

"A sarcastic, spicy paranormal romance where the forest isn't the only thing feeling the heat."

Bitten and Betrayed

BOOK TWO OF THE BANE HALLOW SERIES
T.L. SAWYER

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A Bane Hallow Novella

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The Burning of Ember Grove

They called it Ember Grove then. A small, wooded logging town wrapped in fog and pine needles, where people minded their business and locked their doors tight after sunset. But some doors didn't creak closed. Some lived deeper in the woods, where the redwood trees grew thick and tall, and the air ran cold.

Zoltan and Reign were two of them. Quiet people. Strange, some said. The kind who didn't attend town meetings or pray at church on Sundays. They lived off the land, kept their children close, and only came to town when needed to. Some swore Zoltan had the eyes of a wolf. Others said Reign's shadow didn't match her body.

The whispers grew after livestock went missing. After the deer stopped coming near. And then, after a hiker disappeared.

Search parties found nothing but a shredded backpack and a trail of blood that stopped at the river's edge near the family's property. That's when the stories turned darker. Someone claimed they'd seen Zoltan running through the trees without clothes. Another said the children howled when the moon rose.

What began as unease twisted itself into certainty. Into judgment. Into kindling.

They blamed the family. They called them monsters.

And then, they acted like it.

One night, a group of men gathered with torches and oil. They said it was a warning. Just a burn to scare them off. But the fire spread faster than they planned. It devoured the dry brush, the pine, and the cabin.

And the family inside.

By morning, there was nothing left but ash and silence.

No bodies were ever found, only scorched Earth and a pair of tiny shoes near the riverbank.

The town changed its name after that. Said it was for a fresh start. Said it honored the roots.

But the truth lingered.

They called it Bane Hallow, after the wolfsbane that once grew wild along the edge of the trees. A ward. A warning. A grave.

And some say, on cold nights, you can still hear the children crying in the wind.

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chaos you won't find anywhere else.

Go on. You know you want to run with the wolves.

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Fire and Fury

The first curl of smoke hit my nose before I even opened my eyes.

I sat up fast, my heart still hammering from the ritual the night before. The sky was pale with early morning haze, but just beyond the ridge, the orange flicker was no longer subtle.

“Shit,” I muttered, scrambling for the hoodie I’d tossed aside sometime around orgasm number three.

Brax was already shifting, fury spilling off him like heat. Zane and Jace were mid-run, their forms blurring, fur catching the morning light as they bolted into the forest.

I ran inside, grabbed my phone with shaking hands, and made the call to 9-1-1. My fingers slipped over the phone screen, not just from the heat but from the gnawing fear clawing up my spine. The air burned in my throat with every breath, thick and sour with smoke.

The crackle of flames outside grew louder with every second. Like the entire mountain was screaming.

I clenched the phone tighter, forcing myself to breathe. In. Out. Don't panic. Don't lose it now.

"There's a fire. A big one on Crescent Ridge, the North border. I don't know how it started, but it's climbing fast."

By the time I stepped back outside, Jace had returned, now in human form. He was panting, with a thin line of ash across his cheek. His expression was carved with tension.

I stared at him. "How did this happen?"

"That's what the pack's checking. Scent trails. Territory breach. You know how it works."

The heat was licking the edge of the tree line, heavy and pulsing. The air shimmered, leaving beads of sweat on my back. "I need to find Brax."

Jace's voice was soft, but firm. "Roxy... we can't. Brax was adamant that I'm to stay here with you. We're not allowed to leave until we hear from our Alpha."

My mind was spinning, overwhelmed by the fire and smoke. The pack had scattered, and Brax still hadn't come back. Then I heard heavy footsteps outside the cabin.

Ace.

I'd never spoken more than a couple of words to him until today. His black fur shimmered, like Brax's, but dusted with grey, from age, experience, and power. He walked a little stiffer and slower, but there was purpose in every step.

I trampled down the porch steps barefoot, my chest tight. "What happened to Brynn, Ace?"

He didn't answer.

Instead, he shifted, right there in front of me. A sickening crack echoed as his bones shifted, accompanied by the visual stretch of his skin. Then he stood there, tall, scarred, completely, and unapologetically naked. *Okay, I thought. Marked that down as a question for Aurora: Will seeing naked men around me ever stop being weird?*

I met Ace's gaze head-on. "What happened to Brynn?"

His voice was calm, but heavy. "I don't want to disrespect you, Roxy. But I'm loyal to my Alpha first. You second. I need to discuss what happened with Brax first."

An unexpected growl escaped me, followed by a shaky laugh. "Well, shit."

Ace just gave me a half smile, like he'd seen this before. "You'll get used to it."

Brax's commanding voice came through the link with orders.

"There's a box in my office closet with a red lid. Grab it. The computer. Ace, Jace, take all the guns and ammo. Everything you can get without endangering yourselves. Take them to Roxy's. This is moving fast, and I'm not sure the cabin will survive."

We didn't ask questions; we just hurried and packed the cars with whatever we could grab. Important files. Computers and electronics. When we finally pulled down the mountain, smoke in the rearview mirror and ash streaking the sky, I was grateful to be alone. Black tears rolled off my cheeks. *"They can't lose their home."* My voice cracked. *"God. I feel like I came in and ruined everything."*

The words spilled out before I could stop them, thick with guilt and smoke as I gripped the steering wheel tighter. My knuckles were white, heart pounding under the weight of it all; I hadn't grown up learning how to handle disasters or lead a pack. I barely knew how to keep myself afloat most days. But here I was, dragging them through hell, watching their home burn in the rearview mirror, and every instinct inside me screamed that this was my fault. If I hadn't shown up, if I'd stayed in my quiet little world, maybe none of this would've happened. Maybe Brax wouldn't be out there risking his life. Perhaps none of them would.

Jace's voice floated through the link.

"Roxy. This isn't your fault."

Ace added, his voice rough and low, *"If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I should've seen it coming."*

I pressed my fingers to my temples. I had to get used to this. To the bond and the fact that they could hear my thoughts and feel my fear.

Behind us, the fire kept burning. It looked like every firetruck in the county was en route, passing us on the highway. I pulled into the house with the boys following behind me. "Leave everything in the cars except the food."

I stomped up the steps with them on my heels, arms full. We set everything that needed to be frozen or refrigerated on the kitchen counters. I pointed toward the basement door. "Jace, there's another freezer downstairs."

“I’m sorry, guys, I only have one shower,” I added, pulling my hair up and fanning my neck. “Ace, you can go first. You look like you caught the worst of it.”

He shook his head. “Roxy, no. I insist you go first.”

“I’m okay,” I muttered. “You go. I need to calm down. I’m freaking out.”

Jace stepped back into the room, setting a box on the counter. “When I felt like that in the beginning, it helped to sit in the dark.” He nodded gently toward the hallway. “The basement might be a good place for you to take a moment for yourself.”

He was right. I needed it. I sat in the old chair in the far corner by my washer and dryer, letting the darkness and cool air swirl around me. I sat there softly crying and coughing from the smoke in my lungs.

“Brax, can you hear me?”

Nothing.

“Zane?”

If the boys upstairs could hear me, they didn’t answer, but maybe they were panicking too. I stayed in the dark, back pressed to the chair, trying to breathe around the weight in my chest.

The bond stayed quiet. And for the first time since I met Brax, I felt truly alone. And somewhere in the fire, in the wreckage, in the silence...

He still wasn’t answering.

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Smoke and Blood

♦ Brax ♦

The smoke hit hard, sharper than it should've been this early, this far up north. Not the steady burn of a controlled fire. Not someone's chimney. This was burning wild and fast. I dropped low, paws pounding through pine needles slick with frost. The Earth vibrated beneath me. Zane's amber blur darted ahead and veered west, toward the ridge. "*North border*," I sent through the link.

"*I'm already on it*," Zane answered, his mind-voice clipped. Focused. Behind us, I felt the pull of the pack. Jace's eagerness. Ace's tension. And under it all, Roxy. Fear spiking through the bond, raw and rising. Her panic was a living thing now, sharp enough to cut through the smoke. One hell of a way to start our life together.

"*Jace. Ace.*"

Jace's voice jumped into the link. *"We're on standby. What's the call?"*

Get Roxy out of the house. Grab the computers, the red-lid box from my office closet, and every damn drive you can find. Prioritize electronics, weapons, and food. If the cabin goes, I want nothing left behind but ash.

Ace grunted in acknowledgment. *"Copy. We'll run it to her place."*

"Protect her," I added, harsher than I meant. *"No one leaves her side." I didn't know how this started, and if it was retaliation for us mating, I couldn't take any chances.*

The ridge split open before me, charred branches snapping under my paws. Zane shifted mid-stride, landing hard as his body reformed, bare feet skidding across scorched Earth. I followed a heartbeat later, body reforming in a rush of pain and instinct. The two of us crouched low on the overlook, muscles tight, eyes scanning the tree line.

Flames licked along the northern ridge, fast and unnatural. Fire doesn't climb that high this time of year unless something, or someone, feeds it. Zane wiped soot from his cheek. *"The wind's wrong. It's jumping the firebreaks."*

"It's not natural." I closed my eyes, sniffed. Beneath the sharp bite of burning pine was something else, something acidic. *"Boone?"* I reached through the link. Nothing. *"Brynn?"* Silence. They weren't answering, which could be a huge problem.

Zane's expression hardened. *"You think it's her?"*

“I think it’s a message.” The fire roared below us, dragging heat up the slope. My skin prickled. Not just from the burn, but from the sense that we were being watched.

“Can you track the ignition point?” I asked.

Zane nodded. “Southwest quadrant. I caught a trail. But it’s thin.”

We shifted again, painfully fast. I felt the strain in my limbs, too many shifts in too short a time. But we didn’t stop. We ran down the slope. Through smoke so thick it blurred the trees into silhouettes. My paws burned on the hot ground. Branches clawed at my face as deer, squirrels, and birds scattered ahead of us, fleeing blind from the rising heat.

Still, I kept running. Every stride dragged me deeper into the burn, but it wasn’t just instinct pushing me forward; it was her. Her panic thrummed through the bond like a warning bell, sharp and wild. It pulled at the animal part of me that wanted nothing more than to turn back, find her, shield her with my body and teeth. But I couldn’t. I had to shut it down, shove that instinct down so deep it burned worse than the smoke in my chest. She needed me to end this. Not to run back with my tail tucked.

We reached a clearing blackened at the center, as if something exploded outward. Zane slowed beside me, nose low. *Scent trail*, he confirmed. *But it’s old. Twisted.* I sniffed too. Wolf. Familiar. And something else, burned flesh? Magic? I couldn’t place it. A shiver crawled down my spine. “*Pull out*, I told him. *Get back to the ridge. Keep the fire off Roxy’s side.*”

“And you?”

I stared at the scorched Earth. The scent curled around me, old and mean. “*I’m going to follow this. Find out who lit the match.*” Because if it was Brynn, if Boone helped her, or if someone new just declared war? They weren’t ready for what I’d do to protect my mate.

He turned to go, but the fire shifted, cutting off the trail.

“Looks like you’re stuck with me,” he growled.

We ran until the heat started burning in our lungs, until the smoke was so thick it scratched down our throats like broken glass. We didn’t stop. Couldn’t. Somewhere below, the scream of sirens echoed through the valley. Red and blue flashes began to paint the tree trunks. Firetrucks. Human crews. We had to stay out of sight.

“*Stay shifted,*” I told Zane. “*We can’t risk being seen.*”

His response was a cough over the link, ragged and strained. “*Copy.*”

We cut west, toward a higher ridge where the fire hadn’t yet climbed. But the terrain was sharper here, broken shale underfoot, trees stripped bare by the dry heat. The scent trail we’d picked up wavered and vanished under the churn of smoke. Zane darted ahead, heading towards Roxy’s.

Then I heard his paws skidding, a snap of limbs, and silence.

“Zane?”

Nothing.

I scrambled to the top of the ridge, claws scraping stone, lungs screaming. Below, through the smoke, I saw him trapped behind a collapsed tree, flames licking closer from two sides.

“Zane. Look north. Do you see the outcrop?”

A pause. *“I see it.”*

“There’s a drop-off behind it. Go under the trunk, not over. I’ll circle down to meet you.”

“Got it.”

He moved. I watched his shape blur through the haze, stumbling once before dragging himself through the debris. I didn’t wait to see him clear it. I turned and ran, heart hammering, firelight chasing at my heels.

Every muscle burned. Every breath hurt. But I didn’t stop. Because that fire wasn’t just meant to destroy our land. It was meant to scatter us. To divide us. And I had no intention of letting that happen.

Then it hit me. If this was Brynn, if Boone had turned with her, they’d know exactly what we’d do. That we’d run toward the fire, leaving Roxy exposed and alone with nothing but ash and smoke between us.

“Aurora,” I sent sharply through the bond. *“Get to Roxy’s house. Now. Check in with Ace and Jace. Make sure the perimeter’s tight.”*

A beat of silence, then her voice cut through. *“Shit. I’m forty minutes out.”*

Panic flared hard in my chest, but I gritted my teeth. *“Just drive. Don’t stop. Tell them it could be Brynn. Or Boone. Tell them this fire might be a distraction that’s meant to pull us out and leave her exposed.”*

The smoke thickened again, biting at my eyes as I forced my focus back into the bond. Back to the only thing that mattered.

The pack will protect her. By any means necessary.

Zane staggered up beside me, his wolf form trailing smoke. I could smell the singe on his coat. Could feel the exhaustion rippling off him in waves.

“You good?” I asked.

His answer was quiet. *“Burns. Nothing deep.”*

We turned east, toward home. Every step felt heavier than the last. Muscles spasmed. Lungs fought. But neither of us stopped. The ground blurred beneath our paws as we ran the long way back, avoiding human eyes, weaving through smoldering brush and falling ash.

We veered south to avoid the road, wind slicing across the scorched hills. For a breath, just one, I felt her again through the bond, sharp, panicked, spiraling. Close. Closer than I expected. We were near the house.

The fire had taken too much ground, and we were running on fumes.

Zane stumbled beside me, and I caught his shoulder with my teeth to keep him upright. He snarled but didn’t pull away.

We reached the edge of the tree line behind the house and didn't stop. Just pushed through it. Didn't shift. We couldn't. If we slowed down now, we might not get back up again.

By the time we crested the slope overlooking the cabin, every step felt like dragging stone. My legs shook. Zane's paws left blood behind. We climbed the last hill with our bodies on fire.

Zane growled, a low sound, half warning, half pain. I answered with one of my own. Not anger. Not command. Just that raw, unfiltered noise that meant: *keep going*.

One blistered step at a time.

Until we saw what was left of the only place that ever felt like ours.

The outbuildings were gone. The deck. The trees along the back fence, scorched to bone. Smoke still curled from the dirt, like the land itself was grieving.

Zane stopped beside me. He didn't move or speak.

And I lifted my head to the ash-stained sky and howled. Low. Long. A sound carved from exhaustion and instinct, not asking permission to mourn.

Zane joined me, his voice rougher and staggered. Two wolves on a burned-out ridge. Grieving something older than the house. Something rooted.

Then, without a word, we turned back toward Roxy's.

Burnt and Bothered

The feeling started deep in my chest. It was a flicker at first, barely there, then a steady thrum that tightened with every heartbeat. I stood before I even realized it, the blanket slipping from my shoulders and pooling on the floor as I moved.

The air in the room thickened and shifted around me. Every nerve in me was lit up, waiting, straining toward something I couldn't quite name, but I knew. Oh, I knew. The wave of relief hit before I even heard the steps outside, crashing through me so fast it left me dizzy. He was close. Closer than I expected.

Then came the low thump of paws against the porch, each step deliberate. The slow, sharp scrape of claws followed. I stepped closer to the door, with my heart in my throat.

I flung the door open and froze. Brax and Zane stood there in wolf form, their fur caked in ash, singed at the tips, smoke

curling off them like ghosts. They looked like they'd run through hell and barely escaped.

Zane looked up at me first, ears low, eyes tired. Brax didn't lift his gaze at all. They shifted right there, and two men stood barefoot on my porch. They were burned, bruised, and filthy.

Brax stepped forward first. His steps were heavy, dragging across the porch like his body barely remembered how to move. He didn't speak. He just stared at me with a wrecked, unreadable look.

He filled the frame of the doorway, wrapped in silence, with ash clinging to the line of his jaw. His muscles tensed beneath soot and blood. He braced himself on the wall like he needed it to remain standing.

I couldn't stop staring at him. He was covered in soot, with dried blood down his arms. The smell of smoke and sweat hit me, and buried under it was exhaustion. He wasn't just burned out. He was wrecked, like he hadn't stopped running from the moment he shifted.

He took just one step forward and fell into me. It wasn't dramatic; his body just gave in, shaking like he'd been holding it together with willpower alone. He wrapped his arms around my waist and leaned into my chest. I didn't speak, just held him and let him break for once. Let him be mine.

Behind him, Zane looked away. It wasn't out of shame, but out of respect. This wasn't surrender, it was trust, and I could

feel the storm in the bond, thrumming beneath his skin like it was trying to claw free.

“Are you okay?” I rasped, my voice smaller than I wanted.

“I didn’t think we’d make it.”

I tightened my grip on him, holding him like maybe I could stitch him back together with touch alone. “Let’s get you guys into the shower,” I said. “Cool you off.”

River didn’t even look up as he cut in, with a sharp, steady voice. “Take Brax. I’m concerned about Zane’s breathing.”

Brax pushed himself to his feet, still shaking, but his tone was firm. “Move him to the sofa first.”

I helped ease Zane onto the cushions, and River was already there, kneeling beside him, calm but fast. I turned back to the kitchen, grabbed the biggest bucket I could find, filled it with cool water from the sink, and set it beside River along with a handful of rags.

He was already working, strapping oxygen to Zane’s face, checking his pulse, eyes sharp as ever, even in the chaos. I waited until Zane’s breathing steadied just enough to ease the tightness in my chest. Without a word, I slipped down the hall toward the bathroom. Brax was already under the spray, standing there beneath the cold water, head bowed, his shoulders heaving with every breath.

◆ Brax ◆

The water was cool. I needed it that way.

Smoke still clung to my skin. Blood washed in slow, diluted spirals down my chest, seeping from the cuts I hadn't stopped to treat. My shoulder screamed every time I moved it, my tendons tight and raw. I braced one arm against the tile, trying to breathe around the burn.

She stepped in behind me. Her hand gently touched the space between my shoulders. I didn't flinch because I was too fucking tired.

"You're hurt," she whispered.

"Nothing deep," I lied.

Her fingers slid down my back, and I felt her pause when she reached the raw patch where the tree hit me.

"Jesus, Brax," she breathed. "You're bleeding."

"Only where it shows," I muttered. My voice came out rougher than I intended.

Then her gaze shifted. I didn't need to turn around to know what she was looking at. My ink. My oath, carving me from the inside out.

"They're changing again," she said, her eyes wide.

I turned, slow and stiff. The tattoos were alive, crawling across my chest like they were trying to rewrite me from within. "They shift with the land. With the pack. When our story's rewritten. Every choice I make as Alpha is carved into me."

Her gaze dropped, following the jagged shapes forming over the bruises. “Are Lunas marked?” She asked. “Is that why my skin’s been itching?”

I nodded once. “Yes, they’re becoming part of you now. You’re ours, Luna.”

She didn’t move, just stared at me like she could see the pieces coming undone. She stepped in close and pressed her body to mine. I hissed through my teeth. Her skin touched an open cut on my ribs, and for a second, the pain made my vision blur.

“You’re not okay,” she said, trying to pull back.

I didn’t let her. “I don’t need to be okay,” I growled, dragging her closer with my good arm. “I just need you.”

Her breath caught. She felt it too, that desperate, dangerous edge, and my need to claim her. To *anchor*.

Pain flared as I dragged her closer, but I didn’t care. I needed her more. I kissed her hard and deep, like I could shift the ache from my body into hers and find peace in the wreckage. She moaned into my mouth, teeth chattering. I reached back and cranked the water hotter, the pipes groaning in protest.

Her nails bit into my shoulders right over the bruises, and I fucking *shuddered*.

Pain licked up my spine. I wanted it.

I *needed* it.

I needed something real to burn through everything else.

I lifted her, and every muscle in my back screamed. She gasped against my mouth as I lined us up. No teasing. No patience. Just a push, deep and sharp like I was driving my body into hers before it gave out on me completely.

“Say it,” I groaned into her neck. “Say who you belong to.”

Her pussy clenched around my cock, and I lost any thread of control I’d pretended to have. I was running on instinct, past the point of exhaustion, past the pain, past everything but her.

“They’ll see it,” I growled. “In your skin. In the sound you make when I fuck you.”

As we moved together in that tiny stall, it felt like we were made of fire and glass, breaking, burning, and fusing together.

I barely noticed the blood anymore, or the water when it went ice cold.

Just her. Grounding me in ways I never thought possible.

When we finally stilled, breathless and shaking, I slumped against the wall, pulling her against me like a lifeline. My legs barely held me up, but I didn’t let her go; I couldn’t.

She ran her fingers over the new ink curling along my chest.

“Bigger water heater,” I snarled, voice wrecked from the smoke, and her sex.

She hummed, lips brushing my shoulder. “Bigger shower too. You almost passed out on me, boss.”

I smirked, baring my teeth, voice still rough. "Still had enough left to fuck you through the tile."

"Barely," she whispered, smiling against my skin. "And don't think I didn't notice the limp."

"Shut up, wildling. I'm trying to die in peace."

Later, when the house was finally quiet, I lay back in bed, every inch of me felt like it was on fire. Zane was breathing steadily, finally asleep, and that was enough to let some of the tension bleed out of my chest.

Roxy moved beside me, carefully trying not to jostle me. I could feel the way she hesitated, holding herself back, afraid to touch anything that might hurt.

I didn't have the patience for it.

With a rough growl, I hooked my arm around her waist and dragged her in close, ignoring the bite of pain that shot through my ribs.

She let out a soft laugh, warm against my throat.

"I didn't want to hurt you," she whispered.

"Too late," I muttered, pulling her tighter, burying my face in her hair. "You're stuck now."

I shifted, sliding my palm down her spine. "Close your eyes."

She stilled. "Why?"

"Because this isn't about what you see. It's about what you feel."

Slowly, she obeyed, lashes brushing her cheeks. I traced the fresh ink curling along her back, dragging my fingers over

the jagged lines that mirrored mine. She shivered under the touch.

“My mark?” she whispered.

“Your mark,” I said softly, reverent. “Ours.”

Everything still ached, the weight of the fire, the wreckage, the bruises we’d all carry tomorrow.

But tonight?

Tonight, I could finally close my eyes, with us right where we belonged.

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Tools and Testosterone

The scent of sizzling bacon and coffee made the kitchen feel almost normal. It was almost as if the fire had never occurred. Like we weren't suddenly housing half a pack of wolves. It was nearly noon, but nobody was in a rush. We'd all slept in, too sore, too worn out to care that half the day was already gone. I had eggs on the stove, toast popping, and Jace was doing his best not to set anything on fire.

Zane walked in first, carrying two cots stacked on top of each other, moving slower than usual but still too damn stubborn to rest. Aurora followed, balancing three boxes of donuts and wearing her usual air of mild disgust.

"I see you've gone domestic," she said, eyeing the kitchen. "You made food?"

"Someone had to," I muttered, flipping a pancake.

Zane raised a brow as he passed through, nodding toward the basement door. He looked pale, with dark circles still

under his eyes, but of course, he acted like nothing was wrong. "I'll start setting up down there."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You should be resting."

His brows drew together. "I'll rest when we're not tripping over sleeping wolves."

I sighed but let him pass. "Blankets are in the hall closet. Try not to trip over my emotional baggage on the way."

The bathroom door opened, steam trailing behind Brax as he stepped into the kitchen. Those damn grey sweatpants hanging low on his hips, no shirt, hair still damp.

Everyone stopped talking.

His eyes widened. "You made breakfast?"

I slid a plate his way. "I did."

He crossed the room and kissed the top of my head, still looking a little surprised. "You're really doing this," he said, voice soft and raspy from smoke and sleep.

"I've got coffee, pancakes, and a full house of wolves. I better be."

He didn't answer. Just stepped behind me, slipping an arm around my waist, the heat of his body cutting straight through the thin fabric of my T-shirt. He pressed his lips to the top of my head.

"Damn," he murmured, voice brushing against my skin. "You're taking this Luna thing seriously."

I handed him the coffee instead of answering, trying not to look directly at his stupidly perfect mouth. "They're not just your pack," I said finally. "They're mine too."

His hand tightened on my waist, and for a moment, the entire room softened around me, and all I felt was him.

Brax's voice cut through the noise. "Alright," he said, loud enough to shut down the room. "Listen up." The room fell quiet. Not in fear but in respect. That alpha-brand gravity that made the air heavier when he spoke. He stood by the table now, hands braced on the edge of a chair, like he needed something to anchor him. His eyes swept the room, landing briefly on every face.

"The fire department says it could be up to a week before they open the road back up to Crescent Ridge," he said. "The smoke's too thick. Trees are unstable. We're not cleared to go back until they finish their damage assessment."

A few quiet curses echoed through the room, but Brax pressed on. "Ace, Stark, I'm going to need your help at the loft above Roxy's shop today. We're going to demo and add a kitchenette so we can house a few of you there."

Zane reappeared at the top of the stairs, moving fast.

He made eye contact with me. Just one look.

Oh shit.

Just pure, silent *Why are we letting this happen* panic.

"Finish eating," Brax said, grabbing his phone off the table. "We leave in twenty."

Zane glanced at me, then at Brax. "I can take the guys to the loft," he offered, casual on the surface, but too fast. "Give you time to deal with..."

Brax didn't let him finish. "You trying to keep me away from the shop?"

Zane's shoulders stiffened. "No. No, I just meant..."

Brax chuckled low and dangerously amused. "I'm going to the shop."

Just the kind of quiet finality that made it very clear Brax knew *exactly* what Zane was worried about and didn't give a damn.

It wasn't exactly how I had pictured my Sunday: half the pack stomping through my shop, demo plans on the table, and Brax looking way too comfortable in my kitchen. But this was the new normal. Wolves in the loft. Wolves at the table. Wolves underfoot. I grabbed my coffee, took one long, steadying sip, and accepted my fate. Let's just hope *he* can play nice with the tattoo artist.

By the time we piled into the truck, my nerves were buzzing harder than my coffee. The ride wasn't long, but long enough for me to picture every worst-case scenario, wolves, tattoos, and testosterone colliding in my shop. When Brax opened the door, Carl was already there, leaning on the counter like he'd been waiting for this exact train wreck to walk in.

"Well," Carl drawled, not even pretending he hadn't seen who was walking in. "Are you here to throw me through the wall again, or are you getting matching tattoos?" His eyes flicked to Brax first, then to me, and then landed on the two shadows stepping in behind us.

His smirk twitched. "Oh shit. There's more of you." Ace didn't say a word; he just closed the door with one heavy hand, surveying the room like he was calculating square footage for violence. Stark didn't blink. Brax didn't respond either; he simply moved deeper into the shop, calm and silent, like the walls recognized him.

Carl raised his hands slightly, coffee and all. "I'll behave. Scout's honor."

"I doubt you were ever a scout," I muttered, already heading toward the back.

I led the guys toward the loft entrance, showing them the stairs and the rough space they'd be working with. It wasn't pretty, but it was solid, and with enough lumber, caffeine, and stubbornness, it could be home for a few of them.

They started hauling supplies through the back door while I turned toward the front of the shop. "I should go let Carl know what's going on," I said, brushing my hands off on my jeans. "Would you like to come with me, boss?"

Brax let out a soft laugh. "I trust you," he said. "You probably don't want me in the room with that cocky little fucker." He leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching me with that unreadable calm.

I raised an eyebrow. "Who's the cocky fucker now?"

His lips twitched. "I'll show you cocky."

"I bet you will."

Carl was sorting through a shipment of ink bottles, sleeves rolled up, forearms dusted in tattoo pigment.

“I heard about the fire,” he said without glancing at me. “Did they lose their property?”

I stepped closer. “We don’t know yet. The fire department said it could be up to a week before we’re allowed back up there.”

He finally looked up at me with his brow creased. “Shit. That sucks. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” I whispered. “I’m trying to get everyone settled. I was hoping to have Zane and Aurora stay in the loft above the shop. Just temporarily.”

That got a reaction. He set down the bottle and cocked his head. “Zane, that pretty boy with the permanent scowl? And the one with the pink Range Rover?”

I grinned. “That’s them.”

He plastered on a smile and asked, “Are they a couple, or...?”

I laughed. “No.”

He leaned in, lowering his voice, “So tell me...”

“Tell you what?”

His grin widened, all teeth and trouble. “What’s it like...”

“Carl.” I grabbed the closest towel and chucked it at his chest. “You’re an absolute menace.”

He caught it with one hand and winked. “Yeah, but I make it look good.”

Blood Ties

It was nearly noon, but nobody was in a rush. We'd been dragging like this for days, fog and wet chill creeping through the redwoods, clinging to everything. I was piling sandwiches into a basket when the back door creaked open.

Zane wandered in from the porch, coffee mug in hand, hair a total disaster, like it had wrestled with a pillow and lost.

"Morning, Grump," I said, sliding him a smirk. "I see you found the coffeemaker."

He gave a sleepy laugh and dropped onto the barstool. "Yeah. I couldn't sleep."

He set his mug down with one hand and dropped a small stack of mail on the counter. A yellow manila envelope stuck out from the pile.

"What is this?" I said, flipping it over. "Something from Mom, probably a finger painting from first grade or one of those macaroni art pieces she couldn't let go of."

Zane didn't reply. Just sipped his coffee while I tore open the flap.

It was paperwork.

Faded copies with my name at the top.

"Oh my god..." I sat down slowly next to him, envelope still in hand. My chest tightened up, like I'd swallowed something too sharp.

Zane set his mug aside. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I just... wasn't expecting this." I scanned the top form again. "She sent my adoption records. It says they adopted me from a place called Ember Grove. Where the hell is Ember Grove?"

The name hit something inside me. It didn't spark recognition, more like a weird, hollow ache. Ember Grove. It sounded made up. But it still crawled across my skin, unsettling me in a way I couldn't name.

I kept staring at the paper, but the words blurred. I couldn't make myself read the rest yet. Part of me wanted to laugh it off, joke about weird small towns or bad record-keeping. But another part, the part I'd been ignoring since I got dragged into this world, whispered that maybe I didn't want to know the truth after all.

Zane didn't answer right away. When I glanced over, his jaw was clenched tight, like whatever I just said pulled something in him.

"You said you were adopted," I murmured. "Were you ever interested in finding your real parents?"

He nodded slowly. "I found out they passed when I was two."

"Zane... I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"No," he cut in. "It's okay. I don't remember them. I was adopted by a local family here in Bane Hallow. They were good people, but when I turned sixteen, things got weird, and I didn't understand what was happening to me."

He hesitated, his forehead furrowed.

"I thought I was sick or losing it. Then one day, I just shifted, or tried to. I couldn't stop it or control myself. I panicked and ran. I ended up half-shifted and feral on the edge of town until Brax found me."

I stared at him. "So you weren't bitten."

He shook his head. "I was born a wolf. It's a long story."

I looked back at the envelope, fingers tracing the edge of the form.

"Do you want me to help you look into this?" he asked, nudging his chin toward the pile.

My heart said yes, but my gut wasn't ready. "Oh. No. Not right now," I blurted out quickly. "I mean, one day. I'll get around to it."

He studied me for a second like he could see past my words, and maybe he could. I cleared my throat and stood, lifting the basket. "Let's go get those boys fed before they shift from hunger and tear each other apart."

My phone rang just as we reached the door. I pulled it out of my pocket and hit the speaker. "Hello?"

“Hi, I’m trying to reach Braxton Abbott.”

“He’s unavailable at the moment. Can I take a message? This is his...” I paused, shooting a look at Zane.

His eyes sparkled with unspoken sass and amusement.

“Wife,” I finished.

Zane choked slightly on his coffee, covering his mouth, wildly entertained.

“This is Fire Chief Richards,” the voice said. “Just letting you folks know Crescent Ridge is reopened as of this morning. We got the final go-ahead about twenty minutes ago.”

“Already?” I said. “Wow. Okay. Thank you so much for letting us know.”

“Let Mr. Abbott know I’ll be in touch once the investigation is done. We’re still looking into the root cause. These things can take a while to sort out.”

“Of course. I appreciate the call, Chief.”

“Take care now.”

The line disconnected.

Zane roared with laughter.

I flushed, turning bright red. “Not a word of that to Brax!”

By the time we loaded into the truck, Zane was still smirking like an idiot and I was still giggling under my breath. But the mood didn’t hold. Once we picked up Brax from the shop, and the rest of the pack crammed in around us, the laughter died fast.

Smoke still clung to the ridge as we drove up, thick and low, turning the forest into a ghost town. Charred brush

hugged the shoulders, blackened and brittle, but the path itself was smooth, newly graded, and salted with gravel. The deeper we went, the more damage showed. The trees were stripped bare on one side of the road.

No one spoke. But I could feel them. Not just their body language, it was deeper than that; they were gutted. Their thoughts didn't reach my ears, but their emotions did. It felt like tension and dread, and quiet mourning. It buzzed low beneath my skin. As we rounded the last corner, I let out a shaky breath.

The cabin sat at the center of the clearing like a weary survivor. The front looked untouched, but when we pulled closer, the full picture came into view. The back deck was scorched, half of it collapsed into ashy splinters. The grass was gone, replaced by tire marks from fire trucks that had battled hard to save it.

Some of the outbuildings weren't as lucky. The storage shed had collapsed entirely. One of the bunk structures still smoldered, just a skeleton of beams and blistered metal.

No one moved right away. Then Brax threw the truck into park and stepped out.

He didn't say anything at first. Just stood there, head slightly bowed, taking it in. Zane came up beside him, arms folded tightly. Jace trailed after them, slower, wide-eyed, but Stark and Ace stayed back by the vehicles.

I followed in silence, my boots crunching across gravel and singed pine needles.

Inside, the house wasn't much better. The roof had held, but the walls bore black soot in streaks, like ghosts had dragged their hands through the living room. It smelled of wet ash and scorched insulation. Some furniture would need scrubbing. Most of it would have to go.

Brax's voice cut through the air like a whip. "We strip everything. Walls need repainting. Back deck's a full rebuild. Windows are holding for now, but we need to check the seals. Anything flammable goes."

He didn't bark orders, he commanded. And damn it, there was something sexy about that.

I watched them all fall into place. Stark was already scanning the walls, Ace pulling open storage bins. I turned toward Brax.

Zane's eyes gestured toward the ridge.

Brax nodded, and no further words were necessary. In a flash, both of them shifted, fur exploding from their skin mid-step. It was still so jarring to see, still something my mind hadn't adjusted to. But my wolf? My wolf knew them and trusted them. They took off into the woods, vanishing into the trees without a backward glance.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the spot where they'd vanished. The silence they left behind wasn't peaceful; it was heavy. Thick with grief and exhaustion and that quiet, gut-deep dread of knowing it could've been much worse.

I looked around the room again, the scorched walls, the ruined furniture. The windows smeared with ash. This house

had seen so much: fights, laughter, pack meetings, quiet nights wrapped in blankets, and now it was just another structure gutted by fire and smoke.

But it wasn't just the house that felt hollow. I could feel it in the others, too. They moved so quietly, like any noise would shatter the fragile peace they were desperately trying to maintain.

This place wasn't just their home. It was their history. And now it was burned and broken. My stomach twisted. Not just sadness, but something sharper and protectively fierce. This wasn't just *their* house anymore. It was mine too.

That's when I noticed Jace standing by the fireplace. His shoulders curled in. I walked over and wrapped my arms around him. He went stiff under my touch at first, like his body didn't know how to accept comfort without bracing for pain. But then, slowly, he sagged against me, and every part of him unraveled. I felt the exact moment his walls collapsed. His breathing hitched, shallow and fast, and his hands gripped the back of my shirt like he was afraid I'd disappear too. I didn't say anything, I just held on tighter, rubbing slow circles between his shoulder blades, anchoring him in place.

His brown eyes, too clear for how much he carried, locked on mine with something raw behind them. It made you want to fight for him even when you were already running on fumes. Not just because I was Luna, but because the pack was mine now, too.

We worked on the house for the next hour, hauling out scorched furniture, opening windows, and brushing soot from every surface we could reach. It was dirty, hot work.

When Brax and Zane reappeared from the woods, they were both streaked with dirt and sweat. Brax shook his head as he crossed the clearing toward us.

They moved slower than usual, like the forest was still dragging at their heels. There was something heavier about them now, and neither of them looked at anyone right away. Brax's eyes finally flicked up to me, just for a second. His gaze said everything his mouth wouldn't; *it wasn't good*.

"I'm not sure what happened," he said, voice low. "We both thought we could smell an accelerator. But it's hard to tell. Might've been a hot spot or..." he rubbed the back of his neck. "Could be a focal point near that campground. It caught fast."

Ace stepped forward, his brow furrowed. "Have you heard from Boone or Brynn yet?"

Brax shook his head, saying nothing.

Stark stood nearby with his arms crossed. "Might be time to reach out to her family."

Brax nodded, slow and tired. "Yeah," he said. "But not today."

Triggered

Smoke blanketed the sky like a heavy quilt, thick and gray, casting the forest in a bruised twilight. But I knew it wasn't night. Somehow, instinctively. Like the knowledge was stitched into my bones. It was just past dawn.

I stood in the heart of the woods, breathing in ash, my lungs burning even in the dream.

At first, I thought I was alone. Then I felt small arms wrapped tightly around my middle. A child. No... a toddler. Clinging to me like he'd done it a thousand times.

I looked down at a boy, maybe three years old. Chubby cheeks streaked with soot. Brown hair tousled and soft, touched with copper strands that caught the dim light like firelight trapped in each strand.

He was shaking, silent, and scared. He was holding me like he expected the world to end again.

I bent instinctively, smoothing his hair, my small hand trembling. That's when I noticed my fingers and arm. The way

my hoodie sleeves hung down too far. I was small too, maybe five or six years old.

I wasn't dreaming of this as an adult. I was living it.

I scanned the woods for parents or anyone calling us home. But there was nothing. Nobody was coming to rescue us. Just trees, smoke, and me, and this boy who fit perfectly against my chest, like I was born to shield him. A sharp ember floated down and burned the back of my hand. I hissed and tucked him tighter, shielding his body with mine. Another ember landed in his hair, curling one copper strand into ash.

No. No no no.

I had to move.

I hoisted him higher, his small arms winding around my neck. I knew I was his only chance. My feet scraped against pine needles and dirt as I started walking away from the fire, away from the crackle of destruction behind us.

But it wasn't just fear I felt.

It was an unbearable loss.

It felt like someone or something had been ripped away from us.

My heart pounded as I walked, my legs wobbling under the boy's weight. But I didn't stop. I couldn't.

Not until the world blinked, and I woke up gasping.

The sheets were damp with sweat when I woke up. My heart was hammering like I'd been running. Phantom smoke clung to the back of my throat. My lungs burned anyway. I sat

up, rubbing the palm of my hand into my chest, trying to settle the panic.

My skin was clammy, and it chilled fast in the cool air of the room. I could still feel it, smoke at the back of my throat, ash in my hair, the weight of that child's arms locked around me like I was all he had left.

I looked down at my hands again, expecting to see soot, dirt, something marking me from that nightmare. But there was nothing. Just my shaking fingers, trembling against the sheets. I wiped my palms on my thighs, trying to ground myself. But it didn't work.

The room was dark except for the soft glow of the hallway light.

I could feel him there, sitting in the old armchair like he'd never gone to bed. Elbows on his knees. Hands clasped tight while watching me, not in that possessive way he sometimes did, when the bond pulled tight and his eyes went dark. This was different. He looked like he'd been sitting there watching with concern.

"You okay?" I asked, my voice a croak.

"You were dreaming," he said softly.

"You felt that through the bond?"

He gave a small nod, but his eyes didn't leave mine.

I leaned back against the headboard, dragging my fingers through damp hair, my chest still aching. "It felt so real."

He didn't say anything. Just listened intently.

“I was small,” I whispered. “Like, little, and there was a kid. A toddler, I think, with curly brown hair with copper streaks. He was holding onto me so tightly, like he knew me and trusted me. The sky was filled with smoke, but I knew it was early morning. And I was carrying him away from it. Away from this fire. I could feel the heat on our skin.” My voice cracked. “It didn’t feel like a dream. It felt so real.”

Still, Brax didn’t speak, but the tension in his shoulders tightened just enough to give him away.

“Is that a thing?” I asked, softer now. “Dreaming about stuff that’s real? From when you’re a kid?”

“Yes,” he said.

“So I’m not crazy.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t remember it. Not consciously. But in the dream, I did. I knew how old he was. I knew it was morning. I knew the fire was getting too close, and no one was coming for us.”

I paused. “I felt alone. Like the world had ended, and no one told us.”

The silence stretched between us, thick and heavy, and I knew the thing he wasn’t saying.

I watched him for another moment before I spoke. “You think it was a memory, too.”

He stood slowly, walked over, and sat on the edge of the bed. His voice was low and barely audible. “I think the fire triggered a memory.” He held me close, his hand trailing up and down my arm like he was trying to calm us both. I let

myself sink into him, breathing in the steady rhythm of his chest, the way his scent grounded me, so familiar it always pulled me back from the edge. I didn't fight it. I didn't pull away or pretend I was fine. I just let myself feel his strength, his warmth, and the safety of being held.

After a long stretch of quiet, I pulled back just enough to look at him. "Actually," I said softly, "I don't think it was just the fire." I reached over, opened the drawer in the nightstand, and pulled out the envelope I'd stashed there earlier. He took it without a word, eyes scanning the front before sliding out the paperwork inside.

"Were you adopted from Ember Grove?" he asked, his voice just barely steady.

"Yes. Weird, right? I've never even heard of it. I tried to Google it earlier today and couldn't find anything. It's like it doesn't exist."

Then he pulled out a small chrome object and held it up.

I laughed, breathless from the whiplash of the moment. "That's a silver bullet."

He studied it. "A what?"

I snatched it from his hand, waggling it playfully. "Not the kind that kills werewolves, the kind that gets a girl through a long, lonely winter."

His mouth curled slowly, and recognition dawned on his face. "You keep this in your nightstand?"

"Where else would I keep it? Kitchen drawer next to the corkscrew?"

He set his hand on my thigh, firm and possessive. “Is this what you used the night I left you alone after dinner?”

My stomach flipped. “Maybe.”

His eyes sharpened, hungry. “Show me.”

“You want to watch me?”

The second it left my mouth, heat rushed up my neck and bloomed across my cheeks like wildfire.

I tried to laugh it off, play it cool, but it was too late. His eyes were locked on mine and he wasn’t smiling.

God, I *had* used it the night he left me, frustrated, angry, aching for something I wouldn’t let myself name.

But now? He was here. Watching and waiting.

The minute it touched my skin, I gasped.

Oh, shit.

My legs went weak.

My breath hitched, and a low moan escaped my throat as I started to cum.

I could feel him watching me. And *fuck me*, that was hot.

The weight of his gaze dragged me under and made the heat curl tighter.

Brax started undoing his pants, glaring like I’d challenged him to a damn duel.

Right as I tipped over the edge, my body locked up. Heat exploded under my skin, fur sparking across every inch of me, and my limbs jerked like I had been hit by lightning. My foot caught the blanket, and I kicked out so hard I knocked the

lamp off the nightstand with a loud crash. I went tumbling off the bed in a mess of limbs, sheets, and paws.

Brax burst out laughing, completely unhinged. He laughed so hard he couldn't catch his breath.

Some poor soul knocked on the door. "Is everything okay in there?"

Brax didn't even hesitate. "It's fine. Night," he called back, voice commanding enough to stop a freight train.

I lay there on the floor, fully shifted, soft golden fur streaked with copper, tail twitching like I was still trying to figure out how to exist in this ridiculous body. I let out a huff and dropped my head onto my paws, absolutely done.

"You are going to be the end of me," he muttered, still breathless from laughing as he patted the bed. "Come here, Luna."

I didn't even think. I leapt up like some overexcited golden retriever hearing the word walk and curled up beside him like I had always been his.

Because I was.

Broken and Betrayed

If you'd told me six months ago I'd be running for fun, with a tail, no less, I'd have laughed in your face. Yet here I was, three jogs deep into the week and keeping pace with Zane like it was normal, but the second I spotted Brax waiting on the porch, I knew something was wrong.

The tension in his shoulders was brutal. I could feel his anger from the treeline in my gut like a storm brewing. He wasn't just mad. He was lit up from the inside.

"It's not your call to make," he snapped. "I'm the Alpha. I won't continue justifying myself to you. She's my Luna, and she's legacy-born."

I stopped dead. What the actual hell? Legacy-born?

I glanced at Zane, but he was suddenly very interested in the gravel, making no eye contact, having zero reaction. By the time we made it up the path, Brax had already stormed inside. The front door slammed behind him, hard enough to rattle the frame.

Once dressed, I dropped onto the porch steps with a dramatic exhale and a rising sense of dread. Zane sat down beside me, quiet and calm, but underneath that calm was something else. He was nervous.

“What was that about?” I asked, staring ahead.

Zane hesitated. “I think you should talk to Brax.”

I turned to him slowly. “So you know what he’s talking about?”

He didn’t answer. He just stood up and slipped inside, leaving me alone on the porch with nothing but my heartbeat and the spinning thoughts in my head.

I stayed there for a long time, pissed off and confused. Wound tight with questions I wasn’t ready to say out loud. If it were something I needed to know, Brax would tell me. Wouldn’t he?

My chest ached. That familiar warmth of pack and belonging I’d come to trust felt fractured. The screen door creaked open behind me, and both Brax and Zane tromped down the steps like they hadn’t just ripped the ground out from under me. Neither of them looked at me. Brax patted the top of my head as he passed, like I was a damn dog, and muttered, “We’ll be back.”

No explanation. No apology. No, hey, about that whole ‘legacy-born’ bomb I just dropped within earshot of your developing telepathic wolf ears. Nope. Just a casual head pat and a retreat into the woods.

The urge to scream into the trees was real. I tugged off my clothing and stepped into the shower, trying to wash off the sense of betrayal I felt deep in my chest. The hot water beat down on my shoulders, but it didn't do a damn thing to fix the knot in my chest.

Eventually, I slid down the tile wall and sat on the floor, legs folded, arms wrapped around myself like that would keep me from falling apart. I didn't even know what I was crying about. It wasn't like they'd said anything to me, but something inside me knew. Something deep and wolf-born was whispering they're keeping things from you, and it hurt like hell.

The water kept running. My mind kept spinning. And when I finally stood up to turn the shower off, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. A line of dark ink was curling down my left arm, opposite the rose sleeve I'd had for years. It wasn't floral. It wasn't delicate. The tribal design was sharp, with sweeping lines that seemed carved by moonlight and the forest itself; the patterns felt ancient and powerful.

I stared. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to these tattoos just popping up on my body," I muttered. They looked like they belonged to someone else. Someone stronger. But my skin prickled beneath them, and I knew the truth.

They were mine.

Magic had marked me. Again.

Wrapped in a towel, I padded down the hallway, climbed into bed, and curled into the blankets like they might have

answers. Half sleeping, half crying. I don't know how long I laid there like that before I felt his fingers in my hair.

I looked up, my eyes still heavy, and found Brax beside me, watching me like I was something fragile. A tear slid down my cheek, and he caught it with his thumb.

"Nothing to cry about, Roxy," he whispered. "But we do need to talk."

His fingers kept stroking through my hair, slow and careful like he was afraid I might disappear. "I don't have all the answers," he said quietly. "But I owe you an honest conversation."

I didn't move. Didn't speak. I just waited.

"I've suspected for some time you might be legacy-born."

I pushed up onto one elbow, staring at him like he'd grown a second head. "How is that even possible?"

He didn't flinch. But he didn't meet my eyes either. "We could smell it. Before we met you, we knew someone was out there. Someone old-blooded and unclaimed. We didn't know who or where."

Tears bit at the corner of my eyes. "So you've been watching me?"

"Not exactly. We were tracking the scent. It got stronger around the shop and you, but we had to be sure." He paused.

I sat up fully, towel clutched to my chest. "You knew something about me before I even knew you and you still let me walk around clueless?"

His forehead creased. “Roxy. That’s what shifters do. We scent, we sense, we wait. I didn’t know for sure. Not until Brynn bit you and you shifted.”

I looked away, shaking my head, anger low in my throat. “You all talk about instinct and fate, but you kept me in the dark. Like I couldn’t handle it.”

He didn’t argue. Just sat there with his head down.

“I had that dream.”

His eyes snapped to mine. No more calm, no more control, just his raw, full attention. He already knew what I was going to say.

“The two kids in the woods. That was me?”

His face shattered. “Roxy,” he whispered, voice thick with regret. “That was Zane.”

I jerked back like he hit me. “Zane? Oh my god. OH MY GOD. Is he my brother?”

Silence.

The weight of what I’d just heard, what I felt in every bone, cracked through my ribs like ice. Legacy-born. Shifter by blood. He knew. They all knew and they didn’t tell me.

My fists hit his chest before I even realized I was moving. “Fuck you, Brax!” Another hit. “Fuck you for keeping this from me!”

He didn’t move. Didn’t block me or flinch.

“I trusted you.”

My voice broke. I slammed my hands against him again and again. “I trusted all of you!”

He stayed silent, letting me hit him like he wanted to feel the pain and knew he deserved it. I watched him crumble, piece by piece, under the weight of what he hadn't said. When my arms gave out, I collapsed against him, choking on tears. The grief, the betrayal, the shift in who I was, it all poured out.

His arms wrapped around me like armor, and like a home I wasn't sure I belonged to anymore. He nuzzled his scratchy beard into the crook of my neck.

"I'm sorry, wildling," he whispered. "I wanted to tell you. I'm sorry I waited so long."

His voice cracked. I'd never heard it like that before.

I was still crying when I kissed him. Not because I'd forgiven him. God, no. But because I needed to feel something other than broken.

He froze, just for a second like he didn't deserve it, but would take every second of it before I changed my mind. He kissed me back like I was oxygen. His hands moved up my back, gently slipping under my shirt, memorizing me. There was no dominance. No claiming. Just us, touching and trying to patch the cracks.

We undressed each other in silence. No rush. Just the whisper of fabric, the occasional shaky breath, the softness of his lips against my collarbone. He laid me back and I let him see me, that soft, aching part of me I didn't show anyone.

"Still mad," I cried, even as I arched into his touch.

He smiled against my skin. "It's deserved."

His mouth worshiped its way down my body. Every kiss was an apology. Every touch, a promise. And when he slid inside me, it wasn't about dominance or need. It was about coming back together and reminding me that even if the world didn't make sense, we did.

His hand tangled in mine. We moved like the tide, slow and steady. Tears blurred my vision again, but this time they weren't just from pain. They were a release.

"I should've told you." His voice broke against my skin. "I was trying to protect you, but I see now, I didn't protect you. I hurt you, and I'm so sorry, Love."

He pressed his forehead to mine. "Even before I knew who you were, I knew you were my fated mate, and I won't make you question that again."

I kissed him like I believed him. And between the ache and the afterglow, I did.

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Legacy Wolf

I'd barely slept. My thoughts had looped through the same questions all night, never settling. Now, the breeze coming in through the open window felt like the only thing holding me together. I lay there under the sheets, eyes fixed on nothing, trying to convince myself to get up, move, and deal with it.

I just didn't feel ready.

The door creaked open, and Brax walked in. He held a mug of coffee and handed it to me without a word. I sat up and took a sip. He sat beside me on the edge of the bed, like he wasn't sure he had permission to speak.

"So," I said, breaking the silence, "how much does Zane know about all this?"

Brax exhaled slowly, like he'd been waiting for that question. "Not everything. But he's always had a sense. When we first noticed you, before you and I ever met, he said you felt like home and that he could smell something familiar in you."

I furrowed my brow. That phrase, *felt like home*, echoed through me, sharp and unexpected. I knew that feeling. I'd chased it my whole life, being adopted and wanting somewhere to stick.

"All that kid's ever wanted was a place to belong," Brax went on. "A real family. I've tried to give him that, but I know it's not the same. He's always felt like something was missing."

"So... he's suspected it all along?"

He nodded. "Yeah. He remembers your parents, in pieces. Faces. Voices. But not much more."

I swallowed hard. "My parents?"

"Yes. Your parents."

He looked down at his hands, then back at me, something unreadable in his eyes. "I wasn't one hundred percent sure at first. Everything pointed to it, but it felt impossible. Then you were bitten, and after your shift, there was no doubt in my mind. The scent, the energy. But the records your mom sent... that sealed it."

I let that sink in. Ember Grove. A place I hadn't even known existed until a few days ago, and now it felt like the axis my whole life had secretly spun around.

"Can you tell me about them?" I asked quietly. "My parents?"

Brax hesitated, then gave a small, almost apologetic nod. "I can, but I think we should wait for Zane. If that's okay with you."

I didn't answer right away. I just nodded, slowly, my thoughts heavy and tangled. I was still angry, still reeling, but I loved this man. That hadn't changed even if everything else had.

He stood up and hesitated by the door. "Everyone's at the cabin working. I'll give you some time to yourself."

"Brax?"

He turned.

I shook my head, eyes stinging. "I don't want time to myself. I want you."

He was on me in a heartbeat, lifted me, belt already undone, jeans shoved down just enough. He pressed me against the wall like he couldn't get close enough, fast enough. My legs wrapped around his waist as he found me, filled me in one hard thrust that knocked the breath from my lungs.

"I want you every second of every fucking day," he growled, voice low and violent with need. "You don't get it, wildling. You don't understand how out of control you make me feel."

His mouth crashed into mine, all teeth and heat and desperation. I moaned into him, already soaked.

He pulled back just enough to snarl, "You're gonna take it, right here up against the wall, and you're gonna beg me not to stop."

As he lifted me again, he slammed into me with a grunt that rattled through his chest and into mine.

“Fuck,” I gasped, head hitting the wall. “Brax...”

“Say it,” he hissed against my neck. “Say my name when I fuck you. I want the whole damn pack to hear it.”

“Brax,” I pleaded, nails digging into his back.

He thrust harder.

Again.

And again.

Like he was trying to fuck the wolf out of me.

“You like that?” he panted, eyes dark. “You like being split open by your Alpha?”

My whole body convulsed as I cried out, “Yessssss.”

He carried me to the bed and flipped me with a growl. His hands dragged down my back, firm and possessive on my hips, before pulling me up.

When he pushed in again, deeper this time, I cried out but it didn’t stop him. He started thrusting harder. Gripping my thick curves like he loved them. Like he’d starved for them.

His hand tangled in my hair, pulling my head back as he fucked me from behind.

I was gasping, my hands scrambling for the sheets, crawling forward like I could escape him, like I could outrun the way he made me feel.

“You don’t get to hide from this. You don’t get to run little wolf. Not from me.”

His grip just tightened. “Something wrong,” he teased darkly. “Can’t take it?”

Then he saw my hands tremble, the flicker of my wolf just beneath my skin.

“You’re close, aren’t you?”

He slammed into me again, deep and hard, dragging a sharp cry from my throat.

“Don’t shift,” he warned, hips snapping forward again, harder, rougher. “Not yet.”

He was drilling into me like he meant to ruin me. His words came in sync with every brutal stroke.

“You’re.”

“Going.”

“To.”

“Cum.”

“As a human,” he finished, slamming into me one last time, holding me there, keeping me right where he wanted.

“Brax,” I sobbed, body shaking, toes curling.

A sharp smack landed on my ass.

“Control yourself,” he growled. “Fight it, Roxy. Fight it for your alpha.”

Every nerve in me was on fire. My wolf was clawing to get out, but I clung to him, to the heat, to the rhythm of him slamming into me again and again.

“Don’t you dare shift,” he said through gritted teeth. “I want to feel *you* fall apart around my cock. Not your wolf. *YOU.*”

I gasped, head jerking up and he slapped my ass so hard my body jolted.

Every time his palm cracked against me, it pulled me back from the edge and shoved me closer all at once. I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. My skin burned with pleasure.

I shattered. Screamed. Came so hard my vision went black, and my knees gave out, but Brax didn't let me fall. He held me firm. Still moving.

"Fuck," he growled behind me. "You feel so good."

He wasn't finished with me. Not yet.

"You think you're done?" he rasped, chest heaving. "You think *I'm* finished with you?"

Before I could answer, he flipped me onto my back and caught my wrists, pinning them to the headboard with one large hand. I was folded up like a fucking pretzel, his body towering over me. He slowed, just for a moment inside me. Teasing me, drawing it out.

His thumb brushed the inside of my wrist, just above the ink that mirrored his own. The moment he touched it, I felt it, *us*.

The tattoos weren't glowing, but they pulsed, hot beneath the skin, like they were alive. Like they'd been waiting for this.

Brax shuddered. "You feel that?"

I nodded, breathless. The connection between us surged. Where his skin met mine, the bond deepened, heavy and electric.

When he started to move again, it wasn't just pleasure, it was euphoria. I could feel him. *Really* feel him. Not just inside

me, but through me. Through the ink that linked us like a tether.

And when I came again, I felt him unravel too.

He grunted, riding the edge with me like we were falling in sync. Our bodies moved like they were being sewn together, threading us tighter with every pulse.

He collapsed into me like a fallen tree, massive and completely wrecked.

I let out a breathless laugh. “Oh. You’re done now, Alpha? You done *done*?”

He let out a low growl that vibrated against my ribs. “Shut up.”

He rolled off me with a dramatic grunt and slapped the button on the fan. It whirred to life above us as he flopped onto his back like he’d just been hit by a truck full of orgasms.

I snorted again.

His arm flung across his face. “I swear to god...”

But then he dropped his hand and turned to look at me, serious. Still panting. Still flushed.

“Marry me, Roxy.”

My whole body froze.

“Did you just propose to me *naked*?”

His lips curled into that maddening smirk. “What? You want me to put a suit on first?”

“Brax...”

He leaned closer, tracing a lazy fingertip along the curve of my shoulder. “You’re already my Luna. My mate. But I want

more. I want to give you everything you've ever wanted. The ring. The vows. That white dress you pretended not to love." His voice dropped to a growl. "You looked so damn happy in it, wildling. And I want that look to be because of me. I want you in every way this world lets me have you. The wild ways. The sacred ways. The human ways, too."

I swallowed hard. "So this is real? You're really proposing?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying yes?"

My laugh was watery and real. "Of course I am."

He exhaled and collapsed fully onto me with a groan. "Good. Now I can die."

I snorted. "Oh no, no. You're not dying on me, Alpha. You still have to meet my mother."

He groaned louder. "I take it back. Let the ancestors claim me."

Marked by Blood

I expected him to be out there. It had become our thing. We never said much, we'd just stretch, shift, run through the trees until the world quieted. Until the ache inside us dulled.

But this morning, when I stepped outside, I didn't find him lacing up metaphorical sneakers or pacing with anticipation. Zane stood at the edge of the porch, barefoot, shirtless, his hair a mess and his eyes so full it nearly broke me. He looked at me like he'd been holding everything inside for too long, and now he could finally let it out.

I swallowed hard, my chest tightening as my voice cracked. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head instantly. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"But I do. I forgot," I said, stepping closer. "I forgot about my childhood, our childhood."

Zane's eyes shimmered, like he was barely keeping it together.

“It’s not your fault,” he said quietly. “It’s not unusual for trauma to make you forget things.”

I closed the gap between us and wrapped my arms around him, and he broke. His shoulders caved, and his arms wrapped around me like he was scared to let go. “None of it matters,” I whispered into his chest. “We’re here now. You’re my brother, and I have every intention of making up for all the lost time.” I pulled back just enough to grin up at him.

“Now I can understand your exquisite looks and great sense of humor. It’s in the genes.”

That got a watery laugh out of him.

“You’re so annoying,” he mumbled, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

“Damn right,” I said. “And now you’re stuck with me.”

We stepped back in sync. One breath, one nod, and we shifted together, two wolves, golden and amber, racing through the trees like we’d been doing it forever. It was fast and free. He flashed through the trees behind me, paws pounding the damp forest floor. I could feel his energy humming through the bond; it was joyful and unrestrained.

I stopped.

Dead stop.

He slammed into me, yelping as he tumbled forward and rolled in a mess of leaves and fur.

“Oh,” he growled, “*so the big sister’s gonna start picking on me now?*”

Gotta keep you humble, I teased, nipping at his tail as I shot forward again.

We ran for miles, looping through old trails. Over streams and up ridges. A slow play of nips and tackles and speed. At one point, I knocked him off a low ridge, and he dragged me down with him. We rolled into the underbrush in a laughing heap of limbs and fur, untangling just enough to dart back toward the house.

When we returned, our paws shifted to feet on the front porch.

Brax was sitting at the dining room table waiting for us. The red-lidded tub sat on the floor beside him, and his expression was serious. “Get dressed,” he said. “It’s time to talk.”

We dried off and changed. Zane sat beside me at the table. Brax pulled out a worn folder, across the front, a single name in black marker: **Draven**.

Brax met our eyes.

“Zane, I know you have some memories of your parents. Roxy doesn’t, so I’m going to start at the beginning.”

He opened the folder.

“Your parents were Zoltan and Reign Draven,” Brax said. “The Dravens were one of three shifter families in this area. It was said your mother, Reign, was legacy-born. She had power, old power, and people noticed. Too much attention in a town this small. By 1995, the whispers started. Suspicions of shifter activity spread. Then a hiker went missing, and the

panic turned into action. Wolfsbane was planted near property lines. Families packed up, pretended it was nothing—but we knew better. Fear spread like oil on water. Eventually, they even renamed the town.”

“That explains why I can’t find any information on Ember Grove.”

Brax nodded and pulled out a photograph, sliding it across the table. My breath caught.

It was our parents.

Zoltan had dark, expressive eyes that mirrored Zane’s, and Reign’s smile... It was mine. There was no mistaking it. I felt it in my chest like a deep thrum of recognition that made my eyes sting.

Zane reached for it slowly, fingers brushing mine as we both stared.

“I see us,” I whispered.

Brax gave a quiet, “So do I.”

He went on to tell us about Bane Hallow. How the town turned on our people, how rumors became threats, and the threats became arson. Fires were set deliberately on shifter homes. Some families made it out but some didn’t. Our parents didn’t.

“The fire was deliberate and was started with accelerant, aimed at the homes where the bloodlines were strongest. Your parents were inside when it caught. There wasn’t enough time to save them. But you two were found near the river.”

My chest ached. Zane looked down at his hands.

“Your adoptive parents were traveling through town, Roxy. Someone we trusted overheard them saying they were moving to L.A. and looking to adopt. It felt like fate to place you with them.”

“That left Zane. We placed him with a local family, but when he started shifting as a teen, he was terrified of telling them. I found him alone in the woods near our border. Watching me after a run.”

“Why didn’t I shift as a teen?”

“I don’t know. Maybe being so far from other shifters made it go dormant. It happens sometimes, especially with legacy blood. Without a pack, or a trigger...”

He shook his head. “Your wolf was waiting, hiding, until the bite woke her up.”

Zane leaned forward with his elbows on the table. “Do you think anyone else from our family survived?”

Brax didn’t answer right away. He looked out the window like the trees might give him an answer. “It’s possible. There were rumors of others fleeing east. I’ve tried to track it, but there’s not much left to find.”

I ran my fingers over the edges of the photo again. “Do you think I’ll remember more?”

“You might,” Brax said gently. “Sometimes the body remembers before the mind does.”

Zane met my eyes. “We’ll remember together.

Brax reached into the tub and pulled out something small, a worn stuffed animal. It looked like a wolf, one ear flopped, the stitching loose in places.

“Zane, this was yours,” he said. “It was with you when we found you by the river.”

My breath caught in my throat. He took it with trembling hands, brushing the matted fur with his thumb. A memory, faint and ghost-like, flickered at the edge of my mind: his little hand gripping mine, firelight flashing behind trees, the sound of someone shouting my name.

“I remember... running,” I whispered. “And you holding that.”

Zane’s voice was low. “Me too.”

The three of us sat in silence, just the hum of grief, of connection, of something lost slowly becoming found.

I jumped from my seat. “Oh my god, what time is it?”

Brax glanced up. “2:30. Why?”

“I have to get to the house. I have a furniture delivery this afternoon. There’s still some things I need to clean up.”

He looked at Zane. “Can you take her?”

“Of course.”

I kissed Brax, grabbed my hoodie and followed Zane to the truck. The ride was quiet at first, the window cracked just enough to let in the breeze.

“What time’s the delivery?” Zane asked, glancing over.

“Four.”

“Good,” he said. “I want to show you something.”

About halfway up Crescent Ridge, he turned onto an old, overgrown gravel road. We jostled over ruts, and low branches scraped along the side.

I laughed. "What are you doing, off-roading?"

"You'll see."

The brush thickened, but I noticed the tracks were recent. Someone had been through here not long ago. When we pulled into a clearing, my heart stuttered.

There was a collapsed house, burnt, with just the bones of it left. The skeleton of a tire swing swayed gently from a crooked tree limb.

Zane cut the engine.

"This was our house?"

He nodded. "I thought you might want to see it."

We stepped out into the clearing, walking the perimeter in silence. The wind carried the sound of the river, not far off.

Tears stung my eyes. "I remember this place," I whispered. "I remember the swing. And the smell of the woods. I used to collect pine cones..." I laughed through the tears, wiping my cheek. "You used to throw them at me."

Zane smiled, but his eyes were wet too. "You always picked the good ones."

He walked beside me. "It's the little things that come first."

I reached for his hand. "Thank you for showing me."

He squeezed it. "Always."

I looked out toward the trees, realizing something that made my stomach twist.

“We’ve been swimming in this same damn river, and I didn’t even remember.”

Zane slipped his arm around my shoulders.

He was always so hot to the touch. Muscular, just a little taller than me, with shaggy brown hair and copper flecks in his eyes. So handsome. Now every time I looked at him, it hit me how he looked just like our father.

“I thought maybe you’d want to build out here with Brax,” he said gently.

“No,” I said, shaking my head, pulling slightly away from his embrace. “No. Why would we do that?”

His arm fell away, and I turned to look at him.

“Is this property ours?”

“Yeah,” Zane said. “Just a little paperwork, and we can get it all taken care of.”

“Zane,” I said softly, “I’m very happy at Brax’s house. This is yours. For your future. When you have a family of your own.”

He nodded slowly, a single tear slipping down his cheek.

“I just wanted you to have the choice.”

“You waited for me.” I rubbed my nose with my sweatshirt and sniffled an embarrassing amount of snot across it.

Zane buckled over laughing. “Nasty ass.” We just laughed together. A deep, belly laugh that shook the air between us.

I leaned my head on his shoulder, thinking that he was the only person on Earth who remembered the same things I did. If I lost him... There would be no one left who remembered me before I was a Luna. Just Roxy. Just a girl with a box of pine cones and no clue what she was.

“This is perfect,” I said, brushing at my face. “It’s perfect, Zane. I can’t wait for all the memories we’re going to create. And maybe I’ll be an aunt one day! Chasing your little ornery kids around.”

He winked.

“You first. You’re the old one.

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Loyalty and Leather

Our mornings had slipped into this lazy little ritual of coffee in bed, legs tangled, no alarms, no emergencies. Just Brax, warm and shirtless, stretched out against the pillows while we traded sips from the same mug. His hand dragged slow circles along the curve of my hip, completely at ease, like he wasn't the man half the town feared.

I muttered, "You know you're turning into a house husband, right?"

He smirked but didn't argue, just tugged me closer.

Then, all at once, he stilled.

His head tilted, like he was tuning out of me and into something else, something only he could hear.

A second later, his palm landed on my ass with a firm, possessive pat.

"Sorry, babe," he muttered, already moving. "Duty calls. We've gotta run to the shop."

"Wait, why couldn't I hear that?" I scoffed.

“Because you keep turning yours off.”

I squinted at him. “Hold on... I can turn it *off*?”

He glanced over his shoulder with that infuriating smirk.

“Is there, like, a *Shifting for Dummies* book I missed?”

Brax didn’t answer. Just kept walking, shaking his head like I was the pack’s favorite little disaster.

The bell above the door jingled, but the room was already full of tension. Ace stood with his arms crossed by the sink, a silent wall of muscle. Stark leaned against the wall, eyes pinned on Carl like he was already judging his soul. Zane didn’t even look at us when we walked in; he just said, “Take a seat.”

Carl was in the chair by the station, sitting there like a man about to confess something ugly.

Brax didn’t sit. His presence filled the room the way smoke filled a closed cabin. He clocked the setup instantly. “What is this?” he asked.

Carl glanced at me, then zeroed in on Brax. “I wanted to wait until I was sure,” he said. “But I don’t think it’s worth the risk.” He took a breath. “I’ve been hearing things from the Kings. Background noise mostly. But there’s this guy. Marko. He’s an older member. A loudmouth and anti-pack. He’s been pitching a fit about you guys being in town more. About you hanging around the shop and Roxy.”

That got Brax’s full attention. Anger swelled up in him, and he clenched one of his fists.

“Last night, I saw him out back behind Murphy’s,” Carl continued. “He wasn’t alone. Some guy I didn’t recognize, clean-cut, suit, real polished. Not part of the club. He looked like old money.”

Carl’s voice dropped. “I didn’t hear everything, but I caught the end. Marko said, ‘It’s done.’ The suit told him, ‘Nothing will trace back to you.’ Then he handed him an envelope. It looked heavy.”

There was a minute of silence, and my stomach turned.

Carl leaned back in the chair. “I don’t know for sure, but I’ve got a bad feeling he’s involved with the fire.”

Brax nodded once. “You think you can find out more?”

Carl shrugged, but there was a quiet confidence in it. “Yeah. I can try.”

“If you need protection,” Brax said, eyes hard, voice harder, “say the word.”

Carl gave a small nod. “I’ll keep you posted.”

Before we left, Carl looked at me and cracked a tired smile. “Didn’t think my tattin’ gig would lead to espionage. Guess I’m multi-talented.”

I smirked, but Brax didn’t. His eyes were still locked on Carl, calculating.

Brax let the door swing shut behind us. He didn’t say anything right away, just started walking towards the truck.

Zane stepped out a minute later, coffee in hand. “Want me to call the council?”

Brax didn’t look at him. “Yeah. Schedule it.”

Zane nodded.

“I want to sniff around first,” Brax added. “See what else shakes loose before we make this official.”

Zane took a long sip, then muttered, “I’ll make the calls.”

I stood between them, my heart racing. This wasn’t just suspicion anymore. This was war prep, and Brax? He was already hunting.

Once we were in the truck, Brax rubbed his palms over his face with a groan.

“Well,” I muttered, buckling in, “looks like it wasn’t Brynn and Boone after all.”

“I had my doubts,” Brax grumbled, his voice low and rough. “If they’d planned something that big, it’d be hard to hide. Someone in the pack would’ve felt it. Something would’ve been off.”

I glanced at him. “So... what’s the plan, boss? I am your Luna now. How do I help?”

That pulled a laugh out of him. He reached over, tugging me against his side, hand warm and steady on my shoulder.

“What did I do to deserve you?” he muttered.

“Lucky, I guess.”

He exhaled once. “We move tonight.”

There it was, that shift in his voice. No longer just my Brax. This was the Alpha.

He didn’t have to say it, but I already felt it in my bones.

Something was coming, and we weren’t going to wait for it to hit us first.

Brax didn't say another word. He just shifted into gear, gravel kicking up behind us as we peeled out of the lot.

By the time we pulled up to the old council chamber, his jaw hadn't unclenched once.

The council chamber smelled like polished wood and old air, faintly dusty, like a building that held decades of secrets in its walls. A long table stretched across the center of the room, flanked by old chairs filled with even older wolves. Brax sat at the head, his face unreadable, Zane and I flanking him. He had the Draven folder sitting unopened in front of him.

Chatter dipped the moment the door creaked open and Brynn walked in like she still belonged there. Every head turned. Zane stiffened beside me, and Ace stood from the back wall with disbelief written all over his face.

"She shouldn't be here," someone muttered.

Brynn didn't acknowledge anyone; she strolled to the far side of the table and took a seat like she hadn't gone rogue weeks ago.

The room buzzed with low chatter until the first elder, a sharp-nosed woman with silver hair, raised her voice. "Let's begin with the fire, the rumors, the tension in this town. Things have been quiet for thirty years, Alpha. And now your wolves are shifting in broad daylight. Running amok in town. Drawing attention back to us." I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "And then there's the matter of your mating," another elder added. "You chose to mate with a human."

Brax stood up, calm, cold, and commanding. “She’s not human.”

Murmurs sparked. He picked up the folder and tossed it onto the center of the table. “She’s legacy, born of the Draven bloodline. So is my Beta, Zane.”

The whispers sharpened, even Brynn’s expression twitched.

An older man stood up at the end of the table. He must be Brax’s father. He was broad with the same cold authority Brax carried, but stripped of warmth entirely.

“You’re just now telling us this?” he demanded.

“Because I had to be sure. And your lack of faith is staggering.” His nostrils flared.

From the corner, a kind-eyed elder woman rose and crossed to me. She cupped my face, her voice thick. “I knew you’d come home.”

Then Brynn finally spoke. “So that’s it? A fire rips through our territory, and suddenly, the Draven bloodline resurfaces? Seems a little too perfect.”

Ace narrowed his eyes. “Are you accusing someone?”

Brynn leaned back in her chair. “Just asking questions no one else wants to. Maybe it wasn’t a random attack. Maybe it was a setup.”

Zane’s voice was cold. “You’re suggesting Roxy and I had something to do with the fire?”

She shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. You and your sister suddenly have power and position, which seems a

little fast, doesn't it?"

Brax slammed his palm on the table. The crack echoed through the room.

"How dare you walk in here questioning me after ignoring my orders and attacking your Luna."

The room went silent.

His eyes flared bright green.

"You were given grace because of your bloodline, Brynn. Nothing else. You've been a problem since the day I took this mantle, and if not for your name, you'd have been exiled a long damn time ago."

At the end of the table, his father nodded slightly. His mother's lips curved in the faintest smile.

Brax didn't stop. He looked straight at Brynn.

"Did you do this, Brynn?"

She didn't answer.

"You want a voice? Find another pack. Mate with another Alpha. Because here, you're done."

He turned to the elders. "The council recognizes her exile. From this moment on, she is no longer one of us. Anyone who gives her shelter answers to me."

The air in the room shifted, even the elders felt it.

Brynn stood slowly. She didn't speak; she just walked out and no one cared to stop her.

Everyone slowly stood to leave, the weight of Brax's judgment lingering in the air like smoke. No one spoke above a whisper. Chairs scraped across the floor. Papers were

gathered. A few elders glanced at one another, unsure whether to be unsettled or impressed.

Brax didn't wait.

He pushed through the chamber doors with Zane and me trailing behind. I could feel his body thrumming with contained rage.

Outside, the air was cooler, but it didn't help. He made a straight line for the truck.

"Brax!" his father called after him.

He didn't stop.

Neither did Zane.

We climbed into the cab in silence, Brax's hands gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. We tore out of the parking lot, gravel spitting from the tires.

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Forgiveness is Feral

♦ Zane ♦

I found her where we always ended up when things went sideways. Half-hidden in the trees, like the forest carved out a corner just for the two of us.

“Brynn,” I said, with exhaustion in my voice. “If Brax knew I was out here...”

“He’d tear me apart.” She smirked faintly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah. I know.”

I should’ve walked away, but instead, I lingered, dragging the toe of my boot through the dirt, restless. Twenty-seven years old, Beta of this pack, and sometimes I still felt like the stray kid Brax had picked up out of pity. Did I earn my position, or did he give it to me because he knew I needed it?

“So, you know now.” My voice dropped. “About me and Roxy.”

Her gaze cut through me. “Draven. You should’ve told me, Zane.”

I sank onto a fallen log, elbows on my knees. “I didn’t know the whole truth myself. Not until Roxy showed up.”

She stepped closer, then sat beside me, her shoulder brushing mine. It was too easy and familiar. Like every time we’d found ourselves here, circling the same thoughts.

“Everything’s not about you, Brynn,” I said, my voice quieter. “About what you want. About being Luna. I don’t get why you can’t let that go.”

Her laugh cracked like glass. “It’s not about Brax. Not really.” She bowed her head. “You think I want him? You don’t get it. I was raised for this. Luna, legacy. It was all I was ever supposed to be. And now it’s gone. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

The words hit harder than I expected because I knew that feeling. Raised on someone else’s script. Adopted into something that never felt like mine. Always wondering if I was enough without the title.

Before I could stop myself, my hand was on her cheek, brushing away the tear that slipped free. She leaned into it, just for a second. Then her lips pressed to mine.

It wasn’t new or shocking. We’d done this before. Always in secret. Always in silence. A habit we couldn’t shake.

And like always, I kissed her back before I remembered who the hell I was supposed to be.

I tore away first, chest tight. “What are we even doing?” My words came out rougher than I meant. “You fight for him in daylight, then sneak around with me in the dark. You question Roxy. My sister. My Alpha. Me.”

Her breath hitched. “Because you’re the only one who sees me.”

That undid me. For one breath, I wanted to let her be right. Wanted to believe it was enough.

But it wasn’t. Not with what was coming. Not with who I was supposed to be.

“You accused me of starting a fire. Of chasing power I never wanted.” My thumb slipped from her cheek, leaving her skin wet where I’d been. “Choose your side, Brynn. Because the middle? That’s where you’ll get crushed.”

I stood, my duties pulling me away from her, even though every part of me still wanted to stay.



Aurora pulled up outside my place in her obnoxiously pink Range Rover and leaned out the window like we were starring in a supernatural Mean Girls reboot.

“Get in, Legacy bitch. We’re getting coffee.”

“You did not just say that.”

She smirked at me. “Oh, I absolutely did. Now get your ass in the car.”

We drove through town, the windows down and the radio blaring something poppy that I would never admit to enjoying. I was still trying to shake off the tension from everything that had gone down with the council and Rivera last night. I needed a caffeine IV and maybe a reality check.

As soon as we stepped inside, I froze. Of course. Of course, she was here.

Brynn sat alone in a corner booth, looking way too tragic for a casual coffee run.

I glanced at Aurora, suspicion creeping in fast.

I stopped short. "Am I being ambushed?"

Aurora put a hand on my arm. "I'm sorry. I've known her since we were kids, Roxy. Just give her a chance to speak."

Brynn's eyes were glassy, her voice cracked before she even got a full sentence out. "I've behaved like such a bitch."

She glanced down at the table, then back up at me. "It was never about me wanting Brax. It was about wanting to be Luna. It's something I've always dreamed of and was raised to expect. I was so focused on tradition and what my family expected of me that I couldn't see anything else. I'm ashamed of how I treated you. Not having a connection with my Alpha, and my pack has messed me up more than you could ever imagine."

I sat back, watching her. Not ready to forgive, but maybe ready to listen.

"Brax said our families were close, once?"

“Yeah, that’s the real kicker, isn’t it? I know your family’s history. And I remember you. We used to play in the forest behind your house, back when we were kids. Before everything changed.” I remember Zane, too, but he was pretty young. I’ve seen him around town my whole life, and it’s a real shock to me that I didn’t realize who he was.”

I looked down, biting the inside of my cheek. “You and I had it out in the field. This? This is between you and your Alpha now.”

Brynn nodded quietly.

“Shall we head to the cabin?” Aurora asked.

“Yes,” I said. “But coffee first.”

The car was quiet as we headed up the mountain. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Brax was out on the porch laying new boards to replace the burnt-out deck, shirtless, as always. My god, what did I do to deserve him? Sometimes it was still so shocking.

I saw his face when he registered that Brynn was with us. He started tramping down the stairs, barking at Aurora. “You know better than to bring her here without my approval!” He lunged mid-shift.

Brynn was fast. I’ll give her that. Before Brax could catch her, she shot into the treeline, his massive wolf form only a few feet behind nipping at her heels.

Aurora looked at me calmly. “Don’t worry. They’ll work it out as wolves. They’ll be back.”

“Brax is pissed at you, Aurora.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I should’ve known better. It’s not right that I put you in this position. If something had gone wrong, it would’ve been my ass. I’ll take my punishment when he dishes it out.”

We sat there on the steps.

“So when are you going to let me know what’s going on with you and Carl?”

She laughed. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“No,” I laughed. “I’m not mad.

“Girl...”

I laughed again. “I’m going to refrain from making a comment or allowing that to go in my brain right now for fear Brax may sense my thoughts.”

She laughed. “Smart move, Legacy.”

Brax returned with sweat clinging to his skin, twigs stuck in his hair, and still visibly pissed off. Brynn trailed behind him, clearly shaken, her eyes wide and nervous.

He stomped up the porch stairs, grabbed my hand, all while jabbing a finger into Aurora’s chest. “I’ll deal with you later.”

“Yes, Alpha,” she said without flinching.

Brax made a beeline for the bedroom, dragging me with him, and I had a pretty good idea where this was going. We stepped into our room, which had freshly painted walls, and a new mattress sat in the center, still wrapped in plastic.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “These kids.”

“Remind me not to piss you off... actually, I might like to see what happens if I do.”

He grabbed my arm and yanked me down hard. “You’re making me soft,” he growled.

“I’m not making you anything, buddy!”

He brushed the hair out of my face and kissed me slowly.

“I love you, Roxy. Have I told you that yet today?”

“Yes, you have, but say it again.”

“I love you. Let’s move back out here this weekend. I need to feel grounded, and as much as I love your place, this is home to me.”

“I agree. It feels like home to me now, too.”

“I’ll keep Ace and Jace at your place. Aurora and Brynn at the loft. The rest of the pack can stay out here.”

“And Boone?” I asked.

“Boone’s done. He was a lost cause anyway, and I’ve wasted way too much time on him. He knows he fucked up. Brynn said he’s already headed back to Oregon, where he came from.”

His jaw flexed. “Roxy, I need to be certain you’re okay with me letting Brynn back in. Just thinking about what she did to you makes me furious, even if I do believe she regrets it.”

I lay there for a moment, thinking of the past month and everything that had happened. “Brax, where would we be right now if she hadn’t changed me? Part of me thinks it had to happen this way. I’m ready to put it behind me.”

“Part of you?” His eyes sharpened, and I knew where his thoughts were going.

“Don’t do that,” I said, firm but soft. “I understand why you waited, and none of that matters now.”

The tension eased a fraction, though his eyes still burned.

“Brax,” I said, running a finger down his side.

“Roxy?”

“What are we going to do about your parents?”

I curled into his sweaty, sticky body, breathing in deep against his chest. He smelled like the forest fused with his skin.

He smirked against my hair. “Are you sniffing me, pup?”

The breeze from the open window stirred the curtains, carrying in the smell of the woods. It wrapped around me, crawling over my skin. My pulse kicked up, and my lungs expanded like I couldn’t get enough of it.

Brax tilted his head toward me. “You want to shift, Luna?”

I didn’t answer. I just launched myself from the bed, my feet hitting the floor once before I leapt toward the open window. Mid-air, my body cracked and twisted, fur replacing skin, instincts replacing thought.

Behind me, I heard Brax shift with a grunt. He landed beside me in the clearing behind the cabin, paws thudding into the earth.

I ran.

The wind howled through the trees as I moved faster, the ground a blur beneath my paws. I felt wild and boundless, like

the forest itself had taken up space in my lungs.

And for a moment, I wasn't a girl or a Luna or a legacy, I was just the forest's daughter, flying through the trees with the only one I ever loved.

◆ Brax ◆

The sun dipped low as we pushed deeper into the forest. Shadows stretched long across the trees, the air cooling as the last streaks of daylight burned out above us. By the time the first silver light broke through the branches, I knew we wouldn't stop until the moon ruled the sky.

We ran for hours until the moon rose high above us, casting light over the trees. When we reached the riverbank, mist curled at her feet like it recognized her. She shifted back to her human form.

She shifted back to her human form.

I slowed, stunned, not by the shift itself, but by how effortlessly she now embraced it. The snap of bone, the shimmer of skin, the way she now stood in her own body. She belonged here.

She was the forest now, and I was in awe.

I stepped out of my shift, my skin still buzzing. I didn't speak. I couldn't. She stepped into the shallows, moonlight dancing off the water and her bare skin, and my body moved to her like it never had a choice.

My chest met her back, arms locking around her soft curves, pulling her tight. I could feel the heat of her back pressed against my hard-on. I breathed her in. She smelled like lilacs and the Earth itself. Always lilacs.

“God, I love you,” I whispered.

“And I love you.”

She turned to face me, and now I was firmly pressed against her stomach. I picked her up, her thick, damp thighs wrapping around my waist as I knelt and laid her on the forest floor.

I slid down, flicking my tongue across her clit. The river water lapped at our thighs and at her pussy. Warm, salty, and euphoric. Her tits were hard from the cool water rushing across our bodies.

She was close. Grinding against my face, chasing it like she needed it to breathe. Her moans got sharper, breath catching. Then she broke, spilling across my tongue, hips jerking, thighs trembling. I could feel her pussy pulsating under my mouth, and I didn't let up.

I slid two fingers inside her. Still sucking her. Still fucking her slowly with my hand.

I rolled her onto her side, letting the river tease more of her body. Cold as hell, giving no mercy for my cock.

I lay behind her, cupping her breasts, and slid inside, smooth and wet.

I lifted her outer leg, angling her just right, and drove in deep.

She spasmed, hips bouncing against me, rhythm building. She felt too good.

I brushed my lips against her neck, then nipped her, my wolf hovering just beneath the surface. She let out a soft warning growl.

Sorry, my Luna. I'm barely holding on.

I thrust slow, too slow for her, and she shoved back against me, greedy. "Faster," she growled, and fuck, I almost lost it right there.

She tightened around my cock, and that was it. I came hard, my body flooding with heat, hips still rolling as the orgasm took hold and wrecked me.

My body refused to let her go.

I'd taken her a hundred ways, but here, with the moon above us and the river at our feet, it was different. The bond was deeper; it had carved us into one.

After, we lay tangled on the riverbank, stuck, with the sound of the water rushing past like a lullaby. I cradled her against my chest, my nose buried in her hair, heart still thudding.

Wolfs Den

We'd worked our asses off, but it finally felt like home again. We didn't just slap on a coat of paint and call it done, either. I'd gone full vintage scavenger on this place, dragging Brax to every dusty thrift store and estate sale I could find within fifty miles. Somewhere along the way, I'd convinced him that elk antlers above the fireplace were "charmingly rustic".

Native American blankets draped over the chairs, soft and worn with bright, bold patterns that looked right at home against the rough wood walls. We'd scored a massive leather sectional that could probably seat the whole pack, and we piled mismatched pillows and beanbag chairs in the corner like some kind of feral reading nook. A giant hutch full of folded blankets and pillows sat against the wall, mostly for the boys to crash on when they stumbled in half-drunk or half-shifted.

And yes, we'd even managed bunk beds in the spare rooms, because apparently, I was running a halfway house for

misfit wolves now.

Morning rolled around and we had the first real breakfast at the cabin since the fire. We'd already broken in the new back porch with mismatched chairs, a folding table, and more coffee than anyone should drink before noon. I couldn't stop grinning as I helped Aurora and Brynn haul trays of food out to the deck.

Aurora flicked her sunglasses down her nose, tilting her head like a queen assessing her kingdom. The lenses caught the light, reflecting the forest behind us in sharp, mirrored green. Brynn? She just grabbed a strip of bacon straight from the pan and popped it in her mouth.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Well? How's loft life treating you two?"

Aurora's lips curled into that perfectly smug little smirk of hers. "I like it. I'd say it has its perks."

Brynn didn't even look up from buttering her biscuit. She just said, in the driest voice imaginable, "Great, until you hear the headboard slamming against the wall all night."

Aurora sipped her coffee, utterly unbothered. "Good insulation's expensive."

"Oh my God. Aurora," I gawked, pointing my fork at her. "You *didn't*."

Aurora didn't even blink. Just gave that slow, dangerous little smile. "Oh, but I did. I'm heading out now to meet him for lunch."

I shook my head. “You know your alphas are not going to be too happy about this.”

Aurora shamelessly put a finger up to her mouth, giving us a little wink. “Shhhh, I’ll deal with that when the time comes.”

After she left, Brax and I cozied up on the deck with our coffee. The morning sun was already warming the boards beneath our feet, and the sounds of the pack in motion drifted through the trees.

Zane stepped into the clearing with Talon, Ace, and Jace right behind him. None of them looked like they’d come for breakfast.

He barked an order, low and clipped, and the others moved into position without hesitation. Zane circled them slowly, eyes sharp, posture loose but controlled. There was a quiet authority in the way he moved.

I watched him, surprised by how strong and confident he looked. The boy from the fire was long gone. In his place stood someone calm, capable, and even dangerous. For a second, I wondered if our father had carried that same kind of command. That same presence that made people stand straighter when he walked into a room.

Jace took a hit to the ribs that made me flinch. He stumbled, regained his footing, and threw himself back into the fray. I started to rise out of my chair, but Brax reached out, his hand resting gently over mine.

“He’s okay, Mama Wolf,” he said softly. “I know he’s your baby, but he has to learn. We’ll be ready. Whatever comes next, we’re not running from it.”

It had been a few hours by the time Brax leaned over and suggested we stop by the shop, check in with Carl, and see how the loft was looking. Plenty of time for Aurora to be done with her lunch date.

The place looked empty, but then Aurora’s laugh floated from the back room. A moment later, she and Carl appeared, both slightly flushed and trying a little too hard to act normal. My brows lifted as I glanced at Brax, just in time to catch the subtle clench of his jaw.

“Shit, Aurora,” Brax muttered, dragging a hand over his beard. “Haven’t we pissed off the council enough this year?”

Carl looked like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. His fingers flexed by his sides like he wasn’t sure whether to look amused or brace for impact. He cleared his throat and nodded toward the front desk. “Have a seat.”

We sat, and the tension in the room eased a little. Aurora perched herself on the edge of the counter, completely unbothered.

“The suit’s name is Rivera. He’s one of the guys running for mayor of Bane Hallow. He’s real clean on paper. But behind the scenes? He’s running product, marijuana mostly, with two of the Kings. Marko and Redding.”

Brax’s expression darkened.

Carl continued, "I think Rivera's trying to consolidate land. Yours in particular. The pack's property cuts through the cleanest, quietest routes into the city. If they get control of that, it's all profit and no attention."

I crossed my arms. "So he's running a political campaign while secretly dealing drugs with outlaw bikers, and his master plan is to buy, or burn us out? Great. Love that for him."

Brax arched a brow, cutting Carl a slow look. "How deep are Marko and Redding with the Kings?"

Carl didn't hesitate. "Deep enough to make this messy if it goes public."

Brax leaned back slightly, voice low but lethal. "Would Butch have a problem with this? Or does he let you all run rogue?"

Carl scoffed. "Nah. He'd have a big problem. Especially if Rivera's doing this behind his back."

"You want me to set up a meeting?" Carl asked.

Brax nodded. "Do it."

I turned toward the window, chewing on the inside of my cheek. "This whole thing feels bigger than it looks. And dirtier."

"It is," Brax said. "And if Rivera thinks he's gonna run this town from a podium or a pipeline, he's not gonna like what's coming."

Carl leaned back in the chair, one arm slung over the back like he owned the place. "The shop's been doing surprisingly

great, by the way. Even with you off playing Alpha Barbie.”

I grinned. “You mean me reclaiming my bloodline and awakening my inner bad ass?”

“Sure. That too.” He smirked. “The pack’s been pulling their weight. Customers like seeing new faces. Makes the place feel like more than just a one-woman show.”

“I do miss it,” I admitted. “But I’m glad it’s running okay. You’d tell me if it was uncomfortable? I know you didn’t sign up for all this wolf-pack weirdness.”

“Nah,” Carl said, shaking his head. “It’s working. Sales are up, and Aurora’s been taking the books home at night. Girl’s scary good with numbers.”

I snorted. “She’s scary good at everything. It’s a little rude, honestly.”

Carl shrugged. “I like having her around.”

“You *like* having her around?”

He gave me that signature cocky smirk. “Don’t start.”

Brax didn’t say a word. Just sat there, arms crossed, watching us with that unreadable expression that said he was listening to *everything*.

I leaned back, satisfied. “Well, good. You’re still my favorite person to give shit to.”

“Flattered,” Carl said. “Even if your new boyfriend could snap me in half with one pinky.”

Still no reaction from Brax, but I noticed a slight shift in his posture. Just barely.

Carl raised his hands in mock surrender. “Kidding. Mostly.”

We made our way out, and the shop door clicked shut behind us. Chill crept under my skin.

Things were working.

For now.

But we were one meeting away from the next storm.

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Fangs and Foreplay

The night had started perfectly.

The town had been buzzing with tourists lately, and someone finally opened a little bistro that didn't smell like fryer oil and desperation. It was tucked between a new wine bar and a gallery, all low lights, vintage wood tables, and fancy chalkboard menus listing things like charcuterie boards and flatbread pizzas.

Brax had dressed up for me, jeans, boots, and a dark button-down that clung to his chest and stretched across his biceps like the fabric was one deep breath from giving up. My thighs pressed together under the table every time he shifted, and that was *before* he reached over and slid his hand onto my leg.

His fingers skimmed between them, slow and warm, and the low sound he made under his breath, half growl, half hum, had me way to turned on. I barely managed to take a sip of wine without choking on it.

I hadn't stopped craving him. Even when he fucked me into oblivion, I never felt like I could get my fill. Not of his hands, his mouth, his voice in the dark when he whispered mine.

I shifted slightly in my seat, the hem of my sundress brushing his wrist, and his hand gripped my leg a little tighter. I knew that sound. That warning rumble meant if I moved again, we wouldn't make it to dessert.

My thighs had gotten a little thicker lately, thanks to all those hearty breakfasts they insisted on making. I didn't mind, and Brax certainly didn't. He'd made a point of telling me, repeatedly, with his mouth, that he approved of every soft new roll.

The wine made me warm and flushed, or maybe that was just the way his gaze dragged over me like I was already spread out under him.

We ate too much and laughed harder, about the pack, about the chaos of trying to plan a wedding with wolves who could barely agree on pizza toppings.

When we made our way back to the shop, Brax's whole frame went taut, his steps slowing as his gaze locked on something in the alleyway ahead. His body slid between me and whatever caught his attention. His shoulders rolling back in that dangerous way I'd come to recognize as *Alpha-mode activated*.

Without a word, his arm shot out across my chest, stopping me in place.

Then he raised a finger to his lips.

“Shhh.”

We crouched down low, hidden by the shadow of the building. Carl was outside Rivera’s office, and someone had him pinned against the wall.

“What the fuck are you doing, King?”

“Nothing, man. Just lost my keys. Was heading home.”

“No, you weren’t. You were trying to break in.”

“Are you kidding me, Marko? Break in for what? I dropped my keys back here, taking a piss.”

A man in a suit walked up, glancing around like he was checking for witnesses.

“Take him out,” he ordered.

Marko hesitated. “But he’s one of us...”

“I don’t care,” Rivera snapped, then he punched Carl hard in the face.

Carl slumped down the wall, landing hard on the pavement. He sat there, dazed.

The growl that followed made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

She came out of the shadows. Aurora. She didn’t lunge at first, just circled them, nipping and growling, with her teeth bared. When Rivera drew his foot back to kick at her, she snapped forward, teeth sinking into his ankle. He screamed as her fangs locked on him. The crunch of bone echoed off the alley walls. She let go, snarling again but her eyes never left

them. Beautiful. Terrifying. Divine rage wrapped in pink-painted claws.

The men scrambled away, shouting.

Aurora pranced around Carl and licked his face. He just sat there, laughing like an idiot.

“Oh my god,” I muttered. “He’s in love.”

Brax shook his head. “Jesus, Roxy. You fucked this guy?”

I shrugged. “I mean... he’s pretty good in bed.”

Brax huffed a laugh. “I’m not even mad. I just feel like we should talk about your standards.”

I snorted, and we continued walking back to the shop.

A few minutes later, Aurora and Carl walked in. She was still nude, so I grabbed her something off the rack to throw on.

“You think anyone followed you?” Brax asked.

Aurora shook her head. “No, they headed out to the north side of town and got into a black sedan.”

Brax nodded. “Find out anything?”

Carl pulled out his phone and passed it to Brax. “I did.”

Brax thumbed through some images of what looked like documents. “Thanks, Carl. Can you send them to Roxy?”

“Done,” Carl said.

“Listen,” Brax said, locking eyes with him. “I appreciate what you did, but lay low. We don’t need them getting any ideas; we’re on to them. And I don’t think the girls would be very happy with me if something happened to you.”

Carl had the biggest shit-eating grin on his face, which Brax entirely ignored. He just stood up, grabbed my hand, and took me to the truck.

It was quiet on the drive home.

I sat in the passenger seat, scrolling through the photos Carl had sent, blurry shots of documents, addresses, payoffs, things I didn't even fully understand yet. Brax was lost in thought. His hands stayed locked on the wheel, every muscle in his arms flexed like he was ready to rip the steering column clean off.

I kept my voice even, trying to focus on the facts. "Some of these look like bank statements. Or something tied to the property. I think this one's a name... maybe a shell company?"

Still nothing.

I turned toward him, watching the way his eyes stayed glued to the road. His whole body radiated tension, wound so tight it was like sitting next to a storm that hadn't hit yet.

"You think we should meet with the pack tonight?" I asked, softer now. "Or wait until morning before the council meeting?"

Nothing.

He didn't even flinch, just kept driving, his knuckles white on the wheel.

"You're not even listening to me," I muttered, more to myself than him.

I thought it was the photos. The danger. The council.

But then he spoke, voice low and strained, almost like it hurt to admit it.

“I’m pissed at myself,” he muttered, “Parading you around town like everything’s fine... sitting at dinner, laughing, like we’re untouchable. It was stupid, Roxy. Rivera and Marko were right down the fucking street.”

Ah.

There it was.

He wasn’t angry about the photos.

He was angry at himself. For letting his guard down. For putting me at risk.

I didn’t say a word.

I just reached over, palmed him through his jeans, and slowly unbuttoned them.

His breath hitched, but he didn’t stop me.

I leaned in, brushing my mouth along his jaw. “Pull over.”

He did.

Of course he did.

As soon as the truck rumbled to a stop, I straddled him, yanking my dress over my head and tossing it aside.

No bra. No panties.

His eyes went black, hands instinctively grabbing my thighs as I settled onto his lap, bare and shameless.

“No panties or bra?” His voice came out rough.

I grinned, leaning in close to his ear. “What? Less to worry about if we shift.”

He let out something between a laugh and a curse, but I didn't give him time to think.

I reached between us, guiding him inside me, slow and steady, until he filled me completely.

"Fuck," he rasped, his head falling back against the seat.

His arms slid under my thighs, lifting me easily, his palms splayed across my back, holding me like I was something he'd never let go of. He started to move me, slow and deep, helping me ride him with steady, possessive strength.

His mouth found my chest, licking and sucking my nipples, his breath hot and desperate against my skin.

"God, you're beautiful," he groaned, dragging his tongue over my skin before biting down just enough to make me gasp.

I moaned, grabbing the handle above the window for leverage as he thrust up into me, slow but deep, every stroke making my breath hitch.

"You feel like everything I've ever needed," he panted, moving harder, every word falling apart between us.

We lost ourselves in it. We were sweaty, shaking, grinding together until we both fell apart, coming in a tangle of heat and breathless curses.

Still gasping, I pushed the door open and slipped outside, completely naked, flushed and glowing under the moonlight.

"Woman," Brax choked, still half-wrecked in the driver's seat, "what the hell are you doing?"

I glanced back with a wicked grin, eyes flashing.

“Catch me if you can.”

Then I shifted.

Fur replaced skin as I bolted into the woods, wild and free, laughing inside the bond.

Behind me, I heard him scrambling, muttering curses as he ripped off his clothes.

“Shit,” Brax growled, shifting mid-stride as he gave chase.

We ran together through the trees, our wolves wild and free under the moonlight. I led him through the forest, darting and weaving, until I felt the shift inside him, the storm finally breaking, his spirit light and unburdened.

We slowed together, padding back toward the truck, breathless and content.

As we shifted back near the truck, I watched him tug on his jeans, barefoot and grumbling.

“Shit,” Brax muttered, looking around. “Where the hell is my boot?”

I doubled over laughing, unable to stop myself.

“I swear to god,” he grumbled, standing there with one boot, his hair wild with a leaf sticking out of it. “I’m going to have to limp into the cabin like this.”

I was still laughing as we climbed back into the truck, both of us flushed and glowing, the night air filled with the sound of our laughter all the way home.

Pack Politics

Brax stood at the head of the long table, shoulders squared, tension rolling off him like heat. The council's eyes were focused and waiting.

"I have news," Brax said, "My contact found something. Joel Rivera's been working with Redding... and Marko."

A hush swept the room. Chairs creaked. One of the elders, Laird, grunted. "Redding? That name's not new."

A beat of silence followed the name.

Then someone muttered, "Redding was the original suspect, wasn't he? For the fire that killed Zoltan and Reign."

My stomach clenched at the thought.

Another voice cut in, sharper now. "Rivera, he's the one running for mayor, right?"

Brax nodded. "Clean image. Public campaign. But behind the scenes, he's buying loyalty and running drugs. And now we know he's working with two Kings."

I rolled my eyes. So this wasn't just politics. It was legacy. And they were using our blood as currency.

Across the table, Zane's eyes met mine. Wide. Distant. Like the floor had just cracked open beneath both of us, and we were trying not to fall through. We didn't say a word. Didn't have to because hearing it out loud felt like someone had reached into my chest and ripped out something I didn't even know I'd been protecting.

Brax nodded once. "My contact with the Kings broke into Rivera's office. He found evidence, documents, names, and phone calls. It's solid. Rivera's not just stirring shit up he's colluding with the same bloodlines that tried to wipe us out."

Zane gritted his teeth, but he stayed silent.

The head of the council, Mara, silver-haired and sharper than wolfsbane, met Brax's gaze. "So, you're sure about this?"

"I wouldn't be here if I weren't."

She nodded slowly. "Then we trust you to handle it."

Silence again. Heavier now. And final.

"Quietly," she added. "The last thing we need is a public war in this town."

Brax didn't argue. Just dipped his head once. "It'll be handled."

As he turned to go, his mother Mara's voice stopped him. "You said Redding was with Marko?"

Brax paused, glancing back. "Yeah."

Her expression darkened. “Then whatever you do, make sure it ends this time.”

A chair scraped back.

I turned as a silver-haired man stood, clearing his throat. His presence filled the room.

“I want to express a public apology,” he said, his voice so thick it made my spine stiffen. “From the council.”

I didn’t breathe.

His eyes found mine. “To you, Roxy Abbott.”

Hearing Abbott said like that made my gut twist.

“I also want to speak on behalf of those of us who should’ve known better.” He glanced at Brax. “Even if you were human, some of us are still stuck in old ways. Fear. Pride. We should’ve trusted you, Brax. You’ve never failed this pack.”

Brax didn’t move. His face gave nothing away. But I felt the tension in his fingers where they rested near mine, like he was holding it all in because letting go would mean cracking something wide open.

We got halfway to the truck before his father’s voice cut through the air.

“Damn it, Brax. Stop.”

Brax froze mid-step, his whole body locked tight. He didn’t turn, not right away. After a breath, he finally turned, his expression sharp enough to draw blood.

His father didn’t flinch. He met Brax’s glare head-on, voice steady but heavy.

“We owe you an apology, son. Both of us.”

Brax’s mother stepped up beside him, nodding quietly. “I know we haven’t made it easy for you, Braxton, and I’m sorry for that. This isn’t the way we want to meet your mate. I’ve been waiting for this since the day you were born.”

Brax held her gaze for a long, tense second, then, to my surprise, half-laughed and cocked his head. “You’re damn right you do owe me an apology.”

His mother huffed, a bit of a smirk creeping in. “We should’ve trusted you. We just had all the elders breathing down our damn necks, and you know how your dad gets with them.”

Brax’s father shot her a look, clearly annoyed. And in him, I saw Brax. The stubborn pride. The weight of leadership. The refusal to bend unless it was on their terms. For the first time, I didn’t just understand Brax; I understood where he came from.

Brax’s mother gently took my hand. “I know what this looks like. But we’re a strong family, Roxy. This is just the kind of thing that happens with wolves and testosterone.”

I squeezed her hand and smiled. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Abbott.”

She winked. “Call me Mara.”

Brax and his father didn’t hug. They didn’t shake hands. But something passed between them a flicker of understanding, and tension eased, if only slightly.

Then Brax turned back to the truck.

And I followed.

I climbed into the truck beside him, the engine growling to life. The drive back was quiet but not tense quiet, not anymore. Brax's parents had apologized, the pack had owned up, and for the first time in weeks I saw something ease in him. His shoulders weren't locked like stone, and his jaw wasn't one flex away from cracking his teeth.

By the time we pulled into the drive, the night air had cooled. I stepped out and shivered. "It's chilly out tonight."

Brax shot me a look, a ghost of a smirk on his mouth. "You haven't been exposed to a drunken pack bonfire yet."

I gave him a lopsided grin. "A what now?"

He didn't answer. Just took my hand and nodded toward the glow already flickering through the trees.

The glow turned out to be a full-blown firepit, flames snapping high enough to spit sparks into the night. Half the pack had already gathered, dragging out mismatched chairs, a sagging loveseat, and what looked suspiciously like my kitchen stool.

Aurora was in charge of the marshmallows, and from the way she waved the bag at Jace, it looked more like a weapon than dessert.

"This is science," Jace declared, skewering his marshmallow with exaggerated precision. "Golden brown perfection only."

Zane held up his own, already half-charred. "Real wolves eat them black."

Ace cracked a beer and leaned back, smirking. “Yeah, wolves with no taste buds.”

The group laughed, the sound warm and easy. No one was looking over their shoulder for danger. They were just... together.

Aurora shoved a stick in my hand. “You’re up, shop girl. Don’t let Zane corrupt you.”

“Too late,” I said, eyeing the bag of marshmallows. “I’ve always liked my sugar with a little fire.”

The circle broke into laughter again, and through the flames I caught Brax watching me. Not with sharp edges or the weight of command, but with something warmer. Softer. Love, plain and certain.

He loved seeing me here laughing with his pack, fitting into the chaos like I’d always been meant to. I realized how lucky I am... to be sitting here, to be with a man who really loved me.

Jace plopped down beside me, stick in hand and a marshmallow already threatening to slide off. “So, Roxy, I’ve been thinking.”

Zane groaned from across the fire. “Uh oh. This never turns out good.”

“Shut up,” Jace shot back. “I think you should let me handle the shop’s social media.”

Zane nearly choked on his beer. “What, like a Team Jacob thirst trap? Because that’s literally what you’ve got going on in yours.”

The whole circle erupted in laughter, and Jace's shoulders slumped like I'd just told him Santa wasn't real.

I slipped an arm around him. "It's okay, kid. We can talk about it. Honestly, you might be onto something. I've been avoiding it, but no shirtless pics."

Jace perked back up, grinning. "Hey, whatever sells the merchandise!"

Another wave of laughter rolled through the group, even Ace nearly tipping his chair back with it.

And across the fire, Brax's eyes stayed locked on me...

I couldn't tell you how many beers we went through, but by the time my words started to slur, Brax was on me scooping me up like a rag doll.

"We're going to bed, kids," he announced.

"Hey... what if I'm *not* ready to go to bed?" I snarled, squirming in his arms.

He gave me the softest kiss, tongue flicking to catch my top lip. The fire crackled, the whole pack watching us with shit-eating grins.

I raised one arm in defeat. "Yep. Goodnight, kids."

The group howled with laughter as Brax carried me off, smug bastard that he was.

Deals and Dominance

The pack gathered in the kitchen. I kept my distance, making another pot of coffee for the boys.

Stark and Ace sat at the table, their voices low.

“We’ve been following Rivera,” Stark said. “We know his routines. Every week, he meets Marko and Redding for a drug run outside of town, up on that forest reserve road.”

Zane entered, brushing off his jacket. “I’ve confirmed with Carl; he’s handled things inside the club. He’s got access to a chop shop that’ll take care of Rivera’s car. Meetings are scheduled for tonight.”

Brax nodded. “Good. Ace, Stark. I’ll need you in the forest as backup in case anything pops off. He won’t know what hit him.”

He turned to Zane. “You handle getting the vehicle to Carl?”

Zane gave a sharp nod in agreement.

“Sunday at midnight, then.”

“And I expect you all at the meeting with the Kings tonight,” Brax added, pouring a cup of coffee like he wasn’t casually scheduling a murder spree.

My mind was spinning.

They’re going to kill Rivera.

Not just confront him. Not scare him off. **Kill him.**

Brax had always radiated a quiet kind of threat, the kind you didn’t notice until it was too late. But this felt different, measured and merciless, served alongside eggs and black coffee like it was just another day.

I knew Rivera deserved it. I did. But knowing it didn’t stop the tight coil in my stomach or the tremble that hit my fingers as I reached for the plates.

I forced a deep breath and tried to move like everything was normal, like I didn’t feel the floor shifting under my feet. But when I looked up, they were all watching me, quiet and unreadable.

Brax crossed the room and wrapped his arms around me, his voice low against my temple.

“Don’t worry, Luna,” he murmured. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

Before I could answer, the phone on the counter started ringing. FaceTime.

I shot him a surprised glance. “You FaceTime now?”

He didn’t answer, just swiped the screen, and the call connected.

And oh... oh no.

The man on the screen lounged back in a leather chair, boots kicked up, whiskey glass in hand, like this was some kind of goddamn photo shoot for *Dangerous Older Men Monthly*. Salt-and-pepper hair, scruff just enough to tempt, and a faint scar slicing across his cheek that only made him look more dangerous.

And smug. God, he was smug.

“Braxton,” he drawled, grinning wide. “Didn’t think I’d hear from you so soon.”

Braxton?

Oh, I was absolutely leaning in now. No way was I missing this.

And he noticed.

Oh, he noticed.

“Well, look at you,” he said, eyes locking on mine, sharp and amused. “Who’s this?”

Brax exhaled hard, clearly annoyed. “Roxy and I mated.”

I raised my brows at that little revelation, but I wasn’t offended. I was too busy staring at the man on the screen, who seemed to be *thoroughly* enjoying every ounce of discomfort rolling off my man.

“Ahhh.” His voice was pure smugness, eyes glinting with mischief. “Living up to those Alpha expectations, huh? Mom did mention it.”

He looked back at me, that grin widening even more. *Brax has a brother?*

“Roxy, was it?” His tone dipped lower, smooth as honey but baiting Brax just to watch him twitch. “Can I call you Rox?”

I started to nod yes before I could stop myself. I was that charmed, and Brax cut him off with a snap.

“No.”

That one word sliced through the air, sharp enough to make my head snap toward him. His eyes were locked on me, hard with warning.

Oh, this was *gold*.

He clearly saw the amusement I wasn’t bothering to hide. He grinned like the devil himself, absolutely thriving on it.

“Older brother,” he said, smirking like it was his full-time job, “and, obviously, the better-looking one. Names Brayson.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it and from the way Brax’s brows drew together, I knew I’d just found my new favorite person.

The boys shifted gears after that, falling into some heavy conversation about Rivera and timing details. How to make him disappear without raising suspicion.

I sat back, watching them talk, but my brain had a death wish and went straight to wondering what Brayson would be like in bed.

Probably nastier than Brax.

Dangerous Older Men Monthly.

Yeah, I’d subscribe. That’s exactly when Brax looked up at me, because he’d heard it.

Every filthy thought.

By the time the phone call ended, my pulse was still tripping over itself and Brax was watching me like he already knew every filthy thought in my head. I tried to shake it off, but there wasn't much time to dwell, not with the Kings expecting us tonight. And nothing sobers you faster than walking straight from pack drama into biker politics.

The meeting with the Kings took place inside the tattoo shop after closing. No neon lights. No music. Just silence and shadows and the faint hum of the old fridge in the back.

It was casual on the surface, masked as normal business, but the tension in the room was anything but.

Men filed in one by one, pretending to wait for appointments. Leather cuts. Heavy boots. Inked hands and tired eyes that had seen too much. Zane sat on a stool near the back with his arms crossed. Carl stood behind the counter, watching every move.

Butch arrived last, as expected. The door opened with a heavy creak, and he stepped inside like he owned the place. A chilling silence hung in the air, the kind that spoke volumes about his intimidating aura. He was tall, silver-haired, with a commanding presence. A weathered leather jacket hugged his broad frame. The back was stitched with the emblem that read Redwood Kings, the rough thread work showing a tilted crown balanced over a pair of motorcycle handlebars, and a grinning skull nestled menacingly beneath. He didn't need to say a word. That patch said enough.

He didn't sit. He didn't smile. He just looked at Brax.

"Let's hear it."

Brax didn't waste time. "We know about Rivera. And we know about Marko and Redding. We have proof. Movement. Money. Meetings. This isn't the first time Redding's been a problem."

Butch's expression didn't change. "You think I don't already know?"

"No," Brax said, voice low. "I think you're a smart man. And smart men wait until they're sure."

Butch's gaze narrowed. "Marko's been ducking runs. Redding too. Slipping in whispers when they think I'm not listening. But going rogue on wolves?" He shook his head once. "That's a death sentence."

Carl cleared his throat lightly. "They've been leveraging your name with outsiders. Promising protection they can't actually give."

That got a reaction. Butch's lip curled, just slightly.

"Those two forgot what this club was built on," he muttered. "Loyalty. Not power."

He looked around the room, letting the moment settle.

Then he turned back to Brax. "You're not asking for war?"

"No," Brax said. "Just accountability. And space to handle Rivera ourselves."

Butch nodded once. "You'll have both."

The air changed again. Tension didn't disappear, but it shifted like a deal had been made in blood, not words.

“I’ll handle Marko and Redding,” Butch said. “By the time the sun’s up Monday, they’ll be ghosts.”

“And Rivera?” Brax asked, already knowing the answer.

Butch held his gaze. “He’s yours.”

Brax nodded once in return, then motioned for his pack to move. The meeting was over.

Butch’s men filed out quietly, one by one, boots heavy on the old wood floor.

Carl lingered near the counter, arms folded. “Well, that went better than expected.”

Brax stepped toward him. “Watch your back until it’s done.”

Carl nodded. “Always do.”

Brax paused, then added, “Zane and Aurora will continue to stay here in the loft for now.”

Carl raised a brow. “For security?”

Brax smirked. “More like babysitting.”

Zane groaned. “Fuck. Seriously?”

“Take the couch,” Brax said.

“I *know* what’s happened on that couch.”

Carl grinned. “He’s not wrong.”

Brax turned, already walking away. “Don’t make me regret this.”

High Heat

The heat was unbearable.

I'd been on edge all day, snapping at Carl, snapping at Brax, snapping at the air for daring to exist near me. Everything felt too tight and too *hot*. Every time I tried to focus, my brain kept circling back to the same need, clawing at me from the inside out.

I heard the low *purr* of a motorcycle pulling up outside.

The door swung open, and there he was, every bit the leather-clad bastard I'd imagined during the phone call with Brax.

Except hotter in person. Way hotter.

Brayson.

That smug smile. Those eyes. That body looked like it could wreck me without even trying. "*Holy hell,*" I muttered under my breath before I could stop myself.

That was all it took.

Brax's growl ripped through the shop, sharp and lethal.

The entire room froze.

Brayson's eyes flicked over to Brax, a lazy grin spreading wider, like he *thrived* on the kind of tension he created.

He didn't even need to speak. He just gave me a look, one that made my skin prickle under my clothes, and walked in farther, giving me a once-over that made my knees wobble.

"Sup, Brayson," Zane muttered as he headed out, like this wasn't a full-on meltdown in progress.

I barely registered Zane brushing past us, tossing a box toward the recycling bin outside.

And then Brax, clearly one second away from tearing down the walls, ground out the words through clenched teeth.

"Roxy. Carl. This is my brother. Brayson."

Carl, still oblivious to everything except the shiny new motorcycle parked outside, grinned like an idiot and stuck out his hand. "Nice ride, man. What's it got under the hood?"

Brayson shook his hand, eyes never really leaving me. "Enough," he said, his voice just as dangerous in person as it was on the phone.

I couldn't breathe.

Then Aurora appeared out of nowhere, snatching my arm with all the force of a woman trying to save me from myself.

"Outside. Now."

I didn't try to fight it. I let her drag me out into the fresh air, collapsing against the side of the building like I'd just run a marathon. Zane was there, tossing more boxes into the bin, glancing at us like we were the town's latest freak show.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Aurora didn’t blink. “Don’t ask.”

Zane nodded and walked back inside without another word, the door swinging shut behind him.

I groaned, putting my hands on my face.

“Seriously, what the hell is *wrong* with me?” I gasped, my voice half a laugh, half a cry for help. “I’m irritable, I’m sweating, and all I can think about is getting *wrecked*, like ten ways from sideways, aggressively.”

Aurora *snorted*, doubling over in laughter.

“Oh, babe,” she cackled, wiping a tear from her eye, “you’re in heat.”

I froze, staring at her.

“I’m what?!”

She kept laughing, clutching her stomach. “I’m not even in heat, but that room? That room was so thick with testosterone my vaginal lips started waving hello.”

I choked on a laugh, collapsing next to her.

“Aurora, oh my god...”

We couldn’t stop. We were wheezing, doubled over, laughing like maniacs.

Through my hysterics, I muttered, “That’s a three-way I wouldn’t mind having.”

Aurora let out the loudest squeal I’d ever heard. “Please! Your brother’s not bad either. I could take down all *four* of them.”

And right then, like the universe had *perfect* comedic timing, Brax's voice slammed through the comm link, low and full of growling Alpha fury.

"I can hear you."

We froze.

Aurora's face lit up with pure, wicked delight.

She grinned. "Oops."

I groaned, face burning, every muscle in my body screaming for death, or at least some kind of divine intervention.

"Oh god. I'm so dead."

Aurora just kept smiling, completely unbothered as she pulled her hair into a messy knot on top of her head.

"Eh," she said, clearly amused by my misery, "at least you'll die satisfied."

I shot her a look. "That's the thing. I *should* be satisfied. We have a great sex life. An *insane* sex life. And yet..."

She cut me off with a knowing smirk. "It's the wolf, babe. The heat makes it ten times worse. You could screw Brax senseless and still wake up ready to climb him like a tree an hour later."

I groaned again, slumping further against the wall, muttering something that sounded vaguely like, *Kill me now*.

Aurora stretched lazily, looking far too pleased with herself. "Hey, I've got an idea," she said, standing up and slipping her sunglasses on like she wasn't about to suggest

something completely unhinged. “It’s hot out. Let’s head up to the cabin and hit the river. The cold water always helps.”

That’s your solution? Ice-bathing my horny ass?”

She shrugged with a grin. “It works. Plus, you’ll thank me later. Trust me. The river never lets you down.”

Despite myself, I laughed, shaking my head.

“Fine,” I grumbled, dragging myself up from the ground. “But if I drown because my body just gives out, you’ll have to save me.”

Aurora just winked, already walking toward the door.

I stomped inside like I meant business and clapped my hands once, loud enough to snap everyone’s heads up.

“Alright, listen up!” I called, grinning as every face turned my way. “Pack day at the river. Everyone’s going. Aurora and I will grab supplies for burgers and sides. You boys,” I pointed toward Brax and Brayson, “go get the barbecue fired up and ready to roll. Carl, close up shop. You’re coming too.” They all just kind of stared at me for a second, like they couldn’t quite process that I was giving orders now.

Brayson pushed off the wall, stretching like a dog and giving an exaggerated, slow hip-thrust. With a grin so wide it should’ve been illegal. He barked out, “Well, you heard the lady! Pack it up, it’s burger time, boys!”

Brax was staring at me, somewhere between amused and turned on. His eyes glimmered in that way that always made my pulse skip, but he didn’t say a word as I walked right over to him. I stood on my toes, gave him a quick, lingering peck

on the cheek, and couldn't resist smirking as I whispered, "See? I'm good at taking control."

His lips curved into a slow, wicked grin, voice dropping low just for me.

"It's pretty hot, babe. Good decision."

◆ Brax ◆

The sun hit the river just right, turning the surface gold as the pack splashed below, loud and wild. Roxy was right in the thick of it, hair wet and wild, laughing with her whole chest as Zane lunged at her from behind and sent her flying into the water with a dramatic cannonball.

I stood at the edge of the deck, tending the grill but watching the scene below with quiet intensity. My gaze lingered on her, watching as she surfaced, grinning wide, tossing her head back as water streamed down her cheeks.

There it was. That bond.

She and Zane wrestled and tumbled in the shallows like they'd been together their whole lives. No awkwardness, no hesitation, just instinctive, feral playfulness.

Carl wasn't far behind, floating in a tube with Aurora while she shouted at him to stop trying to tip her over. The whole scene was ridiculous, loud, and so damn good it made something deep in my chest ease. This was pack. This was family.

"Hell of a girl you got there, brother."

I didn't even have to look to know Brayson had sidled up beside me, perched on the edge of the deck with a beer in hand, his signature cocky grin in place.

"Where the hell did you find her out here?"

I let out a soft grunt, flipping a burger. "She found us. She's Zane's sister."

Brayson looked stunned for once. "No shit. That's... Damn. Feels like destiny or some shit."

I huffed a low laugh, shaking my head. "Fuck off."

Brayson just chuckled, lifting his beer in salute. "She's solid. Was starting to think you were more like me than you wanted to admit."

My eyes followed Roxy as Zane launched her through the air again, her laughter echoing through the clearing.

I hesitated for half a second, then muttered, "I asked her to marry me."

Brayson's head whipped around. "Marry? Didn't you already mate?"

I shrugged, flipping the last burger onto the tray. "She deserves more than just the bond."

To my surprise, Brayson didn't laugh. He just nodded, quiet, like he understood more than he let on. After a long moment, he tipped his beer back, gaze watching the others down by the water.

"What about you?" I asked, eyeing him sidelong. "Are we gonna talk about how you avoid family just as much as I do?"

Brayson snorted, the grin sliding right back into place. "Touche, brother. Touche."

He stretched lazily, glancing toward the horizon. "You know pack life's never been for me. I'm making good money as a fixer. Mostly cleaning up for other packs. Some vampire stuff. Bike clubs. A coven once. Weird shit, man. Always some mess to solve... and an endless supply of ladies."

I just shook my head, half-amused.

"One of these days," I muttered, a smirk tugging at my lips, "someone's gonna ruin that."

Brayson laughed, deep and unbothered, eyes glimmering with that familiar mischief. But then something flickered behind it.

"Maybe." He took a long pull from the bottle, then glanced sideways. "You referring to Kari?"

"She still talks to you after high school?" I asked, arching a brow.

He gave a soft laugh, barely there. "Yeah. We still see each other from time to time."

The smile dropped from my face. "Brayson..."

He held up a hand before I could go further. "I know. Trust me, I know. Mom's on my ass about her all the time."

He said it like a joke, but his eyes didn't quite meet mine. He'd been chewing on guilt for years and just got used to the taste.

I let it go. For now.

After a quiet moment, I asked, “You sticking around for a while?”

“Got another job lined up in a week, Braxton. But I’ll be better this time. I promise.”

“You know the full moon’s coming.” I gave him a skeptical side-eye, but a faint smile tugged at my lips all the same.

“Yeah?” he said finally. “Thought you didn’t like strays.”

“You’re not a stray,” I said. “You’re family.”

In the clearing below, Roxy shrieked with laughter as Zane dumped her into the water again, her joy echoing through the trees.

My heart clenched, but this time, it wasn’t worry.

It was everything I’d ever wanted, right in front of me.

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Fists and Fury

The bar hummed with low music and the sharp click of pool balls. Carl and Brayson were posted up at the table, trading shots. Not the drink kind, the competitive, teeth-gritting, cue-slamming kind. Aurora was half-watching them from her perch, Carl shamelessly flirting with her between turns, while Brayson smirked into his drink like he had dirt on everyone here.

I sipped my drink, shaking my head. “Who would’ve thought,” I said, tilting my glass toward her with a grin, “you’d end up dating my ex-situationship and somehow Brax is letting him breathe in the same room.”

Aurora let out a soft, wicked laugh. “Please,” she purred, leaning back with a smug twirl of her straw, “I should be thanking you for falling for my Alpha and leaving me this prime meat.” She sent me a wink, completely unbothered by the chaos she’d just casually tossed into the air.

I couldn't help but snort, laughing as I watched Carl blatantly ogle her while pretending to line up a shot. "Remind me to never underestimate your taste again."

Across the room, Brax sat in his usual brooding glory, watching everything with that sharp gaze. I caught the faintest glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he listened to us giggle like teenagers. He didn't interrupt, just leaned back, letting us have our fun.

A slow song drifted through the speakers, low and sultry, cutting through the buzz of laughter and clinking glasses. I caught Brax's eye, and I knew that look.

He stood and walked toward me like a man on a mission. He offered his hand, and I didn't hesitate. The second his fingers wrapped around mine, I felt the heat that never quite cooled between us. He pulled me close, settling his hands low on my hips as we started to sway. His chest was solid and warm against mine, his arms wrapping around me, holding me like he never intended to let go.

God, I loved this. Being wrapped up in him, tucked under those massive arms, my body fitting against his like I was made for it, did something to me. He felt like a mountain, towering and unmovable, and I never wanted to stop climbing.

I tipped my head up, smirking at him. "You gonna dance with me like this at our wedding?"

His grip tightening just enough to make me shiver. His voice was low, rough, that familiar growl rumbling against

my skin. “Oh, I’m gonna do a lot more than dance with you at our wedding, sweetheart.”

That was when I felt him, hard and insistent, pressing right against me through his jeans. And this man wasn’t even a little sorry about it. I let out a breathy laugh, sliding my hand down, bold as hell, pressing my palm right over the thick length straining against his zipper. I kept my voice sweet and teasing, tilting my head to meet his gaze. “Settle down, tiger. I’ll take care of that later.”

Every muscle in his body tightened, but before he could speak, Brayson’s voice rang out across the bar, loud enough to make half the place turn and look.

“Brother, you got yourself a spicy one!” he hollered, grinning from ear to ear.

I didn’t even bother pulling my hand away. I just smirked, leaning back into Brax’s chest, feeling the heat rolling off him like a furnace.

When I made my way back to the booth, I gave my wolf a hard pat on the ass and tossed a grin over my shoulder. “You’d better watch yourself, Alpha, or I’ll have to drag you into the bathroom stall.”

Some drunk stumbled into me, breath reeking of cheap whiskey. Leaning in too close, as he let his eyes drag down my body.

“Well, damn,” he slurred, grinning like a fool. “What’s a fine little thing like you wasting her time with *that*?” He jerked his chin toward Brax.

I arched my brow, unimpressed. “Not a good idea, buddy.”
He didn’t stop, clearly suicidal. “Heard about their kind,”
he sneered. “Dogs like that? Can’t be tamed.”

Snap.

Brax’s cracked a pool cue clean in half.

He stood there, slow and lethal, eyes locked on the guy,
every inch of him radiating *danger*.

I muttered, “Oh, here we go.”

Brax started walking across the room with death in his
eyes.

Before he could reach the guy, Brayson slid in front of him,
palm to Brax’s chest, a half-laugh in his voice.

“Stand down, brother,” Brayson warned, though his grin
said he kinda wanted to let it happen. “Not worth your temper
tonight.”

The drunk? He *grinned*, too drunk to know how close he
was to death.

“Ahh, look at that,” he snickered, swaying. “Another
guard dog comin’ to heel.”

Brayson’s grin widened, sharp, and full of amusement.

He leaned in, close enough for the guy to smell the danger
on his breath.

“Oh,” Brayson said, voice low and dark, “I’m a hell of a lot
worse than a guard dog.”

WHAM.

One punch. Fast. Brutal. The guy crumpled like wet paper.

That’s when all hell broke loose.

Tables flipped. Chairs scraped. Shouts echoed through the bar.

Carl was already mid-swing, laughing as he clocked a guy who grabbed his collar. Brayson was loving every second, fists flying, wild and feral.

I stayed in my seat, calm and unbothered, until another drunk lunged toward Aurora.

I finished my drink and *smashed* my bottle right over his head.

Glass shattered, and he went down hard.

I set the busted neck of the bottle on the table, muttering, “Amateurs.”

Brax finally had enough.

He grabbed Carl and Brayson by their collars mid-swing, dragging them out like misbehaving kids, both of them still laughing and throwing half-hearted punches as he hauled them toward the door.

The second they hit the pavement, Brax let go, shoving them both toward the parking lot.

The three of them burst into *laughter*, adrenaline high, bruised and breathless.

Brayson wiped a smear of blood from his lip, grinning wide.

“Damn, brother,” he chuckled. “Just like the good ol’ days.”

Carl, still catching his breath, snorted. “Shit. I would’ve paid good money to see you lose it back there.”

“You and me both,” I said. I enjoyed every second.

Brax glared at all of them, but the corner of his mouth *almost* twitched.

“Next time,” he growled, grabbing me by the waist and lifting me clean off the ground and spinning me around. “I’m leaving your ass at home.”

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Fire and Gasoline

Brax was busy with pack business, so I decided I'd make my way down to the shop. It was nice having a break, but I felt like I was neglecting it. The store had been such a huge part of my identity for years. Funny how time changes things.

I parked out back and slipped in through the rear entrance, fully expecting to catch Brayson and Carl in some mischief since both of their bikes were parked out front. To my surprise, the store was quiet. Carl was leaning back in his chair, not a customer in sight. He didn't hear me come in, so when I cleared my throat behind him, he jumped about two feet.

"There's iced coffee waiting for you in the truck if you help me carry these boxes."

He recovered quick, flashing that smug grin. "Well, damn. Look what the cat dragged in."

"Nice piece, Carl. When'd you get this done?"

I walked up way too comfortable and ran my fingers across the side of his neck. The piece was floral and bright, with a black crow in the center. His mouth curled into that all-too-familiar smirk.

“Aurora helped me, actually. I drew the piece, and when my arm got tired she tattooed the back where it was harder to reach. I’ve been teaching her. She’s getting pretty good.” He beamed with pride.

“It’s sexy,” I teased.

“Sexy?” He grinned. “Thanks, boss.”

We made our way out to the truck and hauled in boxes of new inventory I’d picked up at a swap meet. After several trips, I grabbed the iced coffees from the console and headed back inside.

This time, we had company.

“Hey, let us know if we can help you find anything,” I called automatically.

The woman turned. Dark hair, sharp cheekbones, leather jacket. Beautiful, but not soft. She looked like she’d lived harder years than I had, and it clung to her in a way that made her striking.

“Hi, I just... I saw the bike out front. Thought someone I knew might be here.”

“The bike?” I asked, glancing at Carl. “You looking for him?”

Her eyes flicked to Carl and back. “No.”

“Oh. Then you must be here for Brayson.” I smiled, adding just enough bite. “Hi. I’m Roxy. Brax’s girlfriend. And this is my shop.”

“Hi.” She hesitated only a second. “Kari.”

She didn’t seem like the type for small talk, so I didn’t push. I bent to unpack a box while she lingered, and Carl caught my eye, giving me a sly side glance. I shrugged. Beats me.

“I was just surprised,” Kari said, almost to herself. “Figured Brayson had left town. Seeing his bike threw me.”

“No problem, girl. He’s probably helping Brax with some pack stuff. If I had to guess, he’ll be around until at least Friday.

At the word *pack*, something flickered across her face. A tiny crease in her brow, the barest hesitation, like she’d just heard a word that didn’t fit. But just as fast, she smoothed it over, her eyes unreadable.

I filed it away. Weird. Maybe she didn’t care. Whatever.

“Want me to tell him you stopped by?” I added.

Her mouth pressed thin. “No thanks. Actually, please don’t.”

And with that, she huffed out the door.

“Well, that wasn’t weird at all.”

Carl leaned back in his chair, smug as hell. “She was something.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, staring after her. “Like trouble wrapped in leather.”

I was restocking shelves, sliding vintage glassware into place when my hand hit something wedged at the bottom of the box. A pair of handcuffs. I snorted under my breath, slipped them into my pocket before Carl could notice. No way was I explaining those.

That's when heavy footsteps creaked down from the loft. I turned just in time to see Brayson strolling down the stairs. His hair mussed, shirt nowhere in sight, jeans hanging dangerously low on his hips. He was built just like Brax but thinner. He could benefit from some pack breakfasts.

I froze. "Wait a minute... what the hell are you doing up there?" My eyes narrowed. "Brynn?"

Carl barked out a laugh. "No, Roxy. Nobody's up there. I told him he could crash in the loft."

Brayson stretched like he owned the place, cocky smirk tugging at his mouth. "Sorry, Roxy. Hope you don't mind. Was too tired to ride out to the cabin."

"Mm-hm." I crossed my arms, eyeing him. "Well, someone came by looking for you. Kari?"

That wiped the grin off his face for half a beat. "Shit. Thanks." He leaned against the counter, all tanned muscle and sin, like the word trouble had grown a body. "I'll take care of it."

"Take care of it?" I repeated, my eyes betraying me as they dipped down to the hair on his chest before I snapped them back up.

Brayson caught it, smirk widening as he stepped closer. "Good thing Brax already mated you. Otherwise..." His gaze dragged. "...I might be tempted to test my luck." He gave a little hip thrust, and flashed a wicked grin.

Carl cackled from behind the counter. "Told you he was cocky."

My mouth dropped open. "Are you serious right now?"

"She knows I'm playing," he said with a wink, turning his attention to Carl. "What about you? Wanna ride?"

Carl glanced at me like a guilty kid asking for recess.

I rolled my eyes. "Go! You certainly deserve a day off. Be safe, boys. Try not to get arrested!"

When I finally made it home, I was surprised to find Brax already in bed. Reading glasses perched on his nose, newspaper in hand.

I slipped in beside him, curling close. "I'm sorry I'm so late. Lost track of time."

He set the paper aside, tugging me against his chest. "Do you want me to heat you up some dinner?"

I shook my head. "No, honey. I'm fine. Carl grabbed us something at the shop." I hesitated. "Hey... someone came by looking for Brayson. Kari?"

Brax slid off his glasses, ran a hand through my hair. "Kari's Brayson's ex. From high school."

"High school? Seriously?"

"Long story. Let's just say he never told her about us. She came to her own conclusions about some of his behavior, and

Brayson never bothered to explain. I don't know if it's because he was mad she didn't trust him, or because he thought she was better off without him. Still..." His voice softened. "Every time he's in town, they can't seem to stay away from each other."

"Wow," I murmured. "That explains so much about Brayson."

Brax's arm tightened around me, his voice low. "If there's any chance of my brother staying in town, it'll be because of Kari. Just be prepared, they're like fire and gasoline."

I went quiet, letting that sink in. Brayson's chaos. Kari's shadow. The way the two of them circled each other, like gravity itself, kept pulling them back together.

I curled into Brax, pressing my face against his chest. His scent was warm and grounding, his heartbeat steady under my ear. He smoothed a hand down my back, slow, possessive, like he was reminding me where I belonged. I let myself melt into him, safe and anchored, and drifted off in his arms.

Good Girl

“Where did you even find them?” I demanded, tugging at my wrists. The cuffs scraped against the headboard, metal biting skin as I struggled.

Brax’s grin was wicked, hair mussed from sleep. “They fell out of your pants when I tossed them in the laundry. All you had to do was ask nicely.”

My mouth dropped. “Brax...” I yanked, but the cuffs held firm. The sharp click of the lock echoed in the quiet room.

A nervous laugh bubbled out of me. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Challenge accepted.” He lifted my wrists higher, guiding them up the headboard, sliding the cuffs behind the posts until I was spread wide beneath him like he’d been planning this all night.

When his gaze met mine, it burned.

“When you imagined this, wildling...” His voice dropped low, dangerous. He perched on his knees between my thighs, his body looming, cock already hard and pulsing with intent. “How did you want it to play out?”

My heart stuttered as he leaned in, his breath hot against my ear.

“Did you want aggression?” he growled, ripping my panties away in one brutal motion. The fabric snapped, sharp against my skin.

His mouth closed over my nipple, tongue swirling, teeth grazing until I gasped.

“Or did you want to be teased?” he murmured, dragging the thick head of his cock in slow, taunting circles over my clit, heat coiling with every pass.

Then his tone shifted, louder and darker, meant to brand itself into me. “Do you want me to have my way with you?”

The cuffs bit into my wrists as I arched under him, breath catching. His eyes pinned mine, waiting for my answer.

Through the bond, I let the words slip free, trembling but sharp with need. *All of the above.*

His answering growl rumbled low and feral, vibrating through my ribs. In one brutal snap of his hips, he pressed his cock harder against my clit, teasing me with the weight of it, every vein pulsing with restrained violence.

“You greedy little thing,” he snarled, kissing me hard enough to bruise. His teeth caught my bottom lip before he pulled back, voice ragged. “You think you can take all of it?”

I whimpered, tugging uselessly at the cuffs, the steel grinding against the headboard. Yes.

His smirk was savage. "Then don't you dare look away, wildling. You asked for it all... and now you're gonna choke on it."

Instead of slamming into me, he leaned back on his knees, wrapping his fist around his girth. He stroked himself slowly, eyes never leaving mine. The cuffs scraped as yanked at them, desperate to touch him.

A low moan rumbled from his chest, dark and guttural. "Watch me, Roxy." His voice was rough, almost cruel. "Maybe I should just take care of myself right here while you watch. You don't want my cock, do you?"

The sight of him thick and hard in his hand, veins straining, the sound of his moaning shredding me. My thighs squeezed together, useless against the ache.

I yanked the cuffs until the headboard shook. "Please. I want it. I want you."

He chuckled. "Begging already? And I haven't even touched you yet, love."

His fist moved faster, precum glistening at the tip, catching the light as his chest rose and fell. My mouth went dry watching him, every stroke felt like torture. Then he slowed, tipping his head back, another moan ripping from his throat.

"I should cum right here," he snarled. "Paint your stomach, make you watch what you begged for slip away."

“No!” I screamed, thrashing against the cuffs. “Please, Brax, don’t.”

His eyes snapped open, merciless. *Shut. Up.* His voice cracked like thunder, Alpha power flooding the bond. His strokes quickened.

I whimpered, torn between watching and looking away. The sound of his pleasure, the sight of him stroking himself over me. It shredded every ounce of control I had.

His growl vibrated through the bond and he leaned in closer, lips brushing my ear, cock pressed against me. “I know you liked them watching when I claimed you,” he whispered. The cuffs rattled as I tugged, a helpless sound breaking from my throat.

His smirk was lethal. “Should I let them in, wildling? Should I open the bond and let them hear what kind of dirty girl their Luna really is?”

My eyes widened.

“Answer me.” His teeth grazed my jaw. “Do you want the pack to know how bad you beg for me? How wet you are right now with your wrists chained, sprawled out with your Alpha between your legs?”

The bond pulsed, alive, like he really could drag them into the mess of me.

Brax stood, towering, and unhooked the cuffs from the headboard. My arms ached as he pulled me upright, settling me on the edge of the mattress. His hand tightened around the chain, keeping me leashed even as he loomed above me.

“I bet you’d like to taste me right now,” he said, voice daring. Thick, slick, right in front of my lips. “Do you want it, Roxy?”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Yessss.”

His smirk deepened. “Then open.”

The heavy head slid over my tongue, salt and heat filling my mouth. For a heartbeat, I thought I had control again.

“Can you take it all?” His voice cut sharp as he grabbed the back of my head, fingers fisting in my hair. “Let’s find out.”

He thrust forward, slow at first, then deeper, harder. I gagged, eyes watering, wrists straining against the cuffs.

“That’s it,” he growled, hips rolling steadily as he fucked my mouth. “Take it all, wildling.”

His grip tightened, forcing me down further, spit running down my chin, tears spilling from my eyes. He pulled out just long enough to swipe his thumb across the mess at my lips.

“Messy little wolf.”

Then he shoved back in, rougher, groaning as I gagged around him. “Take it all, Roxy. Every inch.”

“Good girl,” he rasped, holding me down as he drove deep. “You’ll take what I give you.”

He pushed me back onto the mattress, as he reached over the nightstand. When he turned back, something glinted in his hand.

My breath caught.

He dangled my silver bullet above me, the cord swinging lazily and his smirk was pure sin. “You can have this...” His

smile was wicked. "...but only if you're a good girl."

Heat flooded my body, my skin burning for it.

Brax raised one finger to his lips. "Shhh." His eyes pinned mine, sharp and unrelenting. "Don't you make a sound."

I writhed, desperate, but he didn't move. Just held my toy like it was his now, like everything I thought was mine belonged to him the second he touched it.

"You understand me?" His growl thrummed through the bond. "Stay silent, or you get nothing."

He grabbed my hips and hauled me against him, the metal biting into my wrists. The thick head of his cock nudged against me, sliding just enough to make me shiver.

"Then we can use the bullet," he murmured, smirk sharp. The toy still dangled from his hand, taunting.

I whimpered, straining, trying to sink down on him. But the second I moved, he pulled back, just out of reach.

Again. And again.

My thighs trembled with the effort, my body screaming for more, every near-thrust a cruel tease that left me clenching around nothing. "Brax," I gasped, sweat slicking my skin. "Please..."

His grip on my hips tightened, holding me still. "Not yet." His voice was thick with command. "Good girls get the bullet. Bad girls get nothing."

I groaned out of frustration, yanking at the cuffs. He only smirked, merciless.

I was barely holding it together when the bullet hummed against my clit, pleasure detonating through me. My whole body arched, trembling, wrists rattling the cuffs. And then. mid orgasm, he slammed into me.

My eyes rolled back, head snapping against the pillows as I melted, utterly undone. The bed was soaked beneath me, and still I couldn't stop cumming.

He pulled out ripping the bullet from my soaked skin, and tossed it aside. I lay panting and limp.

But Brax wasn't finished with me yet.

In one brutal motion, he flipped me, yanking me up onto my knees. His hand cracked across my ass. "You're not done. You haven't pleased me yet."

Then he drove back into me, his growl shaking through my spine. "You better fuck me, Roxy. You wouldn't want your Alpha disappointed."

My knees buckled, but I forced myself to meet him, thrusting back against every savage snap of his hips. My cries broke, frantic and raw.

I tightened around him, the orgasm clawing again. I moaned his name, teetering at the edge, only for him to pull out at the last second.

"Damn it!" I squealed, collapsing into the sheets, fury sparking through the haze of need.

He just laughed, the sound feeding on my frustration.

"You're wrecked," Sweat dripping off him, chest heaving as he pulled back to look at me. "You can't take any more, can

you?

The cuffs rattled as he finally unhooked them, my arms falling limp. I sank into the mattress, trembling. Relief washed through me, until I caught the look in his eyes.

“But I told you...” His voice dropped, feral and final. “...I’m not finished yet.”

Before I could catch my breath, cold steel clinked again. He snapped one cuff around my ankle and hitched it high to the bedpost, leaving me spread wide, one leg stretched above me, one hanging over the side of the bed.

My protest broke into a moan as he thrust back inside me, brutal and unforgiving.

The new angle was devastating. Every drive of his hips wrung another cry from me, my body convulsing as he fucked me relentlessly.

“You think you’re done?” His voice was savage in my ear. “You don’t stop until I stop. You fuck your Alpha until he’s satisfied. Do you understand me?”

“Yes!” I sobbed, nails tearing at the sheets.

“Good girl,” he snarled, slamming into me again and again, until all I could do was scream and take it.

He pulled out and spilled hot across my stomach. I twitched under him, too far gone to even flinch. My body was wrecked, my nerves fried. He’d fucked me senseless. I barely registered the sound of water running in the bathroom a moment later.

Then strong arms lifted me, cradling me against his chest like I weighed nothing. My head lolled against his shoulder, catching the steady thrum of his heartbeat as he carried me into the bathroom. He lowered me into the warm tub with such care, like porcelain he refused to let crack.

The water lapped at my skin, soothing the fire he'd stoked raw. Brax knelt beside me. His big hands were gentle now, tracing suds along my arms, over my stomach, down my thighs. Every place he'd broken me down, he touched again, but soft, kissing the sting away, worshipping instead of claiming.

My lashes fluttered, heavy, hazy. He leaned in, brushing a kiss across my knuckles, then my shoulder, then finally my lips, tender in a way that gutted me worse than the cuffs ever had.

"Good girl," he whispered against my mouth. His voice hoarse but warm, like he was giving me back every ounce of control he'd stolen.

When he pulled me from the tub, wrapping me in a towel, he carried me back to bed. He tucked the blankets around me, kissed my damp hair, and slid in beside me. His body curved protectively around mine, one arm draped heavy over my waist as if to say: *you're safe now*.

Draven Born

It wasn't even noon and I'd already been dominated by an Alpha wolf. Can't say I didn't have it coming. *Cuming?* I snickered in my head.

Brax was curled up next to me, no doubt exhausted from his performance. I thought about starting it all over again, locking him tight against the headboard, but we run tonight under the moon, and I knew we'd already drained enough energy.

I snuck downstairs in his oversized shirt, ready to make coffee... only to find the pack halfway through breakfast. They avoided my gaze, but I didn't miss the smirks.

"Someone's up early, considering..." Jace grinned, biting into bacon.

Laughter rolled through the room. My cheeks burned.

Zane brushed past me, carrying his plate to the sink. "Fresh pot's ready for you, sis."

"Thanks," I muttered, pouring two mugs.

“Who made breakfast?”

Brynn raised her hand primly. “I did.”

“Appreciate it.” I loaded a tray with waffles, fruit, bacon, and two steaming coffees, then carried it upstairs.

Brax was sprawled on his stomach, arms folded under his head, giving me a sleepy grin through messy hair.

“You proud of yourself, Alpha?”

He cracked a smile. “Not sure proud’s the word. Did I take it too far?”

I handed him a mug, laughing. “No. If you had, I’d be cuffing you to the headboard.”

His grin spread wide. “You made breakfast after a morning like that?”

“I wish I could take credit. It was Brynn.”

He slid up in bed, sheet pulled over his lap, sipping slowly. “So, we run tonight. You know what to expect?”

I sat beside him, nibbling a piece of bacon. “That’s what I was going to ask. Do I have to... you know... perform? Is mating in front of the pack some kind of standard practice now?”

Brax cackled, deep and warm. “Don’t tell me you’re ready for round two? No, wildling. That was a one-time deal.” His eyes glittered as he added, “Not that there’s anything stopping us.”

My cheeks heated, but I rolled my eyes. “So what is expected of me?”

“Nothing,” he said simply. “Unless you feel like speaking. It’s your first full moon as Luna. Tonight, you’ll feel the bond humming stronger. Just stand with me. You’re Luna now. That means more than you realize.”

Brax set his cup on the bedside table and rubbed the back of his neck, hair sticking up in every direction.

“What’s on the agenda today, boss?” I teased, stealing a strip of bacon off the tray.

“I’ve got to meet with some of the boys. Brayson too. Last-minute prep for Rivera.”

I tried to play it cool, but the word *Rivera* buzzed through me like a live wire. The moon was already pulling, a low hum under my skin I couldn’t shut out. My fear must’ve slipped onto my face because Brax reached for my hand, thumb brushing steady circles into my palm.

“Roxy,” he said softly, “don’t worry. The pack’s ready. Everything’s going to be fine.”

He scooted to the edge of the bed beside me. “The packs loyal to me. They’ll protect me and watch my back. If it makes you feel better, come to the meeting with me and the boys. Maybe it’ll help to hear how it’s going to play out.”

I shook my head. The thought of sitting in that room, listening to strategies and worst-case scenarios, made my stomach twist. “I think it’s better if I try to put it out of my mind.”

I reached up and ran my fingers through the waves in his hair. “You need a trim. It’s almost long enough for a man

bun.”

“Because nothing screams Alpha like rocking a man bun,” he mused.

Then he stood, gloriously naked. I hadn’t seen this man lift a single weight, but he was sculpted like a god. Perfectly built. Entirely mine.

I grabbed my book and curled into the window seat, trying to focus, but the words blurred on the page. Every crack of the axe below rattled through me. Brax stood in the yard, flannel shirt hanging open, muscles flexing with each swing.

The idea of something happening to him terrified me. I was so in love with him, and I don’t tell him enough. Maybe it was the guard I’d worn my entire life. The fear that if I said it out loud, it would slip away. That adopted girl who never quite felt worthy.

My throat tightened. *Screw it.*

I shoved the window open and leaned out. “Hey!”

Brax stopped mid-swing, looked up at me with that cocky smirk softening into something else.

“I love you, Braxton Abbott.”

The smile that broke across his face nearly undid me. He gave one sharp swing, splitting the log clean in half, and the crack echoed like an response.

When Brax left to meet with the boys, the cabin felt too still. The pull of the moon gnawed at me already, a hum under my skin that wouldn’t quiet. I tried to distract myself, but my eyes kept drifting to the folder sitting on his dresser.

The Draven file.

I carried it to the window seat, spreading the worn pages across my lap. The handwriting was neat in some places, nearly illegible in others. My mother's name leapt out at me more than once, scribbled in the margins like an afterthought, paired with phrases I didn't understand.

Binding rites. Ancestral oath. Lunar tether.

My breath caught.

The notes described women on her side of the family, Draven women, who were said to carry a rare gift. Not strength in battle, not dominance, but something quieter. The ability to anchor a pack. To draw out loyalty. To seal oaths that could not be broken.

I traced the words with my fingertips, heart thrumming harder with each line. It sounded powerful and beautiful. The kind of legacy people built stories around.

But not me.

I snorted under my breath, snapping the file closed. "Cool," I muttered to myself. "Except I didn't even know I was a wolf until, what, a month ago? Some legacy."

The wolf inside me stirred, restless. She didn't agree. I shoved her down, pressing my forehead to the glass. The trees outside swayed under the weight of the rising moon, like they were already bowing to it.

I hugged the file to my chest and whispered to the empty room, "I just want to be enough for them."

The fire crackled downstairs, and the hum of voices rose as the pack gathered. I tucked the file back onto Brax's dresser, but the words stayed with me. *binding, tether, oath*.

By the time the sun sank behind the trees, I knew what I wanted to say.

It wasn't just about binding us.

Or about an oath.

It was about protecting the people I loved.

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Marked by Fire

The clearing pulsed with quiet anticipation, the fire at our back casting long shadows over the circle of wolves. Brax stood firm, broad shoulders squared, his voice low and steady.

“Rivera thinks he can cut into our land, into our family. He’s wrong. Tomorrow, he learns what it means to cross us. But tonight...” his gaze swept the circle, catching every eye. “We bind. Under the moon, we stand as one.”

His hand closed around mine, tugging me up beside him. The fire roared higher, heat licking over my skin as his grip steadied me. “And she stands with us. Your Luna.”

The clearing pulsed again, but this time it thrummed under my skin. My wolves. My pack. I stepped forward slowly, the full moon bright and watchful above us...

“I know I’m new,” I said, voice clear in the still night. “New to this world. To all of you. But I’m committed and loyal to the bond we’ve built with each other.”

I let my gaze sweep the clearing. “The moon’s power is real. It fuels us. Connects us. Tonight, I want to use that power to protect what’s ours. To anchor us together. Not just as wolves, but as something more. As a family.”

My pulse thrummed louder. I wasn’t reciting a spell. I wasn’t even sure what I was doing. But something inside me knew exactly how to begin.

“Let this night mark us. Let it bond us. Let it remind every force outside this circle that we are not to be crossed.”

The fire behind me flared, shifting energy. I didn’t even realize I was doing it at first. But as I stepped toward each member of the pack, my fingers hovered near their skin, drawn by something I couldn’t name. When I pressed my hand to the inside of their wrist, the glow inside me deepened. I felt it hum, a low thrum in my chest, as if the bond between each of us was waking up.

And then the mark appeared.

It wasn’t ink. It wasn’t burned or carved. It rose beneath my touch like it had been waiting there all along, hidden just under the surface, ready to be seen. One by one, each mark was different. A crescent here. A full moon there. Some looked like they caught firelight. Some looked like they caught stars.

It didn’t feel like power, but like destiny.

No one spoke. Not even the trees.

Until I turned and saw him.

Brayson stood at the edge of the circle, arms crossed. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t asked. But his eyes were locked on me,

and something in them flickered. Not a plea. A challenge, maybe.

He didn't say a word. He didn't have to.

I felt it, the pulse of him inside our pack bond. Guarded. Gritted. Like a wolf who'd spent too long on the outside and didn't know how to let go.

But then... it cracked.

That wall around him didn't shatter, but it bent, just enough to let us slip through. The mark burned onto his skin without a touch. Jagged. Wild. Like the moon had branded him out of sheer stubbornness.

Right over his ribs. Right where it would hurt.

He looked down at it. Then at me.

Didn't flinch. Didn't smile.

Just gave a sharp nod, like fine, Luna. You win this one.

And that was enough.

Then I reached Brax.

I pressed my hand to his chest, close to his heart.

The second I touched him, the energy snapped. Sharp and electric because the charge between us had always been there, just waiting to ignite.

His skin warmed beneath my palm as the mark formed. It wasn't just a symbol, but a story.

My wolf.

Howling in front of a blood moon.

It was bigger than the others. Bolder.

He stared down at it, then back at me, and I saw the fire in his eyes.

I hadn't planned to leave my brother for last, but somehow here he was. Standing tall at Brax's side, steady as a shadow. His eyes softened the second they met mine, the corner of his mouth twitching up in something between pride and relief.

He reached his hand out, palm up. I hesitated, because this wasn't the same. This wasn't a bond between Alpha and wolf, or Luna and packmate. This was blood. My blood.

The second my palm pressed to his wrist, it ignited. The glow burned hotter, brighter, more deliberate than the others. A crest formed, intricate lines curling until the shape revealed itself. A wolf howling inside a crescent moon. Beneath it, letters carved themselves across his skin like they'd been waiting years to be seen.

D-R-A-V-E-N.

My own wrist stung, sharp enough to make me gasp. I looked down to find the same crest blooming across my skin, identical to his, twining us together forever in light and fire.

◆Brax◆

The fire wasn't just in my eyes; it was in her. My Luna. My mate. She was marking my wolves, binding them to her, binding them to us, and I'd never seen anything like it.

But while the others bowed their heads, I was watching. Always watching. And I caught it.

The flicker.

Zane's eyes cut toward Brynn when Roxy marked him. Quick. Subtle. But I'd been Alpha too long not to notice. Brynn looked back, just as fast, her expression unreadable.

My wolf pressed hard against my ribs, suspicion clawing up my throat.

I thought whatever they had was finished, the night she accused him, the moment she turned her back on us.

Maybe I'd been wrong.

I didn't move. Didn't speak. This night belonged to Roxy.

But I filed it away, shoving it down. Tonight wasn't about suspicion. Tonight was about her.

I'd seen a lot in my time, but I'd never seen a man like Brayson accept a bond without a fight.

He didn't kneel. Didn't bow. Just stood there and let her mark him like it meant something.

And the craziest part?

It did.

The air shifted the second it hit his skin. That wild, dangerous pulse of his, always riding the edge of control, settled. Just for a moment. Like, even he couldn't argue with whatever the hell she'd just done.

My chest tightened, not with jealousy, but with something else entirely.

Pride.

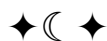
Because that wasn't just my mate standing there.

That was my Luna.

And she'd just tamed the most feral bastard I know without lifting a damn finger.

Roxy shifted first, followed by the rest of the pack. Her breath came out in soft, determined puffs as she ran ahead of me, the moon slicing through the treetops like a blade. She didn't look back. She didn't have to. I followed close, every stride matched to hers, heart pounding with something far more primal than a run under moonlight.

She was so fucking powerful.



The fire was still burning from the full moon gathering. The moon was still high, demanding more. Tonight wasn't finished, not yet.

We all huddled back around the flames, warming our bones from the run. My body was still humming, still alive from everything that had happened, but the fire kept pulling my gaze in, refusing to let me go.

Its crackle was louder than the laughter. Each spark shot upward like it wanted to brand the night itself. Heat licked at my skin, too hot, too close, even though I hadn't moved.

For a moment, I thought I saw shapes in the flames.

Smoke rolled low across the Earth, thick as fog.

In the distance, a howl echoed. Not mournful. Triumphant.

I turned toward it, and like a memory drenched in flame, a clearing appeared.

Zane stood at the center, tall and unmoving. His chest was bare, tattoos pulsing faintly in the heat. Around him, wolves bowed, low shoulders bent, heads down. Not mourning. Submitting.

He raised his arm, fist to heart. A gesture. One I'd seen in the old texts.

The Alpha's oath.

My stomach lurched.

Then Brynn stepped forward. Confident. Smiling like she'd already won. She reached for his wrist, not with affection, but possession.

Zane didn't flinch.

He let her.

He stood still as her fingers traced a mark across his chest.

Not a kiss. Not a claim.

A coronation.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

I looked down, bare arms. No mark. No bond. No Luna.

A voice, familiar and wrong, called my name, dragging like a blade through me.

Then the fire roared up around me, and everything turned to smoke.

I jolted back into myself, breathless. My skin was damp, not from the river, but from sweat. My head spun. Was that real? A

warning? Or just exhaustion bleeding into my thoughts?

The fire crackled like nothing had changed. The pack's laughter continued and Jace leaned forward, grinning.

I told myself it was nothing. Just a vision. Just smoke and fear stitched together by my tired brain. But the racing in my chest wouldn't settle.

"Are you falling asleep on us, Luna?" he teased. "I mean, you've used up a lot of energy tonight." He wiggled his eyebrows.

A few of the others laughed.

I didn't.

I didn't move.

My eyes stayed locked on Zane.

The vision twisted inside of me.

I loved him. He's my brother. My Beta. My other half in a way no one else could ever be. But how well do I even know him? A few months ago, he was a stranger. A ghost from my dreams. Now he sat here with our pack like he'd been waiting to become Alpha all along.

Guilt cut sharp through my chest. Guilty for doubting the bond we'd forged. Guilty for letting fear slip in when I should be stronger.

He continued watching me. Not smiling, not laughing with the others. Just watching. Like he knew I saw something.

I tore my gaze away and stared into the fire, trying to settle the racing in my chest. "I think I'm gonna head in," I

said, voice soft and steady, just enough not to raise alarms.
“I’m wiped.”

Brax leaned into me, brushing his lips across my forehead.
“Let’s go to bed, Luna.”

Our bedroom was dim. The only light came from the moonlight through the window. It painted his bare back in silver as he tugged on a pair of sweatpants, muscles rolling under his skin like he hadn’t just spent the night running with wolves and pretending nothing was at risk.

I sat on the edge of the bed, a blanket still wrapped around my shoulders.

He turned to me, eyes warm. “You okay?”

I nodded, but it wasn’t convincing. Not even a little.

“Just thinking.”

Brax stepped closer. “About?”

I hesitated. My tongue pressed against my teeth like the words wanted out, but I still held them back.

“About tomorrow,” I said finally. “What happens if... something goes wrong with Rivera?”

Brax avoided my gaze, pressing his lips together.

“If you don’t come back,” I clarified quietly. “What happens? To the pack. To... me.”

He didn’t laugh it off. Didn’t tell me I was overthinking.

He sat beside me on the bed, one hand resting on my thigh.

“If anything happens to me,” he said, voice low and firm, “Zane steps in. That’s the chain.”

“And me?”

“You’re Luna,” he said. “You don’t stop being Luna because I’m gone.”

My throat tightened. “You think he’s ready to be Alpha. Do you trust him?”

Brax looked at me, surprised.

Not because of the question, but because it came from me.

Like he hadn’t expected me to ask that. Not about Zane.

“I do,” Brax said. “But I don’t plan on dying.”

I nodded.

But the vision... the fire... the way Zane had looked at me...

I wasn’t so sure.

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Full Throttle

I spent the day in the kitchen. Brynn and I worked side by side, stirring pots and chopping vegetables until the counters disappeared under trays of cornbread and a massive pot of chili, something easy to keep the boys fed for the next few days.

My wolf stirred under my skin, restless, eager to run. Ready to let loose again.

Thoughts kept circling my head: maybe I should shift when they face Rivera. Maybe if I let her out, I'd stop being so damn afraid. But the truth was, I was terrified.

I diced onions, the sting blurring my vision. Easy cover for the tears that slipped free anyway. Brynn didn't comment. She worked quietly beside me, her movements steady, only glancing at me once, long enough to let me know she saw through it, and kind enough not to say a word.

When the chili was done and the kitchen spotless, I still couldn't shake the hollow ache in my chest.

Brynn leaned back against the counter, arms crossed.
“What’s wrong?”

I didn’t even have to answer. The moment my eyes met hers, she knew.

“You’re worried about Rivera,” she said quietly.

I swallowed and forced out, “Will you be there? When it happens?”

She shook her head. “No. I’ll be with Jace and a few others, keeping an eye on the Kings. Making sure we don’t have any unwanted visitors.”

“That makes sense.” My throat felt dry. “And Aurora?”

“It’s my understanding she’ll be here. With you and Carl. Protection detail.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Brynn’s gaze softened, just a fraction. “I understand why you feel this way. I’d love to tell you it gets easier. But the truth is…” She hesitated, then added, “Thankfully, we don’t find ourselves in situations like this often.”

She set a gentle hand on my shoulder before walking out of the kitchen.

The front door creaked open, and Zane came in carrying an armful of wood. He dropped it by the fireplace, dusting his hands off.

“Smells good in here. Chili?”

“Yep,” I said, stirring the pot.

He crossed the room with a serious look etched across his face. “Roxy, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about

something...”

Before he could finish, Brynn stepped back into the doorway. “Hey, Roxy, you want to ride into town with me? We could stop by the shop.”

“Yeah, sure, I...uh...” I glanced at Zane. “He was just...”

Zane shook his head.. “It’s fine. We can talk later.”

Brynn spent the rest of the day trying to distract me. We grabbed coffee, reorganized shelves at the shop, even lingered with Carl and Aurora while they cracked jokes to keep things light. Honestly, I’d be a wreck if they hadn’t kept me busy..

My phone buzzed on the counter.

Brax: *Come home, love. It’s getting late.*

The words sat heavy in my chest. He didn’t mean late as in *dinner’s getting cold*. He meant it was time. Everyone had their place to be. Everyone had their orders. And the clock was running out.

When we pulled up to the cabin, the fire Brax built was still burning low, more embers than flame now. I sat down in one of the chairs, wrapping one of his flannels around me. My skin itched, like something under it was waking up. They hadn’t left yet. Brax, Zane, Ace, and Stark were still out back, waiting. Planning. Watching for a sign, Rivera was on the move.

I don’t know what made me get up, just that I couldn’t sit still anymore. My whole body buzzed with unease. Like my wolf knew something I didn’t. Like she was *whispering*.

When I stepped around the side of the cabin, Brax was already walking toward me, still shirtless, hair damp from his run earlier. The others were standing in a loose half-circle, tension humming between them.

“You’re not supposed to be out here,” he said quietly.

“I know.”

I stopped just in front of him. Looked up into that impossible face. And for a second, just a second, I saw fear in his eyes. Not fear of the kill. Fear of *me being here*.

“I don’t like this,” I said. “Something feels... off.”

He cupped my face. “You’re feeling it because your bond is stronger. Your instincts are shifting. That’s all.”

“Is it?”

His gaze dropped to my mouth for a moment before he kissed me, slow, deep, like he was trying to calm something in both of us. It worked for about half a second. Then I was clinging to him, chasing his mouth, fisting my hands in his hair like he could anchor me to the Earth.

He pulled back first.

“I need you to stay here,” he said low against my lips. “Promise me.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

Brax’s eyes flicked toward the trees. A signal from Zane that it was time.

One last kiss, brief and soft, and then he turned, shifting as his feet hit the forest floor.

Fog coiled around his legs.

They disappeared into the trees like they'd been born from them.

But I couldn't let it go.

I tried. I really did. I sat on the edge of the deck, clutching Brax's flannel like it could pin me in place. Every breath felt wrong. Like my ribs were too tight. Like the air wasn't mine to breathe.

The fire had burned down to a dull orange glow. Shadows flickered across the trees, dancing like warnings as my wolf paced under my skin, restless and wild, snarling at the edges of my thoughts. She didn't want to be still. She didn't want to be safe.

Something wasn't right. I could feel it in my bones, the kind of bone-deep knowing you don't question.

And if anything happened to them...

To Zane. To Brax.

I'd rather die than live in a world without them.

I stood up, heart pounding.

I didn't care what Brax said.

I didn't care what the plan was.

I couldn't sit here.

I couldn't do nothing.

My thoughts screamed too loud to ignore, so I opened the link.

"Aurora."

"What, Luna?" Aurora's voice answered groggily.

"I'm going after them. I can't sit here and do nothing."

"You're insane." A pause. *"Don't move."*

Aurora stepped outside, my fur already shimmering with moonlight. She could hear my thoughts before she even shifted.

"You can't stop me, I snapped mentally."

"I'm not trying to stop you," Aurora replied, landing softly beside me. *"I'm coming with you."*

We ran together off Forest Reserve Road, paws quiet on the moss-covered floor. Moonlight filtered through the trees, dappling our fur. I moved like a shadow, the pine needles muffling my steps, heart thudding in my chest.

Behind me, Aurora's wolf form padded closer. *"Farther back, Luna. They'll hear you."*

But I didn't slow. I crouched low near a ridge and looked down into the clearing.

Leaning against a black car like he had all the time in the world. One leg crossed over the other, cigarette pinched between two fingers, smoke curling around his smug face. The scent of gasoline and cheap whiskey twisted in my nose, and my wolf recoiled

Then Brax stepped forward from the shadows. His eyes were molten fury, his chest rising with heavy, controlled breaths. Every inch of him radiated threat.

"You think you can burn our land and destroy this town?" he said. *"You're not going to get away with this."*

Rivera's head jerked toward him, startled. His lip curled, but I caught the flicker of something in his eyes, fear, buried

under bravado.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he snapped.

Rivera scoffed, the scent of cheap whiskey clinging to him. I could smell it all the way up the hill.

“But I am,” he said, cocky. “Marko and Redding will be here any minute. This is war.”

Brax didn’t move. “Only they’re not coming.”

“What?” he snapped.

“They’re already taken care of,” Brax said.

That’s when Rivera reached around his back.

My breath caught when I saw the glint of silver in his waistband. His hand moved toward the trigger...

And I ran, exploding from the ridge, a golden streak of fur. My body collided with his, my teeth locking around his wrist.

The gun fired, and I screamed. The impact spun me, and I shifted midair, crashing to the ground with a cry. “Fuck! It hurts. Fuck!”

Zane and Aurora were at my side in seconds. Zane slid next to me, checking my shoulder.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” he barked.

I groaned. “I’m fine. I had to come.”

“Fine? You’re shot!”

The second shot was fired, and Brax was already moving towards Rivera. He lunged with a roar that shattered the night. Rivera turned too slow, and Brax slammed into him like a boulder, knocking him flat. His teeth tore into Rivera’s shoulder, ripping flesh from bone. Rivera screamed, trying to

roll away, but Brax didn't let up. He clamped his jaws down again, this time around Rivera's thigh, shaking hard until you heard Rivera's bone snap.

"You fucking freaks." Rivera gurgled through blood, trying to crawl.

The sound of ripping skin was sickening. Brax didn't stop until Rivera was nothing but shredded limbs and broken flesh.

After finishing, they quickly dragged the remains down the ravine to the river. They scuffed dirt over the tracks of blood on the forest road floor. Zane moved swiftly into the front seat of Rivera's car and drove off, flying down the road, sending gravel flying.

Brax was pissed.

He shifted and stood over me, nude, his face covered in blood, muscles and pecs flinching with every breath.

"Shift," he demanded.

I moaned, grabbing my shoulder from the searing pain of the bullet.

"SHIFT NOW," he demanded again.

I screamed and did as I was told. The change was brutal. Agonizing. My bones cracked and lungs screamed, but when I landed on four legs, the pain didn't fade.

"You'll heal faster," Aurora said, flanking me.

Brax shifted again, falling into step behind me, growling low to keep me moving.

We ran.

I was first, flanked by Aurora, Stark, and Ace. Brax was behind me, a wall of pressure in case I faltered.

Every stride sent a jolt through my side. Each inhale felt like a razor blade under my ribs. I wanted to collapse, but the sound of paws thudding beside me kept me going.

The pain was unbearable, but I had to believe it was worth it.

God, Brax looked like he wanted to kill me. He's furious with me and rightfully so. I'd saved him, but I also put the whole pack at risk.

The pain was unbearable. *I don't want to die. Not like this. Not now. Not when I'd finally found something worth living for.*

I was terrified, not just of the pain, but of losing everything.

Brax. Zane. This whole chaotic, wild, broken family.

Please, I thought. Just let it be enough.

Brax, I pleaded through the bond, too weak to say it aloud.

He didn't answer with words, just a low, savage growl that rumbled through his chest and into my bones. Then his nose nudged my hip, firm and unrelenting, driving me forward.

I stumbled, but kept going. One step. Then another.

The cabin lights flicked on as we broke the treeline. Zane and River were waiting, River already holding medical supplies.

Brax shifted as I stumbled across the porch, catching my weight.

"Hold her," River said.

I dropped, shifting back mid-fall. My knees hit the floor, blood soaking the wood. Brax's hands grabbed my arms, securing them as he shoved me down against the floor. The force was so hard it made my vision go white.

"Easy!" Zane snapped, stepping in like he could shield me from the pain. His hands were shaking. Not with rage, but fear.

But Brax didn't speak. Just stood there, breathing like a beast who couldn't calm down.

Aurora grabbed my legs. "You're okay. You're okay."

"Hold her still," River demanded. He crouched down, knife and tweezers in hand.

The blade went in.

I screamed. Loud. Blood-curdling. I tried to kick my legs, but they held me steady. Brax didn't move. Just watched with his fists clenched, blood still wet on his skin.

Everything dimmed. My eyes fluttered, heavy, too heavy. He was the last thing I saw. Covered in blood. Silent and terrified. Still holding my hand as the dark pulled me under.

Bonds that Bleed

◆ Brax ◆

I stalked toward her, the room buzzing with heat and fury.

“You think you did the right thing?” My voice came out rough, chest still heaving from the run. “You think dragging her into a goddamn ambush makes you some kind of hero?”

Aurora’s face was pale, but she lifted her chin, breath shaky. “She’s my Luna. I couldn’t let her go alone.”

Wrong answer.

I saw red.

Before anyone could stop me, I grabbed her by the front of her shirt and slammed her into the wall so hard it rattled the shelves.

She froze, eyes wide, breath caught, body locked in place under my grip.

My face was inches from hers, my eyes glowing bright enough to light the whole room.

“I should tear your throat out for what you’ve done.”

Her voice shook as she whispered, “Alpha...”

She wasn’t defiant now. She was scared. Fully, visibly terrified. She wasn’t looking at her Alpha anymore; she was looking at a monster.

Behind me, Zane’s voice cut through, rough and sharp. “Brax. Enough.”

I didn’t move.

“Alpha.” This time, his voice was demanding, Beta authority punching through the air. “Let her go. **RIGHT NOW.**”

For a second, I almost turned on him and my grip tightened.

And then Roxy let out a weak noise from the floor.

That sound of her cut through everything.

My grip loosened. I stepped back with a low, guttural growl.

Aurora slid down the wall, shaking hard, her face pale as snow.

The door creaked open. Brayson walked in like he’d been waiting, calm but firm.

“Jesus, brother,” he muttered, moving closer. “Get your shit together.”

I didn’t answer.

Aurora didn’t say a word. She stayed on the floor, breathing hard, stunned and shaken.

I turned back and drove my fist into the wall, drywall and wood splintering under the blow. Pieces rained down around us as Aurora screamed, scrambling away.

My body shook, rage burning through every inch of me, but all of it was aimed at myself now.

“Get her in the truck,” I growled, my voice scraping through my teeth.

“You’re not driving,” Brayson said, stepping in fast, palm out. “Give me the keys, brother.”

I didn’t argue. I tossed him the keys, scooping Roxy into my arms, her body burning hot against mine.

River climbed in behind us, already digging through his medic bag, muttering curses under his breath. The cab felt too small, too hot, too full of fear but I wasn’t letting go of her.

Brayson drove in tense silence, knuckles white on the wheel, while Roxy lay across my lap, her fever so high my jeans were damp from the heat radiating off her skin.

My hands wouldn’t stop shaking.

Brayson pulled out his phone, thumb flying across the screen. “Mom,” he muttered, putting it to his ear. “We’re on our way. Silver bullet wound.”

He paused, shoulders sagging.

“Yeah. It’s Roxy.”

I didn’t even hear the rest. The road blurred outside the window, but it wasn’t the speed. My vision burned behind watery eyes. I refused to blink.

I stared down at her, watching her chest rise too fast, too shallow.

Brayson's voice cut through, steady but sharp. "Breathe, brother. You gotta pace yourself."

But all I could think was *too late*.

I carried her through the door, my chest heaving, blood dripping down us, and I'm barely holding it together. Roxy was limp in my arms. Too quiet. Too still.

"Downstairs," River barked, already moving toward the exam room at the back of the house.

Mara met us at the door, hands already gloved, her silver hair pulled back into a tight braid. She looked at Roxy, then at me, and didn't flinch.

"Set her here," she ordered, pointing to the table. "River, prep. I want everything sterilized. Bullet's still in."

I laid Roxy down as gently as I could, but my hands were shaking. Blood smeared across the sheet. Her breath was barely there.

"Fuck," I choked, backing up until I hit the wall. "Fuck."

"Braxton." Mara's voice snapped. "Out. Now. You're bleeding and you're in the way."

"I'm not leaving her."

"You will if you want her to survive." "Go clean up. Get your head straight. You're no good to her like this."

River shot me a look. "We've got her. I promise."

The door slammed shut behind me before I could argue again.

I braced my hands on the hallway wall, breathing like I'd just come back from hell, because I had. My chest burned, and I couldn't tell if it was the run, the shift, or the way she screamed when they cut her open. The sound was still in my head. Echoing. Tearing me apart from the inside out.

This was my fault.

I told her to stay behind. I told her to *promise* me. And still she came.

I should've smelled the danger sooner. Should've ripped Rivera apart the second I saw him. Should've carried her inside and locked her in if I had to.

She was my Luna. My fucking bond.

And I let her bleed in the dirt.

I punched the wall hard enough to crack the wood, then again, and again, until my knuckles split. I didn't care. I welcomed the pain. It kept me tethered.

Behind the closed door, I could hear them moving. Metal tools clinking. River muttering low. Mara gave orders in that voice that didn't shake. I used to think nothing scared my Mom.

Now I know better. She just didn't show it.

I slid down the wall, hands in my hair, blood dripping onto the floor between my boots. The house was silent except for the chaos behind that door.

I'd never felt so fucking useless in my life.

The sound of boots on tile broke the silence. Brayson and our father stepped into the hall, eyes sweeping over the

cracked wall and the blood-slick floor like they'd walked into a crime scene, which they had. Just not the kind that left bodies.

My father didn't say a word. Just narrowed his eyes at the damage like he was already calculating what lumber he'd need to fix it. Brayson, on the other hand, didn't hesitate.

"We're running," he ordered. "Get up. We're not staying in this room."

He was right.

This room held too many memories. None of them good.

I tried to stand, but my legs gave out. Rage, fear, guilt, every muscle in my body had turned to stone or ash. Nothing in between.

They didn't wait.

One of them grabbed under each arm and pulled. I didn't fight it. I didn't have the strength to.

I let them drag me outside, past the glow of the porch lights and into the dark, into the cold. My feet barely found the ground before instinct took over. Before the shift ripped through me like it always did when the pain was too big to carry in human skin.

Fur exploded across my spine. Bones cracked and reformed. My growl tore through the night as I hit the forest floor running.

Not running toward anything.

Just away from the sound of her scream.

He didn't have to ask where we were running.

We'd lived on this land our entire lives. Every root, ridge, and trail is carved into our bones like second nature.

I tore through the Ossagon Trail, the forest swallowing me whole. The ground was soft beneath my paws, springy and wet with decay, layers of redwood needles clinging to the pads of my feet. Old growth trees towered around us, massive and silent, their ancient trunks wide as cars, limbs clawing at the moonlight like they'd been reaching for centuries and still hadn't touched peace.

Branches slapped against my fur, but I barely felt them. My lungs burned. My legs ached. Good. I welcomed it. I *needed* to hurt. I deserved to. I could hear Brayson's paws behind me, steady and relentless, refusing to let me run too far without him.

A fallen tree loomed ahead, half-rotted and overgrown with moss. I didn't hesitate. I launched myself over it, claws digging into the bark as I landed hard on the other side. The scent of wet Earth and old bark filled my nose. This path was marshy, the kind of ground that sucked at your paws and left a chill in your bones. Still, I ran harder. I didn't care if I bled.

The wind off the coast hit first, salty, biting, sharp enough to sting my eyes even in wolf form.

And then we reached it.

The cliffs dropped into the ocean, jagged and dark, rock formations jutting out like broken teeth. The trail ended in a wide shelf of stone, cracked and slick with salt. I skidded to a

stop, my chest heaving, heart hammering against my ribs like it was trying to escape.

The Pacific roared below.

The moon hung low above it, silver and swollen, casting light across the waves that churned like something wild and ancient was trying to claw its way back out of the deep. The crash of water against rock echoed through the cliffs, louder than my thoughts, louder than my guilt.

It's hard to hold onto pain when the ocean's fury outmatches your own.

For a moment, I just stood there, panting, fur damp from the run, the wind tearing through me like absolution. My claws dug into the stone as I let it come. All of it. The guilt. The rage. The terror I hadn't spoken out loud.

I almost lost her.

And it would've been my fault.

And if I lose her, if she doesn't wake up. If that bullet burrowed deeper than River thought, if she slips through our fingers while I'm out here chasing ghosts. I'll never take my human form again.

I won't deserve to.

What's the point of being a man if the one person who saw something worth saving in him is gone?

The wind ripped through my fur, cold and merciless. I could feel Brayson step up beside me, silent, always giving me space until the weight was too much. His wolf stayed close but

didn't crowd me. Just stood there. Head bowed. Breathing like his own chest might break in two.

Neither of us spoke.

We didn't have to.

Because we both knew what it meant to love something so much that it made you violent. Made you reckless. Made you ruin yourself in the name of keeping it.

The moon rose higher, casting silver across the ocean, the waves below crashing and howling like they could feel it too.

And then we did what we were born to do.

We lifted our heads, and we howled.

Not a sound of dominance.

Not a call to war.

But grief.

Pure. Primal. Shattering.

My voice cracked halfway through, but I didn't stop. Brayson's joined mine, low and mournful. Our howls echoed off the cliffs, dragged out to sea.

If she dies, I'll never be whole again.

I'll burn every inch of this world to the ground before I let it forget her name.

Sight

The world was quiet.

Not peaceful, just empty.

I drifted through the trees like a shadow, the redwoods stretching above me like tombstones. Fog clung to the ground in heavy ribbons. The air was thick and damp, every sound muffled like I was underwater.

I tried to speak.

Nothing came out.

I tried to run.

My feet, my paws, didn't touch the Earth.

I was moving without moving, a silent passenger in my own dream.

The pack stood in a wide circle. Their heads bowed but no one spoke.

Brax wasn't there.

Zane stepped forward. A dark mark burned across his shoulder. The kind of mark you only get when power chooses you.

When someone else falls.

Beside him stood Brynn. Her hand on his arm like she'd been there all along. Like she belonged.

The forest cracked around me. Wind howled through the trees.

No one looked my way.

No one felt me watching.

Because I wasn't there.

I was gone.

I tried to scream, but the only sound was the snap of fire. Flames licking up the edge of the trees, echoing the fire that had taken the cabin. That had taken me.

Then I felt it.

A pull in the bond. Violent. Broken. Like a scream with no throat to carry it.

And I saw him.

Brax was on his knees in the woods, naked and wild, mud streaked across his skin, blood on his hands. His body heaving with rage. With grief.

His howl shattered the air.

It wasn't a cry for help.

It was a promise.

If I were gone, he would be too.

Only the wolf would remain.

◆ Brax ◆

Salt hung thick in the air.

Mist curled along the sand, soft tendrils ghosting over my fur as I lay still, pressed against the Earth like it could keep me from breaking apart. Brayson was next to me, his big frame curled in tight, head resting between his paws. Neither of us had shifted back. Not yet.

The beach was empty. Just the sound of waves pounding the shore and seagulls crying in the fog. Morning light was barely making it through the clouds.

I hadn't spoken since we got here. Couldn't.

If I lost her...

A low crackle sounded across the comm.

River.

"Alpha..." his voice was quiet, respectful. *"She's out of the woods. She's resting. Still medicated, not awake. But she's fighting. Now we wait."*

The relief was so sudden it didn't feel real. Just a pressure cracking open inside me, a gasp I hadn't been able to take until now.

I didn't move at first.

Just let the ocean roar.

When we made our way home, the run felt different. Lighter. Every step carried something closer to hope.

I didn't expect what waited for us.

Tents.

Dozens of them. Scattered across the property like a makeshift camp. Smoke rising from cookfires. Blankets and lanterns and quiet murmurs in the early light. Wolves in human form, some still dirt-streaked from patrols, others curled on the ground in shifted bodies, twitching in sleep, ears flicking toward every sound.

They'd all come.

For her.

For *my* mate.

A knot formed in my throat, and I swallowed it down like it might choke me. I didn't cry. Not out here. Not in front of *them*. But damn if my chest didn't ache with the sight of it. The way they waited. Watched. Protected what mattered to me when I couldn't even protect her.

Brayson lifted his arm, patting me on the back as we made our way through.

We stepped onto the porch. The front door creaked open before I could reach for it.

Zane.

Aurora stood just behind him, her arms crossed tight over her chest, face unreadable. Neither of them said a word.

They didn't have to.

Shame hit me like a blow to the ribs. Hard and personal.

Zane stepped aside, but he didn't look at me. Not once.

The hallway felt smaller than I remembered. I turned into the first room on the left, the one I used to crash in during high school, back when everything was simpler. Just another

guest room now, most of my old stuff long gone. Mara had laid out clothes and towels for me.

I turned on the water. Scalding. Let it run until steam thickened the mirror and sweat beaded on my back before I even stepped in.

Rivera's blood was still crusted along my knuckles, deep under my nails where I'd torn him apart. It flaked off in dark, dried clumps every time I flexed my hands. My shirt was soaked through with Roxy's, so much of it I couldn't even tell where the stains ended. My blood ran in lines down my ribs, barely noticed in the chaos.

I stripped down, every inch of fabric sticking and resisting like it didn't want to let go of what I'd done. It hit the floor with a wet slap, and I stared down at it like it might move. Like it was still breathing.

I stepped in, letting the water pound over my shoulders, trailing crimson down my legs and into the drain. I braced my hands against the tile, head bowed, forehead resting between them.

The silence in the house was worse than any scream.

She'd been in the shower with me not long ago. Still sore from her first shift, worried more about *me* than herself. She'd washed the soot from my skin with gentle fingers and eyes that held no judgment. Only concern. Only that soft, stubborn love she tried so damn hard to hide.

And now?

Now she was the one I couldn't fix.

My brave little wolf.

The one who defied me. Disobeyed me. And still somehow made me so fucking proud. The one who ran into danger without hesitation, who bled for the pack because she'd been born for it.

I stayed in the water long after the blood was gone. Until my skin was pink from heat and my throat burned from holding back the things I wouldn't say out loud.

Not yet.

Not until I saw her.

Not until I could whisper them against her skin and beg her to come back to me.

They'd put a cot in the room for me. They knew I wouldn't leave her side again until they forced me. Roxy lay out on the emergency table, a soft blanket pulled up over her small wolf form. Her fur was matted with blood, dull where it should've been bright. Tubes fed into one paw, and an IV line ran to a bag above her.

My Luna. My wild girl.

They'd medicated her, I knew. Shifter healing worked better in wolf form, especially when the injury was deep. But knowing didn't make it easier to see her like that.

I stepped closer, afraid to touch her.

Afraid that if I did, I'd break whatever spell was keeping her here.

I opened my mouth.

Tried to say her name.

Tried to tell her I was sorry. That I'd do anything, everything, to take it back.

But nothing came out.

Just a sharp breath and the sting of something I wouldn't let fall.

My hand hovered inches from her paw, trembling like it didn't belong to me.

I pressed it to my chest instead. Right over the mark that still burned.

I leaned in, voice so low it cracked.

"Come back."

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In the Fire

They came in one by one. Quiet voices. Careful steps. Like if they didn't speak too loudly, I wouldn't slip away.

Were they saying goodbye?

I wasn't sure. I couldn't move. Couldn't speak. The meds had me locked in place, floating just under the surface. But I could hear them.

I could feel everything.

The blood still moved in my veins. The pain was still there, dull and curling into something that almost felt like healing.

Footsteps moved closer.

Brax's voice followed.

"Take your time, Zane," he whispered.

Then a hand wrapped around my paw. Big, warm, and steady.

"Sister."

The word sank into me. His voice cracked on it. Worry, yes. But also grief. The kind that sits in your throat and won't let

go.

He didn't speak again for a long time. Just stayed with me.

Breathing. Breaking quietly.

Then, almost too soft to catch...

"I've waited my whole life to get you back. Don't leave me now."

Another set of footsteps. Then came the cold rush of something new in my IV. Coolness climbed up my arm like smoke. Numbness.

Then the dark came back for me.

Flames again.

But they didn't burn this time.

They moved like smoke around my body, warm, coaxing, tugging me forward. I didn't walk. I drifted. Each step sent sparks trailing behind me.

The fire wasn't wild now. It was focused. Intentional. It tunneled through the dark, guiding me toward something I wasn't meant to see.

A room. Small. Bare walls. A cracked window letting in just enough moonlight to make out Rivera pacing. The phone pressed tight to his ear. His voice was sharp.

"I said I'm meeting with them tonight."

A pause.

"The girl's not a threat. She doesn't even know who she is."

A chill went down my spine.

“The drugs are fine. But the land is the issue. They’re not going to give it up willingly.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, frustrated. Then froze. His head tilted, slow. Like he felt something.

Then he slammed the phone down. The crack echoed like a gunshot.

Papers fluttered off the desk. A map.

My chest tightened.

The border was marked in red. Our land. Brax’s land. Mine.

He muttered something low. I couldn’t catch it.

Then he stopped. Looked up.

Not at me.

Through me.

Like he felt me there.

And then a woman’s voice slipped through the room. Cold. Cruel. Whispered in my ear like she was right behind me.

“Luna, you better stop snooping.”

“Dead girls don’t get second chances.”

The voice vanished, but the words didn’t.

They burrowed deep. Coiled around my ribs like they belonged there.

No.

Rivera was dead. But whatever he started wasn’t.

There were still maps. Still names whispered in the dark. Still land they wanted to take. And I was lying here, trapped in my body, while everything burned around me.

My fingers twitched.

The fire that had led me here curled tighter around my chest, less like a guide now and more like a warning.

Wake up.

Move.

Fight.

My lungs ached to scream, but all I managed was a soundless growl, buried deep in my throat.

I wasn't dying here.

I wasn't done.

Not even close.

◆ Zane ◆

It had been four full days since Rivera shot my sister.

The tents were gone now. Most of the pack had drifted back to their lives, their jobs, whatever scraps of normal they had left. But our life?

Our life was strapped to that table in the exam room, unconscious and barely breathing.

Our Alpha was falling apart.

Not all at once. That would've been easier. He was unraveling slowly, like a thread being pulled loose from the inside. You could see it in the way his haunted eyes, in how his posture never relaxed, in the twitch of his hands when someone got too close to him.

His wolf was riding him hard.

Every few hours, we convinced him to go on a run: me, Brayson, and Mr. Abbott. It was the only way to keep him from exploding. But he was running too much. He wasn't eating, and he hadn't slept more than an hour since she got shot.

I was supposed to hold the line and keep things steady when Brax went off the rails.

He's losing weight and falling apart.

If she doesn't wake up...

The thought crushed me.

If she doesn't wake up, it's on me to hold this pack together.

I'd have no choice but to step up.

I'd have to.

I found Brayson in the barn, working on his bike like we weren't living in a waking nightmare.

"We've gotta do something," I said, crossing my arms across my chest. "It's reaching a head. He's gonna snap."

Brayson didn't look up. He tightened a bolt and wiped his hands off like I'd told him we were out of milk.

"I know," he said. "He needs a distraction only an Alpha can handle."

I nodded. "That's the only thing I can think of, but he's not going to leave her side."

Brayson tossed the rag aside and cracked his neck. "I know what'll work. Come on. Just stay chill and don't look suspicious."

Suspicious?

I must've made a face, because he let out a laugh that left me panicking.

We found Brax in the living room, hunched over the edge of the sofa like he might shatter it with his fists.

I sat down quietly beside him.

He felt like a bomb someone forgot to defuse.

I thought about saying something, but I thought better of it. Sometimes my silent presence was worth more.

Brayson waltzed in, smug and casual, two glasses of whiskey in hand, like this was poker night and not a grief spiral from hell.

"I don't fucking want it," Brax growled, not even looking up.

"Jesus, Braxton," Brayson sighed. "Just drink it. Take the edge off. You haven't eaten in days. You know what she's gonna say when she sees what you did to yourself?"

That got his attention. He snatched the glass, downed it in one gulp, and slammed it on the table, damn near cracking it in half.

I leaned back and sipped mine. "It tastes like shit," I muttered.

Brax didn't respond. Just stared at the floor like he was willing it to open up and take him. His chest rose too fast, hands flexing on his knees. I saw his claws flash, just for a second, before he shoved them back down.

"I can still feel her," he said, voice wrecked and low. "She's weak, but she's in there. And I'm just sitting here like

some useless fuck, waiting for her to die. WHY ISN'T SHE WAKING UP?"

"You're not," I said. "She's going to be ok, Brax. She has to be."

But the words felt hollow, even to me. I hadn't even gotten the chance to talk to her. To tell her what she'd stirred awake in me. A power humming between us that I couldn't name, that she might never even get the chance to wield.

He didn't move. He sat there, twitching, eyes unfocused.

"She asked me what would happen if something happened to me," he said suddenly, and the words nearly undid me. "The night before. She fucking *knew* something was going to happen. I should've known she'd run."

I didn't know what to say to that. Neither did Brayson.

About 10 minutes later, Brax snarled, "Why do you look so damn smug?"

"Who, me?" Brayson smirked.

Brax stood fast, like he was ready to start swinging, but then he swayed and dropped like a damn redwood. *Timber*. He was out cold.

"What the hell did you do?"

He grinned. "Nothing Mom's Xanax stash couldn't handle."

Before I could respond, Mara stepped into the room like she'd been waiting for her cue.

"Brayson," she said dryly, "I told you. Left side of the cabinet."

Her eyes flicked to Brax, who was now unconscious and sprawled out, snoring on the couch.

“You gave him a horse tranquilizer, son.”

Brayson raised both brows. “Well... he’s damn near as big as one.”

Mara shrugged and started drying her hands with a dish towel. “Might want to be somewhere else when he wakes up. This should buy us a few hours.”

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Need

♦ Brax ♦

Brax, I need you.

It hit like a flare. The bond lit up in my chest, blazing through my dreams with heat that wasn't mine. Her voice slid into my head like silk.

My eyes snapped open.

She was standing in front of me. Barefoot. Wrapped in a hospital gown that clung to her curves. She looked soft, dazed, and more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen. Her eyes locked on mine, and I crossed the room like gravity. Her arms wrapped around my middle, tight. Like she'd never let go again.

"I need you," she whispered. This time aloud, right against my chest.

I'd been drowning for days. And now, I finally found air. Then her breath hitched.

She pulled back just enough to meet my eyes. “We have a problem.”

Her chest was rising too fast. Panic crept into her voice.

“Rivera... he... he...wasn’t working alone.”

I cupped her face, grounding us both.

“Baby,” I said, steady and low, “as long as I have you, I can fix anything.”

Her eyes shimmered, caught between fear and trust, and the bond thrummed like a live wire under my skin. She wanted to believe me. Needed to.

And I’d kill every one of them before I let her be wrong.

I held her tighter, burying my face in her hair, breathing her in. For now, the shadows around us didn’t matter. The fire. The enemies. The weight waiting outside these walls.

For a heartbeat, it was just her. My mate. My air. My everything.

And if anyone thought they’d take that from me, they hadn’t learned what an Alpha looks like when he’s ready to kill.

Coming Soon

Bane Hallow Series: Book Three
Dravenborn

I scooped her up. She felt smaller. Frail.

Fuck.

I felt weaker too.

They were right. I'd run myself into the ground, and I had maybe ten minutes before she'd see it all over my face.

I laid her on the bed and stripped off my clothes. I needed to feel her against me. Skin to skin. I might never leave this fucking bed. I pulled her close, brushing my lips against her hair and temple. She was so soft and beautiful.

I lifted her chin to meet my gaze.

"When you're ready, we'll talk about it. But don't push yourself too hard."

"What if it can't wait?" she whispered, voice still raw from what her body had been through.

"It can wait, my love. I won't let anything happen to you. You're safe."

She closed her eyes and slept peacefully against me. I felt relief settle through my body, but my mind wouldn't stop spinning.

What kind of problem do we have now?

I opened the comm.

Our Luna's awake.

I exhaled hard.

We've got a situation. I'll explain when I can, but stay alert. Lock shit down. No one goes off alone.

Ace. Zane. Brayson. Be ready when I call.

The door creaked open behind me.

Mara.

She took one look at us curled up together and placed her hand over her heart, tapping it with a quiet smile.

"Braxton... I'll need to check her out when she wakes."

I nodded but didn't move. I just lay there, letting Roxy breathe against my skin.

The soft curve of her pressed against me. My fingers in her hair.

For now, in this moment, nothing else mattered.

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