone you don't love?"

"No matter what, it will be good for you in the long term. That's what a mate is for—to make you stronger and a more effective leader. They're your mate because they're good for you."

"But what about him? I hoped... I mean, I love him." The confession felt huge now. "I thought the mating bond would, you know, make him think better of me. A little. Like a soft focus lens in the movies. I'd look more appealing, but it's not like he wouldn't have a choice..." I trailed off. I guess I hadn't thought this through.

I'd always just known that's what you did: You found your mate and you mated with them. Bam. I was used to the idea of werewolves mating, both of them feeling the connection and knowing what they were getting into. "You're making biting sound like a curse, like I'll take away a big part of him."

"It's not a curse," Bren said quietly. "But it is a life change. And for you it's a responsibility. If you bite someone they're tied to you. Under your command, and tied to your pack and your territory. Forever. With Connor it's just worse because he'll feel the mating bond when he's bitten."

I touched my mouth absently. All the little weapons I was carrying around with me and never thought about.

"I'm not trying to scare you," Bren said. "I just want you to know all the facts before you make any decision. You will change Connor, you'll become a part of him when you bite him. Think long and hard and decide what your conscience can handle. For the sake of being a good leader, are you willing to change your mate forever? But remember there are upsides. Longer life. Strength and agility. No sickness, healing from all wounds. I've spoken to a few turned werewolves and they've all told me there's a sense of purpose that comes with the bite, like contentment with your place in the universe that they never had as humans."

"But he'll be tied to me forever, whether he wants to be or not. Pretty big downside."

"That's your call. The bond won't make him love you but it will probably make him want to."

My vision of running through the forest with a Connor-wolf faded. A future together, gone. Those dreams were ugly and pointless if they meant Connor didn't get any other future or any other dreams.

I thought about my urge to bite him, the nights I'd spent chomping down on a stick or my pillow just to make my teeth hurt less. There were times when my lips had brushed Connor's neck, and I'd obsessed over those. Standing behind him at tennis practice and guiding him with my hands around his body. Hugging him after he won an academic award and holding on a little longer because he was trembling at having to go alone on stage. That prank I'd played on one of our school friends, hiding in a cupboard and only realizing too late that I had to crush up chest-to-chest with Connor, nowhere to go and nowhere to put my face but the crook of his neck.

The memories were carved into my mind like grooves on a record, and I played them just as easily, over and over the moment I was alone. I wanted to bite him.

And *this* was what I'd been fantasizing about? My bite would be like paint, pouring over Connor and hiding all his hopes and dreams so all he had left was me. "I can't do that to Connor. Mess with him like that. What do I do?"

"That's up to you."

"You don't think I should bite him?"

Bren sighed. "I kind of wish I hadn't told you anything. I think you shouldn't have asked. Because then you could have just bitten him and been happy."

"What happens if I don't bite him? We can still be friends."

"It will make you weaker. You're pouring energy into the bond and, until you claim your mate, you're not getting anything back. If you don't claim him you'll be worse off than if you'd never found your mate at all."

I didn't care if I was weakened, there was only one thing I cared about. "But what about Connor?"

"Maybe you can be friends. Maybe it will drive you mad." Bren climbed back onto his horse. He looked down at me as he said, "But I think no one understands the mating bond, not really. I don't think it can be stopped. Even if your mate doesn't feel it like you do, I think he'll feel *something*. The world has pulled you together, and it's not going to let you off that easily."

We were silent as we rode for a few minutes. I was feeling sick and shaky. I wanted to get back into the mountains. I wanted to move back in time, back to when I'd just been excited about claiming my mate. But even that word made Connor sound like he was just an add-on or a sidekick, and that wasn't right at all.

"It's not my choice to make, is it?" I asked.

"It's your decision if you bite him or not."

"I think it's up to Connor. I'll let him decide. When we're older, and I've told him everything. I'll keep Connor safe and happy until he's ready, then I'll tell him about werewolves. Maybe when he's eighteen. When he knows, he can decide for himself."

## Chapter Five

*Connor*

When I was fifteen, I spent the summer holidays out of state. Mom was going to a big teacher's conference so Dad took the time off too, and they dragged me along. Dad spent days or weeks at a time meeting up with his old army buddies, getting trashed and angry. I'd sat alone in a hotel room day in and day out, going quietly crazy.

I practiced my drums and I sketched, I went online and read books. The same things I'd always done in my spare time. But I missed Will so badly that, for the first time in my life, I wished the holidays would end so I could get back to school. He called me every night and wrote me emails and letters, but I still couldn't get enough. I wanted him there beside me, even if we weren't talking, just to be there with his cocky smile and an arm around my shoulders.

I was a lovesick idiot, and I tried to hate it, tried to tell myself it wasn't healthy to think so much about someone else when I could have been focusing on my hobbies. But I didn't hate it. It felt great to pine over Will.

Being in love was awesome. I still got to do all the things I enjoyed, I didn't lose any of my ambitions or my hobbies, but I got to share them with Will. He was always listening and always interested, the best friend I'd dreamed of but never thought was real.

I thought of him every time I found a cool new band online or read a funny story or found out an interesting piece of information. I was constantly excited thinking about sharing things with Will. I practiced phrasing in my head until my anecdotes were witty and polished, so by the time I was on the phone with Will, I was guaranteed to make him laugh.

It was weird, but in those long months alone I actually felt myself becoming less shy. I felt more comfortable in my own skin, and I opened up to Will more and told him my boring little embarrassing secrets. I introduced him to Led Zeppelin and got to laugh at his excitement, and then got to listen to his crooning Robert Plant impressions. I was so totally in love with Will, I couldn't deny it. I knew I would have to spend the rest of my life hiding it, but for those three months, when he couldn't see my face, I could let myself indulge in stupid happy smiles whenever I heard his voice.

And, with my crazy teen libido, I'd sometimes touch myself when he was talking. He had this dirty laugh that sent my pulse through the roof. I'd turn the lights off and lie in bed while he told me about Layton and the Jagged Rock Mountains and the wolves, which he was studying over the holidays. He was so passionate when he talked about his hometown. I'd close my eyes as his voice got hoarse from talking, imagining his lips on my skin or that sexy rough laugh as he whispered impossibly dirty things to me.

I was nervous on the first day back at school. All my newfound confidence wilted as I approached the big school building in my ugly sack uniform. What if those months of talking hadn't meant anything to him? What if he was just talking to me because he was bored? I knew I had to hide how in love with him I was and that he wouldn't feel *that* way about me. But what if he didn't even acknowledge me at all?

I was outside the main doors when I heard running footsteps. Will threw himself in front of me, grinning hugely with his bag barely hanging on to one shoulder. "Connor! Give me a hug?"

I opened my arms, and he grabbed me tight. He was laughing as he lifted me off the ground and spun me around. I hoped my mom had driven away and wouldn't see this. I hoped the whole world would see this.

"I missed you so much!" He cried. "You can't imagine." He smelled of warm wood chips and varnish, and his hair was soft on my face despite all the product he must put into it. In a daze, I thought of how strong he was, how effortlessly strong.

He was still grinning like an idiot when he lowered me to the ground and looked me over. I felt self-conscious in the same clothes as last year when he was all new and shiny looking. I tugged at the hem of my uniform polo and prayed my shorts would cover any reaction to the heat and strength of his body against mine.

He was even more handsome than I'd remembered, his skin sun-kissed and his eyes a deep, laughing brown. He was taller and broader, his arms firm and his waist tight and narrow in his shirt. It seemed tailored for him like he was the model showing us how to wear the uniform that looked like old sacks on the rest of us.

"You've grown tall," he crowed.

"You have," I mumbled. I could feel myself blushing, and I tugged my shirt down again. People were staring at us as they walked past, but Will didn't seem to care.



"I've brought you something," he said, shrugging off his bag. His shirt pulled tight over his wide shoulders and shaped pecs. What had he been doing, pumping weights all holiday? He looked amazing. I had to keep blinking to keep myself grounded. Months apart had convinced me that I'd imagined Will's good looks. Letters and endless phone calls had not prepared me for how huge and warm and *close* he was.

He gave me a square package of waxy butcher's paper, carefully wrapped and with a string bow on top. "I watched videos on how to tie that bow," Will laughed. He loomed over me to watch as I opened the present. "Took me *hours*."

"It's amazing. You shouldn't have." My hands were trembling, and my cheeks felt hot. "I didn't get you anything."

Inside the present was a framed photograph of a wolf in the snow. I noticed the dark wood frame didn't have any seams—maybe he'd carved it himself out of solid wood? Then my eyes went to the wolf. Its gray fur had hints of red, dramatic against the white backdrop. Its head was thrown back in a howl. "It's beautiful," I breathed. "You took this?"

"Just for you."

"It's that wolf I like. You remembered." Maybe it would have been hokey and '90s if he'd bought it in a shop. But I couldn't imagine anything cooler than taking a photo of a wolf howling.

"Yeah." Will looked as delighted as if I was the one who gave *him* a gift. He pulled me into a one-armed hug, and looked right in my face as he said, "I missed you, Con."

"Me too," I mumbled. I couldn't look into his eyes any longer, and I focused on the calloused woodworker's hand hanging casually at his side while the other burned a hole in my shoulder. I wondered how long it would be before I got used to him again and could stop feeling awkward and clumsy and shy.

It took three weeks, I found out. Three weeks of stuttering and tripping over my feet and forgetting what I was saying whenever Will smiled at me. On the plus side, I was like that around everyone so Will didn't notice that he made me especially nervous.

The confidence I'd found over the holidays started coming back over the weeks. I'd had Will as a friend for years, but after those holidays apart he became an even better friend. He was always beside me and cheering me up or making me laugh.

The only downside was having to hide how I really felt about him. I hated lying to him. I told myself that it wasn't really lying. We were best friends. I didn't expect anything more. It wasn't like I was pretending to be his friend. I was his friend. Being around him made me feel good—and he obviously felt the same. We were friends. I was just also in love with him. I just had to make sure I didn't slip up and say anything too romantic.

One evening in junior high, I did slip up. Will was at my house studying. We were also playing bottle cap hockey around our books whenever Mom wasn't looking. Will was winning at bottle cap hockey, of course. He had just bounced his bottle cap off a glass to send it spinning through my goal.

“One more for Will!” He whispered and held a finger up proudly. He glanced to the side to double-check that Mom wasn't around. And then he did a tiny touchdown dance, wiggling in his seat. “The crowd goes wild! Will's too hot to handle!”

There was a glass of water on the table. I dipped my fingers into it and flicked some onto Will's face. “Better cool you down if you're that hot.”

Will laughed loudly, throwing his head back. Then he clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes darting toward the kitchen.

He looked so ridiculously guilty that I couldn't help giggling. Will started giggling too. Soon we were both curled up in our seats, trying to keep the volume down as we laughed at nothing.

Will still had a hand clamped over his mouth, and his eyes crinkled with laughter. There was never any laughter in the house when he wasn't there. I'd miss him the moment he was gone. And then it slipped out: “I wish you could stay the night.”

As soon as I said it, I felt like a fool. My cheeks got hot, and I looked down at my open book. I waited for Will to tell me that was weird or to act like I hadn't said anything.

But he said simply, “I could.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table and face pushing forward so I was forced to look at him. “You want me to stay?”

His eyes were endless and dark, and I felt like I was falling into them like an open hole. “My parents wouldn't let you,” I mumbled.

“I'll climb in your window.”

“My room is on the second floor.”

“I’ll climb in your second floor window.”

I laughed. The corner of Will’s mouth lifted, but he kept looking at me seriously. It was like he was trying to stare me down, waiting for me to take back the words. “Okay,” I said. “I call your bluff. Let’s see you do it.”

He did, too. I left a window open that night, even though it was freezing cold, and I didn’t really think Will could get through my window. But he did. He clambered in and dropped onto my bed, shoes in his hands so he wouldn’t make a noise. “Miss me?” he whispered.

From that day onward, he slept over at my house regularly. We’d talk in whispers or listen to music through headphones or just sleep. He’d be gone in the morning. I had to work harder than ever to not slip up and say something gooey. But it was worth it because, day by day, I felt more confident in myself and less scared of the dark. Will was always there for me, day or night. I wasn’t a lonely guy anymore.

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School with Will was perfect. The only cloud was his friends—his cousin Joseph and their group of jocks. They were nice when Will was around, and the others treated me all right or ignored me when he wasn’t. But Joseph picked on me constantly like I had personally offended him somehow. I had no idea how to make him stop, all I could do was ignore him and walk away. I knew Will would set him straight, but I hated feeling like I had to go to someone else for help, like I wasn’t capable of defending myself.

One morning break, I finally snapped. I was in line in the dining hall when Will wasn’t around and Joseph noticed me.

“Hey Connor,” he called. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

I shouldn’t have loitered. Not for long enough for Joseph to notice me. I turned and walked away.

But Joseph wasn’t having any of that. He followed me, raising his voice. “I asked you a question. Where’s your boyfriend?”

I kept walking. I hated him calling Will that. I knew some people thought I was Will’s boyfriend, and I was terrified it would get back to Will. What if he laughed at the idea, or got embarrassed and didn’t want to be around me anymore?

“Answer me!” Joseph’s voice got angrier and louder.

I didn't let myself show any emotion, and I tried to not feel any. I kept my head down and didn't meet anyone's eyes. I heard the charge of footsteps and just had time to raise my arms protectively before I was slammed into the cafeteria door. Joseph's shoulder was wedged into my back, pinning me to the wall. He was massive compared to me, and I had to fight the burst of panic that threatened to paralyze me.

"Not so tough without Will, are you?" Joseph growled into my ear. I could hear people screaming in the hall and the scuffling of feet behind us. I knew no one would haul Joseph off me, not with his big group of jocks standing around. *How could Will be friends with them?* Joseph's breath smelled like cafeteria ketchup, thick and sweet.

"I don't know what he sees in you," Joseph said. "You're a weak loser that no one's ever going to want. You're never going to get laid, you're just a pathetic, tiny little—"

I cut him off with my elbow. I'd been aiming for his stomach, but I knocked his hip bone. Flames of agony burst up my arm. But my combat training had kicked in, finally useful after years of sparring with Dad. I brought my foot down on Joseph's shin then again on his knee, driving against his kneecap with all the force I could manage from the bad angle.

It wasn't much but it was enough. Joseph shifted his weight backward, and the pressure on my back was eased. I twisted out from under his shoulder and faced him with my fists balled. Joseph was twice my size, and the hit to his knee barely seemed to faze him. He took one look at me staring him down, and he grinned widely.

All the years of nagging comments and tiny torture crashed down on me at once, and my body was flooded with anger. I glared at Joseph. "Come on then," I growled. "Let's see you fight me face-to-face."

The mocking smile slid from his face, and for a moment, just a moment, I saw him look perplexed and vulnerable. Then his expression iced over so fast I could almost think I'd just imagined it. He stood up straight, towering over me, tilting his chin up to look down at me. "You're not worth my time," he sneered. He jerked his head at his friends, and they all walked away together.

I sagged against the wall, all the fight draining out of me to leave me sick and shaking. What had I just done? Actually challenged the biggest guy in school? I wasn't a fighter. But I wasn't going to let someone push me around, either.

“Are you okay?” It was a girl asking. Chop. I knew her by sight—everyone did. She was the only Asian kid at school and also the only punk. She was friends with Olivia, who I tried to avoid.

“I’m fine,” I told her.

“That guy’s a jerk,” she said decisively. “He didn’t hurt you?”

“No, he didn’t. And he is,” I added. “Thanks.”

People were staring, so I shouldered my bag and lost myself in the crowd. I headed away from the cafeteria, and no one followed me. Head down, eyes on the ground, I didn’t make eye contact in case anyone was staring at me.

Joseph *was* a jerk. And all those guys who’d stood around and let him be a jerk, they were all jerks too. It didn’t matter if they dressed well and were good at sports—hanging around them didn’t make me feel any good at all.

At lunch that day, I hid in a corridor facing the staff parking. It was dismal, but at least it was quiet. The windows had deep recesses so I could sit on them, both legs on the window sill in front of me and my head on the glass. I watched my breath clouding up the glass, again and again until beads of condensation dripped down the pane. I tried to convince myself I wasn’t hungry, and I wasn’t lonely.

“Hey, Con. I’ve been looking everywhere.” It was Will, leaning up against the box of the window and grinning at me. Even in his uniform blazer and shorts, he was effortlessly cool, slouching like a moody rock star on the cover of a magazine. He belonged with his jock friends, keeping them in line. Joseph was right—there was nothing to see in me. I looked away from him and back out the window.

Will picked my feet up and slid them along the window sill until my knees were bent, and he dropped into the recess in front of me, knees bent and his shoes resting alongside mine. “I brought you some food, didn’t see you at the cafeteria and figured you’d be hungry.”

He held out a paper bag, but I didn’t take it from him. “I’ve got you some of that caramel pudding you like. It’s not on the student menu, but Venice in the kitchen smuggled me out some just for you.”

“Why’d you do that?” I could hear the petulance in my voice, but I couldn’t stop it.

“You like caramel pudding,” Will chuckled.

“I mean, why’d you bring me food?”

“I didn’t see you in the cafeteria, and I thought you’d be hungry so—”

“Why do you hang around with me at all?”

“Because you’re my best friend.”

“But why?” I snapped. I rubbed at the patch of condensation on the window, smearing the droplets over the glass.

“What do you mean?” Will asked. His voice was low and steady, so calm that it got on my nerves right then.

I tucked my arms around me and kept my focus on the window smear until I started going cross-eyed. “What do you see in me? You could be friends with anyone.”

“I don’t want to be friends with anyone, I want to be friends with you. You’re smart. And funny. And really tough. You care about things I care about and make me care about things I don’t. I like you. I miss you when you’re not around. And if I think about going even a day without you I—” Will stopped talking and just nudged my feet with his. He said softly, “I like you. That’s what I mean.”

I nodded. There was a lump in my throat, and I couldn’t seem to swallow it down. *Even a day without you...* Didn’t I know it. It was like Will was feeling exactly what I was feeling—only the buddies version, the part where you goof around with someone and get close to them but never actually fantasize about kissing them or passing hours just looking at them. What would that be like, having a friend I could just like and not worship? Being able to look at his smile without getting butterflies in my stomach, not feeling like the ground was dropping out from under me whenever he leaned close.

Will leaned closer now, putting a hand on my bare shin. “What’s wrong, Con?”

Heat was running up my leg where his skin was against mine. What would it be like, just being friends? I couldn’t even imagine. And for this, for the chance to be close to him and be touched by him, I’d put up with... Everything else. But I’d had enough. “Your friends are jerks,” I mumbled.

“Our friends.”

“Your friends,” I corrected. “They only talk to me because of you. The moment you’re gone they turn on me like a pack of hyenas.”

“Did Joseph do something?”

“Yeah.” I hated feeling like a tattletale, or like I was running to Will like a kid running to a parent.

“I can kick his ass for you.”

“No, don't. This isn't a movie, I don't want vengeance. I just don't want to be around him anymore.”

“Okay. We won't be around him anymore.”

Will's hand was still on my leg. I was having trouble thinking straight.

After a while he asked, “What did he say?”

Joseph had called Will my boyfriend in front of the whole cafeteria. What were the chances that hadn't gotten back to Will? And if I mentioned it, would he be shocked at the idea, or offended that I thought it was an insult? I didn't think it was an insult. And I didn't think I could talk about it without it being obvious how badly I wanted it.

Thankfully, Joseph gave me enough insults that I could pick and choose which one to seem offended by. “He called me weak and made fun of me for being a virgin.”

“Well, you're not weak. And there's nothing wrong with being a virgin. Joseph's a big poo-head.”

I couldn't help a laugh. Will squeezed my leg, and I choked, spraying spit on the window in front of me. That made me laugh more. “You want to tell everyone else that?”

“That Joseph's a big poo-head? I think everyone can see that for themselves.”

“No, the other thing. About virgins.” I rubbed at the glass with my sleeve.

Will tucked his legs up so he could inch closer to me, sliding along the window sill until his chin was nearly resting on my knees. His face was serious, he wasn't joking around anymore. “Do you want to have sex?”

I froze. What the hell was he offering? My mind went blank like a computer shutting down. It was a few moments before reboot and I whirred back to life, actually thinking about his question.

Did I want to have sex? With Will? Didn't I think about it often enough when he wasn't around and I didn't have to feel guilty about where my mind

went? Did I want it? “Well, yeah. No. Maybe. I’m not sure.” I couldn’t break eye contact, Will’s brown gaze was so steady.

“Well, if you’re not sure, it’s too soon,” Will said. He smiled gently. “If you’re ready, you’ll know. You’ll be so sure. And right now you’re not ready and nothing Joseph says should change that. Who cares what Joseph says?”

I swallowed. I could feel my cheeks getting red and wished the window could open so I could just stick my head out into the snow and freeze the shame right out of my face. Of course, Will was asking a hypothetical and didn’t mean it *like that*. How could I think he was propositioning me right there in the hallway on a chilly Thursday afternoon? To cover my embarrassment, or maybe make it worse, I mumbled, “I haven’t even kissed anyone yet.”

“Well, is there anyone you want to kiss?”

This conversation was impossible, with Will practically sitting in my lap and looking so sweet and understanding. There was no way I could answer that question. I sidetracked, “I just feel like everyone else is in this secret club, and I’m not invited.”

“The kissing club? Sounds like a way to spread strep throat.”

“You know what I mean.” I rolled my eyes.

“If there’s a secret club and they don’t want you to be a member then I don’t want to be either,” Will laughed. “But I don’t think there is one. I think everyone’s feeling just as confused and isolated as you are. And not nearly as many people are having sex or kissing as you might think. And even if they were, that shouldn’t change your life at all, right? I mean it: Who cares what Joseph thinks.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“I can kick Joseph’s ass, but you can outsmart him any day.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I eyed Will, looking so effortlessly cool and gorgeous just sitting there in his ugly uniform. I was always flustered and embarrassed, and Will was always confident. Did he really not understand the effect he had on people? On me? “It’s easy for you to not care what people think when you know people want you. I’ve never even been kissed.”

Will laughed, leaning back so his head was against the wall, and his hands fell into his lap with only his shoes touching mine. For a moment, I thought he was laughing at my dorky confession or my weakness, but then I saw his sweet smile. “You think I go around kissing people, Con?”



“Well, yeah,” I mumbled.

He shook his head. He was looking at me across the space of the windowsill all dark and graceful and so breathtakingly beautiful. “I don’t,” he said. “And I’ll tell you what—neither does Joseph. So don’t go thinking there’s some kind of race and you’re losing it because there isn’t and you’re not.”

“Wait. You mean you never...” It was weird, and too much to imagine. I thought Will had to be sexually active, even if he didn’t talk about it. I’d imagined this side of him that he never talked to me about. To think that he was just as inexperienced as me was inconceivable. But the moment the thought took seed, I desperately wanted it to be true.

Will grinned. “Nope. Never kissed anyone. Does that make you feel better?”

“Yes. It actually does.”

He slid onto the ground and threw an arm around my shoulder, giving me a quick hug. “So now we don’t hang out with Joseph and his poo-head club for jerks. You want to hang out here all the time? Because I’ve got a better idea. Let’s go sit in the music rooms.”

“Oh. No. We probably shouldn’t.”

“Students are allowed in there. People go there all the time.”

“That’s the problem. There’s this girl...”

“Oh.” Will’s eyes went wide. “You’ve got a crush?”

“No! I don’t! That’s the problem. It’s this girl, Olivia. She’s the daughter of one of the rangers and Dad wants me to...” I ducked my head, wishing I hadn’t said anything. How many times in one day would I accidentally make Will talk to me about sex?

“Oh, I know her. The one from Canada, the insane hunter?”

I nodded.

“Your dad thinks you two would make a cute couple?”

“Something like that.” He thought Olivia would “make a man of me” and had been dropping hints ever since the day he’d come home with a photograph of her next to a bear she’d shot. Dad didn’t hassle me as much as he used to, but he still made no secret of how disappointed he was in me as a son. He seemed to think that pairing me off with a skilled hunter was the solution.

A skilled *female* hunter, naturally. I didn't want to imagine the ways Dad would find to make my life hell if he ever found out about my feelings for Will. I kept my feelings hidden, and I kept away from Olivia.

"We can hide in the drum practice room, no one will bug us," he soothed. "We can even put up a sign saying 'No Girls Allowed'?"

"No, I'm being an idiot. We should just go. We probably won't even see her."

So, naturally, we saw her the very next day. I was practicing on the school drum kit while Will sang along with my radio. The door burst open, and there was Olivia and her friend Chop.

It was Chop who spoke, pointing at me. "Was that you playing?"

I looked down at the brushes in my hands, paused over the drums. "Yes."

"Obviously," Will said loudly. "He was practicing. You're interrupting."

I shot him a grateful look. But Chop just ignored him. She said to me, "You're really good."

"Thank you."

"You know any metal?"

"He plays jazz," Will said. "Besides, aren't you meant to be punk?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Who said I was punk?" Then she turned back to me. "I play guitar and I'm really good. Really, really good. And Liv here's good too. We've got a guy who can play bass all right. We're just looking for a drummer."

"He's not interested," Will said.

Olivia said, "Is that because you have feelings for me, Connor?"

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. I wanted to look to Will for help, but I was too embarrassed even for that.

Olivia pressed on, "Because I've never even spoken to you before, and you're not my type. And if you're anything like your father then I don't want you joining our band."

I mumbled, "I'm not."

"You're not interested in me, or you're not like your dad?"

"Both. Neither." I glanced over at Will. *Help!*

Will said, "He'll need to hear you play before he decides anything. And you better be fantastic, all of you. Because he is."

"Was that you singing before?" Chop asked. "Because you might have a place in the band, too, if you can treat an audience better than you're treating us."

"Let's hear you play, first," Will said. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Chop.

Three days later, when the five of us took every chance to jam in the school's music room together, I wondered why I'd ever put up with Joseph at all. And, better yet, Will was saying the same thing.

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## Chapter Six

### *Will*

Connor was fascinated with tattoos. He'd mentioned them even before the first time he'd seen me shirtless and noticed mine. My brother Dave was a tattooist and had given me our family crest on my back before he'd left. He promised he was going to give me more, but then his year away had become two and then five and he'd never come back for visits. When we talked on the phone or wrote to each other, we still talked about tattoos, and I was still planning to get more.

A summer without Connor was enough to prove to me that I should spend as much time with him as humanly possible. By age sixteen, we were spending nearly every waking moment together, sitting together in class, then practicing with the band and going to track. Later, I'd go over to his house and stay the evening, then sneak into his window at night when his parents didn't know.

It was on one of those nights that I was there without permission that Connor finally asked me about getting a tattoo of his own. We'd been talking about it like water circling a drain, swirling around and taking our time to get to the point. I'd talk about Dave's career and show Connor photos of his designs or finished work or his modified tattoo machines. I'd talk about my plans for a full sleeve and the designs Dave had sent me. Connor would tell me about books he'd read on tattooing and things he'd seen online, he'd show me designs and ask my opinion on how he'd suit them or how they would affect his life and career. But he didn't directly ask if Dave could tattoo him until one night when we were sixteen.

I'd left his house and driven down the block then later climbed in the window. Connor was sitting up on his bed in the dark in his flannel pajamas with just his feet tucked under the covers. He smiled when he saw me in the window. "Good evening."

"Hey buddy, long time no see," I whispered. He scooted over to give me more room even though there was plenty already. I settled on his pillows with my back against the wall like he had. "I've just had a call from Dave. He's going to be back in town soon."

"Just to visit?"

"I don't think so. I think he's coming back-back, forever or for a long time." Or for the year or two that it took for me to take charge of the pack, his loyalty would be important and his support invaluable. "I'm excited."

"It's been a while. You might not even recognize him."

I chuckled with a hand over my mouth to keep quiet. "Dave's Dave. I don't think he can change much. I can't wait for you two to meet each other."

"I'd love to meet him." Connor drummed his fingers on his knee for a few moments, steeling himself. "Are you going to get more tattoos?"

"Pretty much the moment he walks in the door. I can't wait to have that design we've been working on."

"The roses one?"

"Yeah." Dave had been sending me sketches of flowers growing from barren winter trees, bleak and beautiful.

"Would he tattoo me too?"

"Maybe when you're older," I hedged.

"You got one when you were eleven."

Which I could remove with little effort, any time I wanted to. But I wasn't about to explain werewolf healing to Connor. "Don't get a tattoo just because I have one."

"I'm not. It's what I want. It's what I've wanted for so long."

"I don't want you to do anything you'll regret."

"You think I'm fickle? I'm not. I don't make rash decisions. My few regrets are from missed chances."

I loved the way Connor talked sometimes. When he got riled up he talked like an old-school book on etiquette, and I couldn't get enough of it. It made me wonder what he saw in a slob like me who loved running more than reading. "I don't think you're fickle. It's just a big decision."

"One which I've already made."

He could barely see me, I knew, but I could see him clearly. His brow was furrowed and his lips were twisted. I hated seeing Connor looking messed up. I put an arm around his shoulders and squeezed. "Okay."

"I feel like you're not taking me seriously."

"I am." Connor had given me a copy of a tattoo design he loved and I'd sent it to Dave months ago, asking if he could do it and would be willing to do it on a friend. But I wanted Connor to be really sure of what he wanted.

"I love tattoos."

"Me too."

"I want to show you something." He pulled out from under my arm then tugged his flannel shirt off over his head. He hesitated. "I don't want to turn a light on in case my parents notice. You can't see, can you?"

"I can see fine. Just show me like you would in the light." I didn't have much color perception in the dark but I could pick out details almost as well as in the light. "I eat a lot of carrots."

He wiggled down the bed until he was lying flat and I followed suit, staying propped up on my elbow. Even without much color vision, I could clearly see how pale Connor's skin was and the athletic torso from the many hours we spent working out.

"When we lived in Ohio there was this park that army guys used to train in. They had a confidence course that was really intense. Dad made me do it so many times. There was a part where you crawled on your stomach under barbed wire and one day when it was raining I slipped and got caught in it. It caught in my clothing and I panicked and—" Connor cleared his throat. "Dad was yelling, you know how he does?"

"Yeah." Connor's voice was rough with fear like opening an old wound. I was gladder than ever that his dad had stopped hassling him so much. *One more year then we'll be out of here and never look back.* He tapped his fingers idly against his stomach, they bounced on his taut belly like the skin of a drum. "I just got caught worse and worse. There was blood everywhere. And when I got out, Dad made me do it again to prove I could get through without being hurt."

"Oh, Connor."

"It was years ago. Years and years. But I've still got the scars." He traced a finger over his abdomen and I let my eyes follow the motion of his hand. I could see the scars, not the color of them but just a texture where his skin gave way to smooth shiny patches like rust above his belly button and stopping just above the elastic waist of his pajama bottoms. "You can't see them?"

"I can." I instinctively moved my hand then froze. "Can I touch?"

“If you want. They’re just scars.”

I’d never had a scar except the ones where Dave’s needle had cut into my back, and I couldn’t touch those. Werewolf healing made some human things radical and strange. I thought that was probably why Dave had got into tattooing so intensely, all those nights when we were kids and he’d sat up with a pin or knife and a broken pen just trying to teach himself to leave a mark that would stick. He might have been jealous of the kids at school with skinned knees and sunburn and freckles, living this human life that he didn’t have access too. Or maybe I was imagining that, and Dave just liked drawing pretty pictures.

But for me, I was captivated. Connor had me spellbound all the time anyway, but the scars on his belly were alien to me. The warmth of his skin then the glossy dips or raised bumps of the scars. They were small and probably most people wouldn’t even notice them, you had to be close and really looking. “Is this why you don’t like people seeing you with your shirt off?”

“Yeah. I’ve never shown anyone before.”

“They’re not large.” I picked my words carefully, not wanting to belittle him at all. “I don’t think anyone would be offended by the sight of them.”

“It doesn’t really matter if anyone else sees them. I know they’re there. Like a physical manifestation of all the things I hated about childhood and feeling like I was still stuck in it—until I met you, of course.” He paused, thinking. “They’re just another thing I have no control over at all.”

I was still stroking his belly and I could feel him tensing up, unconsciously resisting my intrusion into the private world under his shirt. I took my hand away. “Thanks for showing me.”

“They’re on my back, too. I hate them all, but I hate these the most because I have to see them so much.”

“I don’t think they’re ugly. I think they’re beautiful. Like patches of ice in the snow.”

Connor smiled, a smile he probably thought was hidden in the dark, but I cherished its warmth. “Thank you, Will.” He tugged his shirt back on, distancing himself from me. “You’re not going to convince me to like them.”

“I wasn’t trying to. Just telling you how I feel.”

“Thank you,” he said again. “It’s not even the scars. It’s what they symbolize. Life out of my control. I just want to have some control, just for

once. I'm sick of seeing memories of my dad on my skin. I want to look down and just see myself, beautiful things I put there."

"Flames," I said, thinking of the design Connor had shown me.

"Yeah. Burn away the old. A primal force of nature that destroys everything in its path and forces fresh starts. I want flames on my body."

"It's funny. I think of you as ice, not fire."

Connor grinned and the serious moment disappeared. "Well I don't think of you as a bunch of roses but you don't see me making fun of your tattoo choice."

I laughed. But I believed him, that he was serious about the tattoo. I told Dave, and he agreed to tattoo my friend—I wasn't going to mention the whole mate thing over the phone. But that's how we found ourselves killing time at my house before my brother arrived.

I kept remembering things Dave had done when we were kids so the wait turned into one long storytelling adventure, Connor grinning on the couch beside me as I regaled him with tales from my childhood—edited down to be human-friendly, of course.

Dave was four and a half years older, which was a lot when you're young. But he was mild-mannered, and I'm a born alpha so it worked out that I was often the one taking leaps and goading him.

A car engine hummed, coming up the private road to our house. Close enough that there was no mistake it was on our road. I didn't recognize the sound of the engine, but then it had been years since I'd seen my brother, and he could drive a school bus for all I knew.

"That might be Dave now," I said.

"The prodigal brother," Connor joked. His pewter gray eyes were wide, and he had the lemon tang of nerves. Nervous about tattooing or nervous about meeting my big brother?

"I have no idea what he's going to be like," I joked, just in case. "I probably won't recognize him. Bet he's grown his hair long and wears Hawaiian-print shirts and calls everything cool, man."

"That would be kind of cool." Connor raised a dark eyebrow and added, "Man."



When the engine was right outside the house, I bounded out. There was a dark green hatchback dulled by dust and in it... "Dave!"

"Hey, Little Willy!"

I would give almost anything for Connor to *not* hear him calling me that.

Dave stood with the door open and held his arms out, laughing. I launched myself at him like we were eight again, playing rough and tumble. The force of my impact knocked him back into the car and we both laughed as his arms came around me hard and sun-warmed. He smelled different, the Dave scent diluted by coconut and floral soap, the hint of sunlight lingering around his clothes, like snow always hung around mine.

But his laugh was the same deep rumble, and he was just as huge. He lifted me off my feet with those tree-trunk arms and squeezed me tight.

"You'll break my ribs," I joked.

"You'll heal them."

I hadn't realized how much I missed him until he was right there in front of me, so achingly familiar yet slightly altered. I stepped back to take him in—he didn't have long surfer hair and his shirt didn't have an obnoxious print. But he was tanned golden and dark, and his hair had natural highlights. "We've got company," I said quickly in case he had the urge to shift right then and there.

Dave was looking at me with his head tilted to the side and his eyes narrowed. He kept blinking like he was confused about something.

"I'm taller than you now," I said, in case that was what had him stumped.

He shook his head slowly. Then a smile appeared on his face like white showing on a fried egg. "You've found your mate."

"You can tell?"

"Dude. Anyone could tell. Bet even humans pick up on it." He was still looking at me intently, tilting his head from side to side. "You're so in love. You're practically glowing. I didn't even know you could be this happy."

"I'm so happy," I confirmed. I couldn't keep a stupid grin from bursting out on my face.

Dave grinned too, his eyes twinkling. "So who is she? One of the pack? She can't be, I've never met anyone who could keep up with you."

I could sense Connor loitering in the house near the front door, hesitating because he didn't want to intrude on the bro bonding. I called out, "Connor! Come meet the prodigal brother!"

"Prodigal," Dave chuckled.

"Yeah, he teaches me all kind of fancy words. Connor's real smart. You'll see."

Connor came down the stairs from the front door, hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched with his eyes on the ground. I muttered just out of his hearing, "Don't buy the omega routine. He's just shy." Dave was watching him with a blank expression.

Connor reached us and held out a hand, barely glancing at Dave. His cheeks were turning pink. "Hello. I'm Will's friend Connor."

"Hello." Dave stared at him in confusion.

Then Dave ignored the offered hand and grabbed Connor by the shoulders, pulling him in for a rough hug. Over Connor's shoulder he met my gaze. His eyes were the same brown as mine and Mom's, and right now they were bugging right out of his head. He silently mouthed, "Human?" I just grinned back.

When Connor was released again—with no broken ribs, thankfully—he offered, "Would you like a hand with your bags?"

Dave was blatantly staring at him, then looking at me, then back at Connor. I couldn't get a read on his emotions, he was all over the place. Then he looked me square in the face and grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Mom and Dad," he said, "are going to freak."

"They already know," I said. "I've told them. About the tattoos, I mean." I widened my eyes meaningfully. I could see he wanted to ask questions, so I shook my head quickly over Connor's shoulder. I didn't need my brother going and slipping a mention about werewolves just to make Connor think we were crazy.

"Actually, could I get a hand with my stuff?" He pulled a duffel out of his car and tossed it to Connor. Then he flipped the hatch and pointed at a box inside. "This is for you, Will."

The box was so heavy it just about pulled my arms out of their sockets. "What have you got in here, lead weights for fishing?"

“Just about. That’s local wood from Cali for you.”

I noticed Connor hovering a few paces from the door, and I called, “Take it into the back room, by the kitchen?”

As I hefted my box out of the car Dave put a hand on my shoulder to stop me. “When did you meet him?”

“Middle school. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I wanted to do it in person.”

He ignored that. “You’ve known him for years, and you haven’t bitten him yet?”

Connor was inside the house and well out of hearing range, but I lowered my voice and stepped closer anyway.

“Nope. I want that to be his choice. When he knows about what I am, I’ll let him decide for himself.”

“When he knows?” Dave repeated. His eyes got huge, and he looked like he was fifteen again, freaking out at my next half-cooked plan for adventure. “He doesn’t know you’re a werewolf?”

“He doesn’t even know they exist. How am I meant to raise that subject, huh? Tell me you’d look forward to that conversation because I sure wouldn’t.”

“But how can he not know? He’s your mate!”

“He doesn’t know that, either.” It was a small comfort while defending myself from my big brother, but I was proud of Dave for worrying about Connor’s knowledge and not about the fact my mate was a guy. “Humans don’t feel the mating bond, not until they’re bitten.”

Dave ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. “So bite him!”

I shook my head. Connor was coming back to the door, and soon he’d be within earshot—and see that neither of us had raised a finger to empty Dave’s boxes from the car. “Listen,” I hissed. “He’s my mate, that’s what matters. So you can treat him with respect or you can turn around and go back to Cali. And trust me to tell him when he’s ready.”

Connor was still terrified of someone bursting through his door in the night. How could I tell him that his best friend was more frightening and threatening than any human intruder?

“Of course.” Dave grabbed a box. He glanced at Connor coming towards us and whispered theatrically, “For the record, I think he’s a total cutie.”

“Hands off,” I laughed.

Connor rounded the car, and I grinned at him. He smiled back, but he was acting awkward, fiddling with the zip on his jacket and barely making eye contact. “Do you want me to leave?”

“What? Why?”

“I think you want to bond with your brother. Which is totally understandable,” he added.

“Nah. I want you here. Sorry if I’m making you feel left out. Or using you as a pack mule.” I handed him another box. “You still up for tattoos?”

“Completely.” Connor met my eyes and smiled timidly.

I grinned back and watched as my happiness seemed to soak through him like sunlight on snow, melting away his nerves.

We got Dave settled in and all sat around eating Dad’s flashy cheese and crackers. I told stories about the band and about me and Connor, Dave told stories about the people he met in California and the fellow workers at his tattoo shop. Connor sat quietly, but he was having fun and drinking in every word.

For my part, I couldn’t believe how happy I was to have my brother back, I hadn’t realized how badly I missed him until he was beside me again. He had never been as wild and strong-willed as me, but he was still the child of an alpha mating, with the kind of intense dedication that very few other people understood. Plus he had been my best friend in the long years before Connor.

Dave was most excited about his modified tattoo machines, and he showed us his favorites, one built on an existing tattoo gun and one which had been manufactured just for him. “I win awards. I’m famous, not just in Cali. People come from outside the States just to get tattooed by Dave Flight. You don’t know how lucky you are, little bro.”

“You get to touch my perfect skin so I’d say you’re the lucky one, big bro,” I laughed. I slung an arm around Connor’s shoulders and hugged him to me in that way that felt so natural I was almost uncomfortable if he wasn’t tucked into my side. “Plus you get to pop Connor’s ink cherry and that’s better than any award.”

He set up in the living room with a quiet portable generator and a big box of inks and fresh cleaning cloths and his pens. I lay on my back on the leather

recliner, propped up on its arm, with my shirt off. Dave sat on a chair beside me and sketched the shape of the roses with a marker over my side and ribs and up to my shoulder.

“Freehand like this is really cool,” he told me. “I do it a lot. We can talk about designs on paper all we want but nothing beats seeing the shapes on your body.”

Connor was perched on the end of the recliner facing me. “Nervous?”

“Nope. You?”

“No. Excited for my turn.”

Dave laughed. “You say this now. Wait until you see Will squirming like a baby under the needle. You’ll change your tune.”

I snorted. “As if. I didn’t even flinch last time, and I was ten.”

“I’ve gotten a lot better at this since you were ten. I go fast and hard and my gear’s modified to give you a gorgeous result. This design should take multiple sessions, more than ten hours. I can do it in four. But it’s going to hurt.”

“Bring it, I can take it.”

Dave grinned. He was loving this, and so was I. Joking around again like real brothers. “You might want to hold Connor’s hand for support when it gets tough.”

“I’m tougher than your needles,” I jeered.

It was like Dave was taking me up on the challenge to embarrass me in front of Connor, he went hard, and it hurt a lot more than I remembered the first time—real pain rather than a prickling sting.

“Whoa,” I hissed. “That’s not meant to hurt that much!”

“It’s worse on the ribs.” Dave sat back, giving me a moment without the needles. “Plus I’m giving you the signature Dave Flight treatment. I can swap to the normal gear and take it slower?”

I shook my head. “Let’s see why you’re so famous, huh?” But as Dave moved higher up my ribs and the pain kept coming, Connor shifted closer to me on the couch. He gently took my hand, and I squeezed back.

When we were finished with my tattoo we took a food break, then went back to the living room to do Connor’s. He took my place on the couch and Dave settled back on his little chair.

"I've got these designs Will sent me, you want these?" Dave asked Connor.

"On my stomach and back," Connor agreed. He pointed at the stencils in Dave's hands—wide flaring flames for his stomach, curling flames for his back. "I've got some scar tissue. Is that a problem?"

"Depends. Shouldn't be." Dave bit his lip. "It's going to hurt. I don't recommend pieces this large for someone's first tattoo, let alone two of them."

"Will they not heal right?"

"They'll heal fine. It's just a lot of pain to take."

"I can take it."

Dave glanced at me then back at Connor. "I'll grab the standard gun."

"I want your magic machine with the gorgeous results, same as Will." Connor leaned forward, elbows on knees. "If Will can take it, I can. Hit me with your best shot."

My brother grinned. "You're cocky. I wasn't expecting that."

Connor pulled off his shirt and glanced at me, the sharp little points of his fear glittering clear. I smiled at him, and said to Dave, "I'm the cocky one. Connor's the one who knows exactly what he wants and gets it. If he says he can take it, he can." I said it confidently, but I had my doubts.

I was proven wrong when Connor stayed perfectly still and unflinching as Dave tattooed him. It was quick but—as I knew—hard and painful. Afterward Dave busied himself cleaning up and I took Connor upstairs to my room. He kept staring at his plastic-wrapped stomach, resting his fingers on it just beside where the skin was puffy and red with the new tattoo.

"I can't believe I've finally got it," he said. "It's like a dream."

I grinned. Connor's cautious joy was beautiful to behold. "It looks good, too. Really badass."

"It's mine, now. My body."

"It always was."

"Now I feel like it is." He stood up just a little taller.

I'd had plans of hanging out more with Dave and Connor. But Connor looked exhausted, the sudden emotional change taking its toll on him. I steered him toward the couch and sat down with my untattooed arm over his shoulders,

watching the breeze in the trees outside until he fell asleep. Only when he was soundly sleeping did I go back down to find my brother.

Dave was leaning on the porch railing with his eyes on the forest. I handed him a fridge-frosted lemonade. One of the aunts made and bottled it, and I'd been hooked on the bittersweet taste and the feel of the glass bottle since I was tiny.

Dave took a sip and winced. "I didn't miss this stuff. It's like sugary battery acid."

I snorted. "You drink much battery acid? Is that what they feed you in Cali?"

"Just about." Dave wrinkled his nose but took another long sip. Yellow and green and the occasional dusky red. "I missed this, though. The shape of the hills and the trees in fall."

"It's perfect. I don't know why you'd ever leave."

Dave chuckled. "To see more of the world?"

"It's all right here. What else do you need?"

"Warm weather?"

"It's plenty warm here."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Don't you ever get itchy feet? The yearning to see what else is out there?"

"This is my home."

"You could make a new home. Or take home with you. Home's you and your dreams and the experiences you love, and you can have that on the open road. Home's people, you know?"

"No, I don't know. This is my home. My soul cries out for these trees and these mountains." I nudged my big brother with my shoulder. "I'm glad you've found something that makes you happy. I'm really, really glad. But that's not me. I love it here."

I leaned on the railing beside him, propping my weight on my left arm so my right arm could dangle freely between the wooden slats.

"Still hurts?" Dave asked.

"Nah, I can't feel it." Except a sensitivity if I bent my arm or knocked it into anything. "It's weird though, as a human. I'm so used to just instantly healing anything."

“You can heal that, you’ve done it before.”

Healing a tattoo wasn’t just like healing any old wound: If you slipped too far into werewolf healing mode you could heal the scars that the ink sat in or break down the ink and lose the tattoo entirely. It took a certain degree of skill and self-control to do it right. But that wasn’t my problem. “I want to do it human, let it heal in its own time. That’s what Connor’s doing, so I want to do it too.”

“Or, here’s an idea,” Dave started. He stopped and just took another sip from his bottle in silence. Instinct kicked in, and he didn’t talk back to an alpha—or maybe just decided to be nice to his brother. He didn’t need to finish his sentence though, I knew what he was going to say before “Here’s an idea: why don’t you just bite him?”

I could sense Connor upstairs, still sleeping. But I still lowered my voice to make my big confession. “I love him.”

“He’s your mate.”

“It’s more than that. I think. I love him. There’s stuff like how protective I feel of him and how I need to know he’s safe and happy all the time, and I think that’s the mate bond. But there’s other stuff, too. His smile makes me breathless, and his laugh stays with me for days. I’ll find myself grinning when I’m alone because I’ve just thought of something great about him. I want to spend every moment with him. He’s like a balm, like he can soothe me when I’m worried or too excited or anything. Connor’s perfect, and I love him. And he’s also my mate.”

“How did Mom and Dad take it?”

I snorted. “They told me it wasn’t possible.”

“To love a human?”

I looked at Dave long and hard, but there wasn’t any trace of irony in his eyes. Earlier, he’d been talking about me “finding a girl” but it was like that had just evaporated out of his head. I said slowly, “They don’t think it’s possible for a werewolf to be gay. Let alone an alpha.”

“You can’t populate your pack through bum sex,” he agreed. Then he squawked like a chicken because I’d hit him with my shoulder, hard. Laughing he said, “So you’re gay now?”

“I love Connor and I’m not interested in anyone else. And I want to, you know, what you just said.” I winked, and Dave laughed dirtily. “So, I’m gay. And I don’t see anything wrong with that.”



“Except that an alpha needs to breed. It’s essential for the pack to have new blood.”

I shrugged. “Mom and Dad only had us and the pack’s fine. Even when you were off on the road for so long. There’s Joseph and the others. I think the idea that a pack needs to be made by alphas and their kids is outdated. I’ve been spending a lot of time with wolves and I know that’s what they do but here’s the thing: Wolves don’t have cars. They don’t have phones and the internet. Werewolves are humans as well as wolves, and that means we get to decide what pack means and what family means. I’ll love my pack even though they’re not my kids.”

“Do you really believe that? Or are you just saying it because Mom’s trying to find you a bride?”

I laughed. “I really believe that. It’s kind of like you wanting to travel: It’s normal for a werewolf to be tied to the place they were born, they should want to stay there and leaving should be like pulling teeth. And I feel that. But you’re the opposite.”

“You’re saying I’m a freak?”

“I’m saying everybody is a freak. What the hell does normal mean?” I raised my bottle, and Dave clinked his against it. We watched the wind in the multi-colored trees. Finally I said, “Mom’s not trying to find me a bride, actually.”

“No way.”

“She respects the mating bond. I mean, obviously, she’s not happy about it. Neither’s Dad. But once they got used to the idea and saw me and Connor together they were less worried about him being a guy and more worried that I haven’t bitten him yet.”

“They’re right to worry. I’m worried.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not you too.”

“I’m serious. You know how I could tell you’d found your mate?”

“You read my aura.” I knew my own abilities were exceptional, but Dave was nearly as good. Mom and Dad could do it a little bit but not as well as we could, and no one else we’d ever met could do it at all. I remembered trying again and again to explain it to Joseph when we were kids and how he’d just stared at me in confusion.

“Here’s the thing,” Dave said. “I can tell you’re happy and I can tell you’re tied to someone else. But it feels like you’re split in half. There are all these ripples of... Or missing, or lacking, or something. You’re giving so much of yourself to Connor or to the mating bond or whatever but you’re not getting anything back. And that’s scary. And that’s probably what’s got Mom and Dad so worried. You know how they’re kind of amplified because they’re together? That’s what a mate is meant to do. Make you stronger. And you’re missing out on that.”

“I know. I know what the mating bond does.”

“You just have to bite Connor and turn him.”

“I’m not going to bite him unless he wants me to. When he knows everything, I’ll let him decide what he wants.” Even if what he wanted was to run in horror from me.

“But why? Why don’t you just bite him?”

“Free will. And love. If I bite him, he’ll feel the bond and that’s like forcing him to be with me.”

“So what are you going to do? What if he says he doesn’t want you to bite him?”

“Then I won’t.”

“Then you’ll be weak forever.” Dave froze and added quickly, “I’m sorry, that was out of line.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“It’s not. You’re not weak. You’re definitely strong. It’s just... I thought you’d be stronger. And I can tell you would be, if you’d just turn Connor.”

“I’m not going to. Not until he’s ready.”

“Okay. It’s your choice. I respect that. But don’t think everyone will. If I can pick up on it, others will be able to. No one wants an alpha who isn’t focused on his pack.”

“I’ll deal with that when the time comes. I’ve got plenty of time.”

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## Chapter Seven

The first thing Connor did when we moved to college was buy caramel sauce. He'd always liked it but his parents didn't, so I used to smuggle it to him. But when he left home he just went a little crazy. He bought the largest jar of sauce you've ever seen. It was like a keg of caramel sauce, so heavy we had to pour it into smaller jars before it was even usable. And he still went through those jars alarmingly fast.

I hated anything too sweet, but Connor loved that sauce, and I loved seeing him happy. I'd come to love the sticky sweet smell of it just from catching that scent on Connor's breath so often.

I put caramel in his coffee every morning. Our dorm was small enough and my coffee was strong enough that, for a few hours in the morning, it was like we lived inside an espresso machine.

Connor woke up while I was stirring the caramel into his coffee. "You need to go," he mumbled.

"Good morning, buddy," I laughed. I took the drink over to him and rested it on a wide arm of my chair. That chair was my favorite thing about the dorm room. I'd made it when we first moved down to Minneapolis. It was made of hickory from a slope near my parents' house in Jagged Rock, felled in a landslide. It was the hardest wood I'd ever worked but the result was worth the dulled tools. I kept as much of the bark and shape of the wood as possible. The chair is huge and heavy and takes up space almost like there's a real tree growing out of the middle of the floor between our beds. The wood fills the dorm with the smell of home.

It has a solid back I can lean against to study or to slouch on when I talk with Connor. Most nights, I fell asleep on that chair, a pile of cushions under me and a blanket on top. Just an arm's reach from Connor. That morning, after our gig, I slumped back into the chair and grinned at sleepy Connor.

"Your parents' place," he mumbled. "You need to go."

"Yeah. In a bit. I've got something to talk to you about. I've been thinking about that presentation you have to give."

"Me too." His face fell into comical despair. Connor hated having to talk in front of crowds. One of his papers had him presenting a project to the entire year and it had Connor tied up in knots.

"I've found you something to wear that's going to make it all better."

"Oh no." He grinned as he reached for his coffee. "Another T-shirt?"

"Don't go 'oh no', our T-shirts are awesome." Chop and I found all the best science fiction pop culture T-shirts for Connor to wear on stage or for band photo shoots. He was the only shy one in a band of big personalities, and we played that up, making him out to be the biggest nerd in the world.

He was kinda nerdy, and studious as anything. But he didn't care about clothes like Chop and I did. If Connor had his way he'd wear the same clothes every day—probably the ratty old shirt he was wearing right now, left over from our track team back in middle school. Chop and I wouldn't let him go around looking like a hobo. We were like his very own stylists.

He sipped his coffee, wrinkling his face at the heat of it but smiling just the same. He had the most beautiful smile, but I felt it as much as I saw it, like he was smiling right into my soul. I'd do pretty much anything to keep Connor smiling.

"It's not a T-shirt, actually. It's way better." I held my tablet out to him. "Check out these suckers."

The picture I showed Connor was of a pair of furry brown sneakers with teddy bear heads instead of tongues and little bear arms sticking out the sides.

In his defense, he took his time and really studied the photo. He had after-gig bed hair, and he kept making it worse by scrubbing his hand through it. Finally, he handed the tablet back to me and asked, "When you said these would make my presentation better, did you mean that I should imagine my audience wearing them and it would be so funny I wouldn't be nervous anymore?"

"Nope." He knew exactly what I meant. "We'll be there to watch you, the whole band as your cheering squad. So you can look up and see our friendly faces. I just thought you might want to see a couple more friendly faces when you look down. You wear those and every time you look down you'll feel a bit happier."

Connor grinned. "These shoes are friendlier than you guys. What if I just want to look at my feet the whole time?"

"Then the audience will be missing out on this handsome face." I ruffled Connor's hair and he pretended to swat my hand away. "Also you'll bomb your presentation. So don't do that."

“Well now I’m not nervous at all,” he joked.

“You’ll wear them and you’ll feel awesome. Trust me.”

He took another sip of his drink. The smell of the syrup was tickling my nostrils. Connor swirled the mug to mix it up and said, “I’ll promise to wear them, if you promise not to take photos.”

“Deal.” I ruffled his hair again, just for the fun of it.

“Now you’ve got to go, you’re running late.”

I really was. But it was just a family meeting—nowhere near as fun as time with Connor. I drained my drink and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, okay?”

“Okay. I can’t wait.” Connor couldn’t help a huge grin. He loved staying at the cabin in the mountains.

I was nearly out the door before I called over my shoulder, “Oh, by the way? I never promised Chop wouldn’t take a photo of you in those shoes. Bye now.”

I closed the door just in time to block the pillow he threw at me.

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Dave was waiting outside my parents’ house, his tattooed arms crossed over his chest. “You’re late.”

“Yeah. You know how it is.” I grinned. I could sense the werewolves inside the house, our whole pack gathered there. I waited for Dave to go inside, but he just stood there making me even later.

“You haven’t turned him yet.”

Why was he bringing that up now? “Nope. I haven’t got his permission yet.”

“I hoped you’d have turned him by now. You promised you’d tell him when he turned eighteen.”

“I did say that,” I agreed. I had meant to, I honestly had. But then he’d told me he wanted me to build him a house...

I knew how Dave felt about me not turning Connor—the same as most of my family did, that I was throwing away my strength and power for no reason. Werewolf strength wasn’t really a physical thing, it was mostly based on “loyalty”, the respect you got from others that decided your ranking in the pack.

I started off stronger than average because I was a born an alpha. But I was losing power constantly from all the energy I put into Connor and our mating bond without it being reciprocated. I knew that, and everyone knew that. But I didn't know why Dave was talking about it now.

"I really wish you'd just do it," he pushed again.

"What's really bothering you, bro?"

He lowered his voice. "I'm loyal to you, you know that."

"I know. I can feel it." Werewolf loyalty was like a flame, bright and warming. Dave was older than me, but he wasn't an alpha and his loyalty was a steady fire burning for me.

"I need you to remember that."

"Why are you bringing this up now? Chill out, everything's fine," I laughed, Dave was usually laid-back and casual. This seriousness didn't suit him.

But Dave just shook his head and looked grim.

My mother was waiting for me in the hallway. "You're late."

"I know. Me and Connor—"

My mom was an alpha through-and-through, the only werewolf I knew with the confidence to cut me off when I was speaking. "You haven't turned him yet."

"Yeah, I know." Why was everyone going on about this all of a sudden?

Mom turned away, and I followed her into the living room. The house was lined with photos she'd taken in her day job as a wildlife photographer, and the huge living room was no exception. Photos of wolves lined the walls, and living werewolves lined the couches facing the glass sliding doors that opened right onto the Jagged Rock Forest.

I leaned against a wall as far from my cousin Joseph as possible. I only had one brother, Dave, and the rest of the pack was aunts and uncles and cousins from Mom's side of the family and a few from Dad's—he wasn't an alpha himself but he was very highly ranked as a werewolf in his own right, so some of his pack had followed him when he left his old pack, or drifted into ours over time. I got along with almost everyone, even though I didn't see anyone outside of the full moon now.

But Joseph was a thorn in my side; he'd made himself my enemy when he started picking on Connor back in high school. He was a loud and arrogant

bully, and whenever I came back home, I was constantly breaking up fights that he started with lower-ranked wolves.

Mom took her place beside Dad in front of the glass doors, addressing the whole family. “We’ve gathered you all here for a serious announcement. As you know, I’ve been leader of this pack for over 65 years. It’s time that another leader stepped up and took over.”

I blinked. I wasn’t ready. Leading the pack would mean more time in Layton, less time at college in Minneapolis. I was still having fun and had years before graduation. Maybe she didn’t mean now, maybe she was making the announcement that she’d retire in a few years.

But Mom kept talking. “Pack loyalty makes it clear who the new pack leader is.” She paused like she was an Academy Awards announcer, and I rolled my eyes. Then she said, “Joseph. Congratulations.”

The bottom of my stomach dropped away, but I was able to keep my face calm. This was a mistake. It had to be. Or some kind of weird joke—not that I’d ever seen my mom crack a joke. I was the only alpha born in the pack, Mom and I were the only alphas, she had to hand the reins over to me. Nothing else made sense.

All eyes had turned to me, people twisting around in their seats to look at me loitering in the back of the room. Even Mom looked at me as she said clearly, “Any disputes about leadership can be taken up at the full moon. But I nominate Joseph.”

She swept past me out of the room. I followed her into the hallway, checking we were alone. “What was that about?” I kept my voice low though werewolf ears could easily overhear. “Joseph? He’s not even an alpha. I’m an alpha.”

“And you haven’t been here. Not for years.”

“I’m here every full moon.”

“You know that’s not enough to keep pack loyalty. No one respects you. No one wants you as leader. Everyone knows you’d rather spend your time with humans than with your pack. Why on earth would I nominate you as leader?”

“Why would you nominate Joseph?” I could hear my voice rising, and I consciously calmed myself down, breathing slowly. My head was spinning, and I could hardly understand what had just happened.

“Joseph shows a lot of leadership traits. He’s a strong decision maker. He has clear vision, and the pack respects him.”

“He’s impulsive and a bully. If that makes him a leader then yeah, sure, go ahead and follow him,” I growled.

“You can challenge this decision,” Mom said calmly. “Take it up in front of the pack at the full moon. See who has the strength and loyalty to lead the pack. I suggest you claim your mate if you have any chance of facing Joseph. Otherwise, you can leave the pack or submit to Joseph’s authority.”

My insides burned. “You know I can’t do that.” Any of that. There were no good choices. “You should have waited.”

“What for? For you to remember that you’re a werewolf and not a human? For you to claim your mate? You gave me your word you’d do it on his eighteenth birthday. We’ve waited long enough. Maybe now you’ll choose between the pack and your band.”

I cursed and pounded my head into the wall, hard. *No good choices*. Use Connor like a game piece in a play for more power. Leave the pack, which would mean leaving Layton and Jagged Rock forever. Or make myself take orders from someone I didn’t respect and I *knew* was no good.

And over all of it hovered my fear for Connor. We were mates, tied together forever even if he didn’t feel it. If I bit him he’d be tied to my pack. And that meant being tied to Jagged Rock and controlled by Joseph who had bullied him mercilessly all the way through high school. At least back at school, I had been able to defend him, or he could defend himself. But if he was in Joseph’s pack there was nothing he could do.

I didn’t know what to do. Every choice was the wrong one.

I whacked my head into the wall again, seething with pent up emotion and confusion as I tried to solve an impossible problem fast.

If Joseph was my leader and I turned Connor, that would make Joseph his leader too. Joseph had picked on Connor all the way through school and he wouldn’t stop just because Connor was a werewolf. Connor wouldn’t be able to defend himself without being thrown from the pack, and neither would I.

If I challenged Joseph and lost, I would be thrown from the pack. Turning Connor would make me stronger, his strength and mine united through the mating bond. But Joseph had so much of the pack’s loyalty that there was no guarantee that I’d be strong enough to beat him even with that bond. So I could



turn Connor and fight Joseph and lose, and get both of us kicked out of the pack.

And getting kicked out of the pack would mean losing my home—losing the mountains that were carved into my heart. And if I turned Connor he'd feel that connection too, and he'd hurt just as much as I would at losing the mountains.

I wouldn't turn him without his permission. And I wouldn't get his permission without telling him everything. And I was so terrified of telling him because that would mean popping the bubble of happiness we lived in, and maybe losing his friendship forever.

I couldn't do it. Connor was worth more to me than the leadership of the pack. His happiness was worth more than the strength I'd get from biting him.

So I went back into the living room where my family was assembled. I held my hand out to Joseph. "Congratulations."

He took my hand and shook it. He was trying for a display of strength, and I took a little satisfaction in crushing his fingers. He said casually, "No hard feelings. I earned this."

I forced my lips into a smile.

As soon as I could, I got away from him and out onto the porch. Dave followed me out. His face was heavy with sadness. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Did you know they were going to do this?"

"No. Not until just before you arrived. I told them it was a bad idea. You're not ready."

"Of course not. They know that." I looked around the room. The whole pack were assembled, eating snacks like this was some kind of celebration. "I feel like I'm the only one who cares that I'm not leader."

"I care," Dave said. Then he added, "I hate to mention it. But there is something you can do."

"I'm not biting Connor."

I could see that Dave wanted to talk about it further, so I distanced myself. I physically moved myself away from him. I went the short distance into the forest to the dirt bike track where I'd taught Connor to ride.

The bike shed had a roof with a small slant so I could sit comfortably on it and look out into the forest. I let my werewolf senses extend until the wall of trees became a 3D map, a window into an endlessly moving world of critters and bugs and the slow seep of life through the trunks of trees. I let everything disappear except the peace of the forest. After a while, I felt calm again.

I could sense Bren coming from the moment he left the house. When he finally climbed up onto the roof beside me, I said, "You shouldn't have come here. Joseph will know you're coming to talk to me, and he'll be mad."

"He knows where my loyalty lies. I can't hide it." Bren tucked his legs up and rested his head on his knees. He was so huge but permanently stooped and shrank himself in, hiding his massive frame to get as small as possible. "You should be pack leader," he said quietly.

"I guess I'm just not leader material after all," I said. I could hear the bitterness in my tone, and I tried to calm it down. "I've made my choices. The pack is loyal to Joseph. They've all made their choices." Even my mom. I could have done with some warning about *that*. But it was true—I'd made my choice.

"I don't think it's the right choice," Bren said quietly. He was sending out guilt and pain in waves—that was the burden of an omega, loyalty to the pack leader was so deeply entrenched that even questioning it was hard for Bren. "Joseph's a bully."

"Better than a weakling like me, huh?" I joked.

"You're not a weakling." Bren was so earnest it hurt to look at him.

"That's how they all see me, though. I could have taken charge years ago if I'd just claimed my mate. But I loved a human more than I wanted to be pack leader. I knew what I had to do and I didn't do it. And that makes me weak."

"I feel like this is my fault. If I'd just never talked to you about mating—"

"Then you wouldn't be a very nice person," I cut him off. I threw an arm around his shoulders, and he leaned against me. He was so huge and so heavy; comforting Bren while he leaned against me was like comforting a landslide. "You shouldn't be feeling bad right now, you should be feeling great because you helped me out when I had a question, and you helped me make the best decision of my life."

"What best decision? You've lost your pack," he mumbled.

"But I didn't turn Connor into a mindless Will-worshiping zombie. So maybe I'd be the pack leader. But I'd be the kind of leader who didn't properly

care for his mate. That's not the kind of leader I want to be. You helped me see that."

I really wanted to make Bren understand that I appreciated his advice. He lived for the pack and gave everything he could. I felt like he didn't get much thanks, and that he was rarely treated as if he was a real person and not just a walking library.

I wondered if life would have been easier for him as an omega if he hadn't been so large. He just *looked* so strong all the time that no one stopped to check if he was okay. That was just the way it was. And Joseph was the worst—always tormenting Bren to prove his own worth to the pack. Hopefully, he'd stop picking on Bren as much now that he was in charge. Joseph would know he was the top dog, so he wouldn't have to prove himself at every moment.

"Can I tell you something?" Bren asked quietly. "What I think?"

"Yeah. Please, do."

"I think your parents wanted to make you fight Joseph, and that's why they made this decision now. They wanted the whole pack to see a fight so they knew who to be loyal to. You're an alpha, you won't ever fully understand what the loyalty is like. It's a very real need, and without a strong alpha it's not being satisfied. A fight would let the pack know exactly who to rally behind. United under a strong leader. For years, we've been torn because you haven't been around. And I'm not blaming you for that," he added quickly. "But that doesn't change anything. We need a leader, and we know your parents are stepping down. Not having someone else to be loyal to is like having a bad toothache all the time."

"I'm sorry." I truly was. Not that it would change my decision. But for Bren's sake I wished things could have been different. "I just don't think this was the way to deal with it. My parents could have talked to me. I didn't even know this was coming. I don't think that's good for anyone, and if I was leader I'd never have pulled a stunt like this. But maybe that's because I'm a weakling who thinks about feelings as well as power," I joked.

"You're not your parents, that's for sure. You'd be a very different kind of leader. I've seen you with the wolves. And I'm sorry I couldn't see you as a leader for werewolves."

"And I'm sorry for you, with Joseph in charge. I hope he'll be kind to you."

Bren shrugged. I tasted sadness in the air but mostly resignation. An omega's lot.

I found myself unconsciously looking after him. Would I treat him that way if I didn't know he was an omega? Where did werewolf roles end and social structure or personality come into play? I knew I treated Matt the same way, unthinkingly assuming that he needed protection and caring.

But Matt was happy. Every day he was loved and cuddled, treated with respect and friendship, even if he was a follower rather than a leader. My friends weren't like my family, they didn't take advantage of a generous and kind nature. "You don't have to have Joseph as a leader," I said slowly.

Bren looked up, radiating hope. "What?"

"You could come stay with me. Start a new life away from the pack."

His shoulders slumped again. "In the city?"

"Cities. There's a lot of space. And forests and lakes and a river."

"It's not the same. I can't. I'm sorry. I wish I could. But I can't. Jagged Rock is in my soul. I'd rather be hit with sticks here than live in luxury anywhere else."

"I get that," I sighed. It was why I'd take a loser like Joseph for a leader—I couldn't risk losing the mountains. I missed lazy nights in the dorm with Connor or movie marathons with the band so I could run in the mountains at least once a month.

Joseph was going to be my leader, and I was going to have to live with that. It wasn't the life I'd planned when I was a kid. But I would have my best friend Connor. I would have the run of the mountains and I would have my band. I could be happy like that—I had been, for years. And if Connor and the band were happy too, then that was enough for me.

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### *Connor*

Will was up in Layton and would be staying the night. So when I heard his footsteps behind me on the way back from my architectural drawing class in the afternoon, I knew I must be mistaken.

Then his arms were around my waist from behind, and he lifted me off the ground to spin me in the air, laughing like I was fifteen again and it was the first day back at school after a summer apart. There was his rumbling laugh and those leather driving gloves, and when I looked toward the spinning ground I saw him sure-footed on the icy ground in the hideous neon hiking boots he wore just for the attention. It was Will, no question.

“Miss me?” He laughed.

“After all of eight hours apart?”

“Yeah, stupid question. I know you did.” He lowered me to the ground. “How were classes?”

“Really great,” I laughed. “How was your family?”

“Really not great. Skipped out on staying the night.” He rolled his eyes and stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. His shoulders were hunched with a tension that hadn't been there in the morning.

“What's wrong, what happened?”

But instead of answering, he jerked his head over my shoulder. “Incoming snowball fight in three seconds.”

I turned to see Matt, racing across the snowy lawn with a snowball in each of his mittened hands. I just had time to register the sight before both snowballs were in the air and hurtling toward me. I screwed my eyes shut, but only powder fell gently on my face.

I opened my eyes and there was Will, standing in front of me, both hands out to catch the snowballs in mid-air. He winked at me, then bellowed, “Nobody throws snowballs at Connor. This means war!” Then he ducked and grabbed fistfuls of snow as Matt whooped and started running away.

I laughed and started preparing snow missiles of my own. Had I missed Will? You better believe it.

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## Chapter Eight

### *Will*

Three months in Minneapolis weren't enough to make me think of it as home. I was just glad that the whole band had wanted to go to college within the state—I would have been miserable if I'd had to catch a plane every time I wanted to visit the mountains. But we all enjoyed driving up to Jagged Rock whenever we could.

For Thanksgiving, we packed everything into Chop's van and headed home for a camping trip. The long ride north was fun with the band around. Chop and Liv and Matt would take turns sitting in the passenger seat with an acoustic guitar, and the rest of us would sing. We'd pass around bags of marshmallows and potato chips or a big bottle of soda. It was our own little karaoke party.

I had a favorite cabin that I often went to with Connor. It had beautiful scenery and gentle inclines, which we could run or walk together. It was also convenient for driving—hard to find if you didn't know where it was, but down enough of a trail that you could drive right up to the front door step. Sometimes, the whole band would stay there together, and sometimes, just me and Connor. Sometimes, like this time, we'd all go up together, but only me and Connor would stay in the cabin as the others went deeper into the forest.

For me, this trip was all about luxury. I wanted to forget about werewolves and pack hierarchy and Joseph. I just wanted to have fun with my friends. I stuffed the trunk with junk food and pillows and blankets, jammed in around the camping gear to the point of overflowing. I shared the back seat with Connor and Liv and spread a blanket over our knees, resting an arm around Connor's shoulders. I loved seeing him excited. His eyes got bright and clear, like college stress was grime on his eyes that I could polish off with enough smiles.

It was just over a week until the full moon, so I'd be back in the mountains again soon to see my family. But the journey was nowhere near as fun on my own as it was in the backseat with an arm around Connor and a smile on my face.

We all shared a meal on the steps to the cabin, overlooking a frozen lake. Every now and again the conversation would lull, and then the silence would drag as we each got suckered in by the natural music of the woods around us.

After eating, we double checked our phones were working so we could stay in contact. Then Chop, Liv and Matt headed off with their packs. Connor and I settled into chairs on the porch, wearing our fur hoods and wrapped in blankets, Connor with a text book and me with my whittling.

It had been at this exact cabin that Connor and I had met the wolf pups, a little over a year ago. We'd been walking together and I'd heard a wolf in the forest, on its own. I had told Connor to wait on the path while I jogged into the forest to check it was okay.

When I was out of sight I shifted into my half-form, wolf head and throat for easy communication. Wolves are a lot more accepting than humans—if I'd shifted like that in front of a human it would have caused a panic. But the wolf knew it was me no matter what shape I was in.

I knew the wolf and its pack from my year in the forest. I got excited and invited it to meet my mate. I knew he was a human—soft belly and no natural defenses—and of course I wanted to protect him, but the wolf wasn't going to hurt him, and I just wanted someone who understood what I was to meet Connor. Apparently, that's not something werewolves do often because the wolf got all excited, too. After it had finished licking Connor's face and hands, it led us into the forest, to a hollowed shell of a tree where the pack's newborn pups were. There were just two of them, a brother and sister. The wolves even let Connor climb into the hollow tree and touch the tiny wolves.

He'd stroked the little pups like they were made of gold and looked up at me in amazement. "What we're doing right now?" He kept his voice low. "It's the coolest thing ever."

I'd come back to visit that pack often, getting to know the pups as they grew. I was hoping we'd see them this time. Over the days and nights in the cabin, I kept an eye out for tracks or the sound of wolves nearby. But I couldn't find anything.

Over the phone one night, Liv had told us how they'd found wolf tracks and followed them for half a mile before branching off again. I didn't know if that was *our* pack of wolves or not, but it was more sign of them than I'd seen.

On the phone another night, I asked Chop, "Any sign of wolves?"

"None yet. Liv would know, too. We saw bear tracks, though."

"Can you keep an eye out for wolves? You're my eyes and ears out there."

"Roger that, Captain," she said with only a trace of irony.

I was disappointed. I'd wanted Connor to see how the young wolves were growing. But I figured the pack had followed prey to the edge of their territory and away from our cabin.

On our final day in the cabin, Connor and I woke with the sun and ate breakfast on the cabin steps. Chop called to say they were on their way back to the cabin before we all drove home. The weather was crisp and clear, so Connor and I went for a walk to enjoy the forest, our last chance before driving back into the city.

"It's so beautiful," I said as we wound our way through trees between two lakes. I had a pack with food and water, and I was hoping we'd have a meal somewhere nice. "The city's just not the same."

"Like you're not up here all the time anyway," Connor laughed. He was so beautifully relaxed, his arms swinging at his sides. He kept looking up at the sky.

"Yeah, but it's not the same." I tilted my head back so I could see what he was seeing—the clear pale of the sky framed by the white aspen trunks, heavy with snow. Winter was definitely on its way.

"We can come up over the summer," Connor suggested. "Camp out for weeks at a time."

"What would we do with weeks of free time?" I laughed. "Maybe we could get one of those long fantasy computer games everyone talks about, the ones that take more than a hundred hours."

"Or we could patchwork a quilt?"

I could think of a lot more things I'd rather be doing with Connor. It was still over a week until the full moon so I couldn't blame my feelings on my hormones—but Connor's relaxed smile did more for my libido than the werewolf instincts ever had. I licked my lips and tried to think about something, anything, else. The weather was so perfect and the forest around us was a glittering jewel. Everything felt calm and still.

We were walking between lakes, picking our way downhill on a rough deer track that we'd walked and ran down many times before. I bounded down the path, bouncing off the trunks of the aspen and birch trees and imagining I was a living pinball. I swung around to stop an inch in front of Connor. Still breathless, I belted out the first line of one of our band's biggest hits. It was a fun showstopper called "Here's the Sun" with a catchy chorus that got crowds singing even when they didn't know the words.



Connor laughed and blushed, and then he took the bait. He sang with me, his sweet hesitancy and my enthusiasm mingling in the chill air.

“I could howl?” he suggested. “Like you taught me?”

“You remember that?” Fourteen felt like a lifetime ago. It was crazy that it had only been four years since I’d first brought Connor into the Jagged Rock Forest. Back then, I had thought it was only a matter of months before I bit him and claimed him, then took over pack leadership with Connor at my side. I’d introduced him to my parents in their wolf form and I’d taught him to howl a werewolf peace call—it would keep wolves from attacking him and identified him as *mine*, and every time he’d thrown back his head and howled that howl it filled me with pride and delight.

Connor gave a shy smile and stopped walking. He thought for a few seconds then threw his head back and howled. I started in surprise—he was perfect. Pitch-perfect, exactly how I’d taught him.

There was something incredibly warming about Connor remembering. He didn’t have the volume, but if any wolves were nearby they’d clearly understand him. When he was finished, I threw my arm around his shoulders. “I can’t believe you remember that!”

“Of course.” He grinned up at me, then threw his head back and howled again. I couldn’t resist the temptation to join in. We stood there on the worn track in the melting snow and howled like a couple of amateur wolves.

We’d been in a band together for a couple of years, but that howl was the most beautiful music we’d ever created. I smiled at Connor, breathless, and he grinned back. His cheeks were flushed and his gray eyes were wide and clear under his dark brows. He was so stunning with his pale face disappearing into the huge black coat. I could hardly keep myself from leaning close and tasting his sensual pink mouth.

At that moment, I felt two completely opposite things at the exact same time. I felt that I could tell him about werewolves then and there and he’d understand because he was *Connor*, the coolest guy you’d ever meet, who’d understand anything. And at the same time, I felt that I could never, ever have that conversation because he was *Connor*, the most important person in the world to me. Losing him would be worse than death.

So we just stood in the snow and smiled at each other. Like we were just best buddies goofing off by making fake wolf howls. Connor didn’t even know that he was the mate to one extremely conflicted werewolf.

“How was that?” he asked. “Did I get it right?”

“Perfect. Completely perfect. You’re a great student. No wonder you get better grades than me.”

Connor looked down at his hiking boots, like that could hide his happy grin. I could tell how chuffed he was, warm waves of pink and yellow happiness and embarrassment rolling off him like the first roses of spring. “I’m an okay student,” he joked. “You’re just a bad one.”

“You’ve got that right!” I laughed. I threw my arm around his shoulders for a quick hug. His hands squeezed my waist through the puffy layers of jacket, and I had to tilt my head to resist the urge to just kiss him. The thought of kissing him made me ache with longing. But I wasn’t going to take him without knowing he wanted it as much as I did—and not until he understood what I was.

We kept walking down the frost-hardened track. The mood was so happy and peaceful that I was seriously wondering if now was the time to tell him. It was a conversation I didn’t want to have, but when could be more perfect than right there in the woods where I could shift and show him? And Connor was mature, it wasn’t like he was the scared twelve-year-old I’d first met.

But fear was keeping me back, selfish fear saying it was better to keep lying to him if that meant keeping him in my life. And the less selfish fear of saving him the choice between life as a free human or life as a werewolf under Joseph’s thumb.

I was so wrapped up in thought, so focused on my own inner conflict, that I didn’t even sense the wolf until it was close. By the time I realized it was approaching us, it could almost be heard by human ears. So I stopped and held up a finger to my lips. Connor stopped and fell silent.

A few minutes later, the wolf was visible, emerging between the trees on the path in front of us. It was pale gray with a dark mask and stripe down its spine. Connor’s surprise and joy radiated off him like sunshine against my back, but in front of me the wolf was sending signals of fear and panic. It was almost confusing to be caught in the middle of it.

I walked closer to the wolf, picking my steps carefully so I didn’t slip and lunge suddenly. The wolf’s fear increased, and it watched me from wary yellow eyes.

It was one of the pups we'd first met in the hollowed tree trunk—the girl. She knew me and she sort of knew Connor, and that must have been why she approached us. But why was she so scared?

I got within a few paces of the wolf then lowered myself to the ground. I didn't care if it looked weird; I didn't want to frighten the wolf. I rolled onto my back and extended my neck, exposing as much as I could in my winter coat. *Peace! I submit to you! I'm not a threat!* I heard the rustle of Connor's clothing as he did the same, lying down half on the track and half in the snow to mimic my actions.

The wolf came toward us, hackles raised. She sniffed for a long time, wary. There was something wrong. I had never met this kind of fear before. And she didn't seem afraid of Connor, just of me. I could smell the lingering metal tint of blood about her even though her fur was clean. What was wrong?

Finally, she was satisfied. She gave a small whine and nudged my neck with her nose. Then she turned and ran into the woods. A moment later, she was back, looking at us lying on the ground. She turned again. The message was clear. "She wants us to follow her."

"Is it okay? It seems scared," Connor whispered.

"I don't know. She's not hurt. But she is scared. Are you all right with following her off the track?"

"Of course," Connor said without hesitating. "If you're going, too."

The wolf set a harsh pace through the trees. Even with all our practice running in the snow, it was a demanding chase. By the time she stopped, both Connor and I had taken our jackets and hats off. I had my pack slung over one shoulder, but even its small weight was irritating.

She stopped in a small clearing where trunks leaned together and kept the ground dry. Debris had piled up to form a natural fort and under it was a wolf. Its back was to us and its fur was dark with blood.

I dropped to my knees and crawled toward the wolf. I made a low growl of introduction, hoping that would be enough and it wouldn't bite me. But I could tell how bad its condition was—its breathing was shallow and wheezing. I rested a hand in its matted fur and felt the trembling of its body.

"What happened to you?" I whispered. "Show me what's wrong." The blood was dried, caked in its fur. How long had it been here? Where were the rest of the pack? I couldn't sense wolves anywhere nearby. A fight within the pack?

But as my senses got used to the overwhelming shock of the blood, I picked up on another scent. One so familiar and so unwanted that my stomach heaved. Joseph. Joseph's werewolf scent was on this wolf. Had he attacked it? Why?

For the first time in my life, I wished Connor wasn't there. I wanted to shift into a wolf and communicate clearly with this injured one, earn its trust and find out what was wrong. My curiosity was burning, and I wanted so badly to have made a mistake with the scent.

But my first priority had to be helping this wolf. It was one thing to say fights happened all the time and that was nature's way, but now I'd seen this hurt wolf—now I'd been led to it—it was my duty to help it. Besides, there was nothing natural about a werewolf hurting a wolf just as there would be nothing natural about a werewolf hurting a human. We were protectors, not killers.

"What can I do?" It was Connor, his voice low. He crouched beside me, careful to stay behind me enough that there was a clear space in front of the wolf's nest so it wouldn't feel caged in. *How did he know to do that?* He placed a hand on my shoulder, gloveless after the run in the snow, and his warmth seeped through my thermal top and spread through my whole body. I felt my body relaxing and my swirling thoughts calmed just a little. Why had I wished just a moment ago that he wasn't there?

"I'm going to check its injuries and see if there's anything we can do right here and now. Then we're going to call Chop and see how close they are. We can carry this one back to the car and drive to the vet's."

"Okay." He squeezed my shoulder. "How do we check its injuries?"

I carefully ran my hands over the wolf's fur, along its back and across its muzzle. I had to lean forward and reach over it to feel its legs and stomach. "There." There was a sticky patch of nearly-fresh blood on its side and it flinched when I touched one of its legs. "Its front right leg. And there's a wound on its side. Doesn't feel too deep but I'll have to see it to know for sure. Move back a bit, I'm going to slide it out."

I missed the warmth of Connor's hand as soon as it was gone. I carefully wrapped my arms around the wolf and pulled it out into the clearing. It gave a low growl of warning, but I made my own growl back—*friend!*

The blood in the fur looked worse in the light. I moved around the wolf to check its wounds. Its leg was clearly broken and there was an open wound on its side the size of my spread hand, hair and flesh torn away. Its face looked wrong—one of its eyes was swollen and its jaw might be dislocated. There was

also blood all around its muzzle—not its own. The stink of Joseph was unmistakable. *Good on you, I hope you bit him hard*, I thought absently. I didn't know what had happened, but even if a wolf had gone crazy and attacked a werewolf it still wasn't good to attack the wolf back. Werewolves could heal easily, wolves couldn't. Joseph knew that. When I saw him in a few days, I was going to tear him a new one for this.

“We'll have to get it to the vet, but I think it might be okay,” I said. “I'm no expert. But the wound isn't too deep. It will take a while to heal from this leg, though.”

Connor didn't reply. He was standing up now, leaning against a tree. For a moment, I thought he was panicking and distancing himself. But then I saw his eyes were focused on something outside the clearing. “Will,” he said quietly.

I followed his gaze. There was snow on the ground where the trees didn't shelter it, snow just deep enough to leave a clear print but not deep enough to distort it. There were wolf tracks there but also boot prints. There was also the clear indentation where a human body had fallen over in the snow, flailing with one arm out. And wolf tracks leading toward it.

Oh, no. This didn't look good. It looked a hell of a lot like a wolf attack. There wasn't the scent of humans anywhere, just Joseph. I knew no one had been hurt, but Connor didn't.

Why the hell were wolves attacking Joseph?

“I will understand completely if you don't want to do this, I know it's asking a lot,” I said slowly. “But I need to follow those tracks and find out what happened here. I can move faster alone. I need you to stay here. You can climb a tree if you don't feel safe, I can help you get high above where a wolf could attack.”

Connor swallowed then met my gaze. His eyes were steady and his face was calm even though I could sense the prickling of fear, a clear map of panic in the set of his shoulders and his clenched fists. “Do you think there's a chance of a wolf attack?”

I didn't hesitate. “No, I don't.”

Connor simply said, “Okay.” He sat down beside the wolf and put his hands in the fur at its shoulder, stroking slowly like it was a big cat.

I had to blink back a sudden overwhelming rush of emotion. *This boy, this perfect boy...*

I draped my jacket over the wolf. "For warmth." Then I pulled a bottle of water and a bag of trail mix from my bag and put it beside Connor. "I won't be long, but..."

"I might get bored and want snacks." He grinned crookedly. "I'll call Chop and the others?"

"Yeah. Tell them we're going to need to leave in a rush, and leave space in the car to fit a wolf. Or two." The uninjured wolf was keeping a close eye on the one on the ground, and I didn't think they'd want to be separated again. I closed my eyes and breathed past the smell of blood and werewolf and picked up the scent of the wolf on the ground. "You remember those pups we met in the hollowed out tree a year ago?"

"Of course."

"This is them. Brother and sister."

"They remember us?" he asked tentatively.

"They do." And they weren't old enough to want to be separated from their pack for long. So where were the others? I couldn't sense any wolves around, or anything larger than a rabbit. But just in case...

I knelt beside Connor and wrapped my arms around him. "Thanks for this." Under the guise of a hug I rubbed my head against his shoulder, making sure my werewolf scent was on him. *Ally! Friend! At worst, predator. Don't hurt this boy!* Then I looked into his face. "I'll be back soon. If Chop asks, tell her we're safe but don't give her our actual location, okay?"

Connor nodded. As I followed the tracks into the thicker trees and Connor disappeared from view, I heard him call, "Look after yourself, and come back safely."

I ran until the trees grew thick and dark around me, then I stopped to strip and wedge my clothes into a tree branch. I shifted and continued following the trail as a wolf. Giving into my instincts, I followed with my nose rather than my eyes, and the forest floor flew by under my confident paws.

It wasn't long before I found the rest of the pack. Four of them were close together, huddled up. Joseph must have killed most of them while they slept, sweeping in with a blitz attack. The alpha was further away and his skull was completely crushed, his jaw nearly torn away from the rest of his body. He had gone down fighting. Not far from him was his mate. I hoped she'd known that two of her children had survived.

Snow had fallen to cover some of the bodies, but boot prints and paw prints were still visible in the snow. It felt like staging—I could see places where Joseph had deliberately stopped and dropped onto his back like he was miming falling over. I had a sick itching feeling that he was hoping hunters would find this scene and think a human had been attacked.

I had to be misreading it. I had to be confused.

I obliterated the boot prints, kicked around the snow stained with Joseph's blood. Then I sat in the midst of the carnage and howled. My wolf throat opened up and let out all the grief, the sadness of the scene. I howled my misery. I howled my confusion. And my anger, and a promise: I would find out what had happened here and make sure it never happened again.

I followed the track back to Connor, running low with my belly dragging in the snow to smear away all of the boot tracks. If any hunters stumbled on this path they'd find only wolf marks. I didn't want to think about the kind of panic there would be if people thought wolves had hurt a human—there were plenty of hunters who would be keen to shoot a Jagged Rock wolf. It was important to me that wolves weren't hunted in these mountains, and I worked hard to make sure it stayed that way. Maybe Joseph was trying to undermine my authority further by taking that away.

When I got back to the clearing, fully dressed, I'd calmed myself enough to think straight. Joseph had killed almost a whole pack of wolves. Maybe for some ugly political reason, maybe for revenge. But there could be no good reason.

Connor was still sitting and stroking the injured wolf. The other wolf was leaning against Connor. He had an arm thrown over her. It was a touching scene of peace compared to the violent deaths I'd just seen.

Connor looked up. "I heard a howl."

"That was me."

"It was beautiful. Like a song. You could do it on stage, if we turned off your mic."

"I never want to howl like that, ever again." I knelt down beside the wolf. The one leaning against Connor didn't move, she just fixed her yellow eyes steadily on me. I asked, "Did you call the others?"

"They were nearly back. They should be at the car before we are."

“Good. Okay.” I rested my hand on top of my jacket where it covered the wolf. The belly-crawl in the snow had left me cold and numb even through my wolf fur, and as a human my chest and stomach felt like rubber.

I needed to sit down and warm up—werewolves had great healing abilities and I could heat myself, but it took a lot of energy. It was something I could do with effort and focus, or it would happen while I was sleeping when my body could focus on its own. But right now wasn't the time for focusing on myself.

There was blood on the wolf's muzzle—Joseph's blood. It had never occurred to me to find out if werewolf DNA tested as human or wolf or something in between, but this wasn't how I wanted to find out. Maybe there would be panic about a wolf attacking a human or there would be panic about human-wolf hybrids, and I'd be the one who outed werewolves after all these centuries. Neither were good options. I couldn't risk that blood being tested.

“Connor. I know I've already asked a lot from you,” I said. “But I need to ask you to trust me. I need to do something and it's going to look bad. I can promise you that no one's been hurt here, but I can't prove it to you or tell you how I know. Maybe I'll never be able to. And I need you to never tell anyone about this.” I took a slow breath. “But I need to wash this blood off and get rid of those human footprints.”

“You're sure no one's been hurt?” he asked.

“I'm sure.”

“Okay.”

“You trust me?”

“Of course. You've got my silence.” He looked at me steadily. “Do you want me to shake on it?”

“No, that's fine.”

“Do you need my help?”

“Call the clinic in town and see if Bren is working today. If he's not, tell them he needs to. I can give you his number.”

Connor nodded, fishing out his phone.

“Thank you,” I said, loading the words with as much emotion as I could express. I knew I could trust Connor's word. I just wished his aura read as calm as his face.



I used my bottled water to wash the blood from the wolf's muzzle and inside its mouth, holding its jaw open to scrub between its teeth with my fingers. There was a lot of blood, and when I'd used up my water I had to use snow to clean the last of the blood from the fur around its face. I warmed the snow in my hands, but it was still barely better than a handful of ice.

When I'd kicked away the boot prints and human-shaped hollow in the surrounding snow, I crouched down and picked the wolf up. My jacket was still draped over him. He was heavy but that was a good sign to me—I'd carried enough dead animals to know the odd way their bodies seemed to lighten when they were dying. "Come on," I said to Connor, and to the wolf. "It's a long walk back."

Connor nodded. He fell silently into step behind me. The uninjured wolf hesitated then followed after us, all her fear gone now. I wondered if she'd been scared at first because I smelled so much like Joseph, and if that fear had gone because of Connor's gentle way with animals.

It was a long walk back to the cabin, much longer than the sunny walk down. I was still desperately trying to think of reasons why Joseph's blood would be all around a pack of dead wolves. I hoped the one in my arms would survive. I didn't let myself think of anything beyond that.

I had to focus on this wolf, on keeping it warm and safe on the journey to the animal clinic. I had to get the band back to college in time for classes tomorrow morning. Later, I would confront Joseph. But I wouldn't let myself think of that when I had other things to organize.

Matt met us on the steps to the cabin. "Are you guys okay? Connor said something about—what the hell!" He stumbled backward, tripping over the steps as he spotted the wolf in my arms.

"Are you ready to leave?"

"The car's all packed, yeah."

I looked at Connor over my shoulder. "Grab your books and things. What you'll need for the next few days, I can bring the rest back with me later. Just make sure the cabin door's locked."

He nodded and jogged into the cabin. The female wolf watched him go but stayed beside me—beside her brother.

Matt was staring at us. "Is that a big dog?"

“No. It’s what you think it is.”

“What the hell,” he mumbled again. He went inside the cabin, walking backward with his eyes locked on the wolves, like they would leap to attack him the moment he looked away. As if early warning would help at all, if wolves attacked him.

When we were alone together, I took the chance to talk more freely with the wolves. I dropped to my knees and shifted my vocal cords and my ear canals enough to communicate with them. Starting with the basics—who they were, their role in the pack, the kind of details that were crucial to wolves. Then about what had happened—a surprise attack, a half-man, half-wolf stranger leaping silently from the trees as they slept and beating them with fists like tree branches. Running and being chased.

Connor and Matt emerged from the cabin. Connor had his pack on his back. “Ready.”

Chop and Liv were waiting at the car. The doors were open and Liv was poised to slam them shut after us. Chop was in the driver’s seat with her keys in the ignition. Ready to spring into action the moment we arrived.

Liv’s eyes widened when she saw us, but she didn’t say anything. Connor shoved his bag into the back then slid into the middle seat and Matt climbed into the front seat. I growled a quick command to the sister wolf and she jumped into the boot, settling into the pile of bags. I hoped the band wouldn’t comment on my ability to communicate with wolves.

“Here,” Liv said as she patted down some bags to make the space less lumpy and more comfortable. She moved around the wolf, seemingly unafraid. Then again, she’d grown up as a hunter and had been around wolves and bears plenty of times. I’d never been hunting with her—I hadn’t been hunting at all since Connor had told me he didn’t like it back in middle school. But I suddenly realized that I was missing out on seeing a whole other side of Liv, the practical fearlessness of a true predator.

I slid into the back seat with my precious cargo, moving slow and carefully. Connor reached over to do my seatbelt for me and Liv closed the door. Chop met my eyes in the rearview mirror and nodded, not bothered by her two additional passengers. She was already starting the car by the time Liv made it into her own seat.

I hadn’t noticed how bumpy the road was until I drove it with an armful of damaged animal. The wolf’s body trembled constantly and twitched whenever

the car juddered. Connor buried his hand in the fur of the wolf's neck. The wolf rested his head in Connor's lap.

"Does he have a name?" Connor asked. It was the first anyone had spoken since I'd told Chop to drive us to the animal clinic in town.

"Yeah. He loves fishing and watching the movement of light on ice in the lake, ever since he was a pup. That's his name—the way the light shimmers on a fish. And he's big and catches big fish. Like," I thought a moment. "Trout Shimmer. And his sister is dappled like sunlight through trees and in the fall she plays in the piles of dead leaves. Her name's Leaf Mold."

"You're making this up," Matt said. He was leaning forward so much he strained against his seat belt, trying to distance himself from the wolves as much as possible.

"Maybe," I said. I wasn't, but it didn't matter at all. "Wolves don't really have names in the same way that humans do. They know who they are, and they know who other wolves are. They're very social. And now their family and their pack is dead, so for a while they won't know who they are. Losing your pack is the worst thing that can happen to a wolf."

No one replied. For a while the only sound was the road, and the fur rustling under Connor's hand.

"Thank you for getting ready so fast, I appreciate it," I said.

"No problem." Chop met my eyes in the rearview mirror. She smiled just a little before focusing back on the road. "You're our leader. You command us, we leap into action." Matt and Liv nodded even though I didn't think Chop was being serious. "Besides, you take us on such great adventures."

"This is one to write home about," Liv agreed.

Trout Shimmer the wolf gave a low whine. His fur was thick with blood and his jaw was swollen from where my thorough cleaning had exacerbated his wounds. I squeezed his flank, willing him to know how sorry I was for all that had happened to him and to the pack. Connor's hand was sticky and red with blood but he didn't seem to notice. He was just staring at the wolf, stroking it again and again. When I focused on Connor's face, I realized he was crying, tears running silently down his cheeks.

"What's wrong?" I wished we were alone. Connor was hurting, and I didn't know how to make it right.

His eyes flicked to mine, the gray rimmed with red. He said quietly, "Who would do this to something so beautiful?"

I swallowed. I didn't have an answer. Everyone in that car was precious to me, and I wanted to protect each and every one of them. But right in that moment, looking at Connor's unselfish caring, I wondered if I could ever do enough to deserve his trust and friendship.

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## Chapter Nine

*Connor*

Will carried the injured wolf into the animal clinic as Matt and Chop ran ahead to open the doors. I trailed in Will's wake, entering the building just in time to see the stunned look on the receptionist's face turn to fear. "That's a wolf!" She was staring at Leaf Mold who had followed me in. Wolves never came down out of the mountains.

Will ignored her complaint. "I need Bren Flight."

"That's a wolf!"

"Bren Flight," Will repeated. He was holding Trout Shimmer in his arms like the wolf didn't weigh anything, but I knew he was heavy.

Liv nudged my shoulder and nodded at Chop who had her camera out and was taking photos of Will and the wolves. I glared. "What are you doing?"

"Are you kidding?" Chop whispered. "This should be our album cover."

The receptionist was still staring at Leaf Mold. "Wolves aren't like dogs, they're not pets for you to lead around."

"Do you know who I am?" Will's voice rang with authority. I hadn't heard him like that since we were kids and he was trying to impress my parents.

Will's uncle Bren appeared from a back room. "Will. This way." He glanced around at us and nodded his head at me. He held the door open for Will and the wolves. I wondered if I should follow them in, but Bren closed the door before I made up my mind.

We sat in the waiting room. Time passed, minutes turning into hours. The clinic closed and we just kept waiting. We ate junk food and Matt tried to make jokes, but the rest of us were too tired or stressed.

By the time Will came back out, I was so worried I'd twisted myself into knots. I tried to read, but I kept thinking about what had happened in the mountains and worrying about the wolf and Will.

Finally Will emerged, Bren behind him. His uncle waved at us and left the clinic, pulling the door closed after himself and leaving us alone in there.

"How is it?" Chop asked. "What did your uncle say?"

“He’s not sure. He says it’s touch and go.” Will ran a hand through his hair. It was already standing on end. I walked up to him and rested my shoulder against his like he always did to me when I was the one who was stressed. Will leaned into me, just a bit. “I’m going to stay the night here,” he said quietly. “You guys should head home.”

“No way. I drove us all here, I’m driving us all back,” Chop said. She crossed her arms and glared at Will.

“How about we all stay the night in town?” I suggested “We can head back in the morning after we know how the wolf is. All of us, together.”

Will nodded. “Okay.” He looked too exhausted to protest. “I’ll make sure I’m ready to leave in time to make it for classes. I’ll call a hotel and get you rooms.”

“We can stay at my parents’ house,” Matt offered.

“Okay,” Will said. “I’ll be staying here.”

“Here, as in in the vet’s clinic?” Matt laughed, but stopped laughing when Will just nodded.

“If I stay then they won’t need to be in cages.”

Chop frowned. “No way are you allowed to be here alone with uncaged wolves.”

“It’s okay. I’ve helped Bren look after injured wolves before. I know what I’m doing.” He kept looking down the corridor like he was unconsciously trying to get back to the injured wolf.

She crossed her arms. “You get that’s crazy, right?”

“Crazy is Will’s middle name,” I said. “I know, I’ve seen his driver’s license.”

Will smiled at me, then quickly threw an arm around my shoulders for a hug.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” His voice was quiet and some of the tenderness was back, the strain of whatever had happened up on the mountain fading from his face just a little. He let go of me and gave quick hugs to everyone, then disappeared into the corridor.

“Will looks a mess,” Liv said quietly. “Is he okay?”

All eyes turned to me. “I don’t know,” I said. “I hope so. He loved those wolves.”

“Still,” Chop said. “I can’t pretend that Will walking in here wasn’t the most badass thing I’ve ever seen. He’s holding a wolf, there’s a wolf walking behind him, everyone’s freaking out... That was great.”

“I hope the wolf’s okay,” Liv said. “And they catch whoever did this. Is Will going to track it tomorrow?”

“I don’t know,” I said as all eyes turned to me again. I twisted my arms together under my big snow coat. I felt useless and tired. “Maybe he’ll get his whole family on it.”

“We should stay and help,” Liv said.

I shook my head. “Will likes to be up here with just his family, you know that.”

“We’re as good at tracking as anyone in his family. I can call Dad, get him to keep an eye out.” She was already pulling her phone out of her pocket.

Liv’s whole family were hunters, and her parents worked with the Layton wildlife services. “Maybe not yet,” I said quickly. “We might disturb the wolf population.” *And find whatever Will asked me to never tell anyone, blood on the snow and the shape of a body...* “Let’s wait and see what Will says.”

“Okay,” Liv said. “But I need to be back in the city for classes in the afternoon.”

“We’ll get back in time,” Matt said quietly. “Don’t worry. Will will sort everything out.”

I smiled at him, appreciating his faith in Will. “Why don’t we all just get some sleep,” I suggested. “Talk to Will in the morning.”

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought I couldn’t leave Will alone at the clinic all night. I wouldn’t sleep right if I knew I could have tried to help him and didn’t. Even if I was worried about what I’d agreed to cover up. Had I covered up a death, or was there someone out there on the mountain starving and freezing to death, and no one would find them because of what we’d done?

The worst of it was, even as those thoughts flicked into my head, they were so easy to push away. I trusted Will. I trusted him completely. I trusted that if he said things weren’t how they looked then he was right. I trusted him enough to not look further even when all the signs pointed to something going terribly wrong. I trusted him. And that was terrifying.

And I didn't want to leave him alone.

So I stood at the doorway of the clinic and waved good-bye to the others. Then I took a deep breath and headed down the dark corridor, not knowing what I'd find at the end.

The room was small with only tables and cages for furniture. Both the wolves were on a table in the middle of the room. Will was shirtless and in the process of pulling his shoes off.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He froze, one boot in his hand. "What are *you* doing? I heard Chop's van leave."

"I'm staying. I can sleep out in another room if you want or something." I tucked my hands into my pockets to keep them from twisting around anxiously. Will's brows were raised in a question. I went on, "I don't want you to be alone."

Now that I'd said it, it sounded lame. It had been a long day. Maybe I should have just gone to Matt's parents' and crashed. But all I wanted was to make sure Will was okay. He always looked out for me, and I wanted to look out for him, too. Wherever he went I went, since we were kids. So I tilted my chin up and said, "I can tell you're not happy."

Will took his socks off and put them in his boots on the floor. He was standing there barefoot in a sterile room lined with cages and the two wolves huddled on their table in the middle. He rested his hand on a wolf—Trout Shimmer, the injured male. "Their pack is dead."

"All of them?"

Will nodded. He was looking at the wolves and not at me. "Wolves are social creatures. They shouldn't be alone. Losing their pack is like you losing your family." He shot me a quick grin. "Or maybe worse."

He hoisted himself onto the table, a brief flash of his athletic physique before he settled down beside the wolves. Even in the harsh lighting and weird circumstances. Will was beautiful. When he lay down, it looked like the roses tattooed across his side were a real garden growing around the wolves.

His voice was a low murmur, soothing against the clinical setting. "Imagine spending every day of your life with the same people. You're always together. And then one day they're brutally slaughtered in front of you." Will stroked



Trout Shimmer's fur where it was still matted from chemicals or blood or water. I didn't know if he was talking to me or to the wolf. "You can't sleep because you've never had to sleep without them there."

The wolves were huddled together on the table. Leaf Mold, the uninjured wolf, was lying on her side, and Trout Shimmer was pressed close with his muzzle resting on her neck.

Will lay down on his side, spooning his body around the injured wolf. He draped an arm over its neck. His voice was even lower now, and I had to step closer to hear what he was saying. "The pack sleeps together, often with their heads over each other's necks. I can't bring their pack back, but I can make sure they're not alone."

Then Will met my eyes, and his gaze was blazing fierce over the neck of the wolf. There was so much pain in his face and so much fear, and the way he held the wolf spoke of so much love. I'd never seen him like that, laid raw and emotional with no jokes or smiles.

The creature he was cuddling was a fierce predator—I'd seen its muzzle stained in blood. And I'd stroked that creature when he was a pup and his teeth were already sharp enough to tear through flesh. But now, he was curled into himself and breathing hoarsely, scared and hurt.

I kicked off my shoes and shrugged out of my coat.

"What are you doing?" Will asked when I pulled my shirt off.

"A pack's more than three, right?" I clambered onto the table nowhere near as gracefully as Will had. I stretched out on my side and wiggled until I was curled around the uninjured wolf.

Leaf Mold lifted her head when I lay beside her, turning one yellow eye to watch me. I nearly stopped breathing as I waited to see if she would rip my throat out. But after a few moments, she tilted her head to look at her brother or maybe at Will, and then she lay back down again. My heart was beating quickly with fear.

"Wolves are always touching," Will said. "As I said, they often sleep with their heads on each other's necks like Shimmer's doing. Like this." He nuzzled his face behind the wolf's ear, his nose in the thicker fur around her neck.

I could feel the strength of the wolf in front of me, and I knew how helpless I would be if she tried to hurt me. Still I moved closer, leaning my head on her

shoulder. When she didn't object I carefully placed my arm on her ribs, cuddling her. She let out a low rumble and wiggled her head.

I was ready to pull away, but Will reached out and stroked Leaf's muzzle. "She likes that. She thinks you're really warm."

I was too nervous to laugh. "She told you that, did she? I wish I had her fur, I'm freezing here." I kept my voice very quiet in fear of startling the wolf.

Will grinned. "You'll see. Cuddling with the pack is the warmest you've ever been." He draped his arm over his wolf, careful of the injured leg but otherwise as casual as if he was cuddling a pillow. He caught my elbow with his hand and guided my arm so our forearms were pressed together, cuddling over the bodies of the wolves. The fur was soft on my bare skin, but it was Will's skin that had my attention. "Is that better?"

I nodded awkwardly. I was trying not to get the world's most embarrassingly ill-timed boner.

"Not many people have been this close to a wolf," Will whispered. "Or have the guts to. You're brave."

Even in the ugly clinic light, Will looked like a movie star, dark hair and glittering eyes. I wondered if he knew how beautiful I thought he was, or if I'd ever have the guts to tell him. I didn't feel brave at all. "I just keep telling myself that if the wolf attacks she'll go for you first," I whispered.

"She wouldn't hurt you." His smile was playful, but his tone was completely serious. "She knows you. They met you when they were tiny, and their parents told them about you and me."

"I don't know if wolves work like that," I smiled.

"I do." Will petted Leaf's belly, the back of his hand brushing against my bare skin over and over as he moved. His left forearm wasn't tattooed so it was just his warm butter skin glowing all the more against the unsaturated gray of the wolf's fur. My eyes kept being drawn to the cut lines of his muscles like gills over his side. The elegant roses moved slightly every time he breathed.

"Their pack was all killed," Will said.

I dragged my eyes away from his bare chest, feeling guilty and skeevy. "Are you sure?"

He nodded, his cheek rubbing the wolf's fur. "I saw their bodies. They didn't stand a chance."

“Shot?”

He shook his head. “Not shot. But I know who killed them. I just don’t know why.”

“What will happen to Leaf Mold and Trout Shimmer?”

“I don’t know.” Will kept stroking the wolf, and she made little wheezes with every pat almost like a cat purring. “They could come stay at my parents’ place until Shimmer’s leg is healed.”

“Maybe I could visit them?”

“I think they’d like that.” Will smiled. He stopped petting Leaf’s belly and moved his hand to my elbow again. He gave me a squeeze. “Thank you. For being here, and everything.”

“No problem,” I whispered. I couldn’t hold his gaze when he was looking at me so closely.

Will was right, it did get warm. And that’s how we stayed, cuddling wolves, until we fell asleep.

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*Will*

I parked outside my parents’ house and raced inside without bothering to lock the car. I knew the house was empty, and I only took the time to shuck my clothes before I was out through the living room’s sliding doors and running through the snow on four paws. It wasn’t the full moon, and no one would expect me to be there, even though the pack met almost every night. I bellowed out a howl to let them know I was coming and the answer was Dave, distant in the mountains.

Running felt good, the warming of my muscles turning to a good ache as I ate up the miles. Nothing beat emotional runs, and I was fueled by pure rage. Hand me a microphone and I could front for a punk band.

I howled like a game of “Marco Polo” to zero in on my pack’s location. I only got a voice or two in response, instead of the usual chorus of a full pack. I should have realized something was wrong. But I didn’t even think about it.

The first pack mate I saw was Dave, his back on a tree and his eyes wild in his werewolf form. For just a second, I took the time to appreciate how cool he looked, that teardrop marking on his dark mask with his dark human eyes, the intricate dark tattoos and the huge breadth of his chest disappearing into the

thickly furred half-wolf legs. Just a second. Then his panic and fear suffocated me like a cloud of gas. I shifted enough to make human speech. "What's wrong?"

"They're all hunting."

I grunted. I could pick up the presence of their bodies, the smell and sound of werewolf paws on snow. I started running again, but Dave called out to me, "Will! They're hunting wolves!"

I swore and ran faster. Dave ran behind me, struggling to keep up with his heavier body when he was out of practice in these woods. I was on my own when I finally found my pack—and I was just in time.

There was some of my family in wolf form, spread out in a semi-circle, facing a rock formation steep enough to form a short cliff face. In front of the cliff was a wolf. I knew it, a three-year-old beta. He was my favorite from his pack, strong but placid and he let pups climb all over him and nip at his ears.

But all that calm was gone now, he was terrified. He tried to scramble up the cliff face, again and again, but his claws couldn't find purchase. My pack was just standing and watching. As I raced up, the wolf turned around, tail between its legs, and let out a low whine.

Joseph was at the head of the pack, center of the group. He growled as he moved forward with his teeth bared and his ears back. Happiness was wafting off him, and it stank.

I came upon the scene from the side, and the only thing I could think of was stopping it. I raced along the rim of the jagged rock formation and leapt into the air, free falling for a few seconds. In that time, I shifted into a werewolf, body of a human augmented huge and bulging by the strength of a wolf, covered in reddish gray fur. I landed between the wolf and my pack, facing down Joseph.

"Stop this!" I growled.

Joseph twisted into his werewolf form on the ground, then stood up to face me with a smirk. "You have no power here."

"Try me."

"I'm the alpha. You can't tell me what to do."

"You're about as alpha as a bumblebee, Jerk-Off," I growled. It was a silly nickname but it used to get him so mad back at school. And sure enough, he flinched like he'd been slapped. *That's right. I can boss you around. Always have and always will.* "What are you doing?"

“Hunting. Like werewolves should.”

“This is wrong.”

“Not your call, Willy. You’re in my pack. I tell you what to do.”

“What are you going to do to this wolf?”

“Kill it. Like we kill all the other wolves. They’re here for our sport.”

“They’re here for our safekeeping,” I growled. I looked past him to where the rest of the pack were taking their werewolf form. I memorized every face: These were the ones who were willing to hurt wolves. Cousins and aunts and uncles. My mother and father, looking supremely disinterested. I hated them for that. This loser “took charge” and less than two weeks later, they were giving up everything they’d always stood for. If there was ever a time I hated the wolf social rules, it was now. Morality came over blind obedience, any day.

What really got me was Bren. He stood up, shaking and looking sick. There were tears streaming down his face, and he didn’t bother to wipe them off. The wolves were his life, and I could hear his heart breaking. He didn’t want to do this anymore than Dave, but he was powerless to resist. He was an omega. He followed rules, and he followed the leader. It was as much in his blood as alpha was in mine, and that couldn’t be changed.

But the rest of them, standing there like hunting wolves was nothing, like they enjoyed it? They had a choice. And this was the choice they’d made. “This pack is here to defend wolves, not hunt them.”

“This pack *was* here to defend wolves,” Joseph sneered. “Now it’s my pack. We don’t need wolves in these mountains and we don’t need humans in our town.”

“You’ve done something, haven’t you? Staged wolf attacks on humans?”

“You noticed already?” He looked proud. “This is the start of a war, wolves against humans and werewolves against wolves and humans. We’ll rule these mountains and no one can stop us.”

“You’re serious, right? You’re actually trying to start some kind of war? That’s crazy. Just... Crazy.” I looked around the pack. My mom had her arms crossed and was watching me impassively. Bren was looking at the ground, tears of anguish freezing on his cheeks. I called out, “Can’t you hear what this guy’s saying? It makes no sense!”

“We don’t need to be cowed by humans anymore, we don’t need to be slaves to wolves,” Joseph growled. At the back of the pack, Dave appeared,

walking with a hand to his side where he had a stitch. He went immediately to Bren and threw an arm around him. It's what I wanted to be doing—comforting rather than challenging. I wanted Joseph to disappear so I could heal the damage he'd caused.

“When have we been cowed by humans? When have any of us been attacked by a wolf or a human? They're not a threat. You're the only threat, Joseph. Making werewolves commit murder for sport. Thinking about your own fun and not the health of your pack or the wolves under your protection.”

I stepped backward and held out a hand. The frightened beta wolf came forward and leaned against my side. I rubbed him behind his ears, soothing. “Wolves are our allies. To kill them is petty and pointless—you're just jealous that any creature has as much right to these mountains as you do. You're not an alpha. You're a bully who's put himself in charge.”

“This pack put me in charge, and you didn't challenge it.” His eyes glowed wolf-yellow.

I thought of Connor, the life we had together that was all that I wanted. All the reasons why I hadn't stepped forward and taken control of the pack. They were all great reasons, and they were all true. That hadn't changed.

But Joseph was killing wolves. And the pack was letting him. It sounded like he wanted to hurt people, too. And I was the only one in a position to stop it.

I wanted a life with Connor, but I wasn't prepared to let others die for it.

“I challenge you,” I said.

He started laughing. “You don't stand a chance.”

“I challenge you,” I repeated.

My dad said quietly, “Will. Look around you. You don't have the pack's loyalty.”

It was true. Loyalty flared like a flame and these werewolves barely had embers for me. Dave's faith in me was a roaring furnace and Bren's was strong and steady. Loyalty came from the wolf beside me, the beta who looked up at me with yellow eyes filled with pain but complete trust. But wolf loyalty wasn't worth a tenth of a werewolf's. And the pack burned for Joseph, and his stupid crazy claims of oppression that would see innocent blood spilled for no reason.

Even my parents were on his side, though barely. I met my mom's eyes, and she said, “You've been away too long. We don't even know who you are.”

“You know I’m not a killer,” I said.

“You’ll never have the pack’s loyalty.”

“And this jackass will? You’d rather throw away your life’s work and kill wolves than trust a born alpha?”

“You’re not part of this pack,” my dad said. “You haven’t been since you met your mate. You look after him, not us. You’re a born alpha but you’ve let your duty down. You’ve let the pack down.”

That stung. And it was true. I had focused on Connor and my band and not on the pack. Then again, I couldn’t make myself regret it—there was nothing in the world that would make my band start killing people, or wolves for that matter. And my pack had done it in the blink of an eye. Whose loyalty was worth more?

“I challenge you,” I said again, fixing my gaze on Joseph. His smile slipped, his bravado cracking. He was obviously trying to figure out what I had up my sleeve to make such a hopeless challenge. I didn’t have a hope, but I was fueled by the simple wish to stop the killing as long as I could. “We’ll fight at the full moon to decide pack dominance.”

“You can lose at the full moon or you can lose now, doesn’t bother me at all,” he shrugged.

“If I win, you’ll leave this pack. You’ll take your followers and you’ll leave the state. I won’t ever see you in this forest again.” That was standard for pack hierarchy, if there was a dispute over dominance then the loser would leave to start their own pack. But that was between alphas, and I wanted to be sure that my crazy cousin understood.

“When I win, you’ll leave,” he said. “Though you can stay around in my house as my pet and do my laundry, if you want.” One of his brothers snickered. I glared at him, and he fell silent at once.

“And you don’t hurt any more wolves, or any humans, until we fight.” It was only a few days but it was better than nothing. Maybe just enough of a respite for me to try and think of a solution. “Do I have your word?”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said. “You don’t scare me.”

“You don’t hurt any more wolves until after we fight at the full moon,” I growled. I unconsciously squared my shoulders and rose to my full height, alpha confidence rolling off me. Joseph flinched and stepped backward. *There!* That was how you sorted the bullies from the true alphas.

"I was bored of hunting anyway," he mumbled. Then he pointed at the beta wolf who still stood at my side. "We won't kill any except this one."

"This one goes free. It's under my protection. You won't hurt any more wolves until after we fight."

"We've already caught it. It's ours."

"This wolf is a beta, did you know that? If you were to try and join his pack, he'd rank higher than you."

"I'm the leader of a werewolf pack, I rank higher than any—"

"Oh, you tell yourself that," I laughed. It was satisfying to watch Joseph's face turning red, to provoke him like poking at hot coals. Maybe he had the pack's loyalty, but that didn't mean he had mine. I would never think of Joseph as anything more than a weakling and a bully. "Are you killing wolves because you know you couldn't rule them? They won't give you their loyalty and you hate that?"

"Wolf loyalty is worthless! They are prey!" He was aiming for menacing, but he sounded like a kid throwing a tantrum.

"This wolf you're going to kill is very calm and strong. Did you know that? He loves to look after new pups and spends hours playing with them. His territory has a lot of exposed rock faces, and he takes the pups there to sleep in the sun. That's what he's known as—something like, Sunlit Rock. That's the creature you want to kill for fun. And you think he's just prey?"

I was hoping I could get through Joseph's bloodlust, show him the mistake he was making. But he spat on the ground and said, "It's a wolf. It runs fast. A good hunt. That's all I care about. Hey, that human you hang out with runs pretty fast, I wonder if he'd—"

"Stop," I growled. "You want to stop talking right now."

And Joseph did. He smirked, but he shut up.

My blood was boiling, but I had to push my emotions down. Joseph was going for an easy rise. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing that he got to me. So I didn't let myself think about Connor, didn't let myself imagine a pack of werewolves hunting him as he ran for his life. No. This wasn't about Connor. This was about Sunlit Rock, about the life of a wolf and its pack and everything that Joseph wanted to destroy in the name of sport.



“Come on,” I said, nudging the beta wolf at my side. I started to lead him away from the werewolves. When Joseph stepped forward, I glared at him. “This wolf goes free.”

“No!”

I ducked and growled a message to the wolf. *Run! Get away! It's not safe here, run and don't come back.*

The wolf turned stubborn eyes toward me and huffed a disagreement. He wanted to stay. He wanted to fight.

*This isn't your fight. You can't win.*

He kept glaring at me, anger and fear and defiance in every line of his body.

*The full moon, I growled. I'll fight for you at the full moon. Werewolf on werewolf. There's nothing you can do, but I can fight for you.* I stood up as I growled, *Go! Run!*

This time Sunlit Rock obeyed. No one moved to stop him, all eyes turning to Joseph.

“You’ll regret defying me,” Joseph growled.

“You’ll regret going back on our agreement. No wolves will be hurt before we fight.”

“Then we fight now!” He was on me before I realized what was happening. I wasn’t ready to take a hit, and I went over backward. I caught myself on my elbows, the hard ground and sharp rocks cutting into my exposed arms. Joseph kicked me in the side with all his might. His force was insane. It was like I’d been hit with solid rock. I felt ribs breaking as the breath was knocked out of me. I tried to climb to my feet, but he kicked me again, in the face. Then his hands were at my neck, and he slammed me back to the ground, his weight on me and his fists and legs flying.

“Enough!” It was my mom’s voice, and her hands that dragged us apart. She had a hand on Joseph’s chest and held us separated. He had the gall to swing at her, and she responded with a booming growl. “This is not right! You agreed to a fight at the full moon.”

“I’m pack leader,” Joseph snapped. “I do what I want.”

“Honesty means more to a pack leader than anyone else. You gave your word.”

“You’re just protecting him because he’s your son,” Joseph snarled.

“You gave your word,” she repeated. There was nothing quite like my mom in full alpha mode.

Joseph backed down, ducking his head. “Whatever. I’m going to beat him anyway.”

Mom turned to me like she was going to say something, but I didn’t want to hear it. I climbed to my feet and pushed past her, ignoring the pain in my legs. Everything hurt. It felt like I had broken glass instead of bones. How much of my body was broken? Oh, god. What had I just set myself up for? I couldn’t win a fight with Joseph. This was proof.

As I staggered out of the clearing, I passed Bren. His eyes were wide as he watched me walk past. “Offer’s still open,” I growled. “You can come live with me in the city.”

He shook his head, tears frozen on his cheeks. These damn mountains and the effect they had on us. I knew how he felt, how difficult it was to think of leaving here.

But right then all I wanted was to get back to the city. Because that was where Connor was. And I needed to feel close to him.

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## Chapter Ten

*Connor*

I woke up in the dark. Through the window, I saw snow falling. It was still dark. I'd been woken by the sound of the door opening.

I sat up in bed, rubbing my face. "You're home early."

"Connor," he said. "I'm so glad to be home." There was something strange in his voice, something rough that wasn't a whisper. I couldn't see anything in the room except the corner of the drawer by the window, the hint of a silhouette.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't know." A shuffling sound and a thud—his bag sliding to the ground. Then a rustling as he came over and settled into the chair beside my bed. He lowered his voice now that he was closer, but I could still hear something was wrong. I'd known him for years, I knew his voice. A single word could tell me the mood he was in. And right now something was wrong. He said quietly, "I think I've messed up. I don't know."

"What happened? Whatever it is, I can help."

He made a little choking sound. What was happening? Was he crying? I was fuzzy with sleep, and I didn't function well without coffee. My brain was sluggish even though my heart was racing and my body was on high alert. But it wasn't the first time I'd focused all of my attention on listening for Will to make the slightest sound. I needed to know what was happening so I could help, any way I could. I thought about turning the light on, even though the air in the room was cold and I didn't want to get out of my bed.

I was just about to get up when Will finally spoke again.

"Can I get into bed with you?"

"What?" I squawked.

All those nights he slept beside me on his chair, just a stretch of an arm or a million light-years out of my reach. How badly I'd wanted him to ask. All the *Brokeback* fantasies, the porn scenarios I'd gone through in my head, the endless dreams of just casually saying, "It's cold, why don't you come over here and get comfortable?" and Will just climbing into my bed and realizing he was in love with me, too.

And now the man of my dreams was asking the question of my dreams, and I froze up and clutched the blanket to my face like I had to hide my blush in the darkness.

“It’s okay,” Will said quickly. “I just thought... I could really use a friend.”

And he thought I was saying no to him? I was so glad for the darkness because I knew my eyes would be bugging out of my face as I tried to say yes as fast as I could, firing my words out like a machine gun.

“No! Will. I mean. Yes. Of course.” I pulled the blanket aside and slid closer to the wall. Just a few moments to run through a mental checklist of horrors: Did I smell, would my breath smell, were there food crumbs in my bed? Then the mattress shifted as Will’s weight slid in beside me. My mind just went blank.

“Tell me if you need anything,” I mumbled. “Water or... Anything.” I had no idea how to share my bed. I slid down so I was lying on my back, but my limbs felt stiff and uncooperative.

The bed was tiny and Will’s shoulder was brushing mine. He reached over me to tuck the blanket in—Will’s arm, across my body like we were lovers cuddling. My ears were ringing, and I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. But after he tucked the blanket in his arm stayed there, hand resting on my shoulder. He was heavier than I imagined, his body so solid even when only his arm was over me. I just had to focus on my lungs, making sure I kept pulling air in and out of my body.

“Thanks.” Just one word but it came out as that ultra-low Will growl that reached right into my bones and squeezed them to jelly. His fingers were at the collar of my night shirt, his hand curled close to my skin. I shifted, a nervous twitch controlled by my desire and not my mind, and it brought the back of fingers against my bare skin for just a moment. There was a rough touch of wool—he was wearing his gloves?

“Are you okay?” Will whispered.

I jerked my head in a nod. I was the one who was meant to be looking after him, in his weird mood. And all I could think about was how close his body was to mine.

I couldn’t sleep. Even when I calmed down enough to just breathe like a normal person, I couldn’t sleep. I watched snowflakes getting caught in the wind outside our window, and thought about all the things which had led me to

this moment in this bed with this man. My head was buzzing with his closeness and every tiny movement of his body sent waves of shock through me. But as the long minutes drew out in the silent room, my fear and nerves dissolved. I was feeling happy, a huge and calm happiness that pumped through my veins and reached every part of my body every second. Will was asleep, and I didn't have to worry about what he thought of me, what he'd see on my face if I let my happiness show. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't have to hide how I was feeling. And all I was feeling was happy.

Will's body was warm in my bed. But as the night ticked on he started feeling warmer. At first, I thought I was imagining it. But he just kept getting hotter and hotter, waves of heat radiating off him and scorching my side. His arm over my chest was like a band of burning iron. My skin itched and sweat trickled down my neck, down my ribs and thighs.

I blinked and shook my head and hoped I was dreaming, that I was stuck in a hypnagogic dream state or some kind of sleep paralysis where I was imagining my best friend's body burning up like the sun. But I was definitely awake. And I couldn't lie through it. I lay still for as long as I could, but his sleeping heat was hurting me.

I pushed Will off and sat up, throwing the blanket off. I could feel where he'd been touching me and it wasn't just the sweet awareness of his closeness that I usually felt. There was a line of tender skin from my right armpit to left collarbone and my skin felt hot to the touch.

Will didn't sound sleepy at all. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing. You're just really hot." The double entendre slipped out without me realizing it, and I instantly wished I could pull the words back.

"I'm sorry. You're right." He climbed out of the bed. There was a loud thunk as his feet hit the ground—his boots. No wonder he was hot, he was sleeping in his boots. "Must be the room after my car, change of climate and all that." A long zipper sounded. He was wearing a jacket as well?

Will had been in my bed, and I'd kicked him out. I started wondering if I'd made it up, if his body heat had been bearable and I was overreacting. I was still sweating like I'd just been for a jog in the summer. I pulled my shirt off and felt my chest. There was a line of puffy, tender skin, which told me I hadn't been making up anything. The blanket was crisp and warm, and I kicked it off.

Will paced the small room. He was wearing his nylon snow pants, I could tell by the slow egg-cracking sound they made with every step. We had

matching pairs—mine were charcoal gray, Will's were glossy black like leather. He went to the window and leaned his head against the glass. His silhouette was cast in pale blue, shirtless so when he raised his arm over his head his ribs caught the light like sand dunes at night. He slid the window as high as it would go and stuck his arms out as far as the elbow.

There was something wrong with his silhouette. His ribs looked funny, crooked. I'd sneaked enough glances over the years to know.

“What's wrong Will?”

His teeth glinted as he grinned at me over his shoulder. “You're right. I'm too hot. I just need to cool off.”

“It's snowing.”

“Would you like me to shut the window?”

“No, that's fine.” There wasn't much wind, at least not enough to reach me. The cool of the room was a relief after Will's unexpected blazing heat. I lay back down and closed my eyes. My chest felt better now, the welt gone and my skin not tender anymore.

Will closed the window and locked it with a click. There was the egg shell rustle of his pants until he settled into his chair and dropped his shoes on to the ground one after another. Even when he was acting scary weird, I still found comfort in that sound. It meant the end of the day, settling in.

I didn't expect Will to get back into my bed. But he did, sliding onto the mattress and wrapping his arm over me again. My chest was bare and so was his arm. “How's that?” he whispered.

“Cold.” Even in a whisper my voice squeaked. He was still wearing his gloves, the wool rough on my waist.

“Can I ask you something?”

I nodded. I was lying as still as possible. I didn't want to move and scare Will off.

“What would happen if I couldn't live here anymore?”

“In the dorms?”

“In this state. What if I had to move away?”

“You love it here!”

"I know." Will's hand moved confidently, even in the dark. He grasped my hand and linked our fingers together. His words were a gentle rumble that trembled through my body. "But what if I had to move? Would you come with me?"

I wanted to ask him what was wrong. I wanted to know, and I wanted to never know. What had he and Dave gotten into? But he was asking for help, like this. He said he needed a friend. And right now that meant terrifying hypothetical scenarios.

I kept my voice as steady as possible when a weird-acting Will was in my bed and touching me. "Of course I'd come with you. We could move west. There are plenty of lakes and forests. Or go up to Canada, even. I could start looking at colleges and apply for a transfer, everything can be done online so we wouldn't even have to drive anywhere until moving day. We could get a dorm room just like this. Or a house, even. The band would love it, we can have a road trip and a few months as this glamorous band from out of state."

I didn't know what else to say, what else he wanted me to say. I was taking some marketing with my degree and it was something I had trouble with: Figure out what your client wants and give it to them. I just had what I had, and hoped that was good enough.

Maybe it was. Will stayed curled up against me, silent, warm but not blazing hot. We were still holding hands. I didn't move to pull my blanket back up.

Gray dawn found us still lying on my bed. As the light lifted, I let myself look at Will. His face was tilted down so I didn't have to worry that he'd catch me staring. The arm over my chest was dark with tattoos, a slab of color against my pale skin.

I was thinking that he'd got a new tattoo on his ribs, but as the light increased I realized it wasn't a tattoo—it was bruising. Dark purple and red ringed with green. His whole side was a mottled bruise. And the shape was wrong, jagged. It looked like he had a broken rib.

What had happened to him?

As the room lightened, the bruises became more obvious. They were dull and looked old. I wasn't an expert in bruises, but I'd seen enough to know that I was looking at the final stages of a really severe beating. What had happened—something last week? After a gig? I tried to think if he'd slipped out for a while, if I'd seen anyone suspicious hanging around, if he'd walked with a limp or

winned in pain at any point. I couldn't remember seeing anything odd. How had my best friend gotten so badly hurt without me noticing?

"What time is it? I'll put coffee on," Will said.

I started, quickly looking away. "How long have you been awake?"

"Pretty much since I burned you," he laughed. "You want coffee?"

"No. Maybe. I think I might try and get more sleep." Lying in Will's arms felt even more charged in the light of day. I wondered if I was going to smell like him, if my bed would smell like him. I wished he didn't have to be beaten before I got the chance to find out.

Will let me go and rolled onto his back. His side pressed into me, hip to shoulder. Distancing himself, maybe. He was still so close. "Can't believe you don't want coffee. Not the Connor I know."

"What happened to you?" I burst out. I'd just seen his face. It was as bruised as his ribs, swollen and mottled like a rotting apple.

"Nothing." He sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. "Thanks for letting me crash here." With his back to me the bruising looked even worse.

"Will. What happened? That doesn't look like nothing."

"Yeah. I got in the way of a bear. It's nothing serious."

"Oh my god." I sat up. "Have you seen a doctor?"

"It's fine. Looks worse than it is. It hardly hurts."

"I think you've got broken ribs."

"What? No, I'm fine." He chuckled.

I didn't join in. His stupid infectious laughter could wait. "Will. I'm worried. Please go to a doctor."

He'd been leaning over the bed to search the floor for his clothes. He stopped now and twisted around to look at me, half in and half out of his jacket. "Connor. You're being a good friend, but it's okay."

"It's not okay." I couldn't even look him in the eyes. His face was tenderized mince. I'd spent the night touching myself imagining he was there, and then hyperventilating when he was. I didn't feel at all like a good friend right then.

Will sighed. "Let's make a deal. I'll go take a shower, and when I come back if you're still worried I'll go to the doctor. How's that sound?"



I gritted my teeth. I hadn't imagined the damage to Will's side, but he was grinning at me like nothing was wrong. It was confusing at the least. "You promise?"

"I promise."

I nodded. A few minutes wouldn't make him hurt any worse.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes while Will was showering. I wanted to sleep so I would be in a better place to deal with the day, but I couldn't get my mind to stop spinning. Will had lain in this bed. His head had been on this pillow. The thought wasn't any less intoxicating when I knew that that head had been bruised and beaten. His body had been beside mine—bruised, yes. But bare. He'd laid himself bare beside me.

I was getting aroused and calculating how long Will would be in the shower. I was interrupted by a movement on the mattress—a vibrating by my leg. When I pushed the sheet aside I found Will's phone. It must have been in his pocket when he'd lain down and it must have fallen out.

Dave was calling. I answered without thinking. "Hello?"

"Hey. Connor?"

"Yeah."

"Will there?"

"He's in the shower."

"Oh. Tell him to call me back?"

Dave's voice was already fading when I snapped out his name. "Dave! What happened?" I pressed the phone tight to my ear, so close I could hear my own pulse. But I could hear Dave's breathing even if he wasn't talking. "Will's hurt and he won't tell me what happened."

"Will's fine," Dave chuckled. I'd always liked Dave, he was relaxed and friendly when the rest of his family were permanently keyed up. But in that moment I hated him.

"Have you seen his ribs? You should have made him go to a doctor."

"Whoa. Hey. He's fine. Maybe he looks worse than he is. You know how Will gets."

"What do you mean?"

“He pushes himself hard. You know that. He just got a bit excited running and took a few too many falls. That’s never going to stop him, though.” Dave laughed again. It sounded forced.

“I guess you’re right.” My head was spinning worse than ever, and I had to struggle to keep my tone light. “I’ll tell him you called.”

“You do that, Con. See you soon.”

I sat with Will’s phone in my lap and visualized the words “running and took too many falls” and “got in the way of a bear”. I desperately tried to find overlap, some way I could have misheard them. Neither lines made sense and they didn’t work with each other.

Will was hiding something. Dave was in on it. And it had got Will hurt.

Whatever it was, I was going to find out.

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### *Will*

I looked at myself in the mirror before I got in the shower. Damn. Connor had been right—I looked a mess. But maybe Connor hadn’t seen *that* much. Maybe I could convince him that it had just been a trick of the light. That should be easy, since I’d be fully healed by the time I got back into the room.

I shouldn’t have taken the risk, though. I should have slept in my car. I should have healed myself overnight. I should have stayed in my own damn bed. But *Connor*. In a month I might lose everything, and I needed so badly to be reminded of my good thing. The best thing I had ever known. I needed to believe in a future where I could lose everything and still have him. I needed to believe that he could just pick up his life and move across state lines. That I could lose everything and nothing at once. I needed, just once, to know what it was to hold him.

But I hated that holding him had come at the price of having him see me like this. Was the warmth of his body in my arms worth the fear in his voice when he saw me?

I turned the shower on cold and stood naked under it. I reached inside myself to the werewolf part, the part of me that wasn’t wolf and wasn’t human and didn’t answer to any laws of nature. I focused on healing. I watched my ribs sliding back into place, the skin knitting until it was smooth, the blood and darkness washing away until there was no sign that there had ever been bruises

at all. My skin heated from the inside out. That prickling burn that felt like a tattoo gun under my skin trying to drill out. The cold water hissed and some turned to steam as it touched me.

For a moment, I remembered falling asleep with Connor, letting my guard down and letting myself be weak just once. What if he hadn't pushed me away? What if my sleeping self had just kept healing and I'd burned right through him like molten lead? The thought made me sick. Too uncomfortably close to true.

I could tell something was wrong the moment I entered the dorm. My eyes went to Connor automatically, as always. He was sitting on his bed with his back against the wall, and he wasn't looking at me. I could practically feel the unhappiness rolling off him like arctic wind.

I fanned a hand in front of my face and cracked a cocky grin. "Hey, look. No bruises."

Connor didn't look up. "What happened?"

"Wasn't as bad as it looked. Must have been dried mud or something, I got it smeared on my face and..." I stopped talking. Connor had crossed his arms over his chest and tucked his head into his body.

Connor met my eyes and the breath was knocked out of me. I'd been reading him as unhappy. I couldn't handle the anguish I saw in his face, that beautiful face twisted with fear and anger. I would have given anything to never have to see him like that.

"Will," he said quietly. "Just tell me what happened."

I was just standing there in the middle of the room, holding a bundle of my clothes. I wanted to go to him, but I was afraid he'd flinch or shy away. "I'm not hurt. You don't have to worry."

"Tell me what happened," he repeated. I couldn't think of a lie, so I just said nothing as he sat on his bed and watched me. Finally, he said, "Your brother called. Your stories didn't line up. Do you normally check them with each other before you get home?"

I flinched. "Connor..."

"What happened? Just tell me." Connor was the one who closed the distance between us. He crossed the floor in a T-shirt and the thermal pants he slept in. His heart was beating fast, but he'd calmed his expression. It was still there in his eyes, though. The pain and confusion.

And even then, even seeing Connor messed up because I lied to him, I was mostly thinking that I should have got my stories straight with Dave before I left. I'd been lying to the man I loved so long that all I could think of was more lies to tell him.

"Just tell me what happened," he said quietly. "Whatever you're into, I can help. Is it drugs? I don't care if it's illegal. I just want to help. Let me help you."

Connor was so sincere. I had to look away. Like I needed any more reminder that he was a better person than I. I knew that he meant it—and it was funny, to think of him trying to help me with Joseph, but I knew he would. That was just who Connor was. Endlessly helpful. I didn't want to lie to him. I didn't want to tell him the truth and risk losing him. I didn't want to tell him the truth *now* when it felt like using him as a strategy move.

"Please don't push me," I muttered.

Connor hesitated, biting his lip. Then he shook his head. "You're hurting. I can't let you get hurt. You have to tell me what's happening. This isn't a secret you should bear on your own."

He wasn't *ready*. But there he was, up in my face and asking for it. I knew right then and there that I would never think he was ready. I would never be satisfied that telling him wasn't going to cause more harm than good. But I didn't have a choice. What else was I going to do? Never tell him? Get my ass whipped by Joseph and have to leave, or become alpha to a broken pack—and either way, never have my mate know? "I have to ask you something."

"Anything."

"When you said you'd move, did you mean that?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "I can start looking at college transfers right now. If you need to get out, we'll get out. Anything."

I looked at the snowy lawn so I wouldn't have to look at Connor. "But you love it here."

"Only because you do." He was silent a few moments. Then he said, "Will. Tell me what's wrong. I can help. The whole band will help. Just tell me what's wrong."

I looked him straight in his gray eyes. "I'm a werewolf."

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## Chapter Eleven

*Connor*

Will was waiting for me to say something. I searched my mind for an appropriate response. I said carefully, “What do you mean when you say ‘werewolf’?”

“I can turn into a wolf. And I can turn into a sort of half-wolf, half-human.”

“Okay.” He seemed serious. Was this the set-up to a joke? “How did you become a werewolf?”

“I was born one.”

“So your parents...?”

“They’re both werewolves. And Dave. And Joseph—his whole family.”

“Okay.” Ninety percent certain he was joking.

Will took my hands in his. Even exhausted and confused and wrung out with emotions, I still forgot everything just feeling the tingling from his skin on mine. Without his gloves, I could feel his rough callouses, the dry skin. Strong woodworker hands.

“That’s why I’m so fast and strong,” Will said. “I’m a werewolf.” His voice was dipping lower. His breath was on my face. How could he be so sexy and so crazy at the same time?

“You’re so fast and strong because you work out all the time,” I corrected.

“I work out all the time because I’m a werewolf. Too much energy.”

I snorted. Too much energy. That much I believed.

I was still waiting for the punch line. I was just hoping it was a joke. Will was sounding all too serious.

“Would you like to see?” he offered. “I can show you.”

“No.” I tugged my hands out of Will’s and walked to the window. I rested my head on the cool glass, mirroring his posture from this morning. Had that only been a few hours ago? When I’d woken with his body weirdly hot against mine. I should be studying right now. Soon people would be waking up and going for breakfast, starting their days. I should be with them.

How crazy was it that I'd still rather be here? I'd rather have my best friend acting weird than go a day without him. I'd rather face off with whoever had hurt him. I'd rather have him telling me that *he was a werewolf and his whole extended family were werewolves* than go a single day without him.

Love's weird.

Will had gone to sit on his chair, but I could see him from the corner of my eye. His head was in his hands and his elbows on his knees. Where had the idea of werewolves come from? He didn't even watch werewolf movies. *I can show you*. No. I didn't want to see him fail. I didn't want to stand there and watch him trying to do something impossible. I'd take on drug lords or mafia bosses or loan sharks or whatever he'd got himself into. Break my knee caps. Just don't make me watch Will fail.

"I know it's frightening," he said.

I shook my head. "It's not that."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

Yeah, I thought. You really shouldn't have.

Couldn't we just go back to the part where I lay in bed and he cuddled me?

But I couldn't turn back time. And I couldn't just walk away and forget what Will was saying. I didn't believe him. But it was Will. I had to give him a chance. So I said, "Okay. Show me."

Will came to the window. The light was full on him, white-gray throwing his features into contrast. Maybe he was crazy, but right then I wished I was a painter so I could permanently record how beautiful he was.

"I'll stop if you're scared," he said. "I can leave. Whatever you want. Just say the word."

He waited until I nodded. Then he held out his left arm. The tattoos only reached his elbow so his forearm was bare, and I focused on that smooth skin. Will took a slow breath. And then, as I watched, his skin started to move. Like goosebumps which just kept growing.

His skin boiled and grew bumps like a pot of rice without enough water. Then the bumps burst into hairs. After a few seconds, Will's bare arm was covered in steel gray fur. Above the elbow he was just human skin, the thick line-work of his curling tattoo. But from elbow to wrist he was covered in fur.

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

"Scared?" Will asked. His voice was just a husk. I could tell how important it was to him that I say something, but I couldn't look at him and I couldn't say a word. I just mutely shook my head.

Will held both his hands out, palm down. The fingernails grew out, thickened, curved into claws. He rotated his hands so I could see them. I had been watching his hands for years, sneaking glances and indulging in fantasies of those calloused woodworker's hands on my body. I watched those beautiful hands become paws.

I pressed my forehead on the window and closed my eyes. Maybe if I didn't look at him I could forget what I'd just seen. I thought, *I don't believe you. I don't believe you.* The words echoed around in my head, but I was yelling into an empty room. I wasn't going to change a thing.

"Connor?" he husked.

"I'm not scared," I said. It was important that Will knew that. Whatever else I was feeling, it wasn't fear. I was confused. I was dizzy and sick and tired.

I was so in love with my best friend that he could literally transform into a monster in front of me and I'd still be worried about the pain in his voice and how I could make it go away.

"You're..." Where to even begin? I licked my lips. "You're really a werewolf, then? Not just hairy?"

Will laughed. "Definitely a werewolf. Look at this." He lifted up his shirt. There was his perfect hairless belly, the hard swell of his abs and his flat stomach contoured by the sharp V of his hips. He held his shirt all the way up to show off his right pec, the tiny pink nipple. I knew the hours he put into that body. He used to pose like that all the time when we were younger, goading me to touch him and tell him how ripped he was. He didn't show off like that anymore, but I still remembered exactly how his body felt. I burned it deeper into my brain with every secret jerk session.

Will tapped his side. "All healed, see? Super werewolf healing. It heats my body up, though. That's why I got so hot last night."

I nodded. I wished I'd thought to pull on some heavier pants. I tried to angle surreptitiously closer to the wall to hide my interest. I didn't know which was less appropriate—Will grinning like it was a joke as he told me he was a *werewolf*, or me being aroused.

He dropped his shirt back down and started unbuttoning his pants. I barely had time to be shocked before he turned around and lowered his pants, showing me the whole of his backside. "Look at this." He had a tail, growing just above the crack of his ass. "See? Full-on wolf."

"How do you hide that in your pants?" I asked weakly.

"People always ask that when they see me naked," he quipped. He winked at me over his shoulder.

The tail shrunk back into his body, disappearing like it had never been there at all. For a moment, I was just staring at Will's bare ass before he pulled his pants back on.

I leaned my head on the window to watch students down below, making their way to classes. I should be down there. Was it weird that even when Will was making me question my own sanity, I'd still rather be with him than anywhere else in the world?

"You doing okay?" he asked. "Want to touch?"

"Touch what?"

"I don't know. Anything. I've never done this before. Here." He held up his arm and the fur grew out again. "Touch it."

I stroked the underside of Will's forearm with one finger. The fur felt soft. Fur. On my best friend's body. I was having a hard time making any thoughts stick, they just kept floating out of my head. "Soft," I said aloud. The wolf in the back of Matt's car had felt coarse. But I knew how satiny Will's skin felt—go figure even his werewolf fur was perfect. I wanted to keep touching him. "Why's your fur softer than that wolf we rescued?"

"I eat well every day and never have to forage for food. I look after myself. Also, I use conditioner. So my hair is amazing."

"No kidding," I laughed. "I've always been jealous of your great hair."

"Plus this is my undercoat. See?" More hair sprouted from Will's arm, growing up around my fingers like I was just a lawn ornament in a time-lapsed garden. This hair was dark red-brown, it looked familiar but I couldn't figure out why.

I processed something he'd just said. "You've never told anyone before?"

"Of course not." Will chuckled. "Mom and Dad and Dave already know, obviously. You're the only other person I share secrets with." He smiled tenderly. "You know that."



I was still touching his arm. I took my hand away and tried to put it into my pocket but of course my pajama thermals didn't have pockets. I just crossed my arms over my chest and looked out the window again. I was such a mess of emotions I didn't know what to do with myself, where to look. Will was just so close and so open right then. I was scared of what might come out of my mouth if I kept looking into his honest eyes.

"You doing okay?" he asked again after a while.

I nodded. "It's just a lot."

"You want me to leave, give you some time alone?"

I shook my head.

"So what do you want? I mean it that I haven't done this with anyone before. I didn't know how you'd react. I can't even imagine what you're feeling." He left a little silence that I couldn't fill. I was tired with a confused boner. That wasn't the kind of feeling he probably wanted me to talk about.

"Anyway," he said. "If you have any questions, or... Whatever you want to do, I'm fine with that. If you want me to leave or want me to stay. Just say the word."

I could feel his gaze on me. I reached around inside my echoing head and tried to figure out what I wanted. "I want to sleep," I said.

"Okay."

I went to my bed and got under the covers, pulling the blanket up to my neck with my T-shirt still on. Will stayed standing where I'd left him, his fur sucked magically back into his body so he looked all human again. I couldn't read his expression before he pulled the curtain closed.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"You said you can turn into a wolf?"

"Yeah."

"Could you show me that?"

I expected Will to open the curtain again but he didn't. There was a series of rustling sounds and then quiet footfalls on the carpet. I could see something, a low shape moving toward me. It could have been a dog.

I was just thinking that he might not have turned into a wolf, that he could have faked it and just walked on tippy-toes to trick me in the dark. Then I felt something pressing down the mattress like a hand pressing down on the side of it. I put my hand out from under the covers. Something cold and wet touched my fingers then there was warm breath and the rasp of a thin tongue.

“How do I know you’re even a wolf,” I mumbled. “You might just be licking my hand.” And even *that* was an attractive image to my Will-obsessed mind.

Will rumbled a low growl that reached down my spine. I kept my hand still even when my monkey brain was warning me to tuck myself under the covers and hide from the monster beside my bed. He moved his face along my hand to show me the muzzle, the short fur and tough bone structure. That definitely wasn’t Will’s face. He nudged into my hand, and I felt the nubs of canine ears under my fingers. I scratched instinctively, and Will gave another growl.

“This is surreal,” I whispered. “I’m scratching behind your ears.” To be fair I could have done that to human Will. It was the kind of thing I could actually imagine him asking for, when he was in a playful mood. But the ears I was scratching were very definitely not human.

I was trying to reconcile what I was touching with what I knew my best friend looked like and my brain just kept giving up. Will was a werewolf. Werewolves were real, and Will was one of them. It felt like my thoughts were folding in on themselves. “I’m going to go to sleep, okay?” Maybe when I woke up this wouldn’t have happened. Or maybe I’d wake up to Chop telling me she was a vampire. Anything could happen.

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*Will*

I was kind of expecting Connor to scream. Or faint.

But when I told him I was a werewolf, he just took it like it was nothing.

I figured that was shock. He was sleeping it off and any moment he was going to wake up, look at the wolf on the chair next to him and scream until someone carried him off to an asylum.

But damned if it didn’t feel good to be lying beside him as a wolf.

He slept restlessly, thrashing around and letting out small moans. Connor usually slept quietly, and I knew it was my fault that his sleep was so disturbed.

Already I was wishing I hadn't told him. I hated lying to him, but I also hated him knowing that his best friend was a monster.

When he woke up it was with a start, a sudden shocking intake of breath. He rolled out of bed, and I stayed quietly on the chair, as still as possible, even trying to keep my breathing quiet so I wouldn't freak him. He went to the door and tested the lock. Then he paced to the window and pulled the curtains open. He stayed there a long time, his back against the window, his arms crossed on his chest and his eyes on me.

"I'm going to grab some lunch," he said at last. "You'll be here when I get back?"

I nodded my head but, not knowing how obvious that was in my wolf form, I gave a little woof of assent too.

Connor came back rosy-cheeked and panting, arms full of snacks. "I brought beef jerky," he said as he poured everything onto the bed. "I didn't know what you eat, so..."

My chuckle came out as a wheezy bark. Two hours in my wolf form and Connor had already decided I should eat nothing but meat. Or meat and junk food, if the cartons of chocolate mousse on his bed were anything to go on. Maybe treating me like a dog was his way of dealing with the werewolf knowledge.

Connor extended a strip of the dried meat. "I've seen those photos of wolves eating," he said. "You better not take my hand off."

I bit the meat gingerly, jaws well away from Connor's hand. Maybe he thought it was a joke—he didn't even know how terrified I was of accidentally hurting him with his fragile human body, which couldn't heal properly.

The meat was tough and there was no way I could neatly bite a chunk off. I gripped with my teeth and tugged backward, but Connor kept holding his side. We tugged against each other, fighting for the strip of meat. Connor laughed, his cheeks flushed.

I'd been raised knowing that it was an alpha's place to give out food. In my wolf form, I was used to everyone being subservient to me. Connor didn't even realize how radical it was to be the one choosing what I ate and playfully fighting with me over it. I wanted Joseph to see him now, this boy he kept calling an omega. How many people would fight for food with a wolf, let alone an alpha wolf?

I stared up at Connor's laughing face and wondered if it would make any difference to him. He wasn't raised as a werewolf with all the social structure, which made sense for wolves but not for humans. Wolf social hierarchy didn't bring into account art or creativity. Joseph looked at Connor and saw that he was quiet, that he was shy and would never pick a fight. And to him that spelled out omega because he hadn't learned to see life as anything more than a fight for dominance, a constant struggle for survival where empathy was only needed toward your own pack.

It was so strange that I'd once thought the same way. I'd once lived to fight and prove my role as an alpha. But that had changed, and now that I was facing that fight, I wasn't sure if I wanted to win. There were so many lives relying on me, and for them I would fight for the death. But for myself? I'd rather be here in a tiny dorm room with Connor laughing, than free in the majesty of the snow-covered mountains if it meant Connor being afraid of me.

Connor had changed me. Meeting him had changed everything about who I was and what I valued. And I had to believe that was more than a mating bond.

No, it wasn't just that Connor was my mate. There was something about Connor, his quiet strength, his endless kindness and his unquestioning loyalty. His sharp mind and shy smile. Connor had entered my life like ice wind from the mountains.

I'd loved him before I'd known he was my mate. Maybe that was me being slow on the uptake, the mating bond kicking in the moment I met him, and me just not noticing. But I truly believed that I would have loved Connor even if he wasn't my mate. I couldn't imagine a single reality in which I could have met Connor and not loved him.

And I didn't know for certain that I wouldn't have changed if I hadn't met him. Dave was proof that I could have grown up in a werewolf family, surrounded by an alpha's children, and not want a werewolf life. But Connor was the reason I questioned everything I'd been raised to believe. Connor had taught me strength beyond fighting. He'd taught me the beauty of music and of quiet, patient hard work. Joseph would never see that, and his life was worse for it.

I playfully fought for food with my best friend, my mate, my true love. And as I looked at his flushed laughing face, the force of my love hit me like the blast of ice wind that Connor often brought to mind. The man I loved was truly seeing me, for the first time. He knew I was a werewolf. And he was still locked alone in a room with me and still laughing with me.

The relief was more intense than anything I could have imagined, like a physical force lifting from my shoulders. I didn't have to hide anymore. Connor knew. Not everything, but he knew enough. And he still smiled at me.

He let go of the beef jerky, laughing. I trapped it between my paw and the chair so I could rip a chunk off. The meat was salty, not something I liked much as a human. But on my wolf tongue it was amazing.

Connor held up a bright polystyrene cup. "Do wolves eat instant noodles? No? How about cheesecake?" He looked down at the pile of junk food on the bed then back at me. I could see that he was scared, but it was a small emotion, pushed far beneath something warm and furry, that intense human mix of emotions that was always hard to read.

Friendship was in there, happiness, and awe—I'd seen that awe on his face in the backseat of Chop's van. Connor obviously found my wolf form beautiful. But there was more to it than that. There was a warm, fuzzy emotion that flickered over his face and in his scent. I'd seen it on him when we were younger, sneaking pizza into his bedroom, listening to music on headphones so his parents wouldn't hear and find out I was there. Connor was warm with the glow of sharing in a secret.

He ripped open a container of mousse and laid it out on the chair for me like a bowl of dog food, then lay on the bed to eat his noodles. "It's all vending machine food, sorry. I didn't want to go into the cafeteria in case I saw anyone who knew I was skipping class."

Connor kept his textbooks on the table above the head of his bed. He picked one up and lay on his back with the book braced on his knees, reading as he scooped up noodles. I sat on my handmade bench and licked chocolate foam from a plastic bowl with my flexible tongue and wondered if this was the weirdest thing a werewolf had ever done.

"You know what I keep thinking?" Connor said suddenly. He put a finger on his page to hold his place as he looked over at me. "You're naked under that fur, right? So if anyone barges in here you're going to have to either stay as a wolf and scare the whole dorm, or you're going to have to shift back into a naked dude and be the laughing stock of the whole dorm." He went back to reading, and I craned my neck to double check the door was locked.

I was lying lazily, enjoying being in my wolf form inside. And enjoying watching Connor through my wolf eyes. He was concentrating on his book, a pencil in one hand, which he'd alternately suck in his mouth or tap against his

thigh. Sometimes, he'd pause and stare at the page, eyes unmoving. Sometimes when he did that his hand would move faster as he drummed out a secret beat. I knew he was listening to songs inside his head, whether they were old ones or ones he was composing. But I couldn't guess what else was going on in his head.

Finally, he put his book aside and sat up. "I have something to ask you, and I need you to be human so you can answer it."

I'd already started shifting before I remembered that all my clothes were on the other side of the room. I transformed into my human shape, lying naked facedown on the wooden bench seat.

I glanced at Connor. He was staring at my back, his eyes huge and surprised. I started laughing. Connor blinked and looked down, a blush rising up his cheeks. "You could have, like, given yourself a fur loin cloth or something," he mumbled.

"Oh what, you want me to lie around with a super hairy ass? No thanks. You'd take pictures and put them on the internet."

"I wouldn't!" He protested. "But now you mention it, maybe I'll take photos of you with a tail and hand them out at your twenty-first." A giggle escaped his lips.

I stayed lying on my stomach, partly to protect Connor from more embarrassment at my bare body and partly to hide the semi I got from hearing him laugh like that. Laughter was good. Any of the questions he was about to ask would be better if he was in a good mood.

Connor balled up his blanket and handed it to me, carefully looking away. I sat up with it draped around me like a toga. "So what did you want to ask?"

He bit his lip. Even though I was decent now he still wasn't looking at me. Uh oh. I ran through a list of worst-case scenario werewolf questions. But I wanted to answer truthfully, even if it sucked. *Just please, don't ask anything about mating. Not yet. Not when things are going so well.*

He reached over his head to his chest of drawers. He held out the photo I'd given him on the first day of school when we were sixteen. It was a picture of me, howling out my heartache. "Is this you?" he asked.

Of all the questions I'd imagined, that hadn't even entered my mind. "Yeah."

Connor looked at the photo intently. "I never realized."

“Of course not,” I laughed.

He shook his head. He was tracing the photo, fingertips on the wolf's muzzle—*my* muzzle—like he'd been touching me this morning. “I can't believe I didn't figure it out.” His voice was quiet like he was talking more to himself than to me. “I see you every day. And you're still so you as a wolf. Were you hoping I'd figure it out?”

“No! Of course not. How could you possibly figure that I was a werewolf because I gave you a photo of a wolf? I gave you shoes with teddy bears on them, does that make me secretly a teddy bear?” I was hoping to get a laugh from him but he hardly smiled.

When he looked up at me his clear gray eyes were wide and vulnerable. “If you didn't want me to figure it out, why did you give me a photo of you as a wolf?”

Oh. A few moments ago, I'd been promising myself I'd give him an honest answer. So I did. “I guess I wanted you to have something of me, like I could watch over you even when I wasn't there. And I felt bad about not telling you, so I guess a part of me did want you to know even if you didn't *know*. I wanted you to have that part of me even if you didn't know it was a part of me.”

Connor stared at the picture and didn't say anything.

“Sorry if that's weird,” I said. “It's part of the werewolf thing. I can be over-protective. I have this huge urge to look after my friends. I just want to be around you all the time.” *Because you're my friend. Yeah. That's why.*

Connor grinned, “No kidding. That's a werewolf thing? I thought it was just a Will thing.”

“Kinda both. I just need to know you're safe. Sorry if that's weird.”

Connor drummed his pencil on his knee, staring at the wall. “Nah, it's not weird. I loved it when you slept in my room back at school. I sleep better knowing you're here.” He wrinkled his nose and laughed. “Plus you'd back off if I ever asked you to, or if one of the band asked you to, right?”

“Of course.”

“So you're fine. Maybe werewolves just make really great friends.” He put the photo back, stretching his arms over his head so his shirt rode up and exposed a few inches of pale abdomen and the dark lines of the tattoo under his navel. I double checked I wasn't making a tent in my blanket toga.

Connor sat back down, holding his sketchbook. It was in a leather folder that I'd given him. I'd commissioned it from one of my cousins who worked leather. It was deer hide, stained dark brown nearly black. Connor could reuse that folder, swapping in new sketchbooks as he used up the pages.

He gingerly opened it and flipped to the very back where there was a section that folded out—there was one at the front and at the back, a place to store important documents. Connor hesitated, looking at the book, then he held it out. “I never showed you because I didn't know if it was clingy or something. But now I want you to know how much it means to me to have photos of you.”

The folding pages were lined with photos in neat, orderly rows. Photos of the band, on stage and practicing, stuff that Chop and I put on our social media sites. The glamor shots Dad had done for us before college, our publicity shots looking moody and distant with the woods in the background. And photos of me and Connor, spanning the six years of our friendship. Selfies from camping and movie nights. The one Connor took of me grimacing under Dave's needle when I was getting my full sleeve done. Our prom photos—one goofy picture, one serious. My yearbook photo, complete with corny quote about friendship and leadership.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“Is it weird? Silly? I shouldn't have shown you.” Connor anxiously reached out for the book.

I held it out to him but kept holding onto it so our hands were connected by the book. I met his eyes. “This is really sweet, Connor. It's amazing.”

He smiled and tucked the book to his chest, hugging it. I didn't think he was aware of the gesture. “It's us,” he said. “I like to be reminded of us. I never thought I'd have great friends like you guys. When I'm stressed or sad I like to be reminded of that.” Connor smiled up at me and the shy happiness on his face made my heart melt. He said quietly, “Maybe I could have another picture of you as a wolf? To put in here?”

“Of course.” The words came out rough because my throat was thick with emotion.

Connor nodded happily and went back to his book. I sat a while watching clouds through the window, then finally got up in my portable blanket marquee and went to my clothes.

“Can I ask you something else?” Connor called.



“Yeah. Of course.”

“Was it a werewolf that beat you up last night?”

I hesitated. How much would he want to know, and how would I go about explaining it? “Yes.”

Connor looked at me steadily from where he lay on his bed. He said simply, “I want to hurt the guy who hurt you. But how am I going to beat up a werewolf?”

I laughed. Connor grinned. “I’m serious,” he said.

“I know.” Like I was going to let him have a go at Joseph.

But I knew he meant it. Connor the human, wanting to defend me from werewolves. He would never stop inventing new reasons for me to love him.

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## Chapter Twelve

*Connor*

We ate dinner at my favorite diner. Burgers with salad in lots of different colors and generous baskets of fries. We'd eaten there on our very first night in the city. That was as much why it was my favorite as the food. We'd sit in the same narrow booth as the first time and get dizzy and giddy on free soda refills, and it always felt like the first night of a big adventure with my best friend.

That was exactly how it felt after Will told me he was a werewolf. We were taking another big adventure together. Minneapolis had turned out okay; maybe a best friend as a werewolf would be great.

The streets were cold after the warm comfort of the diner. We half-ran to stay warm, laughing and trying to knock each other over on the ice—trying, but not *really* trying.

Will stopped us on the path up to our dorm. He tilted his head to the side. Between the large sign for the dorm and tree line, there was a stretch of clear snow. Still beautiful and white and not trod into the ugly gray mush that lined the sidewalk. "Our snow," Will said.

Will loved finding the freshest, most beautiful snow he could and ruining it by jumping into it. He dropped his bag on the path. "Come on!"

I lowered my bag carefully down beside his and pulled my beanie lower over my head. The next moment, a snowball hit me in the chest. It was packed lightly so it disintegrated on impact. I laughed. "I thought you didn't want people throwing snowballs at me?"

"I'm not people." Will was sprawled on his back, grinning hugely.

I threw myself into the snow, face-first. It wasn't deep enough for a good dive, and I landed hard on my elbows. Will was beside me in an instant. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I laughed. I waited until Will dropped down onto his back, then I grabbed a handful of snow and dropped it onto his face. "Payback!"

Will shook the snow out of his face, laughing. "That's why I'm not afraid to throw snowballs at you, see? I know you can stand up for yourself." He tugged his hat off and ruffled his hands through his hair. "You got snow down my collar, you know? That's going to melt and I'll have a cold neck."

“Maybe you’ll think of that next time you go to attack me.”

Will spread his arms out. I thought he was going to make a snow angel, but instead he just lay there with his arms wide. I mimicked his action. It felt strangely pleasant to lie on my back in the cold and damp. Or maybe it wasn’t that strange—Will was beside me. We were all alone in our own private patch of snow. I watched my breath frost then disappear against the light-shot sky.

His hand touched mine through my glove. He fumbled until his fingers were against the bare skin of my wrist. I thought he was retaliating, his hands were as cold as snow down my sleeve. But he held his hand there, just touching. Intimate.

“Connor?”

“Yes?”

“You’re really fine with this?”

My pulse was speeding up from his hand on me, my breath coming quicker. What was he asking? “With what?”

“With me being a werewolf. I wasn’t looking forward to telling you. I was afraid you’d think I was a monster.”

“I’d never think that. I know you.” We were only a few feet from a major sidewalk, but it still felt like we were so alone. Will, whispering secrets to me in the dark. He needed my reassurance and it was easy to give. “You’ve been my best friend forever. And I guess you’ve been a werewolf as long as I’ve known you. I didn’t think you were a monster before I knew, and I don’t now.”

“I can’t believe this, you’re so cool with it. Wow, Connor. I’m so glad you guys moved to Layton.” Will’s voice was husky and low. His fingers moving on my wrist made me shiver more than the cold did. He whispered, “I’d be lost without you.”

“Other way around. I’d be lost without you, Will.” I could sense him looking at me, but I was afraid of what his expression would be—or what mine was. I knew my feelings must be painted out on my face, how my heart was squeezing from having him touching me and whispering sweet things to me. I knew I couldn’t look at him and hide it.

Will squeezed my wrist then let go. “Thank god you like wolves, huh?” His voice was back to normal—cocky, half-laughing. I’d almost think I’d imagined the moment of intense intimacy, the vulnerability he’d shown. Except my whole arm was still tingling from his touch.

“Yeah.” I stuck my hands in the pockets of my coat. “At least now I understand how you get such great photos. You’ve got inside agents to help you pose all those wolves.”

“Being a werewolf doesn’t make you a good photographer. I’m naturally talented.”

“Anyone could take beautiful photos if they had wolves pose for them.”

“Anyone, huh?” Will rolled over and jabbed me in the ribs with one finger. I hardly felt it through my thick coat.

“Definitely. Even me.”

“Prove it.” He was grinning down at me, the campus street lamp behind him so he had a halo.

“You want me to take a beautiful photo?” His chest was pressed into my arm. I remembered holding him in bed last night. It made it harder to breathe.

“Go on,” he teased.

“Okay.” My phone was in my pocket so I pulled it out and set it to camera. My hand was trembling slightly. “One beautiful photograph.”

As I sighted on Will his expression changed. The mischief faded away so his smile was sincere and sweet. *Beautiful*. I took the photo.

I couldn’t think of anything witty to say. I couldn’t find any voice to say it in.

“You think I’m beautiful?” The husk was back in Will’s voice.

I just nodded mutely. He was leaning in so *close*. I was lying in the snow but I didn’t even feel it anymore.

“You think I’m pretty?”

I nodded. My throat felt swollen. Will’s face was in shadow, a dark smear under the streetlight’s corona.

He jabbed my ribs again then clambered on top of me, lodging his hands under my armpits so he could tickle me even under the layers of coat. “You think I’m beautiful, huh?”

I snorted with laughter. “I meant handsome!” Trying to get away from him just made more melting snow get under my clothing. “You’re very manly!”

“Damn straight!” He bellowed. “I’m handsome and beautiful!”

I managed to wedge my hands into his coat so I could tickle him right back. Will was hiccuping with laughter, struggling to talk. "I'm sexy, too!"

"Yep," I agreed. I could clamp my arms down so he couldn't get at me, but that made it harder for me to get at him. Tickle fights were a war, and they needed strategy. I could only half-concentrate when I was being distracted by Will's weight on my body and his legs tangling with mine as we thrashed around. "You're every groupie's dream boy."

"I'm a werewolf," Will said. He suddenly stopped tickling me. It was like he had only just realized what the words meant, like they were a shock to him. The playfulness drained away, and he was still.

He placed a hand on either side of my head, gloves pressing into the snow. Our legs were tangled, his weight on his knees but also on my chest. I could feel the solid strength of him. When we weren't play-fighting, that felt much more intimate.

I looked up at him along the column of his arms. His head was angled so the light caught his face. His eyes were narrowed and his brow furrowed and his lips were partly open.

"You're a werewolf," I whispered.

Will nodded. He lowered himself closer, closer, until I could see the rich brown of his eyes. I'd been close to him so many times, at sleepovers and camping and fooling around. But this didn't feel like any of those times.

He smelled sweet from the endless sodas at my favorite restaurant. The place we went to before starting big adventures.

There in our own patch of snow, he gave me the smile that I'd never seen him give anyone else. Natural and honest, sweet. He was close to me, in every way. He'd told me his big secret. I needed to tell him mine. *I love you, Will Flight!*

I opened my mouth. To tell him, maybe, or to beg him to kiss me.

Then there was a shout from the sidewalk. "You there! Break it up!"

Will jerked away from me. "He thinks we're a couple stealing alone time," he chuckled. There was a bright beam of light on us—a flashlight from the campus security.

Will stood up, whacking the snow off his jacket. "Hey man. Nothing to worry about here."

The security guard was just standing on the sidewalk, watching us. He focused the light on Will's face. "Will? Is that you?"

I snorted and dropped my head back into the snow. Go figure. Will knew everyone. I wondered if he'd run into this guard while leaving campus for his monthly family trips. Or if he *did* get caught having alone time with someone special—he definitely never brought anyone back to our dorm. He never talked about anyone, either. The last we'd talked about sex at all was back in high school when he'd told me he was a virgin.

In my dreams, he was saving himself, just waiting for the day when he suddenly realized he was madly in love and lust with his best friend. But I'd heard the screams of the adoring crowd at our gigs, I knew how many fans loved our band's sexy lead singer. It was far too much to imagine that he'd never been interested in any of the offers.

But as for the other part of my dream, that Will would suddenly realize he wanted me? There had been looks, glances. Hugs that lingered. Unnecessary touches. But that was Will, he was touchy-feely with everyone. And I was his best friend. In all of the time we spent together, it made sense that he'd give me enough innocent looks or innocent touches that I'd misinterpret.

But lying in the snow on top of me, gazing down at my face, getting closer and closer... That wasn't something friends just did with each other, right? Or was it? What had almost happened? Had I imagined that he was about to kiss me? I couldn't get my breathing right and my head was spinning from more than just sugar.

What had almost happened?

"You coming?" Will called. I heard him say quietly to his security guard friend, "He's not drunk, honest. He just likes the snow a lot."

Will and his big mouth. Even confused and aroused, I still moved instinctively to follow him. Like I was the dog, coming when I was called.

I scooped a handful of snow as I stood up. Will waved goodbye to his security buddy and we fell into step. When we were alone again on the sidewalk, our dorm looming huge and safe in front of us, I ground the wet snow into the back of Will's neck.

He screamed and leaped forward like I'd burned him, clutched at his neck and dragged the jacket off like it was live rats I'd dropped down his collar. "Connor! You're evil!"

I nudged him with my shoulder. As we reached the dorm, he nudged me back, angling to knock me into the door frame. We entered the building laughing, forgetting the weirdness of the moment in the snow.

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### *Will*

I lay on my back on my bed, head propped up on my chest of drawers and my hands on my belly as I worked at a carving, whittling a little wolf. I made them to sell at Mom's shop, and I'd work on them whenever I had a spare moment. It calmed me to work with my hands and the soft white wood from a fallen aspen log.

I needed to relax. Connor was obviously stressed, and I didn't know how to change that. I felt like making some joke, goofing around. But he was totally focused on the glossy textbook propped on his knees. He was just on the other side of the dorm room, but he might as well have been a hundred miles away.

I listened to a comedy podcast and tried to keep my mind on the voices, to just watch my hands moving in front of me. Because if I let my mind wander, it would wander right out to the scuffed up patch of snow where Connor had looked at me in that way that made my insides hot and cold and tingling, all at the same time. He'd looked at me in a way that had nothing to do with mating bonds and everything to do with raw human lust.

But the look had gone as quickly as it had arrived, and I was left wondering if I hadn't just imagined the whole thing, if it wasn't just a quirk of the light. And I couldn't let myself think about it because if I did, then I'd get hit with the urge to walk over to Connor and just demand that he give me an answer, just tell me if that need in his pale gray eyes was real or a trick of the light.

Who was I kidding? I couldn't think about anything else. I just had to keep promising myself that I'd stay on my bed like a good boy and not give into the temptation to get closer to him.

"What are you laughing at?" Connor asked.

I took the excuse to look at him. He was on his bed with his back resting on the wall and his socked feet toward me. The room was warm enough that he was in short sleeves. Tattooed flames licked up his arm, begging me to come over there and touch them. "Just listening to a podcast," I said. "I didn't know I was laughing out loud. Is it bugging you?"

"No, that's okay. It must be funny." He smiled at me.

That smile was all it took. I was off my bed and walking over to his, plopping down on my chair before my brain even had time to catch up. Screw self-control and keeping my distance, Connor *smiled* at me! “You want to listen, too?”

“Sure.”

My tablet speakers were janked, so I had to listen with headphones. I settled on my chair and held one of the ear buds out to Connor. “Maybe we could listen to your music next, or something? You must be listening to something new.”

“Chop recommended this new jazz group, they’re amazing,” Connor said. He propped up pillows and got his back against his chest of drawers then took the ear bud from me. “I’ve got to finish figuring out which tracks I like best, though.”

“Cool.” Connor was always finding new music, but he’d only share his absolute favorites with me. It was weird, maybe, but I loved knowing that my music library was one hundred percent Connor-approved.

When we were settled down side-by-side, I knew exactly why I’d told myself I shouldn’t. The cables for my earphones weren’t long so Connor had to sit right at the edge of his bed. I could smell him so clearly, his fresh shower scent and the mint of his toothpaste. I couldn’t keep my eyes on my carving because Connor was absently drumming his pencil on his knee, the muscles in his arm flexing so his flames seemed to leap and dance.

I put my knife and sculpture away in the ledge under my chair to keep from getting so distracted by Connor that I slipped and cut myself. I closed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest—so I could bask in the scent of Connor, radiate in the warmth of his closeness, but make sure I didn’t actually *touch* him.

“You know,” he said after a while. “If you’re just going to lie there and take a nap, you could do it as a wolf.”

“You want to see me as a wolf again?”

“Yeah. You’ve got to keep showing me or I’ll think you made this whole thing up.”

I laughed. I tugged my shirt off and unbuttoned my pants—werewolf prep 1-0-1. I sneaked a glance at Connor just before I shifted. He was holding my tablet, focused on the screen and not my bare chest. I’d sort of been hoping



he'd be staring at me so I could stop wondering if I'd just imagined his look in the snow.

He did stare when I shifted, shaking his head and blinking his eyes fast. I'd grown up with it so to me it was natural, but I could imagine how shocking it must look to a human.

I settled back down on my stomach and rested my head on my paws. Connor carefully put in the earphones, laughing when it kept slipping out before he settled for resting it beside my ear. There was no way to tell him that my hearing was much better as a wolf and, besides, I enjoyed his hands in my fur.

He scratched softly behind my ear. "Your fur's so soft," he whispered. "Your ears are cute."

Cute. And handsome. And beautiful. I was having a good day receiving compliments. Connor always joked about me having a big ego, and there he was fueling it.

When the podcast finished, Connor turned off the main light so the room was only lit by his bedside lamp. He lounged back in the bed as he went through the music on my tablet and picked out some smooth jazz for us to listen to. Romantic lighting and romantic music... Connor was getting me so worked up, and he didn't even know it.

After he put the earphone back in my ear, his hand stayed on my fur. He turned a page in his book with one hand, and the other played with the fur on my neck and shoulder. I'd never been stroked before, the closest I'd come was rough cleanings from my mom or gestures from other wolves like a head over my neck or nudge of shoulders. But being stroked by a human hand was a totally new experience. I was being petted. And I loved it.

I didn't think Connor was even aware of what he was doing until he muttered, "You're just like a big dog, really. You're a weredog."

I could show him my fangs and prove him wrong in an instant. But my pride wasn't that fragile. I settled for licking his hand.

"Ew." He wrinkled his nose, but he didn't take his hand away. I licked him again. He gave me a little scratch under my chin, and I whined in pleasure. It felt so good. Not even sexual, just warm and sweet and nice. Who knew, maybe I was just a big dog after all.

Connor put his book down on the pillow and took our earphones out. "Come here." He patted a spot on the bed beside him.

I climbed onto the bed, then right onto Connor's side and sat down on top of him. He started laughing and I could feel it, vibrating through my whole body until I was wuffling a laugh as well. I licked Connor's smiling face, and he kept laughing, pushing at my muzzle and nudging my paws out of the way. I licked all the harder, swiping at his hands and neck with my long tongue until he was squirming with laughter.

"Oh man, I can't believe you're licking me!" He paused then giggled harder. "What if someone walks past and hears me saying that? Stop licking me, Will! Get out of here with your giant weird tongue!"

While he was giggling and distracted, I took the opportunity to lick his nose.

"I knew it. I knew you were just a giant dog." Connor stopped fighting me and just scratched behind my neck instead. I rested my head on his chest and grunted my approval.

"You know what I keep wondering?" he asked idly. "Where's the rest of you go? I can't figure it out. You're a big wolf but you still must weigh, what, half as much as you do when you're a person? No way could you put all your weight on me usually. There must be all these Will bits which just disappear when you become a wolf. Where do they go? Newton would love to meet you."

I'd been a wolf among wolves and werewolves, but I'd never been a wolf around humans. I'd never realized how badly I could want to communicate, and how impossible it would be. I wanted to tell Connor that I couldn't believe he'd accepted that I *was* a werewolf, and then worried about details.

I rolled off Connor's chest and lay on the bed beside him. He propped his book up on the pillow above my head. Then, as naturally as anything, he draped an arm over me. His hand was on my front leg just behind my paw, stroking my fur slowly. I closed my eyes and relaxed into him, letting my side press against Connor's.

All my feelings from before were still there, all the arousal and need, but they simmered beneath the warm feeling of love and closeness. I just wanted to enjoy being near my best friend, the love of my life. Maybe I felt more for him than he did for me, maybe he could never love me in the way that I wanted. But there would be time enough to worry about that later, because right then all that mattered to both of us was that I was lying in his arms, and he was stroking my paw.

“I feel like I should be scared,” Connor whispered. In my wolf form, I could pick up every word clearly even when he whispered. “You’re a wolf. Even you think I should be scared of you. But I’m not. I just find it comforting.”

I knew I had enough to be worrying about. There was a whole world of trouble outside and my life was falling apart around me. I had to face the consequences of decisions I’d made. But this time it was so much more than just myself depending on the choices I made.

And yet none of that seemed to matter. I was floating in the bliss of Connor’s nearness. He’d seen me for the first time, and he didn’t mind.

If I were human right then I would be smiling. Instead, I did the closest wolf equivalent—I draped my head over his neck so my muzzle and the length of my throat was resting on him. It was how I slept with other wolves and I hoped Connor would understand the trust and intimacy of it—*I will protect you while you sleep, and I trust you to protect me!*

Connor nuzzled into the fur of my neck, his arm still around me. It was just the two of us, a werewolf and a human, alone in a half-lit dorm room. It was as close to heaven as I could imagine.

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The light was off when I woke up, but that didn’t matter with a wolf’s night vision. I’d fallen asleep on Connor’s bed with his arm around me, lulled into a blissful sleep. At some point, Connor had fallen asleep, too. Now he was sprawled out with his back touching my side. Maybe he was used to taking up the whole bed and that was why he was pressed so close, but I imagined it was just because he enjoyed the closeness.

The heavy textbook Connor had been reading was still open on the pillow over my head. It had migrated during the night and now teetered dangerously close to falling off the bed. I didn’t want it to fall loudly to the floor and wake Connor up like a gunshot, so I slid out of the bed and shifted back into my human form to grab the book.

The chill of the dorm room was worse on bare skin than fur, and so much worse after the warmth of my best friend’s body. I closed his book and put it on his chest of drawers then wrapped my own blanket around my waist and padded to the bathroom.

When I got back into our room, Connor’s lazy sprawl over the bed had changed into a tight ball against the cold. He was lying on top of the blankets, so I unthinkingly wrapped my blanket around him.

Then I stood there naked in my dorm room wondering what to do. It was so tempting to climb into bed with Connor. But I'd lived by the same rule for the many years since I'd realized I'd found my mate in a human:

The more I wanted to do something with Connor, the more I should resist the urge.

Thanks to last night, I knew exactly how great it was to sleep beside Connor. I wanted to warm him up until he was sprawled all over the bed again. The idea was so sweet. Which was how I knew it was a bad idea.

I went to my bed and got ready to lie down even without my blanket. But then Connor made a whimpering sound. "Will?"

"Yeah?"

He whimpered again. He was still asleep. But I couldn't ignore it when he called my name out again. "Will? Where are you?"

"I'm right here," I said. Connor's hands clutched at the blanket in his sleep. With my night vision I could see the strength of that grip. Bad dream?

I was across the room in a moment, clambering over my chair and hesitating beside Connor's bed. Resisting temptation was one thing but leaving Connor lonely was just being a bad friend.

I climbed onto the bed and under the blanket. Connor's body heat hadn't filled the space yet and he was still curled up to get warm. I wrapped an arm around his waist and pressed into him, his shoulder blades against my chest and my legs curling around his. I kept my hips back so he wouldn't know how I felt about the intoxicating scent of his warm skin at the curve of his neck.

I kept my arm loose around his waist so he could pull away if he wanted to. But he didn't. He wiggled closer, nestling into my chest, and moment by moment his body relaxed as he warmed up.

"I'm here," I whispered. "I'm right here."

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## Chapter Thirteen

*Connor*

I was making a habit of falling asleep with wolves. The last thing I remembered was Will's fur under my hands and his wolf breath in my hair. I woke in the dark still feeling his breath and warmth, but it felt different. My night shirt was wrinkled up around my waist from rolling around in my sleep, and Will's hand was resting on my chest, two of his fingers on my bare skin where my shirt had ridden up. Our bodies were tangled together, and my face was nuzzled into his chest. His chest was bare, just warm skin and no fur.

He was human. Sometime during the night, he'd shifted back into his human form. I didn't know if it was something that just happened or if he'd planned it. I didn't know if he was awake. My hand was on his leg, and I only felt skin. I moved my fingers, but I could still only feel bare skin, no clothes. Was he naked? I wanted so badly for Will to have made the decision to lie naked in my bed.

Will was breathing steadily against my collarbone, his cheek on my shoulder and his nose touching the bare skin just above the collar of my night shirt. That nose was warm and human and not the cold wet of a wolf. When I shifted my head, his hair brushed my cheek. We were cuddling, as humans. And this time Will wasn't hurt, and he wasn't acting strange and scared. I was the only human who knew he was a werewolf, and I was the one he was in bed with. That wasn't just friends, it couldn't be. I couldn't be imagining this.

My hand was on his bare thigh. I wanted to move it, but I was scared. Scared that he was sleeping and had just shifted into a human in his sleep and didn't mean to be naked beside me. Or what if I touched him and he just laughed and thought it was a joke?

"Will?" I whimpered. My hand was on his thigh, and I moved my fingers just enough to feel his bare skin there. Even my whisper was just a croak and my heart was pounding. I wanted to touch him, but I was so scared. I thought of how easy it was to stroke his fur when he was a wolf. So I said, "Can you show me your fur? Right here?"

Will was silent and his breathing didn't change. Sleeping.

I felt the fur growing. His skin prickled and made bumps under my fingertips and the silken fur erupted. My hand was trembling, and I tried to

steady it, but it was hard when I was breathing like a frightened rabbit. I had more nerve endings than I'd ever noticed before, and all of them were in the palm of my hand.

Will's fur was so soft under my fingers. So *soft*. It was all I could think as I lay there in the dark, playing human Tetris with my best friend. He was a werewolf, and he felt fluffy like a bunny rabbit. I moved my fingers as far as I could urge myself, stroking the same patch of fur over and over again, petting him. *So soft*, I repeated like a mantra. I murmured it aloud, "So soft."

Will didn't say anything. His breathing was steady but quicker than before—or maybe I was just imagining that, hoping for it. I was so scared to be reading too much into this. I felt like I was going to be sick, but at the same time, I was as happy as I'd ever been. Like dancing with Will at senior prom, that mix of hope and fear and delight.

Thinking about prom helped. I remembered Will's sturdy arms around me and his tender smile as he'd whispered, "I'm here forever," and meant it. He was my rock, the one who'd held me up when I was scared and fragile, until I learned to stand on my own. *Forever*.

And for the first time, I felt the weight of that word as more than just a security blanket to protect me. Bleeding from werewolf wounds he'd climbed into bed with me and begged me to stay with him no matter where he moved. Forever didn't just mean he was there for me, it meant he needed me there with him. *Forever*. I loved him and I'd never told him, and that ate away at me every day.

But there in the dark, with my hand in his fur and his face against my chest, I knew with complete certainty that even if he didn't feel the same, he wouldn't turn me away. Maybe he would only ever love me as a friend and a brother, but that was a big *only* and better than most people ever got in their lives. I didn't want to hide anymore. The time had come to tell him.

I could barely find my voice. "Can I feel you?" I whispered. "Just..." I couldn't finish the sentence. *Just you. No wolf*. I couldn't summon the courage to push us over the line, to show that I was more than just curious about Will's fur and that what I really wanted was to touch *him*. I licked my lips, but no more sound came out.

Beneath my trembling fingers Will's fur moved on its own, rustling like a breeze was rippling through it. Then it disappeared, sliding back until I was just touching Will's bare skin. I thought I'd faint, my heart was beating so fast. My

mouth was a desert and my hand was too heavy to move. I just lay there, still and hopeful and terrified.

Will's breathing hitched, and he moved his head slowly, rubbing his cheek on my shoulder ever so gently. *What did that mean?* I managed to swallow. Then I managed to place my hand on his thigh. Skin to skin. The point of no return. No way to pretend we were just friends now.

Something rough—his stubble, on my collarbone. Will was rubbing his face into my neck—was he smelling me? His chin was always rough, impossibly stubbled, even when we'd first met and all the other guys were years away from shaving. Kind of made sense, now I knew: He was a *werewolf*.

What was he smelling on me, what could he sense about me right now? Could he hear my heart like I'd just been running and my mouth so dry I couldn't swallow? I imagined my arousal pouring off my body in waves and me incapable of stopping it, a tiny body stormed by the weight of my desire.

My hand on his thigh was still moving, but I could hardly feel his skin, I'd gone numb and couldn't feel anything except his hot breath on my neck. No way to pretend this was just an innocent exploration. Friends didn't do this. "Will?" My voice didn't sound like my own.

"I'm right here," Will whispered. His voice didn't sound his own, either. The raw husk that was mostly growl, that rock star heartthrob that made me shiver. His lips moved against my neck. "I'm right here, Connor."

I opened my mouth to speak, but a moan slipped out instead. It was a desperate squeaking whine, embarrassing against Will's low growl.

Will moved his lips to mine and they were gentle, so gentle. Just the lightest brush of his mouth, but it was enough to send shock waves through my whole body. My hand was on his bare skin and his lips were on mine and it was almost more than I could stand, so hot I thought I was going to burn up alive. *Is this happening? Is this really happening?*

His hand rested on my waist, his skin so warm through my T-shirt—not the searing heat from before but just as much of a shock to my system. I felt the wet of his tongue. I opened my mouth and he angled in closer and was *kissing me*. My first kiss. And it was with Will, just like I'd always dreamed.

His lips were soft like I'd never imagined, and when he hummed, I felt the sound in the back of my teeth. I could feel the heat cooking off his face at my cheek and chin. I moved my hand tentatively on his thigh, stroking the firm

muscle. I got shivers up my arm from the fine hairs on his leg, so light and human and different from the fur I'd touched earlier. Will pressed in closer to deepen the kiss. His hand at my waist was strong and confident, his bare chest bumping up against my thin T-shirt. His rich intoxicating smell was all around me and all over my sheets.

I was kissing Will. Will was kissing me. Right there in my dorm bed where I'd dreamed of him every night. He could have had anyone, but it was me he was kissing. It was me who was sharing the sticky, secret warmth under the heavy blankets. Kissing Will. I'd wanted it so long I could barely handle it, my mind was fizzing, and I didn't know what to do or how to move. His breathing was steady but mine quavered, I couldn't seem to get it right because I kept focusing on the feel of my best friend, and I forgot to breathe.

*He probably does this all the time, this probably means nothing to him and I'm an idiot for reading too much into it. But I couldn't hold onto a thought as Will nibbled at my lower lip and squeezed an arm under me to pull me into a closer embrace. My thoughts were just as short and shaky as my breathing. This is Will. Will! I'm kissing a werewolf.*

His hand slid down to my ass and cupped my cheek through my thermal pajama pants. I gasped—it was too much, just too much. My ass was so sensitive and I'd only ever touched it myself, I couldn't handle the calloused strength of his hands. I was going to come, right there and then from my first kiss and the tiniest exploration of his hands. I pulled back enough to choke, "Stop!"

Will stopped immediately, pulling away and shutting down the kiss. I rolled onto my back and tried to get my breathing under control. I felt like I was being smothered, but when I pushed the blanket down the feeling didn't go away. It was just too much. I was painfully aroused and reeling from Will's touch. But I was terrified it didn't mean anything, not to him. I was in love with him. But to him it was just two warm bodies and he probably didn't even think of me like *that*, he probably wasn't even thinking about me at all.

I clambered out of the bed. I felt calmer the moment the cool air hit my skin. I switched the light on and rested my head against the door, breathing slowly. I took my time calming myself down and getting my thoughts together. This was my first kiss. This was Will. I didn't want to mess it up, and I didn't want to do anything he'd regret later.

Will was sitting on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees. Watching me. His face was tortured with uncertainty. I wondered if he was



regretting it already, trying to figure out how to laugh this off. But then he asked, "Are you okay?"

I nodded, biting my lip. My breathing was mostly normal now. It didn't help that Will was just so gorgeous; that lush, creamy skin and the intricate dark tattoos. He looked amazing fully dressed. But naked he was a work of art, every muscle sleek and defined.

The silence stretched out, both of us waiting for the other to say something. *Tell me it's not a mistake. Tell me you want this too.* I had to tell him how I felt, but I didn't have the courage to do it. I didn't have the courage, either, to keep acting like I wasn't in love with him. I couldn't let him go back to his bed and act like this never happened, sleep it off on his chair and wake as just friends again. Things had changed, and I wouldn't let them change back.

But I couldn't get myself to say anything. I was so totally in love with him that just looking at him made my breathing go wonky again. It was just a day since he'd stumbled into this room with his face and body bruised, but there was no sign of that now. He was back to being flawless. Inhumanly perfect—because he wasn't human. He was a werewolf, and I was the only human he'd told.

The thought calmed my spinning insecurities. I was special to him, of course I was. I had years of close friendship to prove that. Even if Will didn't love me the way I loved him, he still cared for me deeply. He wouldn't use me up and spit me out. I had to tell him.

Then Will sat up a little and moved his arm, and I saw his cock for the first time. Smooth and creamy like his skin, uncut and perfect and so *hard*, so impossibly hard even after he'd been sitting there in the cold. I felt dizzy, and I had to close my eyes because if I didn't I'd keep staring at him for hours—or beg him to let me touch it, just let me taste it. I squeezed my eyes shut and rocked my head back onto the door and tried to breathe right. I tried to not think about that erection being for me.

When I opened my eyes again, Will had stood up and wrapped my sheet around his waist. Like he was hiding himself, like he was ashamed or even like he was getting ready to leave. He'd shower it off then he'd come back all cocky and friendly again and maybe he'd laugh about this kiss, or maybe he'd act like it had never happened. This moment would be gone forever, and I'd never have told him how I felt.

I couldn't let that happen. The panic rose up in me almost like bravery, and I said, "I'm in love with you."

I'd finally forced the words out, squeezing them out of my lips like a bellows squeezing out air. Only they came out as a tiny breath and a sound too small to hear. I tried to say it again louder, but my lips were frozen together and my heart was squeezing in fear and embarrassment. I'd tried to say how I felt. But I'd failed.

But Will said, "Since when?"

In a rush of relief and terror, I realized he'd heard me, caught my whispered words with his werewolf hearing. I couldn't look at him, tall and strong and standing there being perfect and wearing a sheet like it was tailored for him. I stared at the corner of the ceiling and choked out my confession. "Years. Junior high. Maybe longer."

Will sat down suddenly. He was less intimidating then, sitting on his chair like he always did. I scanned his expression but I couldn't read it. Not anger or revulsion. Shock, maybe.

I leaned back on the closed door. I was just in my ratty "pajamas", an old track team tee and woolen leggings and shorts, warm enough under blankets but not enough to stand around like this. But I was still semi-hard. In the midst of my confession and emotional turmoil, Will still had that effect on me. I looked back at the ceiling, scared of seeing hatred in Will's face.

Finally he broke the silence, talking quietly. "Same here. I've loved you for years. I remember that summer you went out of state. I missed you so much it was like my heart was being crushed. I couldn't make it a day without you, and I had to go three months? I thought I was going to die. I felt like I did die." He laughed.

My mind reeled. I forced myself to look at him, to check if he was joking. He was looking at me with a smile so filled with love it was breathtaking. So much emotion, all the friendship and caring he showed me every day but now it was warmed with pure, open *love*. I didn't know how he could have hidden something like that—except that I had, too. Every day that I'd pretended we were just friends and pulled away when I felt too much, and now I knew he felt it too.

It wasn't possible. It was too good to be true.

Will asked suddenly, "Even now that you know I'm a werewolf?"

"Of course."

His grin went soft with relief. That squeezed at my heart—I had been thinking it was too good to be true, and it was like Will had been thinking the same thing. He looked at me with a big cocky grin. I'd seen him smile like that on stage, when he was caught in the rush of performing. But this time, it was just for me. He kept smiling as he walked to me, his dark eyes so intense with love that I thought my insides would melt onto the floor.

"I love you," he said quietly. He put his hands on my waist and leaned in close, trailing his lips from my ear to the crook of my neck so sparks flared and crackled inside my body. He opened his mouth against my skin, breathing me in and licking my neck. He kissed me softly, his lips ghosting over my throat and jaw, every touch so gentle but felt through my whole body.

I wanted to wrap my arms around him and pull him close or just spend hours following the lines of muscle on his shoulders and chest. But I was so nervous I was held paralyzed, terrified of moving wrong and losing this beautiful moment. I whispered, "I've never... You know this is my first time..."

"Mine too."

I swallowed. I hadn't known, not for sure. "I've never kissed anyone before," I confessed.

"Me neither." Will pulled back to grin at me, his hands still on my waist. "You just gave me my first kiss, Connor. I think it was a good one. I hope you do, too."

"What? No way. You're so..." *Gorgeous, amazing, perfect?* "You've got so many fans."

He chuckled. "I love you." His face was just inches away, so I looked into his walnut eyes as he said it. He was so intensely happy that looking at him was like basking in sunlight. "How could I want anyone else when I know you?"

And then he winked, he actually winked. All cocky and grinning while he said something that rocked my world—typical Will. But I knew this time it wasn't a flirtatious joke, he truly meant it. He proved it by kissing me again, those soft lips opening so he could lick the inside of my mouth, and I could suck on his tongue.

I got lost in learning to kiss. I got control of my arms again, and I touched him, running my hands over his biceps and his shoulders and as much of his back as I could reach. Everything was smooth and firm and warm except where

our lips met, there it was wet and soft and blazing hot. I could feel the damp spot I was making on my pants, but I didn't care. I just wanted more of him, endless amounts of him.

"We can take it slow," he whispered against my lips. "If you want."

His hips were angled away from me, his back arched so we wouldn't touch below the waist. What was he hiding? I pushed fully into him and felt the length of his erection down my thigh. I groaned at the feeling and so did Will, only his groan dropped to a growl that rumbled in my chest and straight down to my cock. I dropped back against the door, my head rolling backward, and Will followed me. He leaned fully into me and traced the line of my throat with his lips, reaching my jaw then gliding back down to the collar of my shirt. I itched to have it off so I could feel Will's hands and mouth all over me.

"I don't want slow," I said. "I want you." I liked that he was looking out for me, but I also knew what I wanted—what I'd wanted for a while now. The sheet was tucked into itself, riding low on Will's hips. I tugged at it with trembling fingers until it unwound and dropped onto the floor.

"Wow," he gasped. "Moving fast there, Con."

I lifted my chin to meet his dark eyes even though I wanted my gaze lower. "I can go slow, if you want." I was teasing to cover my nerves—not that I had any doubt what I wanted, just that I'd never thought I'd actually walk into my fantasy.

Will balled his hands in my shirt and tugged gently. "Can I touch you?"

"Yes. Of course. Any time."

"Careful, an offer like that might make us both wind up in jail." Will grinned. He was still cocky and graceful, not mumbling and stuttering like I was. But his eyes showed the same desperate eagerness that I was feeling.

He dragged my shirt up, and I helped him tug it off. Freed to the cool air and anticipating touch, my nipples pebbled and goosebumps rose along my arms. I was almost holding my breath, like time was standing still, and my whole body was primed and just waiting for Will's hands.

"You're so perfect," he said, his voice rough and his eyes wide with something like awe.

"You can talk. Look at you. Look at that body."

“What, this?” He flexed his arm like a preening body builder. “This is werewolf, through and through. I don’t think I could keep abs like yours if I was human—or if I had your brain.”

I shook my head. “You outrun me, every time.”

“I know. It sucks.” He rested a finger at the center of my throat and ran it down my chest. Shivers chased after his finger like the tail of a comet. “If I had my way, I’d always be behind you. So I could always look at you.”

I was having trouble following the conversation when he was touching me like that. *Good. More. Oh, god. More!* “You could run backward?”

“I could,” he laughed. “See, there’s that brain. Ugh.” He made a grunting sound, his eyes darting all over my chest. “Look at your nipples. They’re so hard. That’s me causing that?”

“Definitely.” My nipples weren’t the only part of me that Will was making hard.

“So what happens if I...” His words trailed off as he pressed his mouth to my skin, tracing his tongue from the center of my chest and out to lick at one of my nipples. My back arched involuntarily, and I let out a hiss of breath. His eyes were dark with lust but his brows were lowered, serious as he looked up at me with a question. “Good?”

“So good.”

He nibbled at my flesh then nipped hard enough that my back arched again. My hands were sliding over the wall trying to find something to grab onto. I latched onto Will instead, grasping at his back, fingernails scraping over the moving lines of firm muscle.

“I knew you’d taste fantastic,” he muttered. He kept kissing and sucking my skin. “You always smell so good. It’s like being drunk, being around you all the time. Feels so good, breathing you in.” He ran flat hands over the pale skin of my abs and ribs and up to my pecs, gliding over every inch of my chest and making my skin shiver and burn. “I just want to touch you, all the time.”

“Anytime,” I gasped. “You’re welcome to.”

He touched and kissed and sucked at my skin until I was gasping and gibbering. I hoped I wasn’t making much noise, but I didn’t know, and I was almost beyond caring. I was beyond embarrassment or nerves. My skin felt like it was expanding and contracting at the same time, my body feeling things I’d

never thought were possible. I lost track of time or the small dorm room or the hum of the electric light, all I could focus on was Will's sure hands and gruff murmur.

I was beyond ready when he knelt in front of me. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my shorts and looked up at me. His pupils were so dilated his eyes looked inky black, and his hair was tousled from my hand. "This okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. Yes. More than okay." I took a slow breath and tried to slow my racing heart. Shivers kept running over my skin like I was in the middle of an electrical storm.

"The view from down here's pretty great," Will said. "Your tattoos..." He ran his fingers over my navel and the flame tattoos that hid old scars. I remembered the first time he'd done that, back when he used to have to sneak through my window to see me. It was strange to think of all the secrets that we'd kept over the years, and how the last big one had been stripped away tonight. *I love you.*

"We match, see? Almost the same tattoos." He linked his hand with mine, his right to my right so our tattooed arms crossed between our bodies and joined us.

"We look great together," I agreed.

Will grinned. "Yeah. The fans are going to love this."

"So we're going to tell—oh!" The last of my breath puffed out as Will tugged at my waistband, dragging my shorts down an inch. I held tight to his shoulder, feeling like I was going to slip over or melt into the ground at any moment.

"Sorry." He kissed my hip, teeth tracing my hipbone down to the worn elastic of my shorts. My cock was straining to be free, and I could see a wet patch. I knew Will didn't mind—I could look down the tunnel of our bodies and see his own cock jutting proudly out. "You were saying?"

"Nothing." I leaned back into the wall. Will's tongue slid over the sensitive skin just above my pubic hair. I gasped. "I'm not going to last long."

"Of course you won't. Have you seen me? I'm a babe. And I'm about to put your dick in my mouth."

My body shuddered, and my eyes snapped shut. Please, please, let him at least get to fulfill that promise before I faint...

Will tugged my shorts and long johns down in one motion. My erection sprung free and slapped him in the face. He was frozen in a moment of comical horror before he started laughing. "Did you just hit me, Connor?"

"Not on purpose." I scrunched my face into my hand. "I'm sorry."

"I think that's my fault, actually," he chuckled. "I like it." He wrapped his hand around my shaft and squeezed. Stars burst in front of my eyes, and my hunger leaped up to swallow my mortification. He stroked me slowly, one hand exploring my cock while the other roamed over my thighs and cupped my balls.

"I can't believe you're doing that," I whispered. "I've wanted it so long. I've dreamed about it and thought about it, and now it's really happening."

"Yeah." He pressed his nose into my hipbone again and breathed me in. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this. I must have rubbed myself raw thinking about you, a thousand times." It was like the start to one of his dirty jokes but there was no punch line. Just his eyes dark with lust.

Then he ran his tongue along my cock, and it was all I could do to keep from crying out. He lapped at the tip gently, then he closed his mouth over the head. His wet mouth felt incredible, and when I looked down I could see him, brows lowered and dark eyes focused on me.

That was all it took. I was too wired up, too stimulated to handle more than his lips and hand on me. "Will!" I choked, the best warning I could give before I was coming in his mouth. My abs clenched and my shoulders hunched over as instinct took over, and I emptied my pleasure into him. His hand jerked in surprise and he gave a tiny groan of pleasure. I wanted to watch but I couldn't keep my eyes open. That was okay though because the image was seared into my mind forever—my best friend on his knees in front of me, my cock in his mouth.

It was long moments before the room stopped spinning and my body relaxed enough for me to stand up properly again. Will kept me in his mouth, licking me clean until I softened. Then he stood up and wrapped his arms around me. "That was incredible."

"You didn't have to swallow."

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't waste a drop. You know you taste just as great as you smell?"

I buried my face in his neck and clung to his back. "I've eaten it," I admitted. "A few times."

“Oh, Con,” he groaned. His erection was pinned between our bodies, and he gave a little buck of his hips. “Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

Will slanted our mouths so we could kiss again, openmouthed but gentle. When we were both panting I leaned into his neck again and said, “I taste okay. Not amazing, though. I bet you taste incredible. You’re so effortlessly sexy. I bet you taste like gumdrops and sugarplum rainbows.”

He snorted. “I’ll take that bet. Here, let’s get back into bed. It’s too cold to stand around naked.” He flicked off the light then wrapped his arm around my waist and guided me back to the bed. “Your butt could freeze off, and that would be a crime.”

He crawled under the covers after me and cuddled me close. The curtain was open enough that I could see the darkness outside. I could hardly believe it was still night, it felt like a lifetime of change since I’d first climbed into bed.

“Sorry I came so quickly,” I muttered.

“Hey. No.” He cupped my jaw with one hand, finding my face in the dark with no hesitation. “Listen to me. That was the hottest thing that ever happened in my entire life, all right? Don’t apologize. You could come in my mouth every thirty seconds and I’d still lap it up.”

“Wow, true romance,” I chuckled.

“You better believe it.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“I want to suck you, too. But I don’t know if I’ll be any good.” I’d read guides online, but that just wasn’t the same thing. I never managed to focus on reading the guides, either. I’d strain my neck looking over my shoulder in the fear that Will would come home and see what I was reading. Or I’d imagine myself getting to practice on Will, and then I’d have to stop reading to just think about that for a while.

It was lucky I wasn’t studying the theory of blowjobs for school or I’d totally fail that class.

But Will just kissed me again and said, “It’s crazy how you have no idea how totally hot you are. I could bust a nut from you explaining quantum mechanics to me. I’m serious. Anything you do to me will be amazing.” He paused to kiss me hard and slow. Then he added, “Plus what’s the worst you can do, bite my dick off? I’m a werewolf, super healing abilities. Bring it on.”

“I won’t be that bad!”



“Then don't be worried!” He laughed, and sucked my lower lip into his mouth.

We only had to kiss for a few minutes before I was hard again. I got so caught up in the feel of us together that I forgot about trying to suck Will off. We rubbed each other off under the sheets, his gorgeous cock in my hand and his strong hands around me. Afterward, I fell asleep with Will curled behind me, sticky and exhausted.

It was better than any fantasy I'd had.

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## Chapter Fourteen

*Will*

I'd been trying to ignore that it was morning, and I'd done a pretty good job of it until there was a knock on the door. I could ignore light glowing through the curtains but knocking was too much.

"Ugh, I hate whoever that is," Connor mumbled. His face was buried in my chest, and his hair was tickling my chin.

"It's Chop. You don't hate her."

"I hate her," Connor grumbled again. Then he looked up at me, gray eyes narrowed. "How did you know it was Chop? Did you hear her walking?"

"Nope. I sensed her. Liv is out there too."

Connor sat up, the blanket sliding off him to reveal mouthwatering abs and the flames under his belly button. I'd licked that tattoo so many times last night, but I already knew that I'd never get enough of it.

Connor was staring at me wide-eyed. "What do you mean you 'sensed her'?"

"Kind of a werewolf thing," I shrugged half-apologetically. I wished there was some guide on how to tell humans about werewolves, or that I'd known it was coming so I could have planned it better. There was so much to explain and I didn't know what was important or not. I'd have to make sure Connor understood *everything* before I talked to him about turning. I wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

But that was a long way and one terrifying fight away from happening. "I've got great smell, even when I'm a human. My hearing is amazing, too. Eyesight's good, but human, except that I can see pretty much as well in the dark as I can at day. Those are all werewolf traits. But I'm especially good at reading emotions."

"You're saying you're a superhero," Connor nodded. "You're an empath."

"Something like that," I laughed. I gave into temptation and grabbed Connor around the waist, pulled him back under the covers. There was another knock on the door, and I heard Liv make a joke: "They're still asleep, you can tell because it doesn't stink of coffee." But it was easy to ignore her when the love of my life was naked and smiling beside me.

And in the meantime, there was Connor spread out on his back. I ran my lips over the head of his dick, already shiny and wet with pre-come. I licked at it and Connor gasped. His hand tangled in my hair and he bucked his hips gently, halfway between guiding me and just holding on for the ride. I slid him into my mouth, the taste of him already so familiar and addictive. How could something feel so good for both of us at the same time? I loved his dick in my mouth like it was the sweetest reward, and it seemed like he felt the same.

There was a pounding on the door loud enough to wake the whole floor. Liv yelled, "Get up guys, we can get coffee on the way!"

"I hate her," Connor moaned. He covered his face with a pillow while his other hand stayed in my hair.

I climbed out of bed and walked naked to the locked door. Connor stayed lying on the bed, his erection wet from my mouth and his expression almost comically disappointed.

"Hey Liv, could you go wake up Matt and wait in the lobby?" I called through the door. "Connor needs a bit of a pep talk, and I don't want to put any pressure on him." I winked at him and was rewarded with a smile like the first sunny day in spring.

Liv sounded worried. "Is he okay? Can we bring him anything?"

"He'll be great in a few minutes," I called back. Connor grinned. That smile never failed to make me feel warm all over, like Connor's happiness was wrapping me up in a blanket. I tapped on the door and called, "We'll see you guys soon."

I couldn't get back to the bed fast enough. "They're gone," I said. "Now you can be as loud as you want."

Connor laughed and squirmed on the bed, watching me. I dived onto the bed naked and climbed to him on my hands and knees. We didn't have long and I didn't want to make him late, but still I took the time to take in his body. He was hot, yeah. Totally gorgeous. All the more so because he didn't realize it, he didn't strut around like some guys did (guilty as charged). But he was so much hotter because he was *Connor*, my best friend, the guy I knew inside out. I knew every little facial quirk and the way he held his body and how his voice changed when he was sad or nervous and trying to hide it. I knew him so well and had so many memories with him, and that made his body endlessly fascinating.

I ran my hand over his right arm, the sleek muscle under the vibrant tattoos. “I remember when you got this, you were such a badass and just laughed the whole time,” I said.

“I remember you making me laugh.” Connor’s voice was all husk, and his eyes were half-lidded. I bent down to kiss his eyelids, and he purred in satisfaction. “You kept trying to make me move.”

“You did the same thing when Dave tattooed me,” I protested. “You tickled me when he was doing my ribs!”

“Your brother must think we’re crazy.”

“Nah. He thinks I’m crazy, maybe. But he gets us.” I was running my fingers over his arm, following the curves of the dragon and flames. They looked like they were moving, even now after I’d seen them so many times. Dave was a talented artist, but I figured it was Connor’s sexy arms that made the dragon look so great. Connor’s eyes were closed and his mouth was open, pouting open as he breathed in quick pants. This wasn’t the time to talk about mating bonds—it was the time to get Connor off, quick and hard and sweet.

“I want to make you so happy,” I whispered.

“You already do.” Connor’s eyes were clear as he looked up at me, biting his lower lip in that way that made me want to kiss him so badly.

And I *could*, I could kiss him. So I did, lowering myself onto my elbows so my bare chest was pressed against his and our bodies were hot and hard against each other, bare skin to bare skin down our thighs and hips and hard straining cocks. Connor gasped, and I swallowed that gasp with my mouth over his, pushing our lips together and burying my tongue in his warm, wet heaven. He tasted so *good*, so damn good even in the morning when he hadn’t brushed his teeth and should taste terrible. Because he was Connor, and everything about him would always be perfect. I kissed him with my mouth open and my body rubbing up against his, cocks sliding together, until he was trembling beneath me.

“Now where were we?” I whispered. “Oh yeah.” I took his hand from where it was lying on the bed, boneless with arousal. I tangled his fingers in my hair so the warm of his palm hummed at the back of my head. I slid down his body until his erection fit against my abdomen and his left nipple was right under my mouth.

I teased him with teeth, with lips, with tongue, taking it slow and deliberate even though we didn’t have time for slow and deliberate. I got him worked up,

I got him so his back was arching and his fingers were clenching in the sheets and his head was thrown back to expose the sweet line of his pale neck.

Soon his hips were fluttering desperately under me, and his chest was heaving as he took short shallow gasps. His hand gripped tight in my hair as he shoved my head down to his dick. "Please," he whimpered. He was bucking his hips, and that exquisite cock was bobbing in front of my face, a trail of pre-come on his belly and a string of it running from his slit to pool on his tattooed skin. He pushed me down his body, but he didn't force me onto his cock, just showed me where he wanted me. Even in the intensity of his need he didn't push me, he just guided. His voice was choked and needy. "Please."

"All you had to do was ask," I whispered. Then I licked the pre-come from his belly and followed it up to his cockhead, lapping up the slimy, salt chill of it all the way up to where it was warm and fresh. I took his dick into my mouth, closing my lips over the head and wrapping my hand around his shaft.

"I'm not going to last," Connor gasped.

I nodded my head and my teeth scraped on his dick. Oops! But Connor just gasped again. I slid him into my mouth as far as I could go before he made my throat burn and my eyes prickle. I wrapped a hand around his shaft to get the rest of him covered and started working him, stroking like I did to myself, cupping his balls with my other hand.

I was lying awkwardly half on his legs with my weight on my elbow and shoulder. But I didn't care because Connor was moaning, head thrown back and eyes closed like he'd really taken my words to heart and was letting himself be as loud as he wanted. I had no idea what I was doing, so I did what felt right, lapping at him with my tongue while bobbing my head and sliding my hand up and down his shaft.

"Do you want to—" Connor started before his words turned into a groan. He was breathing in short bursts through his nose and the tension in his abs made his whole body tremble. I hummed a question and nearly choked and then tried to swallow with Connor's dick still halfway down my throat. He hissed and mumbled, "Oh! Oh." His cock jerked in my hand, and I pulled back just in time to taste him, to feel the salty wetness of his release in my mouth before swallowing quickly as my mouth filled up again.

Beneath me, Connor was shaking, hands thrashing about, clutching at the blankets, the air, and pulling my hair so hard my head throbbed. His abdomen was a taut rigid plain. I swallowed and swallowed, head held still as Connor

writhed under me. When he was done, I kept licking him, trying to clean him up and get every last taste of him as he softened in my mouth.

“Sensitive,” he whispered.

“Good?”

“Yeah. In a minute, it will be too sensitive.” His voice was slightly slurred, and his breath was deep and irregular. “Wow.”

“Good?” I asked again. I let him slide out of my mouth and gave his head one more kiss. His hand relaxed in my hair, and I slid up his body to rest my cheek on his shoulder.

“Amazing,” he said. “Couldn’t you tell?”

“I want to be good for you. Really good. Maybe you could give me lessons? Connor’s Body 1-0-1.”

“I would love that so much.” Connor was smiling hazily, his eyelids drifting closed. “Can I have a go with you now? I want to taste you.”

“We’ve got places to be right now,” I whispered. Connor was looking so content, and I didn’t want to freak him out about his presentation or how close we might be cutting it to get there on time. My number one priority was keeping him happy. I went up on my elbow and leaned over him so my lips were just grazing his. “Let’s do this again tonight, take it slow and get each other off.”

I kissed him deep enough that he could taste himself on my tongue. His body was so warm and limp under mine, completely blissed out. I wished school didn’t exist, that the whole world didn’t exist so I could just lie there in bed with him and bask in the flower garden colors of joy radiating out of him.

I wrapped an arm around his waist to help him sit up on the edge of the bed. “You want me to carry you to the shower?”

“I can walk,” he chuckled. But when he stood up he staggered just a little. He laughed and looked over his shoulder at me, cheeks flushed pink. “This is kind of new to me.”

“Yeah, me too,” I laughed. “I’ll grab some clothes and bring them in to you. Make it quick, okay?” The clock on my nightstand said we’d taken less than ten minutes which obviously wasn’t right because I’d just spent an eternity in the sunshine meadow of Connor’s pleasure.

“You’re not going to shower with me?”

“Nah, I’m going unwashed like the filthy animal I am.” I grinned at him, loving that I could make a pun like that now, and Connor would *get* it. “I’ll shower with you tonight when we’ve got time to play with bubbles.”

Connor grinned and left the room. I went into instant panic mode, scrambling to get dressed and get all Connor’s things together as quickly as possible. I left a fresh change of clothes outside the shower and checked everything he needed was in his briefcase portfolio—not that he couldn’t do it himself, I just liked helping out and knowing that if he worried on the way to the presentation about forgetting something I could tell him exactly where it was and help him stop worrying.

I leaned against the door and opened up my werewolf senses, scent and hearing and that special werewolf sense all combined together to bring me feedback like I was in the middle of a 3D building diagram. I could sense people moving around their rooms all around us, and I reached out further to find... There! Chop, Liv and Matt all waiting in the lobby, their loyalty to me like a bright spark that glowed even when they were far away.

Connor entered the room with his hair still damp and his skin smelling of mango. His cheeks were still glowing and his smile was warm and content, but he looked fully awake. Content, but not sleepy. Perfect.

“Let’s do this every morning,” I said.

“Sounds good, if you let me reciprocate.” Connor grinned. “So you were serious about these?”

It took me a moment to see what he was talking about—the shoes I’d bought him. Tan hiking boots with exaggerated curves and plush bear heads for the tongues. He had them over his gray jeans and he looked fantastic. Real rocker-boy chic with his tattooed sleeve and ear studs. I glanced down at my own pair, black and white boots with panda heads laced up outside of my black jeans. “I was dead serious about these boots. We look awesome! Look at us. I’m going on stage like this tonight. You should too.”

“I’ll think about it.” Connor zipped on his heavy overcoat. He was smiling in that way that said he was ready to follow me on our own little adventure, whatever silly thing I wanted to do. I’d done enough totally silly things with him to know that face well.

I bit back a joke about getting the whole band some teddy boots and went for, “No one will see your feet behind your kit, anyway. Next, I’ll buy you a hat with teddy ears, and you’ll have all the fangirls screaming.”

“They can scream; I’m not interested.” He smiled up at me shyly.

I twisted my hands into his damp hair and breathed in his shampoo and body lotion. “Me neither,” I whispered. “I’m already taken.” I kissed him. Less than twelve hours since our first kiss and it already felt so natural—maybe because I’d been spent so many years imagining kissing him. “Come on. You’ve got a presentation to rock. The others are waiting downstairs. Race you?”

Liv cheered when we came into view, and Chop held out a tray with two takeaway coffees, size extra-large. She said, “We were just worrying you wouldn’t make it!”

“Plenty of time,” I said confidently. I quickly hugged everyone before grabbing my coffee. “Thanks.”

The snow was shoveled, so we could walk at a quick pace. I took the lead and Connor and Chop fell into step beside me, taking up most of the path. Liv asked, “So how’s the wolf?”

For a jarring moment, I thought my secret had got out already. Then I remembered Trout Shimmer and the last time I’d seen my friends. “He’s great, Doc thinks he’ll make a full recovery, and he’s going to stay with my parents for a while.”

“Scary. I wouldn’t look after an injured wolf,” Matt said.

“You already did, bro,” Chop pointed out.

“Not in my *house*.”

“You know how big our yard is,” I said. “Plus my parents are good with wolves.” I met Connor’s eyes and winked. I was glad to see he wasn’t looking too grim, though he wasn’t as contented as he’d been a few minutes ago.

I asked Connor, “How are you? How are you feeling?”

“Really great, actually.”

“That’s awesome!”

“And unexpected,” Chop said. “I like your shoes.”

“I want some,” Liv said.

“Thanks.” Connor was grinning. “Will bought them. He’s buying me a matching hat to wear on stage, but I asked for a wolf hat instead. Wolves are better than bears any day. Wolves are beautiful.”



“Wolves are scary,” Matt said again. “I wouldn’t want one in my house, and I wouldn’t want one on my head. Or my feet.”

“What about bears?” Liv asked.

“Nope. Bears and wolves aren’t coming anywhere near my feet.”

I laughed. “I’ll buy you some bunny slippers to wear on stage, okay?”

“Hey, I’d wear them,” Matt said seriously.

Chop said, “And I’ll wear a horse mask. Liv can wear bunny ears and tail.”

Liv snorted. “If you’re a horse, I get to be a unicorn. And we’ll go on stage like that and people will *really* respect our music, huh?”

“You guys are all so talented,” I said. “People would still respect your music if you played wearing bananas for shoes with rolls of toilet paper on your heads.”

“I’d wear banana shoes,” Matt said. “I’m always slipping over my own feet anyway.”

I laughed and turned around to slap him on the back for the pun. Just outside Connor’s building, Matt stood on an iced-over puddle and almost slid over, and we all laughed.

We made it to Connor’s building in plenty of time—enough time for him to sit and stew and start getting nervous. I would nudge his shoulder and murmur, “Look at the shoes!” and he’d smile just a little bit more. As the time for his own presentation drew nearer and Connor started obsessively checking over his briefcase again and again, I calmed him down with shadow puppets. I used to do it all the time in school assemblies, when Connor would get worried about having to go on stage for an award. There weren’t any shadows in the well-lit lecture room but I could mime with my hands—thumbs up, a hand cupped for a smile, two hands making the shell and body of a snail when one student went way over time with his presentation. When I put two hands together to form a heart Connor returned the gesture, then blushed and looked both ways to see if anyone noticed.

His presentation was great. He started off too fast and looking down at his notes too much, but once he did look up, we were all there smiling at him, and I had to think that helped. I could see the exact moment when Connor got caught up in the slides and illustrations he was showing, and the fear of being in front of an audience just slipped away. I loved watching him geek out over

architecture. Once when I stayed over at his house, he'd told me that he didn't have any plans and certainty, and he was jealous of how I knew exactly what I wanted from life. But eight years on, it was the other way around, Connor so excited and dedicated and me the bum clutching at plans for the future. Still, I had Connor. That felt just as right and certain as being an alpha ever had.

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## Chapter Fifteen

*Connor*

After my presentation and before our gig, we killed time in our dorm room. The band sat around on my bed or Will's chair as we watched movies on Chop's computer.

I was nervous, not knowing how close I should sit next to Will. I was between him and Matt, and they were both leaning on me. That was perfectly normal. But this time, I felt awkward and out of place. I knew Will and I had this big secret that no one else had. We were a couple, and the band didn't know. Also, Will was a werewolf, and the band didn't know.

But I cared about the werewolf thing a lot less than I cared about getting Will alone again. Maybe that was wrong of me. But Will being a mythical beast didn't interest me half as much as the thought of Will wanting to touch me. I was like a motion detector, my body firing up every time he moved. I kept watching his hands as he ruffled his hair or handed around snacks. I loved when he talked because it was an excuse to watch his mouth. I kept remembering the things he'd done to me with his mouth, how it had felt to be kissed and sucked by him.

I couldn't concentrate on the screen at all, I could only concentrate on Will. I kept hunching my legs up further because I was afraid someone would notice how aroused I got just from sitting next to my best friend.

When Matt got up to look at a picture on Liv's phone, Will took the chance to whisper in my ear. "Are you okay?"

I nodded.

"You're sure? I can tell something's got your brain whirring."

I twisted my head to whisper back, and my lips nearly brushed against his. Shock waves of awareness zapped through my body.

Will chuckled. "Are you thinking you want to get me alone?"

"No." *Well, yes.* "Are we going to tell them?" I lowered my voice further, paranoid. Liv and Matt were still talking, but Chop was doing a poor job of acting like she wasn't listening in on us. I barely opened my mouth as I said, "About us?"

“Up to you. I know what I want to do.”

I raised my eyebrows. Please, please, don't want to keep this a dirty little secret...

“I want to hire one of those sign-writing planes and let the whole world know.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Me too,” I mumbled.

Will gave me the full wattage of his movie-star smile. Then he said aloud, “Hey, guys. We've got an announcement to make.”

Liv and Matt looked curious, but Chop rolled her eyes. “Bet I can guess.”

Will glanced at me. I gave a little nod—he could be the one to tell them. Then I looked down at my hands in my lap, not wanting to see if there was disapproval in my friends' eyes.

Will said, “Me and Connor are a couple.”

“Congratulations!” Liv cried.

“No surprises there,” Chop said.

“Weren't you already?” Matt asked.

Will laughed. Liv asked, “Since when?”

“Just last night,” I muttered.

“Last night, aye? There's a story there, and I don't know if I want to hear it.”

Will said quickly, “You really don't.”

Chop laughed and leaned forward to put a hand on my leg. “This is great,” she said. “If you guys are happy, we're happy. Just don't mess up the band dynamic.”

I looked up at the genuine smiles on their faces. Friends. That's what it felt like to have true friends. “Thanks. For not... For being accepting of this.”

“Of course,” Liv said seriously.

Matt asked again, “No, really, weren't you already together?”

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*Will*

I waited until Connor had his drum kit all packed up and sitting pretty in Chop's van. As the band got into the van, I took Connor aside and asked, "Any chance you want to hang around a bit longer?"

A mischievous grin lit up his face. "Have you got something in mind?"

I couldn't help smiling—that was my boy, his mind always leaping to adventures! I held up the key I'd begged from the bar manager. Connor looked at it, tilting his head and squinting as if he could figure out its purpose by sight alone. It was a canine sort of head tilt, and I had a sudden flash of how gorgeous my mate would look when (or if) he was truly my mate, wolf traits spilling into his human form.

"What is it?"

"A key you've always wanted."

"Is it for your chastity belt?"

Connor asked it so solemnly that it was a moment before the joke clicked in my mind, and I let out a bark of laughter. "No. Not quite. Maybe."

Connor ducked his head and looked up at me, shy and sweet with that sparkle of mischief in his eyes. "Yes, please."

"It's the key to the windows in the back room. I thought we could snuggle up on the couch in front of the city lights for a while. Just us."

"Yes, please," Connor said again.

He looked so happy, his face glowing with a smile that I'd put there. There couldn't be a feeling in the world as great as making Connor smile. I cupped his chin and kissed him gently. "I'll just tell the band to go home without us," I whispered. "Then it's just you and me and the city lights."

Chop was less than impressed when I told her. "What, so you get a boyfriend and now you're too cool to hang out with us?"

Liv was already in the van, upfront in the driver's seat. Gigs always gave her the kind of energy that loved to drive. She leaned out the window to holler, "Battlestar isn't going to watch itself. We're going to keep watching without you. Feel sorry now?"

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I couldn't keep back a grin. "But have you seen Connor? Hot damn. Let the Cylons eradicate mankind, I'm too happy to care."

Matt came up beside me, smiling wide with his deer eyes all gooey and warm. "I'm glad you're happy, Will. You both deserve to be happy."

"Thanks man." I pulled him in for a hug. Over his curly hair, I said loudly, "See guys? This is what a real friend's like. I always knew Matt was the nice one."

"So, Matt's the nice one," Chop said. She rolled her eyes, fighting back a grin. "No surprise. I'm the mean one with photos of you in high school, and access to your social media accounts. You've been warned."

Liv laughed. She started the engine so she could get the radio playing. Out the window she called, "I'll keep an eye on her for you, Will."

"Thanks, Liv."

Liv continued, "I'll only let her post four or five embarrassing photos of you, okay?"

"Thanks, Liv," I laughed.

Back inside, Connor was loitering by the window. The light in the backroom was low, like I was seeing him through a soft-focus lens. I got a thrill in my belly just thinking about being able to *touch* him.

"I've got the key," I said. My voice came out all soft and small.

Connor smiled with that perfect, delicate mouth. He'd rolled his sleeves up enough that I could see the flame tattooed on his arm. I loved his tattoos but I often thought that we were the wrong way around—I was fire, he was ice. I was always loud and leaping around. I was vocal and upfront and exactly what I seemed. Your first impression of me was pretty much spot on. Connor was delicate and beautiful, shy and quiet. But then you looked past that and found out that he could reach right inside you and still your heart.

I unlocked the window and shoved it open. It was on a hinge and opened outward with a blast of cold air and the sharp smell of snow. The sounds of the city got louder, cars driving slowly and music playing low. If I reached out with my werewolf senses, I could listen past the city sounds to the slow slide of the Mississippi. I glanced at Connor, wiggling the key. "Worth the wait?"

"Definitely." I hoped he wasn't just talking about the window.

He was nervous. He kept fidgeting with his hands and biting his lip. Running his fingers through his hair then smoothing it back down. Tugging at his earlobes.

So I stepped right up into his personal space and put my hands on his shoulders. There was the spike in his emotions, the nerves fluttering into that deep purple bass that I was beginning to recognize as arousal. "You used to be scared when I touched you. But now you're not."

He nodded. His face was inches from mine. His eyes were wide, the gray catching the light of building signs outside the window.

"Is it because of your parents? They didn't touch you much so you don't like it when I get too touchy-feely?"

Connor frowned. He said quietly, "I love it when you touch me."

"But you used to get scared. I had to be so careful not to go too far. You'd be comfortable then I'd push things too far and scare you."

"Oh, Will." His eyes opened wide. "You didn't scare me. I was scared of myself." A blush rose on his cheeks, but he didn't look away. His voice dropped even quieter until he was almost whispering into the hushed room and filtered street noise. "I was so scared you'd find out how I felt, every time you got close. You'd touch me and I'd love it so much, and I knew I had to hide it, but it was *hard*. Because I want you so much. Because I love you so much. But now I don't have to hide it."

*Oh.* There he was, looking so innocent but squeezing my heart tight until I thought it might stop beating. I closed the distance between us to trace my lips over his. Connor let out a tiny puff of air then rose up on his tippy-toes to push himself into me, so hard and so close and insistent.

Let the Cylons eradicate mankind. Let me get ripped to shreds by my bully cousin and lose the mountains that I called home. All I wanted was another moment alone with Connor.

I led him over to one of the leather couches. He sprawled out on his back and held out his arms. My body slotted over him so perfectly, like we were made to fit together. I licked his lips then pressed into his open mouth. I kissed him until he stopped feeling nervous and just lay in smiling contentment. Then I whispered, "Your mouth tastes so great."

"Thanks. You too." He giggled. "I don't know where to put my hands."

I caught his hand and placed it on my hip so his fingers cupped snugly around my ass. "You can put your hands on my ass," I said. "I've got a great ass."

“You do.” Connor was blushing, giggling so hard I couldn’t tell if the flush was embarrassment or exuberant joy. He squeezed my ass, then tentatively put his other hand on it, too. “You should wear leather.”

“I’m wearing leather, Con.” I shrugged my shoulders so the hem of my jacket brushed his stomach. “That’s what they call this.”

“No, I mean like leather pants. On stage. Or just in the dorm. They’d show off your great ass.”

“They’d show off other things too.” I nudged my hips against his so the length of our erections rubbed together.

Connor moaned then laughed at himself for the noise. He slid his hand around to my front and stroked the strip of bare chest in my open jacket. Up to my neck, down again to my belly button. He licked his lips and whispered, “You promised.”

“What did I promise?”

As an answer, his hand slid lower until his palm was warm on my fly. Then his fingers curled around my cock, and I lost my breath. Oh. Even through my jeans his hand felt amazing.

“You said I could taste you?”

“Oh god, yes,” I groaned. I shrugged my jacket off my shoulders, but Connor stopped me.

“Leave it on?” He was starting to blush. “Please? I’ve thought about you in that jacket. A lot.”

I wanted it to last, but that was never going to happen. I was a goner the moment I had Connor’s lips on me and his eyes looking up at me. But that was fine—I knew it was just the first of many, many times together.

After he swallowed me and I finished him in a splashing mess on my stomach, we cuddled on the couch.

We lay like that for a long time. Watching the snow through the window and feeling the freezing wind on our flushed skin. My hand was on Connor’s chest, snug between his beautiful warm skin and that Trek/Zone tee. We didn’t have to say anything; we’d been together so long that there wasn’t any awkwardness even though we hadn’t been *together* very long.

Connor’s eyes slid closed, and his breathing evened out. Not sleeping but close to it, lulling. I loved how he got after a gig, that burst of weird energy that



drained away until he was floppy like a cat on a windowsill on a warm day. I let myself just look at him. Those thick eyebrows and sensual lips, the sweet choir-boy good looks and the diamond studs he wore in his ears. Good boy gone bad, all tattoos and black clothing.

Finally, he gave a little snort and shifted his weight, wiggling back into me. The curve of his ass felt so unbelievably good. I started getting hard again just from feeling him against me like that.

Maybe it wasn't good to be so relaxed and comfortable because a thought floated into my head: I could bite him. He was in the perfect position. I could just dip my head and feel the give of his flesh and taste the sweet relief of his blood in my mouth. It was a sick, wrong thought. And it made my heart beat faster, the blood pumping straight to my boner.

It would be so easy to bite him. And then all of my troubles would go away. I could claim my mate and lead the pack, save the wolves, live the life I was meant to... And ruin Connor. Take over him so that all he wanted was to do what I wanted.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't turn Connor just to win a fight. I'd rather have Joseph tear me to shreds. I'd have to fight as hard as I could and try to win. And when I lost, I'd have to find a way to help the wolves. There had to be a way. I'd do anything I could to save the wolves—anything except sacrifice Connor.

Connor tilted his head to look at me over his shoulder. "Are you all right? You've gone all tense."

He smiled at me, and my thoughts just melted away. I just wanted to lie forever with his heartbeat against my palm. Whatever else happened, I knew I would survive if I had Connor with me.

So I flexed my hips and said, "My dick's gone all tense."

He snorted. "So, are you ready now?"

"For round two? Definitely."

Connor rolled over, fitting his thigh between my legs. My jacket was hanging open, and the curling roses tattoo was visible. Connor touched my skin with a tentative hand, brushing his fingertips from just below my armpit all the way down to the waistband of my pants. His eyes were half-lidded, the dark of his eyelashes making his irises stormy gray.

I was so grateful for that tattoo, if for no other reason than how *absorbed* he looked right now. Like my body had Connor mesmerized. I remembered the

day we'd got our tattoos, our first tattoos together, and how impressed Dave had been. I had so many memories of Connor, he was wound around my past like the roses in my tattoo. It really hit me right then: I would never love anyone else. I couldn't. And why would I want to?

Connor dragged his eyes back to mine. His face was flushed, and I could feel his stiffy. But he cleared his throat and blinked and got himself back together. "I mean," he continued. "Are you ready to tell me the rest of the story?"

"What story?"

"About who hurt you. All I know is that it was a werewolf."

"Oh." I wrapped my arms around his waist and cuddled him into my chest. I would much, much prefer round two. But I had to tell him some time.

"You can tell me later, if you're not ready now." Connor's lips moved against my sternum, hot breath on my skin making me want to agree with him.

"No," I sighed. "I should tell you. And soon. Everything is about to change for me so you should know now."

And so I told him. About werewolf pack structure and my family, about being born an alpha and all the responsibility that came with that as well as the power. I told him about my year of running with the wolves. I told him about my parents being awful and pulling the ground out from under my feet, and Joseph being awful and forcing my back against a wall.

I told him about Trout Shimmer, barely pausing to realize that it had only been three days since we'd found the injured wolf and I'd told Connor he might never know the full story.

I told him in a jumbled mess, pulling memories out of my butt and explaining things at random. Anger at Joseph and love for Connor and love for the mountains all mixed up and dropped on him like confetti. Connor kept nodding and listening. I figured I was making a mess of it, but Connor was smart, he could stitch together the pieces. I talked so much that my throat was sore when I was done.

And, hoarse and tired, I finished with trying to sum it all up. "So, I have to fight Joseph. And I'm going to lose. But I can't stand by and let the wolves get hurt."

He had leaned back on his elbow to watch my face as I talked. My arms were still around him and that felt right. He was silent a long time as he

digested the information. I watched his emotion flickering just on this side of panic. Finally, he said, "You're a lot stronger than Joseph."

"Werewolf strength isn't like that. He's got me beat when it comes to loyalty. Because my pack is crazy," I added bitterly. "And they're giving their trust over to a madman." It felt good to be able to express my frustration. I wondered how long it would take for me to get used to not keeping secrets.

But there was still a secret. One huge, scary secret that I couldn't force out for fear of popping the perfect bubble we were in. I hadn't told him we were mates, and I hadn't told him I could turn him—that I was expected to turn him.

Connor was idly tracing my rose tattoo again, pushing his hand up under my jacket in his quest to feel more of it. It was sending sparks of interest through my body and messing my head up when I needed to think clearly.

"I didn't know Joseph was that bad," Connor said. "He killed all those wolves, and he wants to kill people? At school he was just calling people names."

"It's the loyalty. It's kind of like a drug. You know that saying about power corrupting? It's true. I've heard about it happening to packs when their alpha is killed and the beta takes over leadership. It can make them go crazy. And Joseph's not even a beta, he was always toward the bottom of the middle. So he's got these big dreams but no one respects him so he has to prove himself by being a dick to anyone lower-ranked than him. And then he gets more power which just means more people to be cruel to. Only now he's got to be even crueler to prove that he deserves the loyalty he's getting. It's vicious and disgusting. I should have been there to stop it happening." The truth tasted bitter in my mouth. "I'm responsible for the wolves that died. If I'd kept Joseph in check, none of that would have happened. And now it might be too late to fix things."

"This isn't on you." Connor closed a fist on the lapel of my jacket. He bumped his forehead into mine so I had to look straight into his eyes. "You're not responsible for what Joseph's done. You didn't even know." His hair was mussed and darkened by the dim light, a messy crown framing his frowning face.

He was right that I hadn't known. But I was still right—I should have been there, and I should have known. It just hadn't ever occurred to me the pack would move on and pick a leader without me. But that wasn't an argument

anymore. "Now that I know what he's planning, I have to stop him. It's my responsibility. I'm the only one who can."

"And you think he might kill you?"

"Not kill me. Just wound me enough that I surrender. Then he gets to laugh while I crawl away. I'll lose my home." The thought didn't bother me half as much as it had a week ago, before I knew the lives of thousands of wolves were on my shoulders.

"That's why you asked me about moving out of the state?" Connor breathed.

"Yeah. I just need to know I won't lose you."

Connor's face went soft. Then he buried it in my chest. I could feel the warmth of his cheeks heating in happy embarrassment.

I pushed his shirt up and rested my hands on the skin of his back. I wanted to stop talking and just enjoy his body. But his emotions were a confused jumble, and I had to help him. "How are you feeling?"

"It's just a lot to take in."

"Too much?"

"Maybe too fast. But, no."

"Are you mad I didn't tell you earlier?"

Connor leaned back and stared up at the ceiling for a few long moments. I liked that he actually stopped to think about it. Finally, he said, "No. There are so many other things I'm feeling and thinking about. Like this." He tapped my fly.

I barked a laugh of surprise. "I like you bold."

"Get used to it. I'm just going to get worse as I get used to touching you." Connor grinned as his cheeks colored.

I tilted his head so I could taste his lips. I wanted to taste his happiness. I thought again of how much I wanted to know every inch of his body, to know him as well as I knew his emotions. The kiss deepened as we clutched tight with hands and lips.

When we ended the kiss, Connor was breathing heavily. He swallowed and kept talking like he'd never stopped. "It would be different if you weren't in danger now. Or if I didn't get this." Another kiss. The palm of his hand rubbing

at my side. "Or if werewolves weren't so cool. You can actually turn into a wolf! That's amazing."

"I guess it's pretty cool."

"It's amazing," he repeated. Then he tilted his head up to meet my eyes. "Would you have told me if I hadn't asked? If I hadn't caught you out with Dave?"

"Yes," I didn't hesitate. "I've wanted to tell you since junior high."

And there was the opening to tell him about mates. That last big secret that stood between us. I didn't know how to tell him, but hadn't that been the theme of the last few days? Me just diving in with some messy explanation that Connor seemed to understand. Now was the time to tell him.

But before I could say anything, Connor asked, "What's it like? To be a werewolf?"

Now it was my turn to stop and think. "I don't know," I said at last. "I have no idea. I've never been anything else." I remembered a conversation we'd had years ago, back at school when I'd sneak into his room and he'd open up to me. Connor was crippled by his parents' conflicting dreams for him, and he had said he didn't know who he was or what he was meant to be. I'd never understood that. But Bren had told me that turned werewolves talked about finding a sense of purpose that they hadn't felt as humans.

So that was how I approached it. "I've always known exactly who I am and where I belong. I know how everyone around me feels about me. Like if everyone respects me and is loyal to me. And I know where I am in the world—I can't get lost. I know where I've been and everything that's happening around me. And I can feel the moon, constantly. More when it's close to full like this. And I can feel Jagged Rock like a magnet."

Connor's lips were parted, and his eyes were wide with awe. He gave a little nod to show he was paying attention.

I traced a finger over his smooth skin, the hint of stubble on his jaw. "There's nothing like running as a wolf. The snow and the wind and the forest. There's just nothing like it. And I always imagine you beside me, running as a wolf."

His lips quirked, and his eyes went soft. "I'd love that."

Warning bells in my head. I hadn't meant to make it sound too good. I didn't want to manipulate him. So I said quickly, "There's bad stuff, too. I'm

tied to my pack and to Jagged Rock. I miss it, it aches to be away for too long. And the downside of pack loyalty is it can really hurt if you go against the pack leader." I remembered the agony on Bren's face as he had to hunt wolves. "Like Bren—he's the pack's omega. He has to do what he's told. It's like peer pressure times a million."

"Bren?" Connor's eyebrows rose. "No way. Your uncle? But he's huge."

"Yeah. That doesn't matter to werewolf power. But he's been taking orders from me since I was just a pup."

Connor laughed at the turn of phrase. My hand was still on his cheek, and he twisted to kiss the wrist. "You're a wolf. I just can't get over it."

Now was the time. I had to tell him. I couldn't go my whole life lying to him. But just thinking about telling him made me want to hide behind the couch or make dirty jokes until he forgot what I was talking about.

I had to tell him, but the words were lodged in my throat. I had to swallow again and again before I was finally ready. "Connor," I said. "There's something else. You and me are mates."

"Yeah."

I blinked. "I mean, like soul mates. True mates. In all the world, you're the perfect person for me."

"I could have told you that." He kissed the palm of my hand.

"I mean it. This is serious. Like, fate bringing us together and the world changing to make sure we meet. That kind of serious. You said you don't know why your parents moved to Layton? I do. It's my werewolf mating bond bringing you to me."

Connor bit his lip. "You really are serious?"

I nodded. "My parents are mates. Only alphas have them. It sounds like magic, but it's a real thing."

Connor frowned. He pushed away from me slightly. His body let in a rush of cold air and it stung like rejection. "Are you saying I'm only in love with you because of some werewolf magic? That can't be right."

I shook my head quickly. "No. Only werewolves feel the bond."

"So, you only say you're in love with me because of the werewolf magic?" His gray eyes were brooding and he muttered, "Ouch."

“No!” It came out loud, and Connor flinched. And then the distance between us made sense, and I stopped focusing on my words long enough to pick up on the roiling emotions coming from him. Oh. The confusion and the hurt and anger were all as clear as if he was yelling. “I say I’m in love with you because I am. I love you. You’re also my mate. But you being my mate doesn’t force me to love you.”

“So what does mate mean, then?”

“It’s related to love, but it’s not the same thing.” I hesitated. Honestly, I hadn’t fully understood when Bren told me years ago. I’d gotten freaked out wondering what it meant for Connor, and I’d never stopped to consider what it meant for me. “Like, you can be mates without being in love. It’s a force that draws us together because you’re the perfect person for me. But you don’t feel it. Only I do. Because only werewolves feel the mating bond.” I took a deep breath. Then I looked into my mate’s beautiful gray eyes and I said, “You won’t feel the mating bond until I turn you.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

*Connor*

I wanted to close the distance between us. I wanted nothing more than to be snuggled into Will's warm chest. But it sounded like he was blaming his feelings for me on a supernatural force and that stung. And if I gave into the urge to touch him, then I wouldn't be able to think straight.

I almost didn't understand what he was talking about. "Turn me?" An image of a pancake flipping in a pan. Then it clicked. "Into a werewolf? You can turn me into a werewolf?"

"Yeah." Will looked wretched.

My brain shut down, overwhelmed by the possibilities. "I could turn into a wolf?"

"Yeah."

It sounded too good to be true. Way, way too good to be true. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I need you to understand what 'werewolf' means."

Will looked sick and miserable and that didn't make sense. I bit my lip. "Werewolf means I can turn into a wolf or human or anything in between, I can heal and have super abilities."

"And you'd be tied to me." He said it loudly, like it was a damning closing argument. He sat up, straightening his jacket so his tattoo disappeared from sight.

I sat up too, scooting over so there was an empty space between us, and I wouldn't be too tempted to touch him. "Will," I said slowly. "I am tied to you. That's what I mean when I say I'm in love." Saying it the first time was hard enough, and I hated that Will didn't seem to understand what "love" entailed. I was his forever, had been since I was a kid. Even if we were never more than friends, I wasn't going to leave him. But now that we could be more than friends... Well, being "mated" with Will sounded like a bonus, not a curse. Why was he acting like it was the most repulsive thought he could imagine?

Will zipped his jacket up. I knew how uncomfortable he truly was, then. He never missed a chance to show off his ripped body. "This isn't going how I



wanted this to go,” he admitted. “I’ve been messed up over this for years and I don’t know how to explain it to you.”

“You explained being a werewolf fine.” Even when I was hurt and confused, I wanted to comfort Will. Because I was *in love with him*, even if he didn’t seem to understand that.

“I don’t think I did explain it, otherwise you wouldn’t... Look, werewolf isn’t like being a human but now you can turn into a wolf. Werewolves aren’t human, in the same way we’re not wolves. We can take on that shape but we don’t work the same. Like the loyalty thing or pack structure—it’s more than friendship or trust or anything, it’s written deep into our nature. Like instinct. It can’t be ignored. Like, I’m an alpha. I can’t ever change that. Even if I tried. It’s not just about being loud or being bossy or whatever. And you’re my mate.”

“And you can’t ever change that, even if you tried,” I echoed. I regretted it as soon as I said it. I’d wanted to cause him pain. But as soon as I saw him wince I realized that no, I definitely didn’t want to see him hurt.

“I’m botching this up again,” he said. He looked so unhappy that I couldn’t keep away anymore. I moved closer to him and wrapped an arm around his leather-clad shoulders. Will smiled at me, grateful but still anguished. “Please understand, I would never want to change the fact that you’re my mate. You are the best part of my life, hands down. And up to this point it’s been a pretty good life, so you understand what I’m saying. I was willing to throw everything away for you. I didn’t even hesitate. Until I knew Joseph was hurting wolves...”

“I’m not questioning that,” I said quickly. “Of course you don’t want wolves to get hurt.” I took a deep breath. “Here’s what I’m caught on. I don’t understand what ‘mate’ means. And I don’t think you understand what ‘in love’ means.”

Will’s forehead wrinkled. “Of course I know what ‘in love’ means. I’m in it with you.”

My heart squeezed when he said it like that. Like it was so simple and so obvious. “This is really important to me. Are you gay? Do you think you’re gay?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t have a problem with that? It’s not like you wish I was a girl, or...?”

“Of course not. You’re perfect.” Again like it was so simple and so obvious.

“Okay.”

“Also, your dick is perfect.”

I snorted. There was Will, back to the dirty-joking man I loved.

“And your balls,” he went on. “And the shape of your hips and your Adam’s apple and your stubble and your ass and—”

“Okay,” I cut him off, laughing. “I get it.” His words warming me and I could feel the strength in his shoulders. I was getting aroused again. This was exactly why I’d thought it was risky to sit too close. “So explain ‘mate’ to me again.”

“When I turn you—if I turn you—you’ll feel the mating bond. It’s this undeniable force which ties us together.”

“Like what the law does with marriage?”

“I guess. It means if you’re ever away from me it’s going to hurt. Like, soul-wrenching agony. You can’t even imagine what those summer holidays were like when we were fifteen.”

“I bet I can.” I wished my fifteen-year-old self could hear this. It had been so hard, finding myself in love and believing it couldn’t ever be reciprocated. “I don’t get how this is different to anything I feel now.”

Will dropped his head back against the couch, looking up at the ceiling like he was getting frustrated. “It will really, really suck to be apart. You’ll be tied to me and want to spend every moment with me. If I ever say or do anything to hurt you—which, believe me, I don’t want to, but if I do—it will feel like being burned alive.”

Will hesitated, his eyes flicking from the ceiling to my face and then back again. “You’ll live for my smiles. I don’t know if that’s how it works for you or just for alphas, but for me I have to protect you *all the time*. I freak out thinking about you ever getting hurt, or sad. The thought of you crying makes me sick. But when you smile... That’s the best feeling in the world. Your happiness makes me feel invincible.” Finally, he turned to look at me, his dark eyes solemn. “And it will be forever.”

I shivered. He felt all of that for me? After all these years of telling myself I could handle being just friends, to know how he felt... My body couldn’t handle the amount of happiness I was feeling.

I manage to hold Will's gaze as I said, "So how's that any different to what I feel now?"

His eyes widened and a smile lit up his face. But he wouldn't let this go. He pushed, "It's not just a feeling. It's a certainty." He tapped his chest through his jacket like he was saying, *Here it is! This is the part of me that is certain it's going to be in love with you forever! Now come on, join me in acting like this is a bad thing!*

"And that's the reason you don't want to turn me into a werewolf?"

"Yeah. You won't feel the bond until you're turned. But once you do, you can't turn back. It will take over any bits of you which don't want to be mated to me."

"I don't have any bits like that."

"You do," he pressed on. "You have dreams. You want to be an architect. You want to stay in college. That will disappear when—if—you feel the mating bond. You'll just want to be with me."

I frowned. "But I can be with you *and* be an architect and go to college."

Will shrugged. "The mating bond makes you want to do anything to stay with me."

"Because you're an alpha?"

"Because we're mates. That's scary, right?"

"No, I mean... Why will I want to do what you want to do? If we're mates isn't it just as likely that you'll want to do what I want to do? Or is it because you're an alpha and I'm an omega?"

Will looked confused, but maybe that was my poor wording. Finally, he said, "You're not an omega. Why'd you think that?"

"Joseph picks on me."

Will turned, wrapping both of his arms around me. I threw my legs over his so I was half-sitting in his lap—what did it matter if I couldn't think straight?

He rested his forehead against mine, so close that his eyes merged into one and looked like Cyclops. He said, "You're not an omega. Joseph challenges you, and you fight him back. I've seen it. I think he's scared of you—or was, before my parents let him have power. You know how many times he tried to convince me you were an omega? He didn't believe it, either. But I could tell he really wanted to."

“You fight him, I don’t.”

Will shook his head. “You do fight him. I’ve seen an omega interacting with Joseph, and... Well. I can tell you there’s no way you’re an omega. When you talk, people listen. And you talk back to me. You know who else does that? My mom, who’s an alpha. And sometimes Chop. But even she doesn’t interrupt my sentences like you do.”

“So what am I?”

“Humans aren’t as simple as wolves. With wolves you just know your pack and how you rank with them, but with humans there are so many different social interactions every day it’s impossible to gauge rank. I don’t know where you sit *now*, but I know you’re a total badass, if that helps. If you joined my pack you’d be my mate, so ranked equal with me and just above my beta.”

“Who’s your beta?”

“Right now, it looks like no one, because I’ll lose my pack in a few days.”

*Way to be a downer, Connor.* I pushed past the depressing topic of conversation. “So here’s the thing. The mating bond would mean we’ll do anything to be with each other, right? And you say that means I’ll give everything up for you?”

“Yeah.”

“But you just told me you were ready to give everything up for me. And—no offense—but you’re not a college kind of guy. You didn’t want to go to college, and you didn’t want to leave Layton. So why did you?”

“To be with you.”

I just looked at Will, waiting for it to sink in. I saw the moment it clicked—his eyes got huge and his mouth fell open a little. I never got to see Will looking dumbfounded. He was always Mr. Cool.

I bent my head and brushed my lips over his. I just wanted to taste his amazement. Will was so cool all the time, and I wanted to savor his surprise. But then his lips were so firm and his mouth was so hot, and I found I didn’t care about amazement or surprise, or ruffling Cool Will’s feathers. I just wanted to taste his love for me. His love was in his kiss and I drank it in. I would never tire of that taste.

When the kiss was broken, Will murmured, “I follow you around. I never thought of it like that.”

"You always said I was the smart one."

"Yeah, you're the brains and I'm the brawn." His hand slid up my chest under my shirt. "So how come you get a smoking hot body, too? Not fair." He found one of my nipples and tugged at it, just hard enough to make me jump.

"So maybe you'll turn me and nothing will change. But even if it does... Right now you feel the bond, and I don't. That's not fair. And it hasn't been bad for you, has it? Why not let me feel it, too?"

"I can't believe you aren't freaked out by this," he said. His fingers brushed over the center of my chest. Maybe he could feel where my fire sleeve curled onto my chest, his werewolf fingertips picking up the scars of the tattoo. He looked amazed. By *me*. It was me putting that expression on Will's face. Now that was something that freaked me out, but in a very good way.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Because I'm in love with you, Will." He pinched my nipple, rocking me with a jolt of good pain. "I want to be with you, forever. I want to feel what you're feeling."

"I can't think when I'm touching you," he said as he moved his hands to my hips. His smile was rueful. "But I really, really want to touch you."

"Lucky I'm not in love with you for your brain, huh?"

It was a risky joke to make. But it paid off. Will's eyes darkened, and his grin grew wicked. "I'll show you why you love me." He flipped me onto my back on the couch and covered me with his body. His hips ground into mine, and I could feel how *hard* he was, from the ridges of his abdomen to the V of his hips to that glorious boner straining his jeans. I went from half-hard to fully erect in two seconds.

"You love that?" he whispered. Cocky as always, but touching because I could see how aroused he was. His face was dark and his brows drawn together and his breath was rough.

"Yeah. I love that." I grabbed the zip of his jacket, smushing my hands between us because our chests were pressed so close. "I love everything about you."

"I love everything about you too, Con. You're perfect." The last word was dragged out as a groan. He sat up, straddling my hips, his weight on either side of me. He shoved at my tee and I tugged at his jacket. We were both warring to get the other's clothes off which meant neither of us were getting anywhere at all. "Whatever happens, it's you and me forever. Right?"

“Of course.” I still didn’t see how Joseph could hurt Will, but if Will said it was likely then I believed it. But even if Will was broken and maimed, I’d love him forever. Because I was joking when I said I just loved his body. I loved his brain, full of wisecracks. And I loved his boundless energy and the way that he looked after everybody all the time. I couldn’t imagine anything better than a lifetime with Will. So I said, “Turn me.”

“Huh?” Will had worked my shirt up to my armpits and was tracing the outline of the tattoo above my navel. He was completely distracted.

I took the chance to unzip his jacket and shove it off his shoulders. He dropped it on the floor, then helped me out of my shirt. It was awkward undressing on a couch with Will on my lap fumbling and breathless and my chin caught in my collar. My hand slipped, and I boxed myself in the nose. It was up there with the most embarrassing fumbles of my life as a gawky, shy kid. But I wouldn’t have traded it for all the smooth movie-star undressing in the world, because at the end I was looking up at Will’s cocky smile and that was perfect.

Will ran his lips up the center of my chest. He paused at my nipple, mouth barely touching my skin. “So gorgeous. You always smell so good.”

“Turn me,” I said.

He froze. “What?”

“Turn me, Will. I want to be a werewolf.”

“You only just found out werewolves even exist. Now you want to be one?” His breath was warm on my chest.

“I want to run beside you in the snow. I want to feel the mating bond, too. Turn me.”

Will sat up, carefully distributing his weight. His ass was right on my crotch with just enough pressure to make me think that he was right, he did have a great ass and maybe I’d like to explore it. Maybe, some time when Will wasn’t staring at me with a mix of confusion and fear.

“You won’t ever be able to go back to being human,” he said quietly.

“Would you want to be human or werewolf?”

“That’s not fair. I’ve only ever been a werewolf.”

“Would you want to be human?”

He didn't answer. That was answer enough: Werewolf. Who would choose human?

“What do you have to do? Some kind of magic spell?”

Will was silent long enough that I thought he wasn't going to answer. He was watching me, his eyes on my pale chest until I started feeling self-conscious. His body was so perfect, those tight muscles and healthy glowing skin and the sharp crisp lines of tattoos. And any time he wanted, he could change his shape into a wolf just as beautiful and just as strong. Why would he deny me the chance to do the same?

Finally, he said, “I have to bite you.”

I raised my hand and pushed a finger against his lips. “Go on then.”

I felt his smile against the back of my finger. “Not like that.”

“Like what then? Go on, bite.”

When he didn't move, I reached up with the other hand and grabbed his nose. I squeezed it tight so he couldn't breathe.

He probably could have pushed me off but he didn't. He just playfully batted at my hand. “Hey! Stop that!”

When he talked, I shoved my fingers into his mouth. “Bite me!”

“You're crazy!” His words were muffled by laughter and fingers.

“Bite me!” When he didn't respond, I let go of his nose and wedged my hand under his armpit. I jabbed hard and fast with a tickle and Will yelped. His ass and inner thigh slid over my cock as his hips bucked. His teeth pressed down on the hand in his mouth. But at the same time he shoved his own hands under my armpits and tickled me back. I squirmed and squealed and hiccuped with laughter, trying to keep my arms at my sides to defend myself while also tickling him and keeping my hand in his mouth.

“You taste good,” he said, stretching his jaw around. He leaned over me, eyes dark and smile wide. “You actually taste like salty caramel.”

“Yeah, I had a Twix backstage,” I admitted. “The salt's all you, though. Is that the hardest you can bite?”

Will shook his head. Then he admitted, “I don't want to hurt you.”

“I can take it.” I was actually offended when he kept just sitting there. “What, you don't think I can take it? Look at my tattoos and tell me I can't sit through pain for something I want.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” When Will didn’t reply, I offered, “What if I bite you first?”

“What?”

“I’ll bite you. Then when you bite me, it’s like you’re making it even.”

“That’s not how it works. Also... No one bites alphas. It’s not something anyone does.”

“Then I’ll be the first. Come on. Are you scared?”

Will frowned at me, and for a few long seconds, I thought I’d pushed things too far. Then he burst out laughing. “What’s your deal, Con? Why do you want to bite me so much?”

“Because I’m secretly a cannibal, and I have a taste for you.”

“Oh god. You get that I’m a werewolf, right? I’m a *raise your pitchforks and hide your children* kind of monster. I’ve torn the throats out of living creatures. Cannibalism is so far from being funny.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“Because I—” Will stopped, shaking his head. He picked at a frayed seam on the leather couch as he frowned in thought. Then, suddenly, he tilted his head up and exposed his neck. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I pushed up to a sitting position.

“Yeah. No. Wait.” Will let out a breath. Then he put his hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. “This is whack, okay? This is full-on bizarro. But if you want to bite me, yeah, go ahead. You’ll see it’s nothing glamorous. Just... Go as hard as you can, okay?”

I nodded. I raised myself to my knees on the couch and wrapped my arms around Will. I kissed him until I built up the courage to move my mouth to his neck. Then, nestling my face in the crook of his neck, I bit down hard.

I’d partly expected him to writhe in agony and spurt blood everywhere. But I couldn’t even break his skin. We were hugging chest-to-chest, and I felt Will tense against me. I loosened my jaw and pulled back.

But then Will tilted his head to whisper against my neck, “That all you got?”



I snorted and bit down harder. Strained until my teeth ached and I thought I was going to damage my jaw. When I couldn't bite any harder, I pulled away again. "Your turn," I said. It felt like my jaw was vibrating, memories of the strain making my face throb.

Will slanted his mouth into mine and kissed me roughly. "I didn't think I was going to like that," he chuckled. "And I was kinda right. How about you?"

"Could go either way. It hurt. I like holding you, though."

He gently pushed me onto my back and grabbed my arms, pulling them up over my head. He pinned me to the couch, his hips over mine.

Will lowered himself until his body was stretched out over me again, his hands still trapping me but hooked around so our forearms were pressed together. "You want to know what a werewolf bite feels like?" he whispered.

"Yes. Please."

His mouth was against my ear. He breathed out, and I tilted my head, extending my neck instinctively. Will pressed his lips to the side of my neck, his stubble rough. I felt the scraping of his teeth and then the wet of his tongue. I shivered. It was sensitive there, the skin so tender. I'd never known. Suddenly we weren't playing around anymore, I was fully aroused. Will was keeping his weight off me, but he was still heavy and so strong, his muscles firm and his body radiating heat. My nostrils were filled with his leather and musk and the shampoo we shared.

His teeth scraped my neck, his mouth opening wide while his lips stayed clamped on my skin. Like a seal joining me to him, or closing his mouth off: Out here was the rest of the world, in there was Will's jaw with the power to change my life forever. He was sucking on my skin, the pressure like an ache that sent throbbing pleasure straight to my cock.

His tongue was lapping at me so hot and wet, flicking over my skin with the beat of my heart. He was a werewolf, and I had my neck bared to him. But I had never felt as safe as I did under him.

Will released my arms and buried a hand in my hair so his arm was crooked around to hold his head against my neck. His other hand dragged along my ribs, fingernails catching on my skin. My body was stretched out under him, and his fingernails left a blazing trail that seemed to go on forever. His hand found my hips, then my ass. He cupped it and squeezed, lifting me against him. His zipper was hard but his dick was harder, trapped against my hips and my own erection.

His teeth pressed at my skin. Then something weird happened, a surreal feeling like a heavy liquid was being thrown at my shoulder and sliding off it. Something moving, sliding over my neck. Will's teeth. He was shifting. I wrapped my arms around his waist and felt his back, skin warm and smooth and human. But his jaw shifted into the sharp predator's bite of a wolf.

He was still sucking my skin, licking, slowly driving me mad with the steady beating of his tongue. Sharp teeth sunk into my neck. Stinging pressure, a sudden blaze of pain that made my body stiffen. My cock surged and my breathing stopped as I tried to deal with the overwhelming feeling. Pain and pleasure at the same time. It felt so good, but not like the good ache of a hard workout. This pain was intense and immediate, and my delight was just as strong.

When I flinched, Will lessened the pressure then started to pull away. I wanted to scream at him to keep going, explain to him that this was a *good* pain, just something I was trying to get my head around because I had never felt anything like it before. But my brain had dissolved, and I couldn't articulate anything. I clutched at Will's back and squeezed his body closer. My hips rocked, and I ground my dick against his, needy and insistent through the layers of heavy clothing.

Will hadn't broken the seal against my neck. He kept licking me, his tongue stroking my skin like he was trying to soothe away the pain of the bite. I wanted him to let him know I was happy—more than happy—and things were okay. All I could do was cling on to him. I managed to choke out a few words. "If you're going to keep doing that, maybe you should get it pierced. Your tongue, I mean."

His laughter was a snort against my neck, but I felt tension melting from his shoulders. *Good*. When had this become about me making Will feel comfortable? Then again, when had it not been? His pleasure would always be as important to me as my own, if not more. Maybe that's what he was worried about. Suddenly it hit me: That was why he was so caught up on the mates thing. He was afraid I'd stop thinking about myself and just want to make him happy. Only our happiness was already linked in my mind and had been since middle school. And that was exactly how I wanted it.

"I want this," I said. "Please. Bite me."

I couldn't tell if Will's groan was human or wolf. It was desperate and shaking, and I felt it through my neck and straight through the rest of my body,

shivering through me like he'd taken control of my nervous system. He bit down gently. My eyes rolled back in my head at the trembling agony of so much pleasure. My neck was raw but he just kept licking.

I snaked a hand between us where our hips were rocking together. I shoved at Will's fly, fumbling blindly for the button. Our skin was slick with sweat and my back was sticking to the leather of the couch, but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was grind against Will and have Will grind against me. I freed him from his pants and held him trapped between our bodies and my jeans. He had a hand in my hair and teeth at my neck and he was unraveling me a strand at a time. He grabbed my zipper and dragged it down. Suddenly we were together, skin-to-skin, hot and slippery and impossibly hard.

Another blaze of pain from his teeth. My head bucked into the couch and my back arched enough to lift Will's weight above me. I wasn't in control of it, like my muscles had taken over or like it was my spine pulling tight and controlling my body. Frantically I wondered if this was it, if this was what it felt like to shift into a werewolf?

Will kept suction on my neck but pulled back enough to lick at the place where his teeth had been. It didn't hurt but it did feel raw. Our hands and cocks were desperately groping in the tunnel between our bodies, sweat and pre-come easing the glide as our hips and hands guided our cocks.

Even without the pain, the sensation was too much to take. My back arched again as my balls pulled up tight and I gave in to orgasm. I shuddered under Will as my hands scrabbled fast and hard and out of control.

Will groaned again, that half-human half-animal sound that was so primal and rough it made me want to come all over again. His arm was crushed against my body. I could feel the strength in it, the muscles working against my skin as he squeezed himself to climax. He groaned again as he came. His sticky jizz joined mine, plastered between our bodies and leaking into our jeans and down our sides.

He kissed my neck gently and the bite echoed with the feel of his lips. He lifted his head to graze against my mouth then rolled over so his weight wouldn't crush me. He held me and breathed, just breathed for a few moments.

My whole body felt warm, loose and relaxed. I whispered, "Am I werewolf now?"

## Chapter Seventeen

*Will*

It had felt good. So, so good. Connor's ready neck under my mouth. The pulse of blood under his skin just waiting for my bite.

It had felt good. But not enough to lose control.

"You're not a werewolf," I told him. I aimed for comforting, but the words came out raspy. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I didn't break the skin."

There was a mark on Connor's neck, purple-red and dark. An intense hickey with my teeth marks around it, pale blue outlined in white. I hadn't realized I'd leave a mark. If I'd realized I would have asked, and offered to bite him somewhere less visible.

"You didn't bite me?" Connor's emotions were a sleepy beautiful mess. There was fear in there, and excitement. But mostly the warm contentment that came before sleep. "You said you'd bite me."

"I bit you. Just enough that you'd know what it feels like." *And so I'd know.*

It had been incredible. Better even than the shameful fantasies. I'd tried not to let myself think about it since my conversation with Bren three years ago. I was afraid of all that my bite could do to my mate. But then Connor had begged for it, acting for all the world like my embarrassing secret desire was something good. And all at once the need had rushed back into me, even stronger now that it was possible and right there in front of me.

Impossibly good. And impossibly dangerous. I stroked Connor's jaw, keeping away from the bite. "How are you feeling?"

"Annoyed that I'm not a werewolf." His eyes were closed, and he was smiling.

"I didn't hurt you?"

"No. Yes. In a good way."

"You like pain?" I hadn't seen that coming.

Connor lazily licked his lips then opened his eyes and fixed me with that smoky gray stare. He joked, "Came as a surprise to me, too."

I laughed as I shook my head. "I can't believe this. I keep thinking you can't get any better, and then..."

His grin faded as he said seriously, "Soul mates, right? We're perfect for each other? I never thought I'd want to be bitten, but when it's you doing it..."

I leaned in for a slow kiss. His breathing was slow and relaxed, and I liked that a lot. "It will probably hurt more," I warned him. "If I do it for real."

"Why won't you do it now?"

"Because biting you would make me stronger right before the fight and I don't like that timing. I won't ever know if I didn't just do it because it would make me stronger. I can't spend the rest of my life wondering if I bit you because you wanted it or because I did." *Because it's what my mom would do, and I don't want to be the kind of leader she is.*

"Wait. Biting me would make you stronger?"

"Yeah." Looks like I missed that in my yard sale of an explanation.

"Then you have to do it. To save the wolves."

"It has to be at the full moon, so there's no time. And even if there was, there's no guarantee it would work—Joseph's had years to build pack loyalty and I've had years of losing it. He'll have all the pack together giving him their loyalty and I honestly don't know if our mating bond can beat that. My pack is large, I have a lot of cousins. And very few of them have loyalty to me."

"It's better than nothing though, isn't it?" Connor sat up, tucking his legs against his chest. Goosebumps had risen on his arms.

My jacket was out of reach and besides, my body heat would work more quickly. I sat up and pulled him into my lap, his back against my front and my arms around him so my hands rested at his thigh and neck. He was sticky with semi-congealed semen but, then again, so was I. At least I knew where that come had come from. Connor leaned back into me, nuzzling against my jaw and ear. Everywhere he touched felt like it was glowing hot like metal pulled from the fire.

After years of wanting, it was ecstasy to finally be able to touch him. Even if I had to tell him bad news. "If I bite you, you'll get tied to my pack and to the mountains. That will stay, even if I lose the fight. And if I lose the fight I'll be exiled. We'll never be able to find a new pack and there will never be a home for us. We'll always be wanting Jagged Rock and we'll never be able to go back there."

"But if you win that's not a problem?"

“If I win, being tied to the mountain will feel amazing. But that’s too much of a gamble. I can’t risk it.”

“But that’s going to happen to you anyway if you lose, right? Losing the pack and the mountains? At least if you bite me you won’t be alone.”

“No.” I said it quietly because his face was so close to mine, but I said it firmly. There was no negotiation on this. “I won’t put you through that. There’s a chance I’ll find a pack later, but even if I don’t, we can find a new home and if I bite you there then that will become your home.”

“Somewhere cold,” he said, like he’d said last night. “Like to the East, or even Canada. We could go to Liv’s hometown, even. She’d like to go there, she’s only visited but all her family is there.”

“Too close to Jagged Rock. We could go somewhere warm, you know. Like to California with Dave.” We’d just have to avoid being shot when we were wolves, but that was a risk we’d face almost anywhere except Jagged Rock.

Connor fell silent. I was enjoying the feel of his skin, and not letting myself think of anything else. Well, maybe something else: I was wondering if we’d permanently ruined the leather couch, sliding around on it in our delicious filth. I should probably just take the whole thing and reimburse Simon the bartender for it.

“Can I watch you fight Joseph?”

“You want to see me getting my ass kicked?”

“I want to be there for a big moment in your life. Plus I won’t be able to just wait around, wondering what you’ll be like when you get home.”

“Of course you can, if that’s what you want. You can do anything you want. Except becoming a werewolf right now,” I added. “I don’t want you to be there, because it’s going to be grisly. But you’ll be safe.”

“You don’t want me there?”

I hesitated. “Well, I do. Selfishly. Anything’s better with you around.” It wasn’t something I’d thought much about, but Connor’s face in the crowd would be a small ray of sunshine. “But for your sake, I don’t want you to have to see that.” There was also a childish part of me that just wanted Connor to keep thinking of me as some kind of superhero. I didn’t want him to see me fail.

“I want to be there,” he said again. “Even though I kind of don’t want to.”

“Yeah. I get that. I feel the same.” I squeezed Connor close as he chuckled. “Honestly, it might help just having you there. Even though we’re not mated yet and the unfinished bond kind of messes me up. You’re very loyal to me and that will give me some strength, even though you’re not a werewolf.”

Connor froze. “It works like that? You get loyalty points from people?”

*Loyalty points.* He made werewolf power sound like a supermarket promotion. And it was funny because it was true. “Yeah, definitely. Not anywhere near as much, but it’s still great. That’s part of why I like being on stage so much.”

He twisted to kiss my cheek. “Plus you’re a giant attention whore.”

“Yeah. That’s the other part of it.”

Connor rubbed absently at the mark on his neck. It was fading but not much. I loved how it looked, but I didn’t like that I didn’t have his permission to put it there. He said, “Why don’t you bring the band up, too?”

“To watch me fighting a werewolf?”

“Yes.”

I laughed. “Um. Because they don’t know about werewolves.”

“So tell them. Who’s more loyal to you than the band?”

“I’m not going to use our friends.” Cash your friendships in at the checkout, bonus loyalty points for every friend!

“I think they’d want to be used, if you asked. I know I would.” Connor started tapping at his leg, drumming out a nervous rhythm. “But I think you should tell them. I think you have to. The more I think about it, the more I know you should.”

All my petty little complaints dried on my tongue. I just asked, “You think that’s a good idea?”

“Definitely. We’re all parts of your life, Will. You tell me you’re an alpha and I believe that. But you can’t tell me you’re a lone wolf. We’re your friends and we have been for years. If something big is happening in your life, we want to help. Plus we care about the wolves.”

That was true. Chop and Liv probably loved Jagged Rock as much as I did. Still. “It’s a big secret, Con. I don’t want to scare the band.” I thought of Matt refusing to even wear a hat with a wolf on it.

“I wasn't scared.”

“That's because you're tough. And awesome. I love you for a reason.”

He smiled shyly and looked down like he was trying to see the smile on his lips. But when he met my eyes again his face was set with determination. “You love the band for a reason, too. They're not wimps. They all love you and they deserve the truth.”

“It's a big truth, Con.”

Over his shoulder the window was inky dark. Snow was falling again, and the temperature in the room had dropped. But our bodies had formed a private cocoon on our couch. All I could focus on was his eyes, slate gray and drilling into me like he was the alpha here. “You say I was drawn to you because I'm your mate, right?”

“Right.”

“The world rearranged itself so we'd meet, that's what you're saying?”

“Yeah. That's how it seems.”

“There are pubs in Canada named after Liv's family.”

“What?” I laughed at the non sequitur.

Connor nodded and held up a finger. “Liv's family is like a tradition there. The entire family lives there, going generations back.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So why'd her parents move to Layton?”

“For work. They're rangers.”

“And the pay was good enough to leave all that tradition behind? You think so?”

I didn't know where Connor was going with this. “Liv says they had a fight with her grandparents or something.”

“She says she thinks they *might* have, because that's the only explanation she can find for why they moved. But they're still on the phone every night so that doesn't sound right, does it?”

“I guess. Why are we talking about this?”

Connor raised a second finger. “Matt's parents never even showed an interest in hunting supplies until suddenly they up and moved to Layton. That's weird, right?”



“Plenty of people like a fresh start.”

“And move from New York, New York to Hicksville, Minnesota?” He pressed on before I could answer, raising a third finger. “Chop’s family had never even left Singapore before they moved here. And the immigration process is a lot of work. Why go through all of that to be cold all the time?”

“The American dream?”

“You’re being stubborn.” Connor shook his head. He was totally cute when he was worked up. “It’s you, Will. Layton’s full of people who have lived there forever. Then suddenly four families move in, all with kids the same age as you? *You* brought us together. *You’re* the thing we have in common.”

“Coincidences.” It was a lot of coincidences, I had to admit. “You think fate brought the band together? Or something? That’s a lot of fate.” How much fate did it take to drag someone across oceans?

He took a deep breath. His eyes nailed me to the back of the couch as he said firmly, “Call it fate or call it coincidence, I don’t care. But you and the band are the most important people in my life. The only things that matter. And if you ask any of the others, I guarantee they’ll say the same. I think you brought us all here with your freaky alpha magic. But even if you don’t think so, you can’t act like they’re not in your life. You owe them the truth.”

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*Connor*

Will and I got the band together in our dorm room. I locked the door discreetly. Mainly for the secret clubhouse thrill of it. But also because if any of them were terrified out of their wits and went running down the hallway yelling about werewolves the RA might kick us all out, and I loved our dorm.

Liv and Chop were sitting on Will’s chair, Matt was on the ground at their feet. We’d twisted it around so it faced the door and that’s where Will and I were. I had my back to the door and Will stood in front of me. He started by saying, “I’ve got something to tell you all.”

“You’re getting married,” Liv said.

“You’re pregnant,” Chop said at the same time.

“You’re leaving the band,” Matt said, his face falling.

“I’m a werewolf,” Will said.

There was a beat of silence, then Matt started laughing. I crossed my arms over my belly and mentally timed it—if he kept laughing until he sounded “manic” or “hysterical”, I might need to slap him like they did in the movies.

“What do you mean by ‘werewolf’?” Chop asked carefully.

Will laughed. “Connor asked pretty much the same thing. I mean a werewolf. I can transform into a wolf or a human or any stage in between.”

Chop nodded slowly. I could tell she didn’t believe him but was humoring him—almost the same response as mine. Matt’s mouth had fallen open but he’d stopped laughing at least. Liv’s face was completely blank.

“What are you thinking, Liv?” I asked. My voice surprised myself, I hadn’t meant to ask the question.

Liv was looking at Will intently. “I’ve heard stories, of course. You spend a lot of time up at Jagged Rock but you never get lost. Your family takes shockingly candid photos with animals, especially wolves. You’ve lived in your house your whole life but when we go over there it always seems sterile and empty. There are wolf tracks surrounding your house. You have an unnatural affinity for wolves and you can communicate with them. I’ve always wondered.”

Chop stared at her in disbelief. “You wondered if he was a werewolf?”

“Didn’t you?”

“His palms aren’t hairy and I’ve seen him using silver.” She thought of a pun, and said suddenly, “Will was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Does that sound like a werewolf?” She crossed her arms over her Sepultura T-shirt. “Furthermore, werewolves don’t exist.”

“Will’s never here at the full moon,” Liv countered.

“You grew up in the mountains. Ever seen a werewolf?”

“I’ve never seen a bear taking a dump, that doesn’t mean they don’t.”

“I’ve seen bear poop, though,” Chop pressed. “Piles of it. But I’ve never seen a werewolf.”

“What’s a werewolf look like? Maybe you have.”

Will cleared his throat. He winked at me over his shoulder then said, “This is what a werewolf looks like.”

He did what I'd told him to, what we'd discussed—shifting enough to not be scary but enough to be convincing. It was what had worked with me. Then again, I'd always thought of Will as superhuman anyway.

Chop gasped, and Liv went pale. Matt recoiled so fast he knocked his head violently on the base of the chair.

There were a few beats of silence. Then Chop swore loudly.

"I knew it," Liv said. "Do you eat people?"

"No. Never." Will shook his head firmly.

"But you hunt people?"

"Never. I don't even hunt animals."

She nodded. She might have looked a little disappointed. I might have imagined it.

Matt said suddenly, "Can you make me one? A werewolf, I mean?"

It was the last question I'd been expecting—it certainly hadn't crossed my mind when Will had revealed himself to me last night. Will was obviously surprised, too. He said, "You hate wolves, Matt."

"Yeah, because I'm a human. If I was a werewolf I wouldn't hate anything. Or I'd hate wolves and humans equally. Can you make me one?"

Will hesitated. Then he ignored Matt's question completely and said, "I need you to know that I'm still the same person I've always been. I'm sorry for keeping secrets from you but I had my reasons." He paused, and then added, "Obviously. Anyway, I want you all to know that I'm not going to hurt you or anything, and you don't have to be scared."

Chop laughed, her eyebrows raising. "Why would we be scared? We know you, Will."

It wasn't that I had been afraid of how they would react. But seeing the band reacting so *well* made me all warm and fuzzy inside.

Will just said, "Thanks, Chop. I mean it. Do you have any questions...?"

"Can you make me one?" Matt asked again.

Chop asked again, "So what does 'werewolf' mean? Do you turn into a wolf at the full moon?"

"No. I can do it at will. The full moon doesn't make me do anything, it just heightens some hormonal responses. It's nice to be in wolf form sometimes, but

if I don't shift the worst I get is an itchy feeling. I've got amazing hearing, smell and night vision. I can heal wounds. I can move fast, and I'm strong. I don't get sick. I live longer than humans. That's what werewolf means."

"Your family is too, right? Not just you?" Liv asked.

"Yes. My extended family."

"No way," Matt burst out. "Even that jerkbag Joseph? He's got Super Saiyan powers and he still goes around tying people's shoelaces together? What a waste."

Will winced, glancing at me again. "Worse than that. But yes, Joseph's a werewolf."

"Are you at war with vampires?" Matt asked.

"No. Vampires aren't real."

"How do you know?"

"Because they're not real."

"But how can you *know*?"

Liv added, "He's right, you know. You can't prove a negative."

Will looked over his shoulder at me, eyes huge in amazement and exasperation. *Not how you thought this would go?* I laughed and nudged his shoulder until he laughed with me. Then Matt joined in, and soon we were all laughing at nothing.

At last Will said, "I've got something serious to tell you all."

Chop's arms were still crossed but she was smiling. "More serious than you being a freak of nature?"

"Yeah. More serious than that. It's about Joseph, actually. There's something I need you all to do."

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## Chapter Eighteen

*Will*

We were all in Chop's van on the way up to Layton for a werewolf fight.

How the hell had that happened?

A few days ago, I'd still been fixated on someday telling Connor. But now I'd told the whole band as well. When we stopped for gas, I idly wondered if I should tell the attendant about werewolves.

I was being unfair because I wasn't thinking clearly. And I wasn't thinking clearly, because I was freaked out of my skull. The big fight.

The more I thought about it, the more right Connor seemed: Something had drawn the band together. It might as well be fate or werewolf magic, for all I knew. They had fierce loyalty to me, which wouldn't hurt in the fight against Joseph. And they had a van, which couldn't hurt when dragging my battered body home from the fight with Joseph.

But more than that, the band could help me out. They all knew the forest well and could keep an eye on it when I couldn't be there. Liv was very well respected in the hunting community and Chop was a whizz with social media. Between them they could maybe try to undo some of the damage of Joseph's hair-brained campaign to set up a war between wolves and humans.

We'd talked late into the night about all the ways the band could help the wolves after I was exiled. We'd talked until Matt had fallen asleep on my bed. Then I'd climbed in beside him and Connor behind me, then Liv and Chop on the other side, all of us piled together on top of my cramped dorm bed. I rarely slept in it myself so that was probably more action than it could handle. But it had felt right to pile up with my friends as if we were all wolves. They'd even tried to peer pressure me to spend the night in my wolf form, but I'd talked them out of it by reminding them that wolf meant naked, and if I shifted back in my sleep then they'd be officially weirded out. Connor said he didn't mind, but Chop hit my face with a pillow and yelled, "Gross!" That settled it. We all slept fully clothed. Still, it felt right.

After the fight, everything would change. I couldn't hang out at college and play in a college band anymore. I couldn't be with the band all the time anymore. But at least I'd have that one dogpile night to remember them by. That, and a digital scrapbook of embarrassing photos.

Matt was in full jokester mood on the ride up to Layton. He seemed determined to get everyone to smile. He kept asking Liv to turn the music up then trying to get us to sing along. Then he got me to teach everyone wolf howls. He stuck his head out the window and howled a garbled greeting to the wind, and when a bird poop landed on the van right beside his head his expression of total shock was the first good laugh I'd had all day.

We drove straight through Layton and up to my parents' place, set just within the forest. Dave came out onto the porch as we pulled into the driveway.

"Who are all of these people?" he asked in bewilderment. "It's like a clown car, people keep piling out."

"You know the band," I said, rolling my eyes. Dave kept shifting his weight and rubbing his neck and just watching him put me on edge.

"I just don't know why they're here. Sorry, I'm nervous," he added quickly.

"That's cool. And they're here because I told them. Everything."

Dave's eyes got even wider. "Last week you hadn't even told your mate. I guess when it rains, it pours."

"That's pretty much what I was thinking on the way up." I looked past him to where a wolf was hobbling toward us. I dropped to my knees and held out my arms.

Behind me Connor told the others, "That's Trout Shimmer."

"I know," Chop said. "He'll be on the cover of our EP. If we ever make an EP. If Will doesn't get decapitated by his jerk cousin."

I looked back at them. "Don't freak out, okay?" Chop started to say she wasn't freaked out, but then I shifted my head and throat so I could communicate with Trout Shimmer. Chop fell silent.

It was Matt who spoke up. When I was licking Shimmer's muzzle Matt said loudly, "When you make us all werewolves, do we have to do that? Because I don't know how often Liv washes her face."

Then there was the unmistakable sound of an elbow in a rib and Matt laughing breathlessly

I checked how he was healing—well—and how he was feeling—not good. I asked after his sister but he said she'd taken into the woods a few days ago and hadn't been back. It was cruel of her to leave him, but I wasn't that surprised—

the older they got, the harder it would be for them to integrate into a new pack, and one wolf had a better chance of finding a pack than two did.

Afterward, I offered the others drinks. We stood around in the driveway with our hands in our pockets. I didn't want to go inside, I could sense my parents in there and I didn't want to talk to them. The house had been my home since I was a child, and the place of my first sleepover with Connor. But the forest had always been just as much my home, and I knew which I was going to miss more.

I didn't like being nervous; it was pointless and painful. And I especially hated seeing my friends trying to hide their nerves. We still had hours to kill before the fight, and I didn't want to spend them watching my friends trying to hide their nerves. So I offered, "Bet I can beat anyone at a dirt bike race?"

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Mom came out to talk to me while we were racing the dirt bikes. We were in the clear space in the forest not far from the house, the place where I'd taught Connor to ride, and where I'd hidden after my parents had betrayed me to Joseph. I'd kinda started thinking of it as a private place where only my friends could find me.

The band was riding the outskirts of the clearing, and I was on foot in the center, watching them like a ringmaster. I was keeping an eye out for accidents—I would probably have time to run in and prevent injury from all but a massive pileup. I was also acting as judge—Chop and Liv often finished neck-and-neck, and Matt often tried to cut corners. I didn't need to watch that closely to stop Matt cutting corners because every time he did, he would snicker so loudly about getting away with it that I could bust him over it.

I sensed my mom coming, but I stayed in place. I kinda hoped she'd be too afraid to cross the path of the dirt bikes.

But no such luck. Soon she was beside me, back straight and hair pulled into a bun, wearing those soft gloves that showed off her wealth. I realized I was wearing my gloves too and that annoyed me. Right then I wanted to be the opposite of her, as far removed from an alpha as possible. I wanted no one to know that I was related to the woman who sold out her son to put some maniac in charge of her pack.

"It's getting late," was the first thing she said. "You don't want to miss the fight."

“Would you even care if I did?”

“Very mature,” she drawled.

A moment later, I was struck with the force of her loyalty, a flame so bright and hot it roared like an open fire. I had to blink and tilt my head away. Wow. I hadn't been expecting that. She hadn't been giving me much loyalty since I was sixteen. She'd hoped I would spend my fifteenth year leading the pack like she'd done, but instead I'd got to know wolves and fallen deeper in love with Connor.

That was the start of the end, I now realized—I'd spent years assuming it was just a matter of time until I took over the pack, but my mom had known since I was sixteen that it wasn't going to happen. I'd stepped away from pack leadership so I could be with Connor. Still, I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

But I couldn't figure out why she was loyal to me now. I felt the force of it almost like an energy drink, my blood and bones and muscles buzzing with fresh power. She was an alpha with a mate, that made her loyalty more than twice as strong as any other werewolf. I wondered if she had come out here just to show me that, so I asked directly. “Why are you so loyal to me all of a sudden? I haven't bitten Connor, if that's what you were hoping.”

“I'm aware. I was hoping, but not much.” She settled her hands on her hips, watching the band on their bikes. “When I asked you to choose between the pack and your band, I didn't think you'd take me so literally.”

Connor kept looking over at us. I was uncomfortable with seeing him so distracted. I crooked a finger and beckoned for him. “You want me to choose? My band comes first. I've told them what I am. They accept me.”

Mom said, “I know you think this wasn't fair.”

“Forcing me to make a decision before I was ready? Yeah. Not fair.”

“It had the desired result.”

“The desired result? To put Joseph in charge?” I echoed. She had stood around as Joseph hunted and killed wolves for fun.

“The desired result was that you decide where your loyalty lies, and prove it. You can't lead a pack if your heart isn't in it.”

“You could have waited.”

“Would that have helped? You knew I was ready to retire. You're eighteen now, you should have been leading the pack for years. When I was your age—”



"I'm not you," I snarled.

"That's abundantly clear." Her face showed it wasn't meant as an insult.

Connor's bike skidded to a halt behind me, and he slid off. Chop stopped her bike sharply beside Connor, then Liv was a beat behind that. Then Matt climbed off his bike, and the clearing fell silent. It was so abrupt that it was less like the stopping of sound and more like a silence had swept in and taken over. Even the trees were still, no wind to move the branches in the gathering dark.

I was angry, my body tight at the way Mom could work me up with her lousy arguments. Connor came up beside me, close but not quite touching. He tilted his head until his lips brushed my ear and whispered, "I love you."

My shoulders relaxed and my stress released as Connor's words flowed through me like a soothing caress. It was meant just for me, but Mom would have heard it with her werewolf ears. I didn't care. I hoped she heard. If she couldn't see now why I thought some things were more important than the pack, she never would.

The band stood around me, facing my mother down. She'd never really got along with the band; Dad had been the one to make an effort to chat with them and hand out snacks when they were over at my house. Mom could be intimidating. I felt a surge of pride for my band, standing beside me against someone they now knew was an alpha werewolf.

"You could have been leading the pack," Mom continued. "If you hadn't been so focused on your extracurricular activities." Her eyes flicked to Connor, and she frowned slightly. "Make that bite deeper and you might have more hope against Joseph. You still have time to—"

"Leave Connor out of this." I stepped forward, putting him behind me, blocking my mother's view of the bite on his neck.

Mom nodded and, to my surprise, didn't push further. She looked at me steadily, and said, "I wanted you to know you had my support."

"If you really meant that, you would have waited until I was ready."

She smiled softly. "Then I would have waited forever, and you know it. This has been the best thing to happen to you, and in time you'll see that."

The weird thing was, in a way she was right. If she hadn't forced my hand I might never have got around to telling Connor, and I might never have actually made a fight for leadership. I would still be caught in limbo, stretched between

a human life and werewolf duties. At least this way, I would know where I belonged, even if that meant leaving Jagged Rock. So it kinda made sense. Except... “Don’t you even care that Joseph’s killing wolves?”

“Of course I care. But it’s not my call to make. I announced him as pack leader and now I have to respect that, same as everyone else.”

“You’ve fought your whole life to help these wolves, and now they’re all going to be killed. How can you think that’s okay?”

“It’s my duty to follow the pack leader. You know that. You could have been the pack leader, if—”

“Don’t act like this is my fault!” My anger was rising again, fueled by the image of a pack of wolves bloodied and frozen in the snow. Connor put a hand on my arm, unafraid, calming me. I took a long slow breath and relaxed back into his touch. My friends and my mate were beside me, and that meant a lot. “You’re as much to blame for the death of Jagged Rock wolves as I am, or as Joseph is. You know he’s not an alpha and you know he can’t be a good leader. For all I know, you knew he’d become a total psychopath with power. You could have stopped this.”

“I have to look out for the pack,” she said simply. “It was time for me to step down. I wasn’t a suitable leader anymore. If you don’t win the fight tonight, then you’ll know you weren’t either.”

“So you get a psychopath for a leader. Well done.” I managed to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

Mom shook her head sadly. “That’s still better for the pack than a leader who can’t make his mind up whether he wants to be a werewolf or a human.”

“Maybe it’s good for the pack, but it will be the end of the wolves. Their blood will be on your hands.”

Her eyes flicked over my band before settling back on me. “For what it’s worth, I hope you win. I truly do.”

She turned and walked away. Chop nudged my arm and—well within the range of hearing—said, “Will, your mom’s a cow.”

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## Chapter Nineteen

The drive into the Jagged Rock Mountains took a little over an hour. The fight would take place in a large clearing where there was often a lake. The area was rocky and the lake would swell or split or drain depending on the seasons. A lot of Jagged Rock was impermanent—rivers changed their course and lakes changed their borders or disappeared, trees were destroyed or new ones sprouted. Maps never stayed current.

The area we were headed to was nicknamed Skull Lake. The water was tainted so animals who drank it would die and leave their remains, hence the name. I was fighting the leader of a large werewolf pack, and I was doing it at a place where animals came to die. Brilliant.

As we neared the spot Chop glanced at me in the rear mirror. “Pity you’ve got that bite. It’s very visible.”

I angled my neck to try and catch a glance in the mirror. The bite was a purpled bruise from my collarbone to my shoulder. Connor mumbled an apology, but I said, “No, I like it.”

“It’s not very macho,” Chop commented.

“I’ll show macho where to stick itself. I wear whatever marks I want.”

Chop stopped the van, and we piled out. There was a ridge of rock we had to scramble over before we reached the flat land called Skull Lake.

By the bright light of the full moon, I could see Connor’s eyes on my bite mark.

“I like it,” I repeated.

“You don’t have to say that,” he said quietly. “I know it’s not an ultra-alpha-dominant kind of thing to walk around with.”

I went over to the rock pile and deliberately cut a deep slice out of the palm of my hand. I held my palm up to display the blood oozing out.

Chop said, “Crazy mofo.”

Matt gasped. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because,” I told them, “I want to show you this.” I healed the cut and wiped my palm on my jeans. Once the blood was smeared away there was no

trace that I'd ever been wounded at all. I caught Connor in my gaze and said firmly, "When I wear a mark, it's because I choose to. I don't care if people don't think bite marks are tough. This is proof that I told the man I love how I feel about him. What's braver than that?"

Connor smiled wide, his eyes going soft and warm. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders to squeeze him, and he muttered, "You and your big showy displays. We get it, you're a superhero."

Liv said loudly, "I just hope you didn't drip any blood around. The last thing we need is a bear attack."

We climbed the rocky ridge and came upon Skull Lake. The last time I'd been up the lake had been wide and frozen—not quite safe enough for a human to skate on, but it had been fun to slide with my wolf paws. That had been more than a year ago, back before college and the band had taken up so much of my time. Now the lake was dried up and the area was just frigid rocks. The trees bordered it in a line so it was almost like we were in a natural sports field, a rough rectangle. As much as he was a hateful prick, I had to hand this to Joseph: He'd picked a good spot for a showdown.

The full moon was bright and the sky was clear. There were also lights set up in the trees, casting light and sharp shadows over the rocky clearing. The pack was already waiting just outside the line of trees, every werewolf from Layton there to watch. And Joseph was there, standing on his own.

"Didn't think you'd show," he called across the clearing.

"You wish!" I yelled back. Then I turned my back on him and led the band to a clear spot under the trees at the edge of the clearing.

Dave ambled over to us with Bren trailing behind. I frowned to show Bren I didn't think it was a good idea to wear his heart on his sleeve like that—Joseph wouldn't like Bren hanging out with my friends. But Dave said quickly, "Joseph's been going around grilling everyone about their loyalty. We're your biggest supporters, no surprise. There are others—you can tell because they've been bullied into standing on their own. Big surprise is Mom and Dad are on your side, did you know?"

"Yeah, I know." *Not that it will help.* I had the support of a quarter the pack, maybe less. Loyalty crackled like lightning through my body now that I was close enough to feel it.

I couldn't believe it was here. The big fight. My last chance to save the wolves and my home. I took a deep breath and clenched my hands into fists to hide their slight trembling.

Liv said quietly, "Whatever happens, we believe in you."

Chop agreed, "We'll be right here. We're not going anywhere."

Matt stepped forward and hugged me, rubbing his face against my belly.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm so lucky to have you guys. Now look away, I'm about to get naked." I shucked my jacket then paused and said, "Connor can look, if he wants."

Connor snorted and shoved me in the chest. "Stop wasting time and just do it already. You're always making me wait for it. I've been waiting six years." He laughed, but all his little body signals showed he was officially scared out of his mind.

I stripped then shifted into my werewolf form—two legs and long arms, fur from the waist down and across my shoulders and back, mostly human head. Not too far off the special effects from horror movies. Part wolf and part human but mostly badass. Not much good for running or day-to-day life, but great for fighting or looking cool.

"Wow," Matt whispered. "Now I definitely want to be a werewolf."

I winked at him. "I'd have to bite you, you want that?"

"Anything if I get to look like that!"

I laughed. "You might change your mind when you see all the things werewolves have to do." My gaze moved unconsciously to Bren. There was no doubt in my mind that if I bit Matt he'd fall into the role of a low-ranked wolf, maybe even an omega.

Connor rested a hand on my furry arm. "I love you," he said. Right there in front of everyone. He held eye contact and everything, even as his cheeks went red.

"I love you too. I'll see you soon." I gave him a brave grin like nothing was wrong, and Connor smiled back the same.

As I turned my back and headed out into the lakebed battle arena, Connor howled. He let out the howl I'd taught him, loudly proclaiming who he was and that he was my mate. I smiled and held my head higher. Then Matt joined in, and Chop and Liv with the imperfect howls I'd taught them on the long drive to

Layton. It didn't matter that they were human and their howls were hard to understand, they were showing their support for me and that warmed me. I hadn't asked them to do that, and they probably didn't know how much it meant to me to hear their voices and know I wasn't fighting alone.

Joseph was waiting, posed on top of a rock near the center of the dead lake. He was making a big deal out of rolling his eyes toward my band and wincing when the howl wasn't quite right. As I loped toward him he called, "Your girlfriend's not going to give you a kiss for good luck?"

"You want to come down here and say that to my face?" I growled. The moon was huge in the clear sky, and I felt it like a gentle caress on my skin. I felt strong, buoyed by the loyalty of my band and a few werewolves. Being with a pack, that ego trip of loyalty, was the best thing I'd ever felt before I first went on stage.

I reached Joseph. He'd picked a tall rock to stand on, the highest point in the mostly flat space. He'd probably picked the spot because it made him look most dramatic and cool, he'd probably walked around and looked at it from different angles, practiced that pose in the mirror. Yeah, he looked cool. Plus I had to tilt my head back to see him. That sucked.

"Let's howl," I said.

"I don't howl."

"It's tradition." Like humans shaking hands or bowing before a fight, werewolves howled together. It was a sign of respect for each other but also for the wolves in the area. I didn't respect Joseph as a person, and I didn't think he had any place being pack leader, but if he'd earned the loyalty of the pack he earned some recognition. "We always howl to acknowledge the wolves."

"I'm not an animal. And I don't care what the animals think of me."

And just like that, he lost the last of my respect.

I threw my head back and howled alone. I howled to the moon and to the forest. *I am Will Flight, alpha werewolf. I lay a challenge to rule Jagged Rock Mountains.*

The sound was swallowed up by the still night air. Joseph snickered. "Feel better?"

"I'll feel better after kicking your ass."

"Then get ready to feel terrible," he growled. He leapt from his rock, claws extended. I braced myself for the blow. The fight had begun.

I knew it would be bad but I hadn't realized how bad. Joseph wanted blood. He came at me with claws and teeth and fists and showed no mercy. He fought dirty, and he fought strong. I used all the moves I knew from play fighting, but it didn't matter. The pack loyalty was burning in him, and I was no match. He was stronger, faster. His fists blurred and his teeth tore through my flesh like it was butter. From the start, I was on the defensive. Even when I landed a blow, he barely seemed to feel it.

At last, Joseph pinned me to the ground and pummeled my belly. I tried to push him off but he got hold of my right arm and snapped it again and again. Sickening noises like wet gunshots and a white-hot pain. When I shoved at him with my left arm, he broke that too. Then he grabbed my neck and rammed my head onto the freezing rock, shaking me until my head bounced like a ball on a string. I tried to fight him off through the blinding pain, but it was like pushing at a solid wall.

There was a noise to the side, a strangled cry. I looked up to see Connor running toward me. "No!" He was screaming. "Stop that! Stop it!"

I yelled at him to get back, stay back, stay away from Joseph. But my voice wouldn't come out. When I opened my mouth all that emerged was blood, thick and hot and bubbling over my cheek. There was a sticky, wet agony in my throat and chest. I couldn't breathe right. That was the moment that real terror set in. Not from the pain or the inevitable defeat. From seeing Connor scared and not being able to help.

Connor ran to me until I could see the whites of his eyes and the stretched mask of horror his face had become. Joseph's lips were curled back to bare canine teeth, a snarl or a cruel smile. His growl was barely understandable. "I'll eat your boy if he comes closer."

I shook my head urgently, the motion making the world pivot and jerk wildly around me. *No!* Maybe Joseph was mouthing off. Maybe he was serious. He could say Connor got in the way, interrupted a fight that should have been just between two werewolves. Maybe he'd get in trouble for it, but by then it would be too late...

Dave was suddenly there, lunging to grab Connor from behind. Dave's tattooed arms wrapped around Connor's waist, and he dragged him backward. I heard him yell, "Not your place!"

"He's hurting Will! I'll kill him!"

"This isn't your fight."

Connor was fighting Dave, swinging with his elbows and legs. I heard the dull thud of boot on bone. Then Bren was there, grabbing Connor's arms to stop him fighting. Chop raced forward and grabbed Connor's hand to get his attention. She talked to him quiet and low and urgent. "It will be okay. Everything's going to be okay. Will knew what he was getting in to. He needs us to be strong."

I knew I'd never forget how Connor's face looked, taut with terror. His fear hurt as much as my physical wounds. I felt sick, waves of nausea on top of the pain. *Please look away!*

Joseph's eyes were flicking from my face to Connor's, relishing our pain. The sadistic bastard! I couldn't believe my family was going to follow his orders. I tried to push him off, but my arms were lead and the pain made me want to pass out. I had to fight to stay conscious, my brain screaming with all the things I stood to lose if I didn't keep fighting.

"He doesn't like watching you like this, does he?" Joseph leaned close, gloating. "I never liked him. Stuck-up nerd. I wonder what he'll do if..." Joseph caught the index finger of my right hand and bent it back deliberately. A snap and a rush of pain. I clamped my teeth shut to stop a cry of pain, but nothing came out anyway. I was choking and could feel blood running from my nose and lips.

"Stop it!" Connor screamed again. Chop had her hand in his and was trying to calm him while Dave and Bren held him restrained.

Against a backdrop of Joseph's laughter, I twisted my head away. I wanted to shift into a wolf, something less familiar so Connor wouldn't have to see my face as I suffered. But I couldn't seem to shift right. I didn't have the power. The flickering flame of loyalty was fading—my parents weren't loyal to me anymore, I could feel them deciding I wasn't worth having faith in. I was going to lose. I'd lose this fight and lose the forest. But it would be the wolves who suffered most, wolves and any person who got in Joseph's way. *I'm so sorry! I tried! I did everything I could.*

Joseph broke my fingers one at a time, laughing as Connor screamed. I was numb. The pain was too intense, so my body just shut down. I floated out of my body and looked down at myself, wondering absently how long Joseph could keep torturing me. Forever, maybe. If I was left alone for a few hours, I could heal myself. At what point would that stop working? Did Joseph want to push me until I was so broken my body couldn't heal anymore? Maybe he didn't have a goal. Maybe he was just hurting me for the fun of it.



Connor had stopped screaming, but he was still struggling against Bren and Dave. Chop was still whispering to him, her voice choked. Trying to keep him calm. I could hear Connor's quiet sobs and his pained breathing, the sounds so tiny but reverberating through my empty head like he was yelling into a megaphone. Why had I thought it would be a good idea to bring him along? I wanted to yank this memory out of his head. I wished he'd never had to feel fear like this. His sobs were like gunshots to my ears.

Then I heard something else. A howl, strong and loud. Close. Two wolves raising their voices into the forest. I imagined floating away from my body and into that howl, letting the hope of it lift me up to the moon.

But I didn't want to float away. I wanted to fight. I needed to be strong, for the sake of those wolves. Joseph broke another of my fingers, and I forced myself to feel the pain. I forced myself to open my eyes and to look up into his laughing face.

He was sitting on my hips, but both his hands were on my right arm—he wasn't bothering to hold me pinned down, now that I'd stopped struggling. I bucked up and clamped my teeth on his neck. My vision went blotchy and I heard a popping, tearing sound inside me. I ignored it, embracing the pain because it meant I was still *here* and present in the moment. It was years since I'd tried to take down an animal with my teeth, but I acted on instinct. Grab the jugular, make it quick and hard and if your teeth don't touch at the end, twist to do as much damage as possible. I made it messy and I made it hurt, the exact opposite of what I wanted to do with Connor.

Joseph roared. "Bastard! Just stay down!" He pounded my head into the ground with an ugly crack I hoped Connor didn't hear. Both Joseph's hands were on my forehead, holding me down like a vice around my head. My arms were spread out beside me, crippled and useless. "I'm going to kill you," Joseph hissed. "No one can stop me. You want to die like this, with your girlfriend screaming?"

I spat in Joseph's face. Thick, dark blood splattered his chin. I tried not to hear Connor's struggles to reach me, but every cry of his cracked voice was like a saw through my bones.

And then I felt something I didn't expect. A warm tickling in my belly, a good heat. *This must be what death feels like.* It still hurt but there was something else beside the pain, something warm and buoyant.

A moment later, the feeling was suffusing my whole body. Soft heat all over like I was basking in sunlight. It didn't feel like I was dying, it felt like I was getting stronger.

I tried healing, just a little. Two minutes ago, I would have told you it was impossible, that I was too damaged and I needed to lie alone for hours before I could heal myself. But healing was easy in that new warm glow. The bones in my arms popped back into place with no effort. It had *never* been that easy, even at full strength.

But suddenly, I was stronger than I had ever been before. My senses sharpened, the world around me coming into focus until I could sense *everything*. I could hear the slow movement of water under the ground and I could smell rainclouds that wouldn't reach us for half an hour. And I could sense the reason I was stronger—wolves. The forest around us was filled with wolves. And every one blazed with loyalty—for me. As they approached, I got stronger and my senses got sharper. I could sense further and further away. I could sense deep into the forest where hundreds of wolves were moving toward us.

I reached inside of myself and fixed my lungs, my throat. Lined my spine up right and meshed my tendons and muscles and bone. I taped myself back together and it was *easy*, so easy. I felt godlike. And Joseph didn't even realize, he was still teasing Connor and not even looking at me.

I laughed aloud with my healthy lungs. "You feel that?"

Joseph whipped his head around to face me. He saw my smile and responded with a fist. I caught it in midair, no problem. When he kept pushing, I twisted until the bone cracked. His arm splintered like a bag of kindling.

"No!" He swung the other fist but I caught it, too. Joseph flailed in my grasp, and I sat up, pushing him off me and pinning him to the ground. I wedged his arms behind his back so he was groveling facedown in the rock. He tried to kick me so I broke his leg.

"Stop fighting and I'll stop hurting you. Admit you've lost." I looked over at Connor and winked. *Everything will be okay!*

"I haven't lost! I can't have! I'm pack leader!" His eyes darted over the werewolves gathered around the clearing. I knew he was making sure he still had the loyalty of most of the group—and he did. But he couldn't sense the wolves in the forest. Even as they stepped closer, as they filled the spaces between the trees, Joseph wasn't aware of them.

It was funny. Everything was funny, right then. I was so filled with power it made me giddy, and I just wanted to laugh. "Can't you sense the wolves out there?"

Joseph struggled under me. He tilted his head, listening. There were so many wolves they nearly outnumbered the trees, their breathing as loud as the wind. Joseph obviously heard because he muttered, "So what?"

"Those wolves are my friends. I've shared food with them and slept beside them. They're as important as people, and that means as important as werewolves. I've protected them as an alpha should."

Joseph wasn't brave enough to shout defiance when he was down. But I felt his body stiffen with his disagreement.

"They're my friends," I repeated. "They belong in this forest more than the pack does. And they've chosen me." I wanted to just bask in the feeling of power, but I knew I was feeling it for a reason—to get rid of Joseph, once and for all. "Say you give up," I hissed.

"Never. So you've got some wolves on your side, big deal. I've—"

I cut him off by dislocating his jaw. "Say you give up."

He shook his head.

I had his hands behind his back and I broke one of his fingers. I knew how much that hurt.

He screamed—louder than I had, so that was something.

"Say you give up."

His body was trembling. He didn't shake his head, but he didn't nod, either. I was used to him starting fights with smaller kids and backing down the moment he faced a challenge. He wasn't crawling away with his tail between his legs right now, so I knew he must want this really badly. It must have hurt for a weakling like him to lie there acting strong, and I respected that.

Still. He killed wolves.

I picked him up by his elbows and threw him across the clearing. He hit a tree and crumpled to the ground. A wolf walked from the shadows by the tree—Leaf Mold. She watched Joseph with her yellow eyes, standing perfectly still. Joseph crawled away on his back, scurrying over the ground with his broken arm and dragging his broken leg.

I dropped to a crouch by his head and put my hands on his shoulders to stop him moving. His face was twisted and white with pain and terror. I growled close to his ear, “You see that wolf? You killed her family. You killed her whole pack and tried to kill her brother. That’s why she’s looking so pissed.”

“You can’t—” He choked then tried again. “They can’t interfere. A werewolf fight is two werewolves, you can’t—”

“Oh, I know. I wouldn’t let her touch you. Yet. But if you stay here, you’re staying in her forest.” A second wolf stepped into sight—Sunlit Rock, the beta I’d defended from Joseph. My love of drama flared like a hot coal inside me. “And you know who that is? You hunted down his pack and you wanted to kill him. Not so weak now, huh? You want me to let you go so you can try ‘hunting’ him again?”

The beta wolf Sunlit Rock flattened his ears and curled his lips back. His teeth were long and stained, and when he growled Leaf Mold joined in. The sound filled the still clearing like a motorbike starting up.

“No!” Joseph was shaking. “No! They can’t hurt me!”

In the shadows, more wolf forms appeared, hundreds of yellow eyes and thousands of bared teeth. The growling went on and on.

“They can’t hurt you, Joseph. But I can. The strength of their loyalty is in me. I have the power of every wolf I’ve ever cared for—and they’re pissed, because you never cared for them. Can you feel that?”

I picked up a chunk of dense rock and held it close to Joseph’s face. He flinched and tried to pull away. His lips were wet and quivering. I closed my fist and the rock exploded into a cloud of dust. Joseph choked and spluttered, but I leaned in even closer to whisper straight into his ear. “This is what it feels like when the forest fights back. You’re not welcome here.”

“I give up,” he gasped. “I give up.”

“Louder. So everyone can hear you.”

“I give up!” He shouted. “Please, just...”

I nodded. When I let go of him, he collapsed onto the ground.

Leaf Mold and Sunlit Rock were watching from the forest’s edge. They had stopped growling which was good because, yeah, that big growl was starting to scare even me.

An advantage of being a werewolf was the two hands, which let me groom two wolves at once. I stroked them behind their ears and scratched their necks, and just like that they went from fearsome predators to friendly dogs. Still, their loyalty to me was bright and huge and intoxicating. “Did you bring everyone here? You knew there was going to be a fight and you wanted to be on my side?”

The beta wolf licked my face.

I laughed. “This is amazing. Thank you. But I hope everyone’s left a wolf or two at home because otherwise there are going to be so many territory disputes. I kinda don’t want to be here for that.”

Leaf Mold licked the other side of my face. Then she threw her head back and howled.

It was the most amazing howl I had ever heard, let alone been part of. Hundreds of voices joining together until the air grew hot and heavy with the weight of sound. We were howling for me, for victory. At some point, the werewolves joined in, and my band. I was lost in the howl and the power of loyalty pulsing through me.

When the howl stopped and I finally came down from the high, Connor was beside me. There were tears on his cheeks but that was fine—my face felt hot and cold, and I knew I’d been crying too. He asked, “It’s over?”

“Yeah.” I looked around the clearing at the werewolves. They were all watching me. “Or maybe it’s just beginning. But this bit, this bit is over.” I pulled Connor in close and buried my face in his neck. I knew I was covered in blood but he held me just the same. “No more fighting.”

I held my mate there in the light of the full moon, and my heart soared. Everything was right. Everything had worked out right. I felt the wolves leaving and my strength fading. The funny thing was, the giddy high didn’t leave. I’d spent so many years struggling with stress and pressure and secrets, torn in two as I tried to balance werewolf life and human life and tried to treat my mate as just a friend. All of that was gone now, and the weight lifting from my shoulders made me want to jump around in excitement.

“I love you, Connor.”

“I love you too.” His voice was muffled by my furry blood-caked chest. “Even when you stink.”

*Connor*

I'd never seen Will drunk, but I imagined this was what it would look like. He couldn't stop smiling and he walked with even more swagger than usual. My cheeks hurt from how hard I grinned just looking at him. And also from the sharp relief after having to watch him being crushed to a pulp.

Will had an arm around my shoulders, and I had mine around his waist. We walked toward his family while hugging like we were joined. Chop rushed up to us. "What happened? Seriously, what just happened?"

"Will can't really talk right now," I said. "He's high on life."

Will laughed. "Chop, you won't believe what I'm feeling. It's incredible. Like being on stage, but with a really, really big crowd. It's just amazing."

"We can see about booking a stadium tour for the band or something." She was keeping it cool, her face impassive. She'd kept it cool and talked me down when I was out of my mind with fear and worry. Every now and then, I'd feel like I was meeting the band for the first time, completely in awe of them and amazed that anyone that cool would want to be friends with me. I was having one of those moments.

Will said, "Would you like me to bite you?"

"What? Like you just tried to rip Joseph's throat out?"

"Not like that. I mean, I'd like to turn you into a werewolf. All of you." His arm tightened around me. "You're my pack."

"Hang on." Chop hooked a thumb toward Will's werewolf family. "I thought those losers were your pack?"

"Most of them were happy to kill. I don't want or need them in my life."

The rest of the band gathered around us. Will's brother Dave was just grinning and shaking his head. Liv's face was calm but her hands were shaking as she grabbed me and Will and hugged us both. "You're fearless. That was incredible."

Matt was clinging to Will's uncle Bren, and they were both wide-eyed and white-lipped. "I thought you were going to die," Matt gasped. Will held his free arm out and Matt fell into him, clinging on like a limpet. "I thought you were going to die."

"I didn't die, see? I'm right here. Like a superhero, huh?"

“You’re always like a superhero to me.”

Will laughed, then we all joined in. “I like when you get scared and compliment me.”

After a few moments, Matt went back to hugging Bren. Will looked really pleased about that, and he raised an eyebrow at me. Something to tell me later, maybe. Out loud he said, “I’d like you to be my pack. You should take time to think about it.”

“We don’t need to think about it,” Liv said. “We already are your pack, right? We’ve been calling it a band but we’re more like a pack.”

I nodded. It was something I’d been wondering since Will started talking about fate and mating. If his magical alpha superpowers had brought me to him as a mate, why couldn’t they bring a pack to him too?

Chop said, “A pack that plays music, though. We’re a band. But maybe also a pack.”

Will’s eyes were still shining with energy he’d gotten from the fight. “You’re my beta, Chop. My second-in-command.”

“Does that mean I’m in charge of Connor?” She asked.

“Nope. Connor’s my mate and that makes him equal with me.”

Matt asked, “What about me?”

Will glanced between him and Bren but just said, “You’re as vital to the pack as any of us, just like you’re vital to the band.” Then he looked over at his family. Joseph was there still, lying on the ground and groaning as he healed himself. Will said, “Now I need to go talk to the others. Then we’re going to drive home for too-sweet drinks and maybe watch some TV before I sleep for about the next ten years. How’s that sound?”

It didn’t run quite as smoothly as that. The conversation with the pack took a long time. Will started by pointing out over half of his family and telling them that they had to leave and never come back. His mom tried to get into an argument about it, but Will wouldn’t budge. He kept saying he wouldn’t have wolf-slayers or murderers in his forest.

“The local economy is going to be gutted,” Dave muttered. “Who’s going to take over the hunting shop, or work at the vet’s? Will can’t just get rid of half the pack.”

“He can.” Bren was cuddling Matt like an oversize teddy bear, and Matt was happy. “It’s his pack now, he can make it how he wants it.”

“Yeah, of course *you* support him,” Dave chuckled.

Bren didn’t laugh. He said quite seriously, “This is the best thing to happen to the pack. Will’s going to be a leader like no one has ever been before. I’ve never heard of wolves getting together like that. It’s all Will—leading with love, using empathy to bind people together. Even when the people are wolves. This pack is going to do good things. Will you stick around to watch?”

“Maybe.” Dave put his hands in his pockets. “I’ll want to be here to finish Connor’s tattoos.” Then he looked at me. I’d almost thought he didn’t realize I was there.

“What do you mean, finish my tattoos?”

“When you have more skin.”

“What?”

“When you’re a werewolf. You grow extra muscles so you’ll have bare patches around your tattoos. When you’re used to shifting, I’ll get you to shift into your werewolf form and I’ll finish off your tattoos. Then you have to not heal them which, trust me, is hard. I reckon you can handle it, though.” He grinned at Bren. “You should have seen this guy when I first tattooed him. He was like, sixteen? And he’s just staring me down like, ‘I can handle anything Will can’.”

Bren smiled at Dave. Then he glanced at me and away again.

I could tell he was thinking something he didn’t want to say. “What?”

“It’s not my place,” Bren muttered.

I frowned. Was he thinking something mean about Will, or about me? I frowned. “Let’s hear it.”

Bren rested his forehead on Matt’s frizzy curls. He hesitated then finally said, “So he’s going to turn you? That’s what you want?”

“More than anything.”

“You know it will change you? He’ll be a part of you forever.”

“I can’t think of anything better,” I said. And I meant it. Truly and completely.



Chop joined in the conversation by asking, “What about us? You want to warn us off, too?”

Bren flinched. “I wasn’t warning anyone off. I respect your decision.” He looked down, not meeting her eyes. And then something Will had said clicked: Omega. Bren was an omega. That was why he had trouble saying things he didn’t think we wanted to hear. Because we were Will’s pack. Even if Bren questioned whether we should be turned he acted like we already had been.

Chop pushed on, “Will’s been trying to warn us off, too. Do you know a downside to being a werewolf? I think we need to hear it.”

Bren bit his lip. Finally he said, “I’m something of an authority on werewolves, that’s part of my job. And I can tell you that turned werewolves aren’t the same as born wolves. You’ll be tied to Will—you’ll have a part of him in you, like a little voice in your head. And you’ll be tied to each other. You’re not born into a pack but, if Will bites you, then you will be turned into one. Closer than family. Forever.”

Chop looked at him steadily, then said, “Connor spoke for all of us. I can’t think of anything better.”

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## Chapter Twenty

*Will*

We were in the cabin. I was thinking of hiding the keys and calling it our cabin, we loved it that much.

It had been a month. A whole month that I'd been the official alpha of Jagged Rock Forest and all of my family. Joseph had taken four of his family with him, probably to try and start his own pack somewhere or to beg for a place in another pack. In a year or two, or maybe more, I would get into contact with him again and extend an olive branch. But not right now. Now the wounds were too fresh and the lesson needed to sink in—he'd taken a gamble, and he'd lost.

And I'd won. I'd won everything I'd ever wanted. After a few years of feeling lost, I was back to exactly where I needed to be.

I was spending more time in the mountains and in town, and that meant seeing less of Connor. That sucked. But at least when I did see him I got to touch him and hold him close and make sure he knew how much I loved him. And there would be summer break, even if Connor was interning during it. We just had to make it through college then there was a lifetime of time together. And in the meantime I did everything I could to make sure Connor was always happy and his mind was on his studies and getting the kind of grades that made his high-achieving mind happy.

But now, it was time for us and just us. We'd driven up from Minneapolis for the weekend, the full moon hanging low over the mountains as we took the bumpy road at night. We'd been singing and laughing, but now that we were alone in the cabin I could tell Connor was nervous as hell. He was sitting on the edge of the bed chewing his bottom lip. It was the time I'd dreamed of for so long I'd stopped even letting myself want it: Connor knew everything and understood who I was. It was finally time to claim him.

I'd brought along a small set of speakers, which I set up on the shelf near the stove. I connected my phone and started playing an old love song. "You remember this?"

Connor looked up at me. His face was tight with nerves, but his eyes were dark with desire. "This is the song from prom."

"I've had it on my playlist for years. That was a good night."

"It was a great night." Connor looked down at his fingers. "I remember being afraid that it would be our last great night—everything was changing, we were going off to college. I thought we might have just had something at high school and that would be the last of it. That we'd drift apart and I wouldn't see you anymore."

"Never. You're a part of me, Con. I couldn't live without you. Everything can change but not that. It's always you and me." I held a hand out to him. "Come dance?"

He laughed and blushed, but he stood up. I pulled him into my arms. He was in a beanie and snow pants, but he was every bit as handsome as he'd been in his tuxedo. "I love you so much," I whispered. "So much, Con. You can't even imagine."

"Bet I can." Some of the tension was gone from his face as he smiled shyly at me. I held his hand in mine, his other hand on my shoulder and mine at his waist. We swayed gently over the wooden floor, amateur and graceless in hiking boots. Connor admitted, "I'm nervous."

"Me too."

"Really?"

"Of course." I laughed at Connor's surprise. We'd spent nearly every night together, rolling in his dorm bed and exploring each other. I was getting to know his body as well as I knew his mind, and that was exactly what I wanted. But he still left me breathless. Every time he came in my mouth or took me into his, I'd feel my brain shutting down. I just couldn't handle him, all his sweetness and joy and his... The Connor of him. He was just so Connor and that had always overwhelmed me, even when we were just friends goofing around. "You make me nervous. I want for this to be so great for you that I'm afraid it's going to suck."

"It's not going to suck," Connor laughed. He tilted his head forward until his head was resting on my shoulder. "I didn't know you got nervous. You always seem so..."

"Cool?"

"Arrogant."

I laughed. "Alpha, baby. It's in the blood."

The song ended and started playing again. I pulled Connor closer, his body so strong and hard against mine. It was a joyful shock every time I held him. "I

remember prom. I remember wanting to kiss you. You kept looking at me with those eyes... And that smile that drives me crazy.”

“What smile?”

“Any of them. All of your smiles are like a drug, I just lose control, and you get me wanting more. I thought I was going to lose it when I held you for this song. I was so careful to keep my hips back so you wouldn't feel how much I wanted you.”

Connor's lips brushed my neck, and I let out a groan. He whispered, “I wanted you to kiss me. It was all I could think about. And you were thinking it too?”

“Of course.” I squeezed his hand. “Always.”

“How did it take us this long to get together? I've been hiding how I feel for so long. I'm so sick of hiding.” His tongue flicked out. Wet heat on my neck as he tasted me.

“I didn't want to push you. I didn't want to move too fast.” It felt so good to hold Connor, it felt so *right*. I'd been missing out on that for years, not making a move on him for fear of pushing him too far. I'd missed out—but it was worth it, to make sure he was ready. And there would be a lifetime to try to get my fill of him. “I had to make sure you were ready.”

“I'm ready.”

The words were like an electric shock, pure voltage right to my cock. I swallowed. “There's no time limit, we've got our whole lives. We don't have to do anything tonight. Not until you're ready.”

“I'm ready,” he repeated. “I want you to take me and I want you to bite me.”

“You're sure? When I bite you, I can't take it back. You'll be changed forever. You'll feel the pull of the moon and of your wolf and of these mountains. And I'll be a part of you, forever. It's much more than marriage. You're sure you want it?”

“Yes.” He brought his mouth up to mine, and I kissed him, drinking his words off his sensual lips. “I want it,” he whispered.

“Okay.” I tried to calm my breathing. “Let's go outside.”

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We kept our hands linked as I led Connor down the trail to the lakes. The two small lakes were close together and between them was a patch of dry barren ground. There was a large, flat rock there where we'd lain once or twice. On that rock, I'd always felt like the forest hushed and the sun shone brighter so it felt close to sacred. I led Connor there, then laid out a crammed pack worth of blankets and, discreetly, a bottle of lube I'd bought weeks ago and had been carrying around just in case.

"We don't have to do anything tonight," I told him again. "We can just lie here."

Connor sprawled out beside me on the pile of blankets, looking up at the stars and the heavy full moon. At last, he said, "When we're joined, you'll be able to know what I'm feeling?"

"More than I do now, yeah. I guess."

"So you'll stop asking me twenty times if I want something I totally want?"

I flinched. "I'm sorry. I just want to make sure that you're sure."

Connor butted his forehead up against mine. "That was mean of me. Sorry. You don't need to apologize. You're in the right—it's good you check. It's just frustrating for me when I crave you so badly, and you don't seem to realize."

I grinned. "You crave me, huh?"

"I really do. You want to know how much?" Connor swallowed, his eyes wide and clear. The strong moonlight let me tell his cheeks were getting pink. He took another huge gulp of air, and then he said very quickly, "When you're away I masturbate."

I chuckled. "Everyone masturbates."

"About you. I masturbate about you. I put my fingers inside myself and think about you."

"Oh." No chance of a witty retort when my brain was tapioca.

"Yeah," Connor mumbled. His face was bright red. I swooped in and kissed his cheeks, trying to kiss all the embarrassment off him. He laughed and wrapped his arms around my neck. "Now you know. How ready I am. I am so completely sure."

"Roger that."

"I can be quite rough with my fingers," he added. "I slide them into my ass one at a time, or sometimes all at once."

"I would love to see that." My voice came out a croak.

Connor just lay there smiling, lazily toying a toggle on his jacket. "Oh, yeah. I like it to burn a little. I put my fingers inside myself, and I just roll around enjoying how good it feels. I think about you being in me, and my dick gets so hard and leaking that I have to—"

"Okay, now you're just torturing me!" I covered his mouth with mine. Connor laughed into the kiss, burrowing under my clothes to press his hands against my stomach. His fingers moved restlessly up to my nipples and he pinched, hard.

"I'm ready. I want you. Don't you want me too?"

"You know I do," I groaned. "More than anything." I'd worn loose snow pants so they wouldn't restrict my boner too much, but that was a lost cause around Connor. He made me so hard I worried that all the blood was leaving the rest of my body, and I was at risk of fainting.

I kissed and touched him, so grateful that I was learning to know this beautiful man's body, and that I had the chance to please him. We stripped out of our clothes and piled them up around us like we were in the middle of our own fort of coats and blankets. When I shucked my pants and reached for Connor's, he asked, "Is there anyone around?"

I reached out with my werewolf senses. "No. No one. No wolves or deer or anything." I'd howled earlier to make sure of that. "We've got the place to ourselves. There are some birds in the trees, though, is that a problem?"

"Do you think they're voyeuristic birds?" Connor's skin was pale and flawless in the moonlight, his lips the sweetest pink lifted in a kissable smile.

I laughed. "I don't think so. I could climb up a tree and ask them though, if you'd like?"

I went to stand up, but Connor grabbed my hips and pulled me back down again. "You're not going anywhere."

I landed on my side and angled my body so it was pressed the full length against Connor's. I could spread my hand wide enough to touch each of his nipples at once and that's how I teased him, watching the sharp peaks get even smaller and tighter in the frigid mountain air. "You want the birds to watch us, huh? Kinky boy."

"I'll show you kinky," he whispered. He pushed up, and I let him, rolling over onto my back so he was on top of me. He wiggled out of his pants and laid

down on me, naked, our hips nestled together so our cocks rubbed. "You like it out here in the mountains?"

"Love it. I've always wanted you here with me."

He was rolling his hips slowly, and I mimicked the motion, bucking gently so our erections could bump and slide. "I remember you telling me you wanted to run with me up here. This doesn't feel like running."

I said, "The only thing in the world better than running with you in the mountains is fu—"

I was cut short when Connor rammed a handful of snow into my face. He aimed for my mouth, but in his excitement he missed and most of it went up my nose. I choked and snorted and tried to get it out while Connor stayed firmly on top of me. His laughter made his hips wiggle, and that was sweet torture.

"What was that for?" I slapped the side of my nose to get snow out of it. "We were having a moment! I was being sweet!"

"You were being dirty," he corrected. "You said you loved the mountains and you wanted it kinky, so there you go." He sat up with his back straight and his legs straddling my hips. My dick fit so perfectly between his cheeks that I forgot what we were even talking about.

When Connor moved his hips again, I groaned aloud. "That feels good."

"For me too," he nodded.

"Better than a faceful of snow?"

He rocked his hips, sliding his ass over my dick. "Definitely."

"How do you know for sure? Maybe I should lob some snow at you just to find out."

He slapped me on the chest, his eyes half-closed as his head dropped back so I could just see his grin. I gripped his thighs and helped him rock on my cock, back and forth, back and forth, sliding his perfect ass over me. When the head of my cock lined up with his sphincter, he'd stop and give a little shudder.

I was lulled by the motion, slipping almost into a trance in which nothing existed except Connor's slow metronome glide over my dick. I lay with my head back and the stars in my eyes, the crisp mountain air made sweet by the scent of my mate. Sometimes, I'd crunch my abs so I could sit up and watch Connor's movement. It looked as great as it felt—the muscles in his thighs and

abdomen flexing as he moved, his head thrown back in silent pleasure, his lush erection bobbing in the air.

I took him into my hand and squeezed and pulled his cock in time with the movement of his hips. The forest was still around us, and the moon hung silent and huge in the sky to make the snow glow around us. We didn't talk or joke around; we just enjoyed our bodies together.

I wanted to go on like that forever, just the quiet and the lake and Connor. But the pleasure built up and up until I couldn't hold back anymore. We sped up, my hips lifting and Connor's grinding, my hand flying on his cock and his hands pinching his nipples. When we came, it was almost at exactly the same time. Connor's moan of joy drifted out over the lakes and was swallowed up by the forest.

I cleaned up with a towel, and we cuddled on the blanket, my body heat keeping us both warm. We whispered and laughed with each other, sleepy and quiet. For a long time that was enough, just lying there together under the stars.

But small sleepy kisses got heated and my libido kicked into gear again. I rolled Connor onto his back and climbed on top of him, bumping and grinding as we made out like we'd never done it before. I angled my hips and Connor bent his knees so my cock would sit between his cheeks again. As we kissed and rubbed, I started drizzling lube down there between us, slicking us up until our thighs and the blanket and everything felt slimy.

"Hey Will. You want to see it?" Connor was grinning but obviously nervous.

"See what?"

"Me stick my fingers inside?"

In answer, I just groaned, like a total zombie. That got us both laughing, and Connor looked a little less nervous.

He lifted his knees and spread his thighs until his little hole was clearly visible. His cock laid flat on his belly, and I sat between his legs to get a good view. Connor looked at me between his legs and laughed. "It's cold. All the lube and the wind."

"You want me to warm you up?" I stuck my tongue out and waggled it suggestively.

"Oh, please, no." His head rocked back as his body quaked. "I'd come in a second. I want to do this myself, then finish with you in me. How's that sound?"



“That sounds awesome.” I would have agreed to an egg and spoon race if Connor had proposed it in that smoky voice with his ass spread like that.

I dribbled lube on Connor's fingers, and he tapped them against his hole. “Are you watching?”

“Like a hawk.”

“The voyeuristic kind of hawk?”

“What?”

Connor chuckled. Then he popped both fingers inside of him up to the first knuckle, just like that.

“Whoa,” I breathed. “That doesn't hurt?”

“No. You've never tried it?”

“I've thought about it.”

“It doesn't hurt at all when I'm relaxed or really, really aroused.” He pushed his fingers in a little deeper, and I saw his hand flex as they moved inside him. He groaned, “Feels good. I want you in me.”

“You think I'm the size of two of your fingers?” I laughed. “Keep stretching or you'll hurt my feelings.” I squirted some more lube over his fingers where they disappeared inside of him. I didn't care if I had to throw the blanket out, the lube could get on everything as long as it got where I needed it to be.

I watched as Connor pressed a third finger in. When they were nearly completely inside, he groaned. “There. Starting to burn. It's good, though.”

“Can I join you? Just a finger, I mean.”

He hummed his approval and lifted his head to smile at me. His cheeks were flushed, and I knew it wasn't just from the cold.

I slicked up one of my fingers and slid it in beside his. It was so hot I almost recoiled. I hadn't been expecting that. It felt even more inviting in contrast with the chill air. It was just like our tattoos—fire and ice. We were both using our right hands so those tattoos were in my field of vision, Connor's flames and my frost and snowflakes moving and flexing.

I watched my finger disappearing into Connor's ass and felt his fingers against mine, stretching him open together. I said, “If you'd told me two months ago that I'd be doing this...”

“Then what?”

I'd meant to say "I wouldn't believe you" but that didn't ring true—there was something like fate or destiny here, a kind of rightness that felt like certainty. Maybe it was the mating bond. Maybe it was just love, like I couldn't love Connor as much as I did for so long without finally getting with him at some point. So, would I have believed it if I'd been told I'd get to be here with him? "I'd probably jerk off at the idea," I admitted. "Or if it was you telling me, then I'd be begging to take you up on the offer."

He laughed, happy and confident and free of nerves. So I wasn't surprised when a moment later he said, "I'm ready."

I crawled closer and positioned my dick at his entrance, coating it in some more lube. Now that I was actually there and about to pop our cherries I wondered if *I* was ready. I felt dizzy and a little unsteady. I'd been waiting for this moment for so long.

I pulled Connor up for a kiss, slow and open and breathless. When I had him humming with joy, I finally felt ready. "I love you," I said.

"I love you." He held my gaze for a few seconds, those soul-touching gray eyes so clear they were like a pair of moons. He raised his dark eyebrows, and his smile grew wicked. "And I'd love you more if you got on with it."

I laughed and nodded, but I stole one more kiss. Then I was back between his spread legs and lining myself up at his entrance. This was something I got to share with Connor and no one else, and it felt a whole lot like magic.

Then I pushed into him, and it felt a whole lot like heaven. Slick and hot and so tight. I slid barely an inch before Connor tensed up and hissed a warning. I had already stopped, freezing the moment his aura showed that he was in pain. "Should I pull out? This was too soon, I should have—"

"No. No. It's great. I just... Oh, wow. I should have used more fingers."

"I can stop."

He shook his head hard. "No. Don't ever stop." His legs were trembling slightly. I sat there for a few moments freaking out, not wanting to hurt him but not wanting to disappoint him either. His hands were curled in the blanket, and I reached out—carefully, carefully, not moving my hips or cock at all if I could help it—and wrapped my hand around his. Our fingers interlaced, and he fumbled for me with his other hand. The touch seemed to calm him. His breathing steadied when I was holding both of his hands in both of mine. His legs stopped trembling, and he relaxed. He gave a little nod. "Ready. But slow."

I moved my hips as slowly as I could, sliding myself into the sweet heaven of his ass. I listened to Connor's breathing and watched his face, but he didn't show any more pain. When I was all the way in, I held still and waited. Connor breathed slowly, and I let our breath sync up, matching him inhale and exhale. I felt connected to him like never before, very aware that we were breathing in the same air and making love under the same sky.

After a while, he squeezed my hands and said, "Ready."

I still took it slow, as slow as I could. But once I let myself really feel him, I knew I wasn't going to last long. He was just so warm and he was squeezing me like a hand opening and closing around my shaft. His own cock lifted from his belly a little and dropped back down in time with the squeezing motion. There was a string of pre-come trailing on his tattooed navel, and I wanted to lick it up, but I didn't want to stop my slow grind.

"I want to touch you," I said. "But I also want to keep doing this."

"Life is tough," he said. His voice was thick and sleepy. The flexing muscles in his abs looked so great behind his cock.

I tilted forward slightly, thinking about trying to kiss him. But Connor froze and then his whole body shook like a dog getting water off its fur. He radiated surprise and happiness like he was shouting it through a megaphone. "That. You did the prostate thing," he gasped. "Do it again."

The internet hadn't explained how freakin' hot my partner would look when I pegged his prostate. I slid into him again on exactly the same angle and watched as he writhed and convulsed. His fingernails bit into the backs of my hands and his ass clenched tight over my cock.

"Yes," he choked. "That. Oh, yes. Exactly that."

I did it again, and again. It had to be as hot for me as it was for him. My senses were reeling, trying to take in all that pleasure. Every gasp and moan from Connor brought me a step closer to climax, and it was all I could do to hold it back. I just wanted to give him a little more, a little more... "I can't hold on much longer."

"Me neither," he choked. "So good. So good." His head rolled back again, his spine arching like he was trying to dig into the earth with his shoulder blades as shovels. "Will." He managed to look me straight in the eye before I knocked that special spot again, and he gasped and his eyes slid shut. "Will. Bite me."

The fear was sudden and intense, swooping down on me and bringing back all my old worries. "You're sure?"

"So sure."

"Everything will change. I'll be a part of you, maybe taking over your mind. You won't be able to take it back, it's forever." I just had to be certain. It was too big a decision for any hesitation.

"I want you forever. This is my choice."

I maneuvered clumsily, my knees slipping on the blanket and my arms useless to help because I didn't want to let go of Connor's hands. I got myself up over him and pressed my lips into his mouth for a scorching kiss. "You'll be mine, forever. My mate."

"And you'll be mine."

It was all I'd ever wanted.

I teased his neck with my mouth and teeth while I kept moving my hips. It was only a few thrusts before Connor's body tensed, and he groaned, "Now!"

And, at long last, I bit him.

I spread my mouth wide and it kept going as I shifted my jaw. It was werewolf teeth that bit into Connor's flesh, that sunk deep into his skin. He rocked under me, his body stiff from orgasm rather than pain. I bucked my hips into him, and my own orgasm crashed through me. I tasted his blood, copper sweet, the last thing I could focus on before I was lost in my climax and the blinding spots that danced in front of my eyes.

All I was feeling was an intense and savage joy: Mates. At last. Finally, we were mated.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

*Connor*

The bite was confusing, a white-hot moment of so much sensation that I couldn't tell good from bad. I just knew there was a lot of it. It faded and left flickers of feeling, like afterimages from looking at the sun. There was a sharp prickling pain in my shoulder, but it was surrounded and wrapped in warm *rightness*. Something was right.

Yes, that was what I was feeling: Something was very, very right. I was still shimmering from orgasm, and I felt pleasantly tired, like I'd just been for a run. A long run, maybe like the path up to Eagle Peak that I used to run all the time with Dave.

No. Wait. Where was Eagle Peak? I didn't know it. So why did I remember the view of the ash and aspens and the feel of pebbles and snow under my paws?

Paws. What?

I blinked and shook my head. Everything felt too loud and too bright. Hadn't it been night a moment ago? It was almost like day, but the colors were wrong. I could make out the needles on a pine tree across the lake. I could see a caterpillar wriggling along a branch. I could hear its feet moving.

"Ugh," I grunted. Will moved his weight off me then slid out. I didn't want him to pull out yet, I wanted another go. I never wanted to leave Connor's tight warmth.

No. Wait. I was Connor.

Then why could I remember biting Connor? I could still taste his blood in my mouth. But at the same time, I could feel Will's bite on my neck.

"Will," I said. I moved my tongue around in my mouth and there definitely wasn't any blood. I was looking up at Will, and I could see him as clear as day. There was blood around his mouth. "Will, I think I'm a werewolf."

He nodded.

"I think I'm reading your mind."

He nodded again. He opened his mouth, but then he closed it again and shook his head slowly. Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled over his cheeks silently.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. It was weird—I could almost see what he was thinking, all his tiny movements amplified and this complex network of pheromones around him like a colored cloud. I could tell that he was happy, but there were ripples of intense sadness too.

He said, “Your dad. Oh, Connor. He was such a bastard to you. I never knew. How you learned to swim?”

I blinked. I’d never told him about that. But then again, he’d never told me about anywhere called Eagle Peak.

I thought back and all my memories felt intact. I could trace my life up to this point, right up to finding myself naked on a blanket in the snow of Jagged Rock Mountains. But at the same time I could remember a completely different life. The pack and the quiet house made of wood and glass. I could remember shaping furniture with my hands. I remembered having a brother who was older but gentler, my best friend before I’d met a gawky kid with too-short hair and a too-shy smile.

I remembered walking in on Dave with a leg black with blood clots and a knife in his hand as he tried to make ink stick. I remembered stepping on stage for the first time and feeling like I was lifting off the ground with all the strength of loyalty, and looking over my shoulder to see Connor grinning at me like he knew how I felt. I remembered my bones breaking as Joseph tried to defeat me.

I remembered leaving home and how every mile I drove was like another nail in my heart. And I remembered knowing it was worth the pain, because Connor was beside me. The radio was playing our song, and if I could make Connor laugh enough he’d sing along with me.

“I think,” I said slowly, making sure the words were coming out of my mouth and not Will’s. “I think we just did a full-on Vulcan mind-meld. I’ve got all your memories.”

“Lucky,” Will said. “I’ve got yours. Being a human kind of sucks. My childhood was way better than yours.”

I laughed. I was feeling the weight of responsibility from a pack who only expected greatness from me, and I was feeling the pressure of love and a destiny that could damage that love, a decision with only wrong answers. Being a werewolf wasn’t all runs in the snow. But I also remembered every wolf I’d run beside and the feeling of all of their loyalty hitting me at once like a gift of godlike power.

I had no idea what was going on, but at least I had Will there to go through it with me.

He laid down beside me and draped a blanket over us. I burrowed into the safety of his firm chest and breathed in his scent. I could pick up so much more of it than before—his skin and his soap and shampoo, washing powder and the food he'd eaten and my own scent all over him. If anything he smelled better now, more deep and complex. I was feeling safe in his arms, but I also knew exactly what it felt like to need to protect my mate.

"This is so weird," I said. "But I think I like it."

"You wait until you shift the first time. Bet you ten bucks you get stuck halfway. It won't hurt if you do," he added quickly.

I could feel the tiny changes in his mood, see them laid out around him as clear as a show on TV. No wonder Will always seemed so good with people, he held everyone's cheat sheet.

Right then, Will had some anxiety, and he was looking at me with a question on his mind. I asked him, "What?"

"What do you want to do in the future?"

"Be with you." Like I was going to turn my back the moment he turned me?

"I mean, what are your dreams. Tell me about your ambitions."

I frowned. "First, I'm finishing college, then I want to be an architect. Maybe here in Layton. Definitely here," I added with a rush of love for the town and for Jagged Rock. "I'd like to take my music further, too, so I'll want the band to stay around me."

"What if I asked you to quit school and come lead the pack with me? Hypothetically."

I frowned. "Hypothetically, I'd tell you that you're being a bit unreasonable to ask me that. You know how much my education means to me."

He squeezed me tight. "You're still you. It's still you in there. I didn't wipe your brains and turn you into a zombie clone of myself." He kissed me tenderly, hands roaming over my back. He finished the kiss by planting a small one on my nose, then he whispered, "I'm going to kill Bren for scaring me so much. If I'd known it would be like this, maybe I'd have bitten you years earlier."

I remembered the conversation Will had had with Bren as easily as if it were my own memory. “It sounds to me like Bren gave you the best advice he could. He told you to think before you bit me, and that was great advice. He told you the risks and I’d say I’m feeling all of them. You’re a part of me now, definitely. If I wasn’t in love with you then this would be disastrous. I really want to be with you and I really want to stay close to the mountains, so he got that right. Only those were things that I mostly felt before. About you, anyway.”

We lay in the still of the forest clearing, only it didn’t feel so still now that I could hear and see and smell everything around me. I explored my new senses, zooming in on bugs or birds or the path of the wind through the trees. I felt the tug of the moon. When I got used to it, I turned my senses on Will and tentatively explored his body. “I know what it’s like,” I whispered. “To be you. All bold and brazen and not afraid of anything.”

“I know what it’s like to be you,” he agreed. “And looking at me. Damn, I really am fine.”

I laughed and wedged my hands under his armpits to tickle him.

Everything was right, and everything was better than I could have ever imagined it.

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The band played a gig the night before break, then we all drove up to Jagged Rock. We were excited for the chance to get away from the city and also to spend more time with Will since we didn’t get to see him as much now he was taking fewer classes and spending more time in the mountains.

The distance was actually easier on me than the others. I had our weird nearly-telepathic mind-meld—or the mating bond, whatever you wanted to call it. The further away Will got from me the more I could read his thoughts. When he was close it was like I was myself, just with my new werewolf powers and Will memories. But when he was more than a few miles away we found we could tune into each other’s thoughts. In the weeks since he bit me, that was still the most amazing part of being a werewolf. If I ever missed him, I could be instantly connected with him. I had to be careful if I did that in public, though, because Will had quickly figured out how to hijack the connection and send me tantalizingly dirty fantasies.

I hadn’t had the chance to spend much time in wolf form. I kind of wanted to save that until the rest of the band were werewolves too and could run with us.



But I had had the chance for more sex with Will, and that was always amazing. It just got better and better as we learned each other's bodies and how the mating bond could amplify our feelings.

But this break was about the band—or the pack, as Matt was insisting on calling us. During the whole drive up, Will kept telling us that he had something amazing for us to see. He took the wheel just South of Layton and drove us up into the mountains and straight to... A patch of forest, with a lake.

"This is it," he called happily as he jumped out of the van. I climbed out of the passenger seat and looked around, but I couldn't see anything special. Will was beside himself with joy. "I've been working on the road up here for days, getting it ready for cars."

"It needs more work," Chop said. She'd brought her acoustic guitar at Will's insistence and had played us Dragonforce covers for a solid hour. She was still carrying her guitar. "That road was basically tissue paper laid on top of a pot hole."

"But this is perfect, right?" Will insisted.

"Perfect for what?" Liv asked.

"For our houses." Will said it like it was completely obvious.

And then, looking around at the landscape, it was. The trees hid the lay of the land, but when I imagined the land bare I could see the swell of hill where our house would go. The house I'd designed and Will had promised me for my birthday. There was the lake, and there was the elevation to catch the sun during the day. I could visualize exactly what our front porch would be like, and the doors that would let out onto a mountain trail.

"It's perfect," I breathed. I smiled at Will, and he grinned so wide my heart swelled. "You're a genius."

"I know, right? I talked to the wolves until one pack told me about the perfect place."

Chop said, "Guys, are we going to live in tree huts or what?"

I shook my head. "We'll fell the trees and use them to construct the houses. We'll get local glass, too, and local nails. Everything from the area. Your house will be on the other side of the lake, beside Matt's. Chop's will go there." I pointed out the spaces, already picturing the houses and how they'd blend into the trees. "It's going to be so beautiful."

“Beautiful,” Matt echoed. He’d been quieter the past few weeks and spending more time on his phone. I’d finally asked him what was up, and he’d told me he was in contact with Bren. He said that Bren had explained about being an omega and everything made more sense now—and that he didn’t have to try so hard because he knew we would always love him. He said it with complete earnestness, and I’d given into my touchy-feely werewolf instincts and hugged him tight.

“All I care about is the acoustics,” Liv said. “What’s it sound like up here?”

“Sounds like a lot of hard work,” Chop said. But she was grinning.

I said, “We’ll build a recording studio, if we can get enough solar panels or a generator. But it will be completely silent.”

We talked about it longer, but we all knew we were just haggling over details. This felt right—the new pack building a home together, making dreams for the future. We were all misfits pulled together by fate or coincidence, and this would be our home.

That night we played an acoustic jam session with the moon and stars and trees as our audience. In time, Will would bite the others and make us into a real pack. But for now it was enough to just be the band.

And for me, it was enough to lean on Will’s chest and have his arms around me as he sang. He was my best friend and he was my true mate. It was everything I’d ever wanted.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Willow Scarlett writes from where you'd rather be: Beautiful New Zealand, surrounded by water and trees and the occasional stingray. She writes queer romance with an emphasis on unique characters and a strong love story.*

*Willow doesn't have pets or children, but she does have enough kooky friends to stock a sitcom. She also has a mysterious clicking sound in the wall which gets louder every night.*

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