

## Chapter 1

First Day of Junior Year...

Summer came and went, Brad turned 16 and began training for pack gamma under his brother and pack beta, Tony. Tony who always seemed to lecture him on being nice to stupid Melanie. One thing Brad was thankful for was that he hadn't seen hide nor hair of her all summer. Dylan had moved out of his mom's place and into his pack's alpha mansion. Since the pack's bordered each other, Brad often went over to Dylan's place with his friends to party. Selene was almost always there. They practically lived together. But thankfully, Melanie was probably off gardening somewhere so Brad never ran into her at Dylan's mansion.

Of late, Brad had found himself thinking more and more of Melanie. Of the way her expressive green eyes always widened in surprise or darkened to the color of onyx when she was angry. Would they darken the same way when she was aroused? He did his best to hold back the thoughts, but one thing was clear: he needed to find his mate and soon. One of his best kept secrets was, despite being known for disappearing into one of Dylan's many unused rooms with girls, he'd never let himself go all the way. Oh he'd wanted too, but he wanted his first time to be with his mate. His friends would never let him hear the end of it if they knew this.

It was as Brad walked by his lockers that he caught an amazing whiff of chocolate. His wolf grumbled appreciatively inside of him.

Mate...

Turning around quizzically, Brad looked around, trying to figure out where the smell had come from, where his mate was. But the smell disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Brad smiled to himself as he reached a hand into his pocket to check if his packet of cigarettes was still there. Finally, he had a lead. She was here somewhere in this high school. He'd bump into her sooner or later.

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"I'm so glad we have a free period first thing in the morning!" Melanie exclaimed happily as she and her only friend Amy walked out onto the lawn of their high school. She sat down in the grass, feeling reenergized being close to the earth.

Melanie had always loved nature and had what her father called a 'green thumb'. There was just something so satisfying about the smell of freshly cut grass and digging her fingers deep into the dirt, enjoying its texture as she planted flowers.

"I saw Jerrel eyeing you," giggled Amy. "I think he likes you. Didn't you say he came over to your place a few times over the summer?"

Melanie rolled her eyes at Amy when she mentioned Jerrel, a member of their neighboring pack that Brad was training to be gamma of. Selene had shared those details over dinner one night. Melanie could have cared less about Brad and what he planned to do.

"We're just friends. We hung out a few times, he tried to get me to go to a couple of parties with him but..." Melanie trailed off, shaking her head.

Parties were not Melanie's scene. She'd attended one that last year that Selene had dragged her to. It had been a Halloween party and Melanie had dressed up like a cactus. Needless to say she got a few weird stares and then Brad had made fun of her. Melanie couldn't help but think back to that night as she lounged outside with her open books forgotten in her lap.

Flashback

"I thought it was a neat idea," Melanie insisted to Selene as they stood in the living room of Dylan's mansion.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Brad, a girl dressed up in a tight bra and panties with small wings coming out of her back was hanging off his shoulder. Melanie resisted the urge to roll her eyes and looked straight back at Selene.

Selene had always been the prettier sister among the two. She had long legs that went on for days and a perfectly heart-shaped face with almond shaped eyes. Sometimes Melanie wondered why she couldn't have inherited some of their mother's 'pretty genes'. Melanie was all her father, black hair, startling green eyes that were too big for her face and a round baby face. Whereas Selene looked graceful in pictures, Melanie almost always ended up with her eyes closed and her face tilted at an awkward angle so that she looked chubby.

Her body shape just wasn't as lean and lithe as most she-wolves. But that was OK. Melanie was fairly confident that once she had her turn and took up training, her figure would even out a bit. Right now she had chubby legs, a small butt, wide hips and boobs that could definitely afford to be a bit bigger. It was like her body was confused and in limbo between curvy and skinny. She definitely had issues when buying clothes. It was just easier to let them hang off her frame in a baggy style instead of being form-fitting. Which is why she hadn't gone to the store and just bought a costume, choosing to make hers at home.

"It's unique," Selene said as she looked at Melanie's baggy pants and green shirt and long coat. Needles stuck out the back of her arms, hands and went down her back. "I just wish you'd dressed up as something more...conventional." Selene ended.

Dylan came up behind Selene, throwing a casual arm around her waist. Selene was dressed up as a pirate, her cleavage on full display in her off the shoulder white ruffled shirt. Dylan wasn't dressed up at all, wearing a black shirt and pants with a black eye-patch over his right eye.

"Hey babe, let's go out back and start the bonfire," Dylan suggested.

Selene nodded, pleading for Melanie to join them.

Melanie waved them off, promising to join them after she got herself something to drink. But when she made her way over to the drinks table, she realized that there wasn't anything non-alcoholic left. Crinkling her nose in disgust, Melanie simply opted for a bottle of water.

"What are you supposed to be, a porcupine?" sneered a voice behind her.

Melanie turned to see Brad standing off to the side, his older brother (by only one year) Kyle with him. Both had red cups in their hands that Melanie was sure contained alcohol.

"Better than dressing up as a skank on your arm," Melanie retorted, thinking back to the girl dressed as a tacky Victoria Secrets Angel. Even if you wanted to prance about nude, there was a tasteful way to do it.

Something glinted in Brad's eye as Kyle doubled over coughing.

"Better a skank than a weird girl obsessed with plants. You think you're so smart but you're just an idiot for thinking what you're wearing is actually cool. You're just pissed 'cause you could never pull off a costume as sexy as Kayleigh's. You're just too ugly," Brad pronounced.

Melanie took a step back, his words like a punch in the gut. She'd never had any boy ever call her weird and ugly. But maybe he was right. Maybe she was weird. It was blatantly obvious she didn't belong here at this party. She wasn't having fun like most of the other girls. So maybe she was weird...and ugly. But she wasn't an idiot, and that was the one thing that Melanie held on to as she tried to keep her composure up in front of that jerk Brad.

"Hey," Kyle spoke up, taking a step forward towards Melanie. "He's just being a dick." Kyle shot Brad a glare who seemed to be busy lighting his cigarette.

Melanie shook her head, turning before the tears overtook in her eyes and anyone could see her cry. She walked swiftly outside, nally letting herself breakdown on the abandoned front lawn. Silent tears oved down her cheeks as the words 'ugly' and 'weird' hammered into her brain.

It was then that her knight in shining armor appeared. Tony Sinclair, Beta of the Crimson Phoenix Pack, older brother to Dylan and Brad, spotted her as he walked down the steps with his mate.

Of course, at the time, she had no idea who he was.

"Why are you crying?" asked Lana, Tony's mate. She was dressed in a beautiful off-the-shoulder white dress with angel wings behind her back. The dress was form-fitting over her toned figure and Melanie couldn't help but feel a bit envious. Until now, she'd never tried to imagine herself wearing clothes like that. But now she did and was sure Brad was right. She could never pull something so graceful off.

"Do you think my costume's stupid?" Melanie couldn't help but ask beautiful Lana.

Lana shook her head, her open shoulder-length straight hair moving in agreement.

"Why would you say that? I think it's very...unique," Lana ended.

Melanie could tell Lana had no idea what she was supposed to be.

"I'm supposed to be a cactus," Melanie couldn't help but dryly inform her and wait for her to laugh.

Instead, Lana beamed at Melanie.

"That's wonderful! Much more creative than my angel costume!"

That comment made Melanie feel slightly better. She couldn't help the words spilling from her mouth next,

"But he said I was an idiot for dressing up like this...and that I'm probably too..." Melanie choked on the words, swallowing a sob, before resuming her speech. "... too ugly to wear what girls usually wear as costumes on Halloween!"

The look of anger on Tony's face belied his words as he demanded to know who said something so horrible to Melanie. And she was grateful to these two strangers for hearing her out but she shouldn't be voicing her problems on to them.

"Never mind. Sorry for being-" Melanie spat the word out as acid rose in her throat "-weird." She took a deep steadying breath. "But I shouldn't care what he says..." she said it more for herself than anyone else's benefit. "...I've never cared before," she ended awkwardly and brushed a few tears from her cheeks.

Lana tried to comfort her and tell her she wasn't weird for which Melanie was grateful. But it was time to go home and she said as much to them before making her way to the comfort of her bed.

It wasn't until much later, when Melanie was sitting comfortably in her bed reading a book about gardening that she heard her father's voice from the ground floor of their four bedroom house.

"Melanie! You've got some visitors!" her dad hollered up, his voice belying surprise.

Melanie trudged downstairs, confused over who'd decided to visit her at this hour. She was in her loose anel pajamas and her hair had frizzed up around her. Absently trying to pat it down, she reached the bottom landing and did double-take.

Brad stood in her living room, arms crossed while her father sat conversationally talking with the young man who'd tried to comfort Melanie earlier after Brad had made fun of her. Unable to believe the sight before her and thoughts that was hallucinating immediately engulfed her brain. Melanie took off her reading glasses and blinked a few times just to be sure if what she was seeing was real.

"You snitched to my brother," Brad grumbled at her accusingly. "I should have known."

Melanie looked between Tony and Brad and wondered why she hadn't realized it before.

"You're Beta Tony?" Melanie blurt out.

Tony stood up and grinned at her boyishly.

"In the esh, guilty as charged," Tony admitted.

Brad coughed into his hand saying something that sounded like 'tattle-tale' into his hand.

"I think Brad has something to say to you," Tony said evenly as he glared at Brad.

Brad let out an exasperated sigh. Tony gave him a hard smack behind the head.

"Ow!" Brad exclaimed as Melanie's father excused himself from the room.

Melanie knew he was probably giving them all a little privacy to resolve whatever needed to be resolved.

"What did I tell you? You talk about being gamma and this is how you treat people? That is no way to treat a lady," Tony stated and then looked at Melanie with a smile. "Especially one as pretty as her."

Melanie couldn't help but blush at the comment. No one had ever called her pretty before except for her own family and they That didn't count to her.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Brad burst out, glaring at his older brother. "Stop laying it on so thick! Are you sure you're talking about four-eyes over there?"

That last comment earned him another hard smack on the back of the head from Tony.

"OW!" Brad exclaimed, rubbing the back of his head. "You trying to get me concussed bro?"

Melanie looked at Brad, deantly putting her black-rimmed reading glasses back on.

"Maybe he'll nally knock some human decency into you," Melanie quipped.

Tony and Melanie both laughed. Brad growled, crossing his arms.

"You learn to be nice to her! If she ever sheds another tear because of you—"

Brad's neck snapped towards Tony in surprise, eyes wide. Melanie held back a groan. Tony had just outed her.

"—I'll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life," Tony ended threateningly.

There was a few minutes of silence before Brad nally spoke.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," he admitted in a small voice before looking up at her. "Sorry."

And for once, Melanie was surprised to see the look of sincerity in his eyes. He actually looked kind of...cute... when he wasn't glaring at her. Shaking the thoughts from her head, Melanie couldn't stop the words spilling from her lips in the face of such a sincere apology, which she was highly suspicious might be an act for his brother.

"It's O.K." she whispered, looking at the door and absently noting that the bottom of her pajama pants were a little frayed.

Then, all of a sudden, she nearly had the wind knocked out of her as Tony pulled her in on one side and Brad from the other.

"Group hug!" Tony exclaimed, squeezing Melanie so hard with one arm she thought she might suffocate.

"Hey!" Brad yelled as he bumped heads with Tony.

"We're all friends now!" Tony yelled happily.

Melanie couldn't help but giggle. Beta Tony was such a nice guy!

"Let me go!" Brad yelled.

Tony let both of them go, beaming at the two high-schoolers.

"Glad we cleared everything up. Have a good night Melanie."

With that final statement, a roguish grin and wink her way, Tony grabbed the scruff of his collar and dragged him out. Melanie couldn't help but think that Beta Tony was attractive and nice! No wonder girls fell for him left and right. Even Melanie was feeling a bit awestruck after that group hug.

And from that day forth, Beta Tony, in her mind, was henceforth her knight in shining armor. He was the only man that had ever stuck up for her and he'd even called her pretty. He was amazing and Melanie prayed with all her might to the moon goddess that whoever her mate was, he needed to be exactly like Beta Tony. Kind, handsome and funny!

End of Flashback