

30

Walking beside Chris, Rebecca attempted to ignore the looks that the other shifters gave her as she descended the stairs. All speaking had ceased and all gazes followed her every step. Some looked at her with a stunned and wary expression. Then there were the ones that glared at her with outright hatred. Several went as far stride towards her, intent to confront her.

With a growl, Chris had put himself in front of her with a warning look to the others brave enough to approach her. When they would reluctantly clear a path for them to pass, every once in a while she would hear someone hiss out beneath their breath, “Changeling.” The way the word was spat out toward her direction made Rebecca think that it wasn’t meant as a friendly term.

Raising her gaze to Chris’s tense expression as he watched the other shifter around them, Rebecca quietly asked, “What’s a changeling?”

Pressing his flat hand against her back, he directed her through the small groups of shifters that littered the large lobby. Still keeping a sharp eye on those around them, he flashed a raised eyebrow at her words. “What?”

“I heard one of them call me a changeling. Somehow I doubt it was meant as a compliment.” She stated with a shrug.

Sighing, he explained. “Changeling is our term for a human that is bitten and later turned into a shifter. Like you said; it’s not meant as a compliment. To others you are an enemy that’s been allowed to remain among us. Many are not going to be as welcoming as others.”

“You all must really hate humans.” She mused with a wary look.

Chris simply shrugged his shoulders. “Some more than others.” he conceded.

“Do you? Hate humans, that is?”

A brief look of anger and regret flashed behind Chris’s eyes, before he jerked his face from her to look over her head toward Eric’s closed office door. Gulping softly, he nodded his head before lowering his eyes back down to hers. “I do. But I stand with Eric’s policy on humans.”

“Which is?” she prompted, her hands tangling together with worry.

“Remain separate from the human world, keep to our own, protect our own and most importantly; we do not allow others to reveal our existence. I once had two sisters, a mother and a father.” For a moment he remained silent. His chest rose and fell in even breaths before he softly admitted. “Now I am alone.”

Rebecca felt her heart still in her chest at his look of pain. Not wanting to intrude on a painful memory, she looked away from him. “I am sorry.” Shoving at her damp hair as it fell past her ear to brush against her face; she hesitantly looked back to him. Chris was watching her with a hard look. Did he hate her too because of what other humans had done to him? “That night,” the look of recognition in his eyes told her that he knew what she was referring to. “You stood in front of me and against your pack.”

Chris gave her a look of confusion. “Of course I did. I never would have let them harm you.”

“But I am human; or at least I was or currently am, temporary. Why didn’t you agree with them when they wanted to kill me?”

“You are Eric’s mate.” he said as though those four words explained everything. “As his beta, that makes Eric my closest friend, my brother and you my sister. I may not have been able to protect my own sister’s from their deaths, but I will never stand by and let harm come to you. It is our way. Besides,” he said, lifting his shoulders in a casual shrug. “You are different from the other humans. You knew our secret and you could have done so many things differently; but you didn’t. That tells me a lot about you, Rebecca. I am proud that you will our Alpha female.”

Eyes misting at his kind words, Rebecca rapidly blinked her eyes, smiling warmly up at him. “Thank you.”

Suddenly looking uncomfortable, Chris nodded before gesturing to Eric’s office. “There’s his office. I’ll go to the kitchen and see if there is any food leftover from lunch since you slept late. Meet me there once you and your mate make up.” Without another word, he spun on his heels and strode away from her.

Taking a calming breath she approached the door. She was about to knock when the sound of Eric’s hard voice along with a soft female one pierced though closed door. Who was in there with him?

Lowering her clenched fist, putting her ear to the door Rebecca remained perfectly still, listening.

“Listen to me, Beth. Because of our past and my feelings for you I will protect you. But you must not tell anyone I saw you here tonight. I will do whatever I can for you to be safe here again. I care for you more than you know. I will do whatever I must so that you can be a mother to your pups again.”

With Eric’s gently spoken words, she felt her world crash around her like a shattered window. Beth. This was the woman that Eric had once treasured and Travis and Emma’s mother. She was back?

“I’m scared, Eric.” The sound of the woman’s gentle voice as she pled with Eric made Rebecca sick. Eric was her mate. He’d claimed her. She had to be misunderstanding this.

“Don’t be. I will take care of everything. You just focus on watching your back. I could never live with myself if something happened to you.” His tender vow was like a stab to Rebecca heart. With her heart stopping dead in her chest, she braced herself to turn away from the door. Accidentally, her hand slipped on the door knob, turning it and allowing the door to slide open with a loud groan.

Freezing like a deer in headlights, she looked at the sight revealed to her. In Eric’s office stood a short slender woman wrapped tightly in Eric’s arms. The woman's hands pressed fearfully against Eric’s hard chest as her eyes widened at the sight of Rebecca.

Caught, the woman looked from Rebecca to Eric with a look of uncertainty. “Eric...?”

Eric released a deep sigh, his body relaxing once he saw Rebecca. “It’s okay, Beth. She can be trusted.” Letting his arms drop from around the woman, he took a step away from her. Turning to Rebecca he spoke softly. “Rebecca, this is Beth; Emma and Travis's mother...” the rest of his words drowned to silence as Rebecca’s heart pounded in her ears, blocking out everything else he was telling her.

Releasing a shuttering breath as her breaking heart ravaged her chest; Rebecca felt tears filling her eyes. There was no need for him to explain any further. She could guess what was happening. The mother of his children was back. The woman he’d chosen all those years ago was back in his arms, a woman of his own kind. How could she possibly have a place in his heart compared to that?

“Who are you? Do you work for Eric?” Beth’s gentle voice cut through the smothering cloud of heartache, forcing Rebecca to meet her gaze. Before Rebecca could respond, Eric spoke, “Rebecca is Emma and Travis's nanny.”

Rebecca felt her breath explode from her chest with pain. Not his lover, not even his friend; she was just his children's nanny. Was he ashamed to admit to her that he'd claimed her? That a changeling was his true mate? How stupid she must be to think she was more to him.

Grasping tightly at her emotions that rushed to the surface, Rebecca held her voice in check. She wouldn't show how much he'd hurt her with just a few simple words. If he was ashamed of her, she wouldn't bother him with her human presence. "I'll leave you guys. I just—" Unable to come up with an excuse other than the real reason she was seeking Eric, she turned and rushed down a nearby hall. Tears clouded her vision as she ran. She didn't care where she was running. She didn't even care about the shifters that meant her harm. She just needed to get away, to run.

Lifting her head as tears burned a path down her face, she found herself running toward a door that seemed to lead outside. Before she could reach the door, she collided with a tall, muscled body as someone came striding around the corner.

A pair of strong hands reached out, grasping her shoulders when she would have fallen. "Rebecca?"

Looking up in surprise, she felt sobs rack her chest as she saw Damon looking down at her with confusion. The tight rein on her emotions suddenly broke, allowing all her pain to over flow. Lunging forward, she buried her face in his chest, desperately seeking to disappear inside his chest.

Cupping the sides of her tear stained face, Damon pulled her back to study her stricken face. Concern filled his voice. "Rebecca; what is it? Where's Eric?"

No sooner than he'd spoke, the sound of Eric's voice rapidly approached. "Rebecca?" he called.

Looking fearfully over her shoulder in the direction of his voice, she turned to raise her tear filled eyes to Damon's.

Beseeching, she spoke quickly. "Don't let him find me. I can't face him right now." not understanding, but still willing to help her, he nodded solemnly.

Pulling her against his side, Damon wrapped an arm around her shoulders as he led her down the hall he'd come from and toward a stair case. Moving hurried up the steps, Damon directed her down several twists and turns until he reached a door. Without a backward glance, he opened the door and ushered her inside before closing it behind them.

Barely glancing around, Rebecca could only assume she was in Damon's room. She opened her mouth to thank him, but nothing came out. In her mind's eye, all she could see was Eric holding Beth close to him, his reassuring words echoing forever in her ears. Unable to breathe, Rebecca gasped, her hand going to her chest. It felt like someone was squeezing her chest, her lungs, and her heart.

This was what heartbreak must feel like...

As though he sensed what was happening to her, Damon moved closer to her, his big arms wrapping around her shoulders and back, pulling her against him. Gasping as ugly sobs racked her chest, Rebecca shoved against him. She didn't want to be touched. She wanted to be left alone to allow this pain to consume her.

Ignoring her feeble strikes, Damon held her as she cried. When her legs gave out, Damon sank down to the floor with her, his hands moving in soothing circles against her back.

His voice murmuring softly against her ear as her hands fisted in his shirt. "I have you, Rebecca. I'm here."

"You were wrong." She wailed while she sobbed like a wounded animal, full of unrelenting pain and agony. She was never his true mate as Damon had told her. She had been just some stand in until Eric's real mate returned.

She had no place here.

She never did.

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Rushing down the halls, Eric searched frantically for Rebecca's scent. When she'd looked at Beth with a look of utter pain, he hadn't understood what was wrong at the time. Needing to be alone with her, he'd explained to Beth that Rebecca was a trusted friend. He hadn't divulged that she was in fact his mate.

He would have shouted it to the world if he was able to, but even after he'd let go of his anger toward Beth, he wasn't certain he could trust her. Beth's parents were just a few among many that despised humans. He refused to risk that they would come after Rebecca until she transitioned in a misguided effort to avenge their daughter's reputation.

After assisting Beth sneak out of the lodge without the notice of others, with the promise that he would contact her when he was able to address her petition before the pack, he ran after his mate. The scent of her pain in the air as he followed her trail made his chest clench. He didn't know why she'd sought him out after their harsh exchange in the bedroom, but he had to find her and make sure she was alright.

He followed her trail down the stretching hall toward the infirmary. Coming to an abrupt halt, his beast rose when her scent suddenly merged with another. Damon. Growling low in his throat he followed their combined scents up toward the stairs to the opposite end of the second level. His strides quickened as he moved toward the room that Damon had claimed for his stay at the lodge.

Coming to a stop, chest rising and falling with rapid movements as he fought down his beast's need to find their mate and kill Damon, he glared at the dark oak door. Why would she be in Damon's room? Anger filling him with the possibilities he shoved the door so hard that the locking mechanism snapped, sending the door hitting the opposite wall. Growling with eyes a glow, Eric felt his anger fade slightly when he found no one in the room. Damon's and her scent floated in the air, but no one remained in the room. Where were they?

Taking a retreating step out of the room, he focused all his senses on Rebecca, on the addictive scent of his mate. With the faintest of brushes against his skin, he found it. With her perfect scent was Damon's. He had gone with her! Why? This habit that Damon was developing with following his mate around was going to cause him to get killed. With a stormy expression, he turned toward the main staircase; he headed back down, the scent growing stronger with each step he took.