

# Kidnapped by My Mate Novel

## Chapter 61 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

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I had first felt it back on the bus leaving Minnesota; the pain had been sudden and piercing, making me double over due to its intensity.

It felt like a wild animal was thrashing around in my brain, tearing at the walls of my skull with its claws, trying to get free.

I had been tempted to stab something sharp into my head just to relieve the pressure. It had to be the worst migraine in the history of the world.

The pain in my head came in waves, never leaving but occasionally getting more intense, making my eyesight go blurry and the mark on my neck burn as if it were on fire.

The only thing to do was grit my teeth and try to get through it.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was Grayson's way of punishing me.

Because although he had mated with someone else, although I had felt the pain that had almost killed me, indicating he had officially given me up, I still felt this strange connection to him.

But here's the thing: I had let him go. I had blocked him out of my mind and had done everything I could to ensure he was no longer connected.

So it wasn't me that was keeping us bonded together. It was Grayson.

This made me furious. He didn't want me. He'd made that perfectly clear.

During the time I'd lived with him, he'd only spoken to me to tell me what an inconvenience I was or when he was trying to force me into having sex with him.

I was nothing more than a tool to him, a way for him to gain more power. He had never actually cared for me.

And, yet, he was trying to break into my mind. It reminded me of the feeling I felt when we were in Paris, and I had run away from him to see my mother. He had found me so quickly.

It had to have been because of this connection we shared between us. And when I had left him back in Minnesota, I made sure he couldn't see into my mind as he had before.

I honestly didn't think he would care. But I had this strange feeling that this overwhelming, horrible, intense headache I was experiencing was Grayson trying to keep tabs on me.

Was that what this was? He wanted to know where I was and what I was doing just in case he decided he did actually want me?

Yeah, well, fuck that. Under no circumstances was I going to let him back into my mind.

The worst part in all of this was... I loved him. He had made me love him. He had used false compliments and empty promises of a life with him that had seemed like something out of a fairy tale.

It was that love that made me want to look past his flaws and the way he had treated me and... go running back to him. Yep, that's right, despite all the horrible things he had done to me, I still wanted to be with him.

I kept wondering if I had made the right decision in leaving him, trying to convince myself that he hadn't treated me that badly.

That staying in that freezing cold room in the basement and being shunned by everyone around me, even my own soulmate, would be worth it if I got to be even a little bit closer to him.

I wanted to forgive him.

But I couldn't— wouldn't do that. Although it made me feel like I was going against my very nature, I knew I had to be done with him.

I deserved better. When it came down to it, we both did. Grayson deserved better than staying with someone he didn't actually like being around, who he only wanted so he could become more powerful.

And me—I deserved better than pining after a man who would never see me as anything more than a body to warm his bed.

He made me question my worth. He made me question if I was deserving of love.

And I hated that. I hated that he made me think of all the people in my life who I had pushed away, who had left me.

My mother had left me to go create a new family in a fantastic new country, far, far away from my father and me. She had never liked being my mom. She resented me for some reason.

My father had died of cancer, leaving me all on my own.

And even though I knew it wasn't anyone's fault, some part of me still wondered if I had just worked a little bit harder to buy him the medicine he needed...

If I had just spent a little bit more time with him in the hospital instead of hanging out with friends after school, would he still be alive today? Would I still have my dad?

Even Kyle and Elijah—two people who had come to mean a lot to me over the past few months—had left me in the end.

I had tried reminding myself that it wasn't their fault. I knew they would have stayed with me if given the choice. But still, when it came down to it, they had chosen their alpha over me.

And, finally, there was Grayson. I wasn't even good enough for my own soulmate.

God, if he couldn't see past my flaws enough to love me, who would?

As much as I tried to stop myself from thinking this way, tried convincing myself that all of those people left for their own reasons and that it had nothing to do with me, I just couldn't.

It was hard not to dig through my memories and analyze every possible thing I could have done wrong.

It made me want to scream. And cry. The last few days had, admittedly, been one gigantic pity party.

Why hadn't I been good enough? Why did everyone I cared about leave me? What did I do to make Grayson hate me so much?

I hated that Grayson had caused me to think this way.

He made me feel like all of my self-worth was dependent on what other people thought of me when, in reality, the only person's love that I needed was my own.

I would be the one to see past my flaws. I would be the one to love myself...even when memories of Grayson telling me I wasn't good enough made it feel nearly impossible.

So, yeah, he could pound on the inside of my skull as much as he wanted. I was never going to let him in. I was on my own now. And that's the way I wanted it.

BELLE

"I'm a really fast learner, and I never get sick," I told the woman behind the front counter of the cute little boutique. "And I could start as soon as possible, even right now, if you wanted."

The nice-looking shopkeeper—Loretta, her name tag said—was studying me with a sympathetic gaze.

I could feel her eyes sweep over my dirty clothes and unkempt hair before finally settling on the bruise spanning the left side of my face.

I knew I must have looked extremely out of place in the pristine boutique. Loretta was dressed head to toe in name brands, with red, manicured nails.

There wasn't a single piece of hair out of place on her blonde head, which framed her heart-shaped face perfectly. She looked expensive. Mature. Beautiful. She looked like she actually belonged in this town.

I was nervous when I first entered the shop. I wasn't expecting to get a job. I'm sure all of Loretta's employees were just like her—well dressed, with their lives together.

I wasn't any of those things. But I was desperate.

Loretta hesitated a moment before replying and smiling regretfully. "I'm so sorry, darling. I would love to interview you, but we're just not looking to hire anyone new right now."

I glanced behind me at the front door, and the "Now Hiring" sign it was sporting. It was the only reason I had come into the small boutique.

Loretta followed my gaze. "We filled the position this morning," she explained hurriedly.

The hope that had been swirling around in my chest quickly dissolved.

"But I would be happy to take your information and let you know if anything opens up," Loretta continued. She tried smiling again.

I appreciated her kindness and the fact that she was trying to offer me some comfort even though we both knew I didn't stand a chance.

I nodded. "Okay. I would appreciate that. Thank you."

This had to have been the fourth or fifth business I had gone into today, seeking employment. I needed a job, and I needed one as soon as possible.

At least Loretta was kind to me instead of quickly hurrying me back onto the streets as the other shopkeepers had done.

I could tell she was a good person. She seemed genuinely sad she couldn't help me.

"I'm gonna be very honest with you, honey," she continued right before I was about to head for the exit.

She glanced around quickly as if to ensure no one could hear what she was about to say.

The only other person that had been in the shop with us, an older woman with a very expensive-looking bag thrown over her shoulder, had just left. So we were completely alone now.

"I would love to hire you," Loretta rushed to say. "I want to help you. I can tell that you could use a break. But I can't."

She hesitated, her hands fidgeting in front of her. "You're not going to be able to get a job in this town. We're not allowed to hire outsiders."

My brows shot up. "Outsiders?"

She nodded. "It's hard to explain, but... This is a tight-knit community. And the head of our community needs to approve of everyone who is allowed in."

"The head of the community? Like the mayor or something?"

"I suppose, yes. Our mayor."

"So I have to go talk to the mayor before I can get a job here?"

She sighed. "Well, no, not exactly. I'm afraid you won't be able to get any job anywhere in Evergreen. No one will hire you."

I didn't understand what she meant. I had never heard of a city only allowing business owners to hire locals.

All I knew was that I was tired. And overwhelmed. And in a lot of pain. I didn't have the mental capacity to understand what she was telling me. I didn't even want to try.

I was glad she told me, though. This way, I wouldn't continue to make a fool out of myself by interviewing for jobs that I didn't have a chance of getting.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “Do you know if the next town over has the same crazy rules?”

“Woodhurst?” Loretta asked. “No. They don’t. But I wouldn’t go there if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s run down. And there’s a lot of crime. It’s just not a nice place to be.”

The corners of my lips turned up. “I grew up in Minneapolis. I think I can handle a small town in Maine.”

Loretta looked concerned. She studied me, her brows tugging together in worry. But she didn’t say anything else.

“Thank you for your help. And for telling me about the whole job thing.” I gripped the strap of my backpack and grabbed the handle of my suitcase.

I started to make my way over to the door. “I’ll get out of your hair now.”

Loretta stopped me right before I left. “Hold on, darling,” she called out.

I paused and turned to look at her. She rounded the counter, approaching me with hesitancy in her steps.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked.

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

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She glanced around us. “I just don’t feel good about sending you out into the cold, especially in your state.”

I shifted my weight, feeling uncomfortable and a little bit embarrassed. I didn’t look that bad, did I?

“Are you running from someone?” she continued in a low voice. “Perhaps the person who put that bruise on your face?”

My discomfort grew as I took a step back. I couldn’t believe a perfect stranger was asking me this.

I appreciated her desire to help, but the last thing I wanted to do was talk about what I had gone through with my old mate.

Even just thinking about Grayson made my chest squeeze painfully, sucking all the breath out of my lungs. My mark burned on my neck, and I winced.

“Oh, my darling girl,” Loretta said, obviously noticing my reaction. “I’m so sorry.”

The pain faded a bit after a few seconds, and I was able to breathe once again. I brushed my hair out of my face, my hands shaking. Exhaustion coursed through my veins.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” I let out a deep sigh. “I mean...I’m ~going~ to be okay.”

Loretta didn’t look convinced. “Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?”

I didn’t. But I wasn’t going to tell her that.

In all honesty, I didn’t want her help. In my experience, people say they’re going to be there for you and then stab you in the back the moment you start to trust them.

Humans are inherently selfish. I promised myself I would do things on my own. I needed to build myself up again without relying on anybody else. That was the only way I would survive this.

“Yes. I have a place to stay tonight,” I told Loretta, my tone firm.

Her eyes narrowed a bit. It was clear she didn’t believe me. It didn’t matter, though.

There wasn’t anything she could do about it.

“I should get going,” I said before she could continue to question me.

“Hold on a second.” Loretta hurried back behind the counter. She grabbed a sticky note and a pen, writing something on it.

When she was done, she approached me once again. She handed me the paper.

“This is my cell number. If you ever need anything, anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me or the boutique.”

I looked down at her phone number and then back at her. I didn’t understand why she was so eager to help me. What was she hoping to get out of it?

I put the piece of paper in the pocket of my coat, knowing I would never look at it or think about it again. Besides, I didn’t even have a phone. “Uh, thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Loretta nodded and smiled once again. She still seemed worried, looking over my form warily and wringing her fingers in front of her.

“Thanks again,” I said. Then I pushed the front door open and left.

I threw the phone number away in the nearest trash can.

BELLE

After leaving Loretta’s boutique, I wandered the streets a bit more, not caring how ridiculous I must have looked as I lugged my suitcase behind me, turning heads everywhere I went.

I was beyond the point of exhaustion now and was barely able to think.

I wanted nothing more than to take a shower, put on some fresh clothes, and curl up in bed, sleeping until I couldn’t possibly sleep any longer.

Unfortunately though, that wasn’t a possibility at the moment.

I had been hoping to get a hotel room for the night, assuming a town that was only able to thrive due to the money of rich tourists would have some options for places to stay.

You can imagine my surprise when none of the hotels I passed by had any vacancies. I had no idea why some random small town in Maine was so popular to visit in the middle of March, but I guessed it was the place to be.

So, once again, I found myself on a bench on the side of the road, lying down with my backpack underneath my head, trying to breathe through all the stress and pain I was currently battling.

I had no money, no job, and no place to stay, and the pounding in my head only seemed to be getting worse.

Yeah, my life sucked.

And what was worse, I missed Grayson. Even though thousands of miles separated us, I still felt this cosmic connection to him, like there was an invisible string tying us together.

I couldn’t get that stupid butthead, asshole, jerk face out of my mind.

I put my hand over the mark on my neck, groaning and squeezing my eyes shut when it flared with white-hot pain. Everything was a mess.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I didn’t even notice when a car rolled to a stop in front of me.



“Hey!”

I jumped, my head snapping up. I winced when a fresh wave of dizziness hit me.

I met the eyes of a guy who seemed to be about my age. He was driving a red jeep and leaning out of the open window, smirking down at me. A girl was sitting next to him in the passenger’s seat, glaring at him.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” the boy continued. “Just couldn’t help but notice how lonely you looked sitting on that bus bench all by yourself. Had to stop and see if you wanted some company.”

The girl next to him scoffed and rolled her eyes, obviously finding his poor attempt at flirting as pathetic as I had.

He ignored her and continued to watch me, his charming smile growing wider with every passing second. He was very handsome, and the expression on his face told me he knew it.

He had short, curly brown hair and honey-brown skin. His jawline was sharp, and his facial features were symmetrical and undeniably pleasing to look at.

Then there were his eyes, a warm hazel color with flecks of gold and green that reminded me of the forest.

He looked like the type of person who could become successful based on their looks alone rather than their talents or skills.

The girl next to him looked extremely similar, making me wonder if they were somehow related. She had the same hair. Only hers was twisted into long braids that cascaded down her shoulders.

She had the same eyes and the same angular facial features.

The only difference I could find between the two—besides their gender, of course—

was that she had a small button nose, while the boy had a long, pointed one. Both were gorgeous, though, that was for sure.

I sat up, trying to fix my appearance a bit. Before I could say anything, however, the girl groaned. “Liam, come on! If we’re late for dinner again, Dad is going to kill us!”

she said under her breath.

So they were related. I mentally congratulated myself on my perceptiveness.

Without looking back at her, Liam, the boy, swatted his hand behind him dismissively. His gaze focused back on me, running up and down my body in one long, appreciative take.

I couldn't help but shrink back, immediately wishing I were anywhere else.

"You're not leaving town so soon, are you?" Liam asked, motioning to the bus stop I was sitting at. "You just got here."

My guard immediately went up. How did he know I had just gotten here? Had he been watching me?

The girl smacked her brother hard on the back of the head.

"Ow!" Liam shouted, finally looking at her. "What the hell was that for?"

"You sound like a stalker," she told him, exasperated.

She looked at me, offering a kind but tight smile. "Word travels fast around here.

We all heard about the pretty brunette, walking around town, trying to find a job."

I felt my face heat up. The entire town had been watching me fail at getting a job all day?

"You're not leaving, though, right?" Liam asked. He was starting to sound a little desperate. He was obviously interested in me.

I would have been flattered if I hadn't just recently sworn off men for the rest of my life.

"No. Not yet, anyway. Maybe tomorrow, though," I muttered. I would have to move on if I couldn't find a job here, which was starting to look like a real possibility.

So much for believing I deserved to settle down in a place as nice as this, right?

Liam's brows furrowed, obviously not liking my answer. He leaned forward, ready to speak, but his sister cut him off before he could.

"That's too bad," she said, aggressively pushing Liam's back against his seat so she could see me better. Liam glared at her. "We have to go now. It was nice talking to you. Drive the car, Liam."

He made no move to do as he was told. "Let me know if you change your mind about the whole leaving town thing. I could show you around," Liam told me, his grin growing again.

I nodded awkwardly, pursing my lips. "Uh, thanks."

“Great, now let’s go,” the girl snapped.

Liam rolled his eyes. “Hold on a sec, would ya? I haven’t even given her my number yet.”

The girl looked like she was about to chop his head off, her perfect skin beginning to show signs of redness underneath.

“Uh, there’s really no need,” I intervened. “I don’t have a phone, so giving me your number would be kind of useless.”

Liam’s brows rose. “No phone?” he asked. “Isn’t that kind of dangerous? What if some stranger tries something on you, and you need to call for help?”

I shrugged. The thought had occurred to me on more than one occasion, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. No money meant no way to buy a phone.

“I guess I should probably avoid making small talk with strangers then, huh?” I proposed, raising my brows at him in a challenge.

“You know, that’s a great idea,” Liam’s sister said. “We’ll leave you alone and be on our way. No more strangers in your path.”

Liam leaned forward, completely ignoring her. “You know...that whole stranger thing can be taken care of real quick, beautiful.”

The girl faked a gag, whispering, “Puh-lease,” under her breath.

“Uh...,” I managed to say, not sure how to respond. Not many guys had hit on me before. I didn’t know what the proper protocol was. Was there a right way to turn someone down?

“I’m Liam Blackwood, and this is my twin sister Laila,” he continued before I could respond.

“Once you tell me your name, we won’t be strangers anymore, now will we? Then we can talk for as long as we want without having to worry.”

“No, we cannot!” his twin, Laila, yelled. “I refuse to let this trainwreck go on any longer! She’s obviously not interested in you, dude, so, please, move on.”

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“We have places to be and a very angry dad to deal with. And guess what? You better believe I’m blaming this whole fiasco on you.

“You’re gonna have to listen to Dad give you a lecture on the importance of time management for the whole meal, and you’re not gonna get any sympathy from me because this one is all on you, bud.

“We would have been on time if you hadn’t spent forever looking at yourself in the mirror before we left.

“And then you prove, yet again, that you are only capable of thinking with your penis and have to stop to talk to the pretty new girl in town even though you know we weren’t even supposed to be talking to her in the first place.

“So I suggest you get your ass in gear and drive the fucking car before I push you out onto the street and leave without you!”

Laila’s breathing was hard, and her cheeks were tinged with red. Liam, however, looked bored with her rant.

It was becoming clear that this sort of bickering was a regular occurrence between the two of them.

He stared at her for a few seconds. “You done?” he asked.

Laila’s jaw clenched, her entire form stiff with anger.

Liam looked back at me and smiled casually. “You know, I think there are some people out there who could really take advantage of therapy. Or anger management.”

He glared back at Laila, who gave him a look of disbelief, throwing her arms up in defeat.

She leaned back in her seat. “I give up. Do whatever you want.”

Liam turned to me again. “I’m not gonna lie to you, new girl. I don’t feel great about leaving you out here on your own with no way to call for help if you need it.”

I looked around us. There weren’t many people on the streets now that it was getting dark, but those who were still out and about seemed like the least threatening people in the world.

It was mostly just families and happy-looking couples. I raised a brow. “Is your town known for its crime or something? I’m not really getting that vibe.”

“You’d be surprised, actually,” he said. I couldn’t help but notice the way a muscle jumped in his jaw. “Do you have a place to stay tonight?”

I immediately nodded, confused as to why so many people seemed to care what was going on with me. Where I came from, and I think in most cases, people minded their own business. “Yeah. I’m good.”

He eyed my suitcase and dirty clothes. “All right, well, on the off-chance that your plans fall through, there’s a bed and breakfast around the corner that usually has vacancies.

“Tell them Liam Blackwood sent you, and they should be able to set you up for the night.”

My chest filled with hope at his words. “Really?” Then, realizing I had basically just given myself up as a liar with no place to stay, I quickly continued. “I mean, uh, thanks, but I’m sure that won’t be necessary.”

Liam reached into his pocket and pulled out some sort of wrapper, writing something down on it with a pen he had in his car. He handed it to me.

“There should also be a phone there that you could use. Call me if you run into any trouble.”

I looked down at the phone number in my hands. I was starting to have déjà vu, reminded of the interaction I had had with Loretta this morning.

I tried giving Liam a smile, stashing the number in my pocket. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Liam didn’t look so convinced. In fact, he looked more concerned than he had before. After a few more seconds, however, his gaze moved from me to the watch on his wrist.

“Hmm, you know what?” he said, pressing his tongue into the inside of his cheek. “I think we’re going to be late for dinner. Laila, why didn’t you say anything?”

He shook his head, looking back at me with a feigned, exasperated expression. “I have to do everything around here. It was nice meeting ya, new girl.” He put the car into drive.

“Uh, yeah, you too,” I replied.

As they drove away, I watched as Laila’s silhouette through the back window of his car continuously smacked Liam on the head with more aggression than I would have expected from someone so small.

I had to hold back a laugh. I could still hear them yelling at each other as their car drove out of view.

BELLE

“Nine hundred dollars?” I demanded. “For one night?”

The smiling lady behind the counter of the bed and breakfast that Liam had recommended to me nodded. "This is a very nice establishment."

It was also the only place with any vacancy in this godforsaken town. It was just great that it cost an arm and a leg to sleep here.

"Are the sheets threaded with gold or something?" I asked.

The woman's kind expression turned harsh in a matter of seconds.

"No," she snapped back. "But each room has two king-size beds, views of the ocean, a personal jacuzzi, access to the beach, and a complimentary breakfast every morning."

"Is there any sort of exception that can be made? Can I make a tab and pay you back when I have the money?"

I hated the idea of owing anyone, but I had no other choice. "Please, I have nowhere else to stay."

"Afraid not, dear," the woman responded, her tone feigning sympathy. I watched her study my appearance with distaste, stopping at my bruised cheek and then at my stained clothes.

Her nose even scrunched up. "There's a motel about an hour's drive from here that's a bit cheaper if you'd like to try your luck there."

That would be great if I had any way of getting there. When I told her as much, she just shrugged and turned away, obviously done with the conversation. I sighed.

"Would it make any difference if I said Liam Blackwood sent me?"

That got the woman's attention. She turned back to me, surprise painted on her face. "Liam Blackwood? He told you to come here?"

I nodded.

"One second. Let me make a phone call."

The woman disappeared behind a door that must have led to an office. She returned a minute or two later, her lips pursed.

"I'm sorry, the owner does not think it would be a good idea for you to stay here despite your connection to his son."

It suddenly made sense. Blackwood's Bed and Breakfast. Blackwood—as in Liam Blackwood. Liam's family owned the place.

“Now, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” the woman continued.

I bit my lip, feeling my chest tighten and my unwanted tears. I gave the woman one more pleading look, which was only met with a scowl that told me, under no circumstances, was she going to budge.

Having no other choice, I turned on my heel and trudged out of the bed and breakfast.

Once outside, a fresh and unexpected wave of pain hit me like a ton of bricks. I immediately dropped my suitcase and backpack, doubling over and gritting my teeth to hold back a scream.

This was the worst it had ever gotten.

The pain lasted about a minute. I could feel Grayson’s presence in my head, pushing at my consciousness, trying to break into my mind so that he could no doubt torment me some more.

I cried out when he pushed again, almost breaking down my walls. Why was he doing this? Why did he push to stay connected to me?

Was he really that cruel? So cruel that he would deliberately cause me more pain after rejecting me and putting me through hell?

If he thought I was going to let him take any part of my life after all he had done, he had another thing coming.

I just wanted him to leave me alone. Why wouldn’t he do that?

Eventually, I was able to grab my things and stumble over to the side of the bed and breakfast. I leaned against the building, slowly slipping down the wall until my butt met the grass.

I sucked in deep, calming breaths, shutting my eyes tightly and willing myself not to cry. It didn’t work. I couldn’t stop the tears from flowing.

And just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, it started to rain. I looked up, groaning loudly. Of course... Just my luck.

Not knowing what else to do, I brought my legs up to my chest and stuffed my face into my bony knee, letting my crying overtake my body.

“Hey, new girl!” a familiar voice abruptly yelled. I jumped, my head flying up.

“What are you doing out in the rain?”

Liam. Liam, the boy from earlier, was approaching me, his hand raised over his eyes to protect them from the rain.

I wanted to scream at him to leave me alone. I didn't want him to see me like this, and I definitely didn't want the help I knew he would try to offer.

But I just couldn't seem to make my mouth work. I couldn't form the words.

Liam paused when he got closer, clearly seeing my pained expression and tears. His face softened.

"Hey," he said gently. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, fixing my wet hair. "I'm fine," I whispered. I hated how broken my voice sounded.

Liam didn't say anything for a few seconds. I could practically feel the pity rolling off of him.

The pain in my head was finally starting to lessen. I sighed deeply.

"I'm really fine," I repeated. "You can go. Get out of the rain."

Liam stuffed his hands in his pockets, never taking his eyes off me. "Can I give you a ride somewhere? I'd rather not leave you out here by yourself."

I shook my head. "I'm waiting for someone to pick me up," I lied. "She'll be here any minute now."

"Oh, okay. Do you mind if I ask who she is?"

I shut my eyes, not wanting to do this right now. "A childhood friend," I replied without thinking. "Sarah."

"Oh, Sarah," Liam said, nodding. "Sarah who? Sarah Martin? Sarah Paige? Sarah Lewis?"

I had to hold back a groan. Stupid small towns where everybody knows each other.

"Sarah Lewis," I replied curtly.

Liam's brows rose in amusement. "Your childhood best friend is a 95-year-old woman with Alzheimer's?"

Shit.

"Oh. I, uh..."



Without saying another word, Liam crouched down in front of me. There was a moment of silence. “So the bed and breakfast didn’t work out, huh?”

I was suddenly very glad that it was dark out. If not, I’m sure Liam would be witnessing my face turn as red as a tomato. I shook my head silently.

“Did you try telling them I sent you?”

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I nodded once.

“Shit,” Liam said, running a hand through his wet, curly hair in frustration. His eyelashes and skin were sprinkled with drops of rain. He was becoming completely drenched.

“So...you got nowhere to stay tonight, then? And before you respond, I want you to know that there’s no judgment from me.

“I don’t know your situation—I can just make assumptions based on the information you’ve presented me with.

“You’re sitting outside the only place you could stay for the night, your suitcase next to you, crying in the rain by yourself...”

He shrugged. “I’m genuinely not trying to offend you. I just want to make sure that you have somewhere warm to sleep tonight.”

“I have somewhere to stay,” I said firmly.

I knew deep down that Liam meant well. He was trying to help me, but I truly didn’t want it. I didn’t trust him or his charming smile.

I wanted this conversation to be over so that I could go back to being miserable alone.

Liam licked his lips. “Do you mind if I ask where? I could give you a ride.”

“That’s okay,” I replied quickly. “I’ll be fine.”

Liam nodded, seemingly accepting my answer. I thought that he would leave me alone. But then Liam sat his butt down on the wet grass right in front of me. He looked at me expectantly.

“What are you doing?” I asked after an awkward moment of silence passed.

Liam shrugged. “Waiting.”

“For...?”

“I’m waiting until I know you have somewhere safe to sleep tonight,” he replied nonchalantly.

“It sounds like you’re not comfortable sharing that information with me just yet.

Usually, I would respect your wishes and leave you be.

“However, I sort of feel as though it is my moral obligation to make sure you don’t end up alone, sitting out in the freezing rain all night, in a strange town where you know no one.

“So I’m gonna sit here until you tell me where you plan on sleeping tonight.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “And if I refuse to tell you?”

Liam leaned back on the palms of his hands and stuck his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankles. “Then I guess we’ll both be out here all night.”

I didn’t know how to answer. My stubborn side was coming out, reminding me of the promise I had made to myself before I came here. I was done putting my well-being in the hands of others.

So instead of answering, I ignored him and set my forehead back down on my knees. I would just wait him out. It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to be.

A few minutes passed, and I found my mind wandering, thinking about my other options. I could get back on a bus and try to get some sleep while it took me somewhere else.

At least I wouldn’t be in the rain then. Or I could just start walking and hope I found a bridge or something.

“You know...,” Liam said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “I have an extra bed back at my apartment. You could stay there for the night. It would be no problem.”

“No, thank you,” I replied, not even looking up at him. “I don’t stay over at strangers’ houses.”

Liam scoffed. “You afraid I’m going to murder you or something? Do I look like a serial killer to you?”

I glanced up at him. He didn't look like a serial killer. But then again, neither did Ted Bundy until he killed upward of twenty girls.

"I'm not staying at your place. I barely know you. I'm not dumb."

"I never said you were dumb." Liam frowned. "Look, it would be much better than sleeping out here."

I didn't reply.

"I'll ask my sister to sleep over if that would make you feel better. Then you won't be alone with me. She passed out in my car on the way back to her place. I was going to drop her off at her apartment, but—"

"I appreciate your offer," I said, cutting him off, "but I promise you I'm fine. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

Liam studied me for a long while. My jaw clenched. "What now?" I snapped.

"It's just that... You've been through some shit," he responded. It wasn't a question.

His kind, non-judgmental tone made me wish I could sink into the brick wall behind me.

"It's pretty obvious. You're closed off because someone hurt you. And you're stubborn as hell. I can see how those two things would create a major issue with trusting people."

"You want to do things on your own, prove you can take care of yourself without anyone's help. I get that. I've been there too."

"But you should know that part of taking care of yourself is accepting help when you need it."

I tried to ignore the sense in his words. It was an extremely difficult thing to do.

I kept my gaze on my hands while I swallowed down some tears.

"I promised myself I would be more independent when I got away," I finally whispered.

Liam stood, offering his hand to me. "C'mon. You can be independent from my place."

When I continued to hesitate, Liam rolled his eyes and forcefully grabbed my arm.

Before I knew what was happening, I was being tugged to my feet, stumbling forward.

"There's no shame in accepting help," Liam reminded me as I regained my balance and glared up at him. My world spun briefly, reminding me that I still hadn't eaten yet today.

Before I could protest, he grabbed my suitcase in one hand and slung my backpack over his shoulder. “Especially when that someone has good intentions and is extremely good-looking.”

He winked before walking away with my things.

I raced after him, quickly swiping my suitcase from his hands and pulling my backpack away from him.

“Don’t touch my things,” I told him with a scowl. “And don’t get any ideas. Just because I’m staying at your house for the night doesn’t mean anything is happening between us. Keep it in your pants, buddy.”

Liam laughed and raised his hands in surrender as I continued to follow him to where I assumed his car was located.

“I’m glad to hear that you’ve finally accepted my invitation,” he said with a charming smile I’m sure would normally make girls swoon.

“And I have no expectations for tonight.” He leaned down, so his mouth was near my ear, his breath fanning my hair. “Do you?”

My stomach churned. An image of Grayson’s face flashed through my mind, and the pain in my neck worsened, burning as though someone had just put a scalding hot iron to my skin.

I gasped and grabbed Grayson’s mark. I stumbled away from Liam, hoping space between us would lessen the terrible pain.

Was this how it would be every time a boy hit on me? I would think of Grayson and be consumed with pain?

Liam’s steps faltered. “Hey, are you okay?” All the humor was gone from his tone.

“What’s that on your neck?”

Forcing myself to regain composure, I slowly straightened and adjusted the collar of my shirt so that Grayson’s mark was no longer visible. I swallowed. “It’s nothing.

Don’t worry about it.”

My words came out harsher than I had meant, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel guilty. It was none of his business.

Thankfully, Liam didn’t ask any more questions. We approached his car—which was parked just down the street—in awkward silence.

After putting my stuff in his trunk, Liam opened the door for me, motioning for me to get in. I looked inside, hesitating. His sister, Laila, was fast asleep in the passenger seat.

I glanced back at Liam.

He smiled. “She’s a deep sleeper. Don’t worry.” He motioned for me to get in once more before walking around the front of the truck to the driver’s side and sliding in.

When I still didn’t move, he turned and raised a brow at me.

Trying not to think about it too hard, I got in and shut the door.

BELLE

Liam had shaken Laila awake after we had pulled into the parking garage of his apartment building. She was confused but didn’t argue when Liam asked her to stay the night on my account.

She was so tired that when we made our way into his apartment, she immediately plopped down on the living room couch and fell back asleep.

I walked through his apartment in awe. “You live here alone?” I asked.

His place was nice—very nice. It was huge, with a full kitchen and a large living room and dining room.

To my left was a long hallway that I assumed led to multiple bedrooms and bathrooms. I couldn’t help but notice this did not look like the home of a twenty-something-year-old.

It was too neat, too mature, and way too big for one person. It also didn’t evade my attention that Liam had pressed the button for the top floor when we were in the elevator.

He lived in the penthouse, his living room facing out over an incredible ocean view.

Liam sighed. “I know. It makes me look like a rich asshole.”

“No! No, that’s not what I meant,” I rambled out quickly, pulling my eyes from the incredible view to meet his gaze. “It’s just...” I looked around again. “It’s kind of—”

“Big. And fancy,” Liam finished for me. I was surprised to see a frown on his lips as he also examined his apartment. “I didn’t pick it. My dad got me this apartment for my eighteenth birthday.”

That made me pause. Exactly how much money did this dude’s family have?

“Wow. Eighteen,” I mumbled. “Isn’t that kind of a slap in the face? ‘Happy birthday, son. Move out.’”

Liam tried to smile; it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Eighteen wasn’t soon enough if you ask me. I would have gotten out of his house years before if I could have.”

I suddenly felt bad for having brought the subject up. There were obviously some touchy feelings surrounding Liam and his dad.

Trying to move the attention to something else, I said, “Well, where do you want me? I would sleep on the couch, but it looks like it’s already occupied.”

I smiled at Laila, who was drooling all over Liam’s nice leather sectional.

“I have a guest room that you can stay in. Follow me,” Liam replied.

## Chapter 65 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

### Filed To Story:

The room he led me to was just as nice as the rest of the place. It had a queen-size bed, a dresser with a TV on top, and a closet.

It was decorated in neutral colors, all grays, whites, and blues, and had floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the beach. It even had its own bathroom.

“Wow,” I breathed. “This is amazing.”

Liam nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets. He looked uncomfortable. “Yeah, well, it’s all yours.”

Just standing in this pristine room was starting to make me feel incredibly inadequate in my dirty clothes. I hadn’t even taken a shower since leaving Grayson.

“Are you sure you’re okay with a stranger staying in your extremely nice apartment?”

“I insist. Just don’t steal or break anything, and we’re good.” He eyed me, grinning.

“You seem like the stealing and breaking type.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, Liam. Seriously. You have no idea what a lifesaver you are.”

Liam smiled softly. “No need to thank me. I’m always happy to help out a damsel in distress.”

I hated that he could call me that and that it actually applied and made sense. The last thing I wanted was to be dependent on someone else.

“Do you need anything? Soap? Toothbrush?” Liam asked.

“Some soap and shampoo would be great if you have it.” I set my stuff down on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Being in this pristine room made me realize just how dirty I was. I hadn’t had the opportunity or motivation to shower since leaving Grayson. “Is it okay if I use your shower?”

Liam nodded. “Of course. Can I get you some ibuprofen too?”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Besides the fact that you have a black eye and keep holding the side of your neck like someone stabbed you in your carotid?”

My face heated. I hadn’t realized I had been that bad at hiding the fact that I was in pain.

“Um, okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Any time,” Liam replied as he walked to the door.

“Hey, Liam?” I asked him right before he left.

He turned to me.

“I’m Belle, by the way.”

His lips turned up. “It’s nice to meet you, Belle.”

I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

And then the dreams started.

I was in a field of red poppies, the wind rustling my hair and the long, white dress I was wearing. It was peaceful here...serene.

But for some reason, I wasn’t calm. I was on edge, my heart fluttering frantically against my rib cage like a captive bird. Something felt... off.

I whirled around, searching, although I wasn't sure what for. All I could see were poppies, an ocean of red and green. They were everywhere, surrounding me and traveling far past the horizon.

Clouds rolled over the sky, blanketing the sun and making everything suddenly very dark. I could barely see ten feet in front of me.

My panic grew, forcing me to run forward, pushing flowers out of my way as I tried to find my way out of the overwhelming sea of poppies.

But no matter how far I ran, I was stuck, trapped in this never-ending field.

Movement caught my eye. I turned. Two small lights were glowing bright red in the distance, nearly blending in with the flowers. They were low to the ground and moving closer to me.

I squinted, trying to make out what they were through the darkness, but it was nearly impossible.

I took a step forward. Then two and three. Something was pushing me closer to the moving lights. I had to know what they were. They were getting brighter and easier to see in the pitch-black darkness.

It was about ten feet away from me now. I realized with a start that the red lights weren't actually lights at all. They were eyes. And they were connected to a low-roaming beast. A wolf.

Panic speared the walls of my throat and clogged my windpipe. I recognized this wolf. It was huge—nearly the size of a horse and covered in thick midnight black hair. It was Grayson's wolf.

I should have found comfort in that fact. Even when Grayson was horrible to me, his wolf was not. His wolf had always wanted me, always cared for me.

However, if his dark-red eyes and prowling, evil mannerisms were any indicators, this was not the wolf I remembered.

It bared its teeth at me, growling deeply, keeping low to the ground, never taking its eyes off of me.

Grayson's wolf was hunting me.

Without another thought, I turned and began running in the opposite direction. I stumbled over flowers and the bottom of my long dress in a panicked sprint.



The pollen of the surrounding poppies traveled up my nose, congesting my lungs to the point that it nearly felt like I couldn't breathe.

I looked over my shoulder, my heart beating in a blur against my rib cage when I saw Grayson chasing after me, staring me down with his determined, malicious blood-red eyes.

I had no doubt he was going to catch me—and soon. He was toying with me right now, allowing me to run ahead even though we both knew he was more than capable of reaching me whenever he wanted.

Was his plan to tire me out? Or maybe he was enjoying making a game out of me?

My abrupt feet got caught in the flowers, causing me to stumble and fall to the ground. I let out a shriek of terror.

I turned onto my back and watched in horror as the wolf stood on its hind legs and then started to morph into something else. His bones cracked, and the skin of his face stretched and tore open.

Within seconds, a human was standing over me. Grayson was looking down at me with a natural grin, one that took up his entire face.

His eyes still burned red, unlike the usual deep green or black I had become so accustomed to.

"Grayson," I gasped. "Please don't." I wasn't even sure what I was begging for.

His smile only grew at the sound of my whimpering voice. And that's when I noticed them. There were long, pointed fangs peeking out from underneath his curved top lip.

"You can't escape me, Belle," he said. The voice wasn't his own; it was wispier and sounded more like one long hiss.

He pounced on me.

I woke up screaming. My entire body was shaking and covered head to toe in dripping sweat. My heart pounded rapidly in my chest. I couldn't see anything.

Was I still in the field? Was Grayson here to kill me?

My mark was burning so hard I could have sworn it was on fire, and my head was pounding as if someone was repeatedly hitting the inside of my skull with a hammer. My stomach rolled, filled with nausea.

My muscles ached.

Suddenly, the door to the room flew open. Liam came running in, followed closely by Laila.

“Belle!” Liam yelled. I could tell he had just woken up. He was wearing only pajama bottoms and had an alarmed, befuddled look on his face as if he had been shocked awake.

“Hey, hey, you’re okay! It was just a dream! It’s okay!”

I realized that I was still screaming. But I couldn’t stop. The intense terror coursing through my body made it impossible. My lungs begged for air that I was incapable of giving them.

When Liam tried to approach me, I screamed louder, pressing my body back against the headboard in an effort to get away from him.

Someone grabbed my hand. Laila was on the other side of the bed from Liam, looking down at me with wide eyes.

When I tried to pull my hand away from her, she just held on tighter, then placed it over her chest so I could feel her heart beating beneath my palm.

My eyes met her golden brown ones. My screaming faltered.

“Breathe,” she whispered. She took in a deep breath as if to demonstrate, her chest rising and falling under my hand. “You’re safe, Belle. No one is going to hurt you.

Just breathe.”

I listened. Air filled my hoarse throat and traveled to my grateful lungs.

“Good,” Laila said calmly. She continued to breathe with me, grounding me once again.

My mind cleared until I remembered where I was and what I was doing here. I was at Liam’s apartment, thousands of miles away from Grayson. Grayson wasn’t here.

He couldn’t hurt me. It was all just a dream.

After a few more moments, I was finally calm enough to speak. I looked from Laila to Liam. “I-I’m sorry,” I whispered. I wiped at the tears that were streaming down my face. “Bad dream.”

Everyone was silent for a few seconds. Then Laila laughed under her breath. She sat down on the edge of the bed. “Are you okay now?”

I nodded, running a hand through my messy hair. I couldn’t help but wince at the pounding in my head. “I’m okay. I-I’m really sorry to have woken you guys.”

I glanced out the window. It was still extremely dark out. “What time is it?”

Laila pulled her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans. “It’s three in the morning.”

I winced. I was a terrible house guest. “I’m really sorry, you guys.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for—”

“What the fuck was that?” Liam asked me, interrupting his sister and shocking me with the abruptness of his question. “I thought you were being murdered or something. Has anything like that happened before?”

I shook my head. “No, never. I...I think it was just a dream, but it felt so...real.”

“It was a night terror,” Laila explained. “They can feel really real. They’re usually a sign that a person has been through trauma.”

Both of them looked at me expectantly, obviously expecting some sort of explanation. As if I was going to walk them through my traumatic past in the middle of the night.

“I’m okay now, I promise,” I said instead. “I’m honestly just more embarrassed than anything else. Really, I feel awful I woke you both up. You guys should go back to sleep.”

They exchanged worried glances.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Liam asked. “You’re clutching your neck again.”

I dropped my hand from Grayson’s mark. I hadn’t even realized I had been holding on to it.

## Chapter 66 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

### Filed To Story:

“I’m fine,” I said once again, setting my hand down at my side.

“Do you want one of us to stay here with you?” Liam asked me. “In case something like that happens again?”

Laila nodded. “I would be happy to stay here with you, Belle.”

My cheeks reddened. I was starting to feel like a little kid who was afraid of the dark. “I think you guys have done enough for me already, but I appreciate the offer.”

I'll be fine sleeping on my own."

It only took a little bit more convincing before they both begrudgingly agreed to leave me alone and warily started to leave the room.

Liam paused in the doorway, looking back at me. "I'm right down the hall if you need anything, okay?"

I nodded, giving him the best smile I could manage. "Okay. Thanks."

He nodded once, then pursed his lips. "You want me to turn off the light?"

I was about to say yes but hesitated. "Would it be okay if we left it on?" I asked. So maybe I was a little kid afraid of the dark.

"Of course," Liam replied, taking his hand off the switch. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

He gave me one last worried glance before leaving the room and shutting the door behind him.

As I laid my head back down on my pillow, Grayson's words from my dream ran through my head over and over again.

No way I thought to myself. "You can't escape me, Belle."~

I got up extremely early the next morning. Unsurprisingly, I hadn't been able to fall asleep again after my nightmare last night.

The entire night had been spent tossing and turning, trying to get Grayson's face and voice out of my head. It was like he was haunting me.

I knew he would laugh if he could see me. He would find joy in the pain and turmoil he was still causing me.

Every horrible thing he said to me, every lie he had ever told me, kept playing in my mind on repeat.

What did I do in my past life to get stuck with you? I didn't even realize how pathetic a human could be until I met you.

Can you not do anything right, you fucking bitch?

The only reason alphas want their mates is for the power they give them. You are here to bring me pleasure and power. That's it.

And worst of all, “I am physically incapable of causing you pain.”

What a lie.

Pushing those thoughts away, I quickly got up and made the bed. I couldn’t just lie around anymore. As exhausted as I was, I had to get up and get moving. I had to go find a job and a place to stay tonight.

It had to be around five in the morning. Hopefully, Liam and Laila were still sleeping, so I could just leave them a note and sneak out of here without causing them any more trouble.

Once my backpack and suitcase were packed, I quietly made my way out of my bedroom and into the living room. I was wary of the fact that Laila was probably still asleep on the living room couch.

I paused when I looked at the couch and saw it was empty.

“Good morning,” a voice said.

I jumped and let out an embarrassingly high-pitched screech. I whirled around, coming face to face with Laila. She was leaning on the kitchen island, a mug of something steaming in her hand.

Her lips turned up in a smile. “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” she said.

I let out a held breath and glanced to the hallway I had just come from, hoping I didn’t wake up Liam with my scream.

“Don’t worry,” Laila said, following my line of vision. “Liam won’t be awake for at least three more hours.”

I shifted my weight uneasily, feeling awkward. “I was actually just leaving.” I pulled my backpack straps tighter around my shoulders.

“Would you tell your brother thanks for letting me stay here? And sorry again about the whole...nightmare thing.”

Laila waved a dismissive hand. “What’s the rush?” She walked over to one of the cabinets and took out another mug. “Do you like coffee? I’m sure you could use it after the night you had.”

I watched her uneasily. Coffee did sound good, but I had already decided to catch the earliest bus out of there so I could continue my job hunt. “That’s okay. I should really get going.”

Acting as if I hadn't said anything at all, Laila grabbed the coffee pot and filled the mug up to the brim. She glanced at me. "You need a job, right?"

My brows tugged together. Had she read my mind? "Uh...yeah."

"Well, you're in luck." She pushed the cup of coffee across the island so it was in front of me. "There's this diner just outside of town that I know for a fact is in need of a new waitress."

"I've heard the guy who owns it is kind of a jerk, but it could be what you're looking for. Interested?"

"Really?" I asked. I took a step forward, my heart beating anxiously in my chest.

"That would be incredible. How did you hear about it?"

"Liam and I eat there a lot. It's one of the only places around here that our dad doesn't own. We go there to get away from watchful eyes and listening ears."

"So your dad owns basically all of Evergreen, then?"

Laila nodded, taking another sip of her coffee. Her eyes looked far away.

"Everything and everyone, it feels like."

I hesitated. "Is he like...the mayor or something?"

She looked back at me. "Basically, yeah. Might as well be."

So he was the reason I couldn't get a job in Evergreen. "Well, thanks for telling me about the job. You have no idea how much that helps me out."

Laila leaned back on the counter behind her. "Glad to help." She smiled sweetly. "I can drive you there later today if you want. I have nothing else going on."

"We might want to wait an hour or two, though. I don't know what time it opens."

I finally joined her at the island, sitting on one of the stools. I wrapped my hands around the mug. "I would love that. Thank you. Truly."

Feeling a bit more relaxed now that I had somewhat of a plan, I let myself take a sip of coffee.

Laila studied me for a few seconds before her smile grew. "It's nice to hang out with you, Belle," she said softly.

I was starting to really comprehend just how opposite Laila and her brother were.

Liam was loud and energetic, whereas Laila was quiet and calm. They balanced each other out.

I smiled back. "Yes, it's nice to hang out with you."

"You know," Laila continued, leaning her elbows on the counter in front of her, her mug still in her hands, "now that we know you'll probably be staying nearby, I would love it if we could be friends."

"Friends?" I repeated. I had never had a girlfriend before. I had never really had any friends before. Not since I was little. I hadn't had the time after my dad got sick.

"Yeah, if you want. Everyone in this town is either boring or a two-faced liar." She wrinkled her nose. "Or they got out of here and went somewhere better.

Unfortunately, I'm stuck here. Liam too."

"Stuck here? Are you kidding?" I glanced around the incredible apartment that had been provided by her obviously very rich father and out the living room window overlooking the absolutely incredible view.

"Evergreen is beautiful. I would love to live here."

"Trust me, it's not as amazing as it seems. It might look like this incredible getaway on the outside, but on the inside..."

She shook her head as if she were trying to clear away a bad memory. "Just...not everything is as it seems around here."

"Oh," I whispered. "Well...anything is better than the place I came from."

I could feel the way Laila's gaze traveled over the large fading bruise that was still taking over half of my face.

"Yeah, I bet."

I expected her to ask more questions but was extremely grateful when she didn't push. Instead, she walked over to a kitchen cabinet next to the sink, grabbed some ibuprofen, and handed it to me.

She didn't ask if I wanted it. Just simply handed it over, followed by a glass of water.

"Thanks," I murmured. I didn't argue before swallowing the pills.

We spent the next hour or so chatting. I learned that Laila and Liam were basically like royalty in Evergreen. The Blackwoods were the hierarchy, and their dad was the king.

Laila didn't act like royalty, though. In fact, it seemed like she didn't really enjoy talking about her father or all the money her family had, just like Liam.

She was extremely nice. She made me feel comfortable and never pressured me for information about my past.

In fact, she was so sensitive about what she was saying that I had started to suspect that Laila might have had her own past.

There was this sort of dimness in her eyes—a look that told me something else was on her mind, haunting her.

“Wait, you can't be serious.” I laughed.

Laila giggled with me. “I wish I weren't. This scarred me for life. Can you imagine?

Liam and, like, eight of his friends—in custody at the police station, all soaking wet and only in their underwear.”

“Oh my gosh, that's horrible! How could they do something so stupid?” I asked, unable to hold back the large grin taking over my face.

“I asked them that same question. It was one of the hottest days of the year, but still, we live on the beach, for god's sake! There was no reason for them to use the country club's pool.

“And then to strip down and accidentally lock themselves in there without clothes?

They were just being idiots, I swear.”

Someone groaned behind us. “You're never going to let me live that down, are you?”

I whirled around, seeing Liam standing at the hallway entrance, looking at us both with a pained expression on his face.

Laila grinned. She popped one of the grapes she had stolen from his fridge into her mouth. “Nope.”

## **Chapter 67 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen**



### **Filed To Story:**

Liam shrugged and approached us, stealing the grapes from Laila's hand and taking them for himself. "It wasn't even my idea. Anous is just an asshole."

I nearly choked on my coffee. "You're friends with someone named Anous? That can't be real."

He tossed a grape in his mouth. "Oh, it's real all right. He gets shit every day.

Apparently, it's a family name."

"The worst family name ever," Laila added.

"Like I said," Liam continued, "Anous is an asshole."

I laughed so hard that, for a second, I forgot all about Grayson and the pain I was in. It was nice.

I wish it could have lasted forever.

BELLE

THREE MONTHS LATER

My feet were killing me. The heels my boss forced me to wear definitely did not provide enough support for a shift at a busy diner. It probably didn't help that I had worked every day this week without a break.

I was exhausted.

I sighed, brushing my hair out of my face as I carried a tray of food to a table of drunk men who hadn't stopped staring at my ass since they'd walked in.

They all gave me grimy looks as I set down their food. I asked if they needed anything else before shuffling away quickly.

Thanks to my uniform, I was used to this sort of behavior from men. It only took me one week to learn how to fight off wandering hands.

When my boss handed me the short red dress, white apron, and black high heels, I almost thought he was joking—that is, until I saw that the other waitresses were wearing the same thing.

But I had taken it without any complaints, just happy for the work.

Pom Pom's, the place Laila had recommended I get a job, was a diner right outside of Evergreen. They hired me right away, barely even taking the time to interview me.

They'd obviously needed the help. Although, I wasn't sure if I considered myself lucky to be working here. It was run down and understaffed and had paint peeling off the stained walls.

It served hamburgers made of questionable meat and attracted customers of even more questionable character.

The only good thing about working here was that my boss was happy—eager, even—to give me as many hours as I wanted, which was good because I needed to make a living somehow.

My mark throbbed on my neck as I walked behind the front counter. I quickly set down the tray I had just been carrying. I breathed through the pain, leaning on the wall behind me for support.

It was really bad today for some reason. Wave after wave of agonizing heat passed through me, nearly knocking me off my feet.

I couldn't hold back the whimper that escaped my throat or the unwanted tears that started to pool in my eyes.

It was only getting worse. Every day I spent away from Grayson was becoming more torturous than the last.

The mark that Grayson had left on my neck all those months ago used to be just two small dots where his canines had pierced me.

The dots were a little raised and healed over with scar tissue—hardly even noticeable unless you were looking for it. Now, however, it looked absolutely horrific.

It was red and irritated, surrounded by a rash that spread up my neck and down my shoulder and chest.

The two puncture wounds from Grayson's teeth had opened up and constantly bled, staining anything I wore even though I tried to keep it covered up with a bandage.

The mark itself was slightly swollen, looking like I had a small tumor under my skin. It pulsed with pain like it had a life of its own. I could practically feel it draining the energy out of me every day.

Part of me had just accepted this as my new life. Just like how I had to deal with my period every month, I would have to deal with the agonizing pain that came from being rejected by my soulmate.

Just normal stuff, right?

At least the constant headache I had been suffering through for the last three months—the one I knew was caused by Grayson trying to get into my mind so he could know where I was and keep tabs on me—was starting to fade a bit.

This meant my former mate was slowly worrying less about me, forgetting about me, and moving on with his life.

Although I knew it was for the best, my heart still clenched at the thought. Soon, he wouldn't think about me at all—I would just be a distant memory.

Grayson would never be that for me.

I would always cherish our time spent together in Paris, sitting under the glowing lights of the Eiffel Tower as we talked for hours, holding hands while we walked around the Louvre, and waking in each other's arms every morning.

Even though we had a bumpy start to our relationship, he'd won me over quickly and made me realize that all I wanted in life...was him. He was my home.

And now...he was forgetting about me.

Shit, why was I even thinking about this?

You don't want him, Belle, I told myself. ~You can't want him.~

"Belle!" someone shouted.

My head snapped up. My boss, Jerry, had just walked into the diner. He was wearing his usual—stained white T-shirt and jeans with flip-flops on his feet.

His balding head was glistening with sweat, and his yellow teeth were exposed with the constant sneer on his face.

"What the fuck are you doing just standing around?" he demanded. "Get back to work!"

I had to hold myself back from arguing with him and demanding that he not talk to me that way. The diner was dead right now. I had just given food to my only customers.

It was a surprise that they were even here as it was nearly eleven at night, and the diner was usually empty by now.

“Sorry,” I replied, trying to ignore my pain, and searched for something to do.

I grabbed a white washcloth and started wiping down the counter even though I had scrubbed it clean ten minutes ago. I winced when my mark throbbed again due to the movement.

I had no idea what Jerry was doing here. I knew he was the owner of Pom Pom’s, but he spent so much time here that I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had a cot set up in the back.

And yet, he didn’t act like a boss, except for when he was yelling at us to get back to work. Usually, he just sat around, counting his money or hanging out in his office in the back.

I had no idea what he did all day because it definitely wasn’t managing his restaurant. I didn’t even think of him as my boss as I hadn’t spoken to him more than a handful of times since he’d hired me.

Whenever I had any sort of problem, I went to my manager, another waitress named Brenda. She was in charge of schedules, salaries, and keeping everyone in check.

She was also a huge sweetheart and knew what it meant to struggle in life since she was a single mom trying to raise two kids on a waitress’s salary.

I felt like I could talk to her about anything, and she wouldn’t judge me.

It was too bad I wasn’t working with her tonight. I was the only waitress here. The cook was in the back, but he hardly ever came out.

It would have been nice to have someone to hide behind to avoid Jerry’s wandering gaze. He had always been a little too comfortable around me.

He proved my point when his eyes traveled up and down my body appreciatively, licking his lips.

I unconsciously tugged on the bottom of my skirt, wishing for the millionth time that it was about three inches longer.

Thankfully, Jerry didn’t say anything else. He moved behind the counter, going straight to the cash register and opening it up. I frowned, wondering why he needed cash so late into the night.

My attention was pulled from my boss’s shifty behavior when a figure walked through the door. Liam’s angry gaze found me right away. I swallowed a groan. I was definitely in trouble.

Liam approached me immediately. “What the hell, Belle?” he asked. “I just went to your apartment to check on you, and you weren’t there. You told me you weren’t working today.”

I glanced over at Jerry to see if he was listening, but he was too busy snatching cash out of the register and stuffing it into his pockets. Then he turned away and walked to his office.

“I didn’t think I was,” I said as I grabbed a bunch of ketchup bottles from beneath the counter, getting ready to refill them. “Brenda’s son got the flu. She asked if I could take her shift tonight.”

Liam liked to give me rides to and from work, even though my apartment was only half an hour’s walk from here. He always got upset when I didn’t let him drive me.

Ever since I had met him, he had been overprotective to the max, and I had no idea why.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I was grateful for Liam and all he had done for me. If he hadn’t let me stay with him three months ago, I would be sleeping on the street.

But I had left his place over a month ago, moving into a cheap one-room apartment near the diner, so I didn’t need his help anymore.

I thought my relationship with Liam would slowly dissolve into nothing after I moved out, but he still hung around me like he thought he was somehow responsible for me.

I considered Liam a good friend of mine. I enjoyed being around him and grew really close to him while I was staying at his place.

But there were times when he didn’t act like my friend—he acted like my bodyguard. I didn’t get it. I still remembered how pissed off he was when he found out I was moving out of his place.

He just didn’t seem to understand that I wanted to be independent. I didn’t need another possessive alpha male coming into my life, trying to control me and tell me what he thought was best for me.

“Why didn’t you text me?” Liam continued angrily. “You know I don’t like you walking out on the streets alone, especially at night.”

He’d got me a phone only a few days after I met him. His and Laila’s numbers were programmed into the contacts the moment he’d handed it over to me.

I tried to deny the expensive gift, but he continued to insist, so I eventually begrudgingly accepted it.

And now that he couldn't keep an eye on me from his apartment, he required that I text him whenever I went anywhere.

I didn't look at him as I continued to fill the ketchup bottles. "I can handle myself, Liam. I don't need a babysitter. I'm not a child."

"I don't think you're a child. I just prefer you in one piece rather than stabbed or beheaded.

"Or with your body lying in a dumpster somewhere because some demented asshole thought it might be fun to murder you while you were walking home alone."

I looked up at him then, my expression shocked and a little disturbed. "I think you might be the demented one. That was seriously dark. I can promise you I was perfectly fine walking on my own this morning.

"No murderers in sight."

"This morning?" Liam demanded. "Just how fucking long have you been here?"

Shit, I should not have said that. I looked away, choosing not to answer.

"Are you telling me you opened this morning, and now you're closing?" he continued.

I sighed. "I picked up Candice's shift this morning. She had an emergency. It's not that big of a deal."

I didn't mention the fact that the emergency was that she was hungover from partying a little too hard last night and had literally begged me to cover for her.

## Chapter 68 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

### Filed To Story:

Liam's eyes seemed to darken. "You've got to be shitting me," he muttered under his breath. "You've been here since five in the morning? Is that even legal?"

I was about to respond when my neck suddenly exploded with pain. I froze, squeezing my eyes shut. It passed a few seconds later, and I sucked in a deep breath, feeling suddenly lightheaded and queasy.

"You okay?" Liam asked, his tone more gentle now. All of the anger was gone from his tone and replaced with genuine concern.

I nodded, licking my lips. “Fine,” I squeezed out.

“I wish you would just let me take you to my doctor. You’ve had that thing for months.” He motioned to my mark. “It’s only getting worse.”

He was right—going to the doctor was probably a good idea, but how did I explain my mark to them?

Oh, yeah, my werewolf soulmate dude bit me to magically bond me to him forever and then slept with someone else, leaving this thing on my neck that I think might be slowly killing me. Anything you can do to help?

Yeah, I had a funny feeling that wouldn’t go too well.

“I don’t have the time or money to go to the doctor, and you know it,” I replied.

Liam opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off instantly, already knowing what he was going to say.

“I am not letting you pay for a trip to the doctor. You’ve already done enough for me, and I still owe you for the months you let me stay in your apartment.”

I looked down at the ketchup bottles in my hands. “Besides, it’s really not that bad.

I’m just being dramatic.”

Liam’s jaw ticked. I knew he didn’t believe me even one bit. “I already told you, you will not be paying me back for staying with me. Now, how’s your head?”

I rolled my eyes. I wished I had never told him about the stupid headaches Grayson had caused me. It just became really hard to hide that much pain all the time. I couldn’t keep avoiding his questions.

“I’m fine, Liam,” I said once again. “I’m as healthy as an ox. I officially give you permission to stop worrying about me. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

He obviously didn’t agree because he kept asking me questions. “When was the last time you got a good night’s sleep? Are you still having night terrors?”

Embarrassment tightened my chest, remembering all the times I had woken Liam up in the middle of the night with my screaming. It still happened nearly every night and had been that way ever since I had left Grayson.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I said. “I would rather be here.”

It was true. I hated going back to my apartment, where I only had my thoughts for company.

Sleeping was even worse. If I did somehow manage to fall asleep despite all the pain constantly coursing through my body—nightmares tortured me throughout the night.

They always consisted of Grayson taunting me, chasing me, staring me down with his bright red eyes. I woke up screaming, covered in sweat, and tears pouring from my eyes.

I couldn't remember where I was or how I had gotten there, only that Grayson—my soul mate and the only person in this entire world who I really cared about—hated me.

Didn't want me. Would rather be with someone else and found amusement in torturing me.

After every dream, I would spend the rest of the night wide awake, staring at the ceiling, feeling hollow and hopeless and afraid.

So yeah, working at Pom Pom's may not have been a dream, but it was better than going home.

Liam glowered, about to say something else, when the door to the diner flew open, and a very upset Laila came marching in.

"Liam! Why are you ignoring all of my calls?" she yelled. "Are you seriously thinking of having a party at Dad's tonight?"

Liam groaned, his head dropping. He gave me a pleading look, probably asking him to back him up in one way or another, but I just smiled and shrugged.

I decided then and there that dealing with his sister would be his punishment for badgering me.

He turned on his stool to look at her. "Hey, sis," he said casually. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"Do you have some sort of death wish or something?" Laila babbled on, hands on her hips. "If Dad finds out you're throwing a party at his house, he'll kill you!"

I didn't know a whole lot about Liam's relationship with his millionaire father, but I did know they loved to push each other's buttons. Liam would do anything to upset his father.

"Chill," Liam replied. "He's not gonna be home until late tomorrow night, and I'll have the place cleaned way before that. Besides, it's only a few people."



“That’s not what Chelsea Matthews said when I ran into her at the mall. She said our entire senior class from high school was going to be there!”

Liam grinned, shrugging. “So what? It’ll be fun! Lighten up.”

“I wasn’t told about any party,” I interrupted, trying to move their attention away from killing each other.

I had witnessed enough of Liam and Laila’s fights to know that they usually ended with violence, and I didn’t need that in the diner tonight, especially since my boss was here right now.

“That’s because you weren’t invited,” Liam replied without hesitation.

Ouch.

Liam watched my face fall. “Shit, Belle, I didn’t mean it that way—”

“It’s fine,” I said, cutting him off. I had never met Liam’s or Laila’s friends before—not that I really wanted to.

I just found it a bit odd they were always talking about them, but I had never seen them around. I assumed it was because they didn’t want them to know they hung out with someone weird like me.

My presence in their lives was kind of hard to explain.

I looked down, willing the bottles of ketchup I was holding to fill faster so that I could get out of this conversation and go do something else.

I didn’t want Liam to see that what he’d said struck a nerve. Even though I probably wouldn’t have gone to the party even if I had been invited, being left out still hurt.

Laila glared at her brother. “You’re such an asshole.”

Liam ignored her. “Belle, really, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just didn’t think it was your sort of scene. My friends are a bunch of jerks. I don’t want you around them.”

“It’s okay. I get it,” I said. I couldn’t look at him.

I hated the fact that I was sad I wasn’t invited to some stupid party. I had to remind myself that this was what I wanted.

I was going to be independent and work my way from the bottom without anyone’s help. That meant lots of long shifts at the diner and no time for friends.

But even if this was what I wanted and needed to do, it still sucked sometimes. I had absolutely no life.

Just then, Jerry walked out from the back. “Hey,” he said to Liam and Laila. “Either order something or get the hell out. I’m not paying her to talk to people.”

I looked back at my friends. Liam was shooting daggers at Jerry with his eyes.

“Okay,” Laila replied quickly, always the calmer one. “We’ll both get some coffee, please,” she said.

I nodded and turned to the coffee maker, filling a mug of coffee for each of them. I set the cups down on the counter in front of them. Jerry narrowed his eyes at us before turning and marching out the front door.

The table of men across the diner waved me over, probably needing refills or something.

“Belle,” Liam groaned as I walked past him. “Please don’t think—”

I turned to him, pinning him with a heated gaze. “Why don’t you just do us both a favor and stop treating me like I’m this fragile idiot who can’t do anything on her own.

“I can make my own decisions. I’m not stupid, Liam. Stop treating me like I am.”

Liam blinked. “I know you’re not stu—”

“I have to get back to work,” I interrupted. I didn’t want to hear whatever stupid excuse he was thinking up. “Coffee is on me. Have a great rest of your night.”

I turned and walked away from them.

BELLE

The rest of the evening was a blur. That was one nice thing about working at the diner; it kept you busy enough that time moved quickly.

There wasn’t a single moment when I didn’t have something to do. I was grateful for it, even if I was exhausted by the end of the day. It kept me distracted from my own thoughts.

It was dark now and well past 10 p.m. I groaned as I looked at the clock. I still had two more hours of my shift left.

I wouldn’t mind being the only waitress on the floor if I were with Tommy—hardly anyone comes in after eight anyway—but Bert was a different story.

He always knew just what to say to make me feel uncomfortable.

His favorite thing to talk to me about was my appearance—how I looked in my uniform, that I would look better if I put on some makeup, that I looked just like one of his ex-girlfriends, and so on.

Today it had been, “I wish you would smile at me the way you do with the customers. C’mon, give me a smile, beautiful.”

I ignored him and continued working.

I think it pissed him off because the food was coming out considerably slower after that, leaving me to deal with hungry customers who had been waiting over forty-five minutes for their food.

I was beyond exhausted. Sighing, I sat down in one of the booths I knew Bert couldn’t see from the kitchen and pressed my head down onto the cool table.

I had rejoiced when the only two customers in the diner had left, leaving the place completely empty. I needed a break. I had been on autopilot all day. Had I even stopped to eat lunch?

It didn’t matter. My stomach had been roiling all day, most likely due to my mark, so I doubt I would have been able to keep anything down anyway.

My body ached from being on my feet—in heels nonetheless—for ten straight hours yesterday and then again for running on fourteen today.

Ugh, why did I do this to myself?

Well, actually, I knew why, and it wasn’t only because I needed the money, although that was the main reason for putting myself through this hell.

But, really, I didn’t have much else to do with myself.

If I wasn’t here, I was at my extremely crappy apartment, trying to sleep, and my nightmares never allowed me more than a couple of hours of unconsciousness before I always woke up screaming every night without fail.

At least work kept my mind occupied and gave me something productive to do.

I rested my head on my arms, still leaning on the table in front of me. Guilt was eating away at me. I hated that I had yelled at Liam earlier.

He and Laila had left after our argument and hadn’t said another word to me.

I even checked my phone multiple times, the one Liam had given me, expecting to see at least one text from him, but there was nothing.

After everything he and his sister had done for me, I couldn't believe I had said that to him. Sure, maybe he deserved it, and it had felt good to say it in the moment, but now I felt awful.

## Chapter 69 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

### Filed To Story:

Liam and Laila were my friends, and they cared about me and wanted the best for me. And whether or not I wanted to admit it, I didn't want to lose them.

I liked having friends—even if they didn't want me at their parties.

I was about to pull out my phone, ready to text Liam and apologize, when something stopped me. Someone was sitting in front of me.

I screamed and jumped so high out of my seat that I was surprised when I didn't hit the ceiling.

There was an older woman sitting across from me in the booth, smiling the sort of smile you would expect from your grandma.

She was wearing a thick blue coat and a silk scarf over her head, making her look like the types of rich old women you see in Hollywood movies...

The kind that drive old top-down convertibles, drink expensive cocktails, and often daydream about killing their husbands.

She was elegant and beautiful—probably one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen with her silver-blond hair and porcelain skin.

She was absolutely breathtaking. And very out of place in this crappy old diner.

"Oh, my gosh," I said, placing a hand over my chest to calm my racing heart. "You scared me."

She smiled sweetly. "Sorry, deary."

I shook my head. "No, I'm sorry." I began to get up, returning her smile even though I wasn't feeling it. "I was just resting. I didn't know anyone was here."

I was surprised when her hand shot out and grabbed my arm, stopping me. “Why don’t you sit and have a meal with me? I could use a big cheeseburger and some decent conversation.”

I paused. I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I’d never had a customer ask to eat with me before.

“Oh, um, thank you for the offer, but I should really get back to work—”

“Bert!” the woman yelled out, cutting me off. She never let go of my arm, keeping me firmly in place. “Would you be a dear and make us two cheeseburgers and two strawberry milkshakes?”

“You got it!” he called back automatically. He had more enthusiasm in his voice than I had ever heard him use before.

My mouth dropped open slightly in surprise. She knew Bert? “How—?”

“I come here often,” the woman provided, answering my question before I asked it.

That was hard to believe. I had been working here nearly every day for three months and hadn’t seen her once.

If she were one of the regulars, I would have noticed, especially if she looked like this every day. Her beauty was pretty hard to miss.

“Oh, my darling girl, you look exhausted,” she said, consoling me, her kind eyes searching my weary face. There was something about that gaze that made me feel strangely comforted and at peace.

That’s why I didn’t stop her when she grabbed my hands in hers and squeezed them gently. “And I can’t even begin to imagine the pain you’re in.”

My brows tugged together. “I’m sorry?”

“Your bond is starving. Oh, how you must miss him.”

I blinked. Was she talking about...?

She tilted her head to the side as if she knew what I was wondering, revealing her neck. I sucked in air when I saw the two puncture wounds right where her neck and shoulder met. A mark. A werewolf’s mark.

“You’re a—a—” I stuttered, not quite able to get the words out.

“Yes, I know all about werewolves,” the woman said, waving her hand as if it were no big deal. “I am mated to one, just like you.”

My gaze shot over to the kitchen, looking to see if Bert could hear any of our conversation.

I didn’t know if Grayson would care if I told anyone about the werewolf world, but I didn’t want to take any chances. I couldn’t have him tracking me down.

At the thought of him, a sudden burst of pain took over my senses. I gasped and pressed my eyes shut. I braced myself as a big wave of fire began to spread from my mark, about to take over my body...

But then it stopped.

My eyes flew open. Almost all of the pain from my mark had just disappeared, leaving me with a perfectly manageable throbbing sensation. I would have cried out in relief if I weren’t so confused.

I looked at the woman. She didn’t meet my gaze, looking lost in thought. Her grip on my hands tightened.

“Oh my, you are in a lot of pain,” she whispered, eyes much wider than before. Her body looked tense, rigid. She looked back at me. “I will hold onto it for now.”

“What?” I asked. “You—You—”

She nodded. “I took your pain, yes. I’m sorry to say that I can’t keep it for long, as much as I would love to give you that reprieve.

“Unfortunately, your pain is your burden to bear. But I can hold on to it for a few minutes and give you a bit of a break.”

I stared at her. “I don’t understand,” I said.

She pursed her lips, thinking. “Yes, this must seem confusing.” Then she winced slightly. Her eyes were filled with pain when she looked back at me. My pain.

“Your bond is starving,” she muttered. “You need your mate.”

I hesitated. The last thing I wanted to be doing with whatever little time I had not in agony was talking about Grayson. “My mate rejected me to be with someone else.

He doesn’t want me. He never did.”

The woman looked me up and down before smiling widely. “I find that extremely hard to believe.”

Bert approached us then, carrying our meals. I was shocked when he didn't complain about being forced to do my job or having to cook for me.

In fact, he didn't say anything at all. He just put our food down and walked straight back to the kitchen. He didn't even look at us.

"Do you like cheeseburgers?" the woman asked me when Bert was out of sight.

My eyes fell on the food in front of me. I did love cheeseburgers. And I hadn't had one in forever. I got an employee discount for food at the diner but didn't ever use it.

I needed to save as much money as I could so I could keep renting out my apartment.

I nodded.

"Please eat," the woman said, already picking up some fries. "The meal is on me."

There was something about her soothing tone that made me want to do as she told me, made me feel like it was okay to sit and take a short break even when I should be working.

I picked up the burger in front of me and took a huge bite, my stomach cheering in gratitude for the food. It was the first time I was actually able to eat in peace in so long.

I finally came up for air after scarfing down half my meal, only to see the woman watching me with amusement. My cheeks brightened.

"Sorry," I whispered, wiping my face with a napkin. "Hungry."

"I'm sure you are." She gestured to my food, her kind smile never leaving her face.

"Please, eat some more."

I didn't need to be told twice.

Somehow this unnatural situation felt completely normal. She reminded me of my grandma. "How are you doing, my dear?" she asked me a few seconds later.

I swallowed the food in my mouth. She was speaking to me as if she knew me. "I'm, uh... I'm okay."

"Why don't I believe you?" she responded. "You can be honest with me. Being away from your mate is hard. Especially when your connection was as strong as yours was."

"You know who Grayson is?"

She laughed. "Of course I do. Alpha Grayson Stoll is one of the most powerful men alive. Anyone who is a part of the supernatural realm knows who he is."

"Oh," I murmured. "So that explains why you know who I am."

She nodded. "You are Belle Dupree, the mate of Grayson Stoll."

"Ex-mate," I corrected softly, dropping my gaze. I needed to change the subject. "Are you a werewolf?"

"Oh, goodness, no. I grew up in a pack, though. And I am mated to a werewolf." She offered me her hand to shake. "My name is Evangeline Viotto."

BELLE

The name seemed to hold some unsaid significance because chills covered my body.

I leaned back in my seat after shaking her outstretched hand. "Well, thank you for the meal, Ms. Viotto. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, please, call me Evangeline. I've never gone by Ms. Viotto. I'm not even sure I would answer to it."

"Evangeline, then."

She considered me for a few seconds before continuing. "I want you to know that I don't plan on telling your mate where you are. I think you have every right to hide after everything you went through."

My heart did a flip in my chest. I hadn't even considered the fact that she could give my whereabouts to Grayson. "Thank you," I breathed out. "It's very important that he doesn't ever find me."

Her smile faltered, turning serious. Before I knew what she was doing, she reached across the table and took my hand in hers, squeezing it.

"You have a long journey ahead of you, darling Belle. And it isn't going to be easy."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to know that power isn't a bad thing when in the right hands. It may seem scary at first to shift to your true potential, but you are more than capable of handling it. You do not have to be afraid."

She was talking in riddles, and I had no idea. "How do you know all of this?"



“You remind me quite a bit of myself at your age. I was also terrified of my mate.”

“Really?” I asked. I hated that this amazing, kind woman seemed to have gone through a similar situation to me.

“I don’t get it. Why are werewolves blessed with soulmates if they just take advantage of them? My mother is terrified of her mate too. He abuses her...just like mine did.”

“My mate didn’t abuse me, darling. He did the opposite. He took care of me when no one else did. He saved me from a cruel fate.”

“So then...why were you scared of him?”

“It’s hard to explain. For one thing, werewolves are terrifying creatures. It is okay to be hesitant around them at first, especially when they claim to possess you.

“People from my past also made it difficult for me to trust anyone. I didn’t know what he wanted from me, and that was terrifying. But I don’t know what I would do without him now. He is the best part of my life.”

## Chapter 70 – Kidnapped by My Mate Series II: His Lost Queen

### Filed To Story:

The genuine love in her tone made my throat feel raw. As much as I hated to admit it, I was jealous of what she had. There was a point when I was convinced that Grayson and I would have a life like that.

I shoved down the intense and sudden longing to be with my mate. What was wrong with me? He hated me. He hated me. God, why did that make me feel like crying?

I swallowed the lump in my throat while somehow managing to keep my tears at bay.

“I wish my mate loved me the same way yours does. Grayson slept with someone else and told me he only planned to keep me around for power. I truly hope I never have to see him again.”

Evangeline gave me a sad smile. “You don’t mean that.”

“Uh, actually, I do—”

“No. You don’t. You miss him. Terribly. And that is okay. It’s okay to miss him even after what you went through.

“He is your mate. Your soulmate. Which is why it is also okay to hate him for what he did to you. No one you love should ever treat you that way.”

I wasn’t sure why she was saying all of this to me. Why did she care how I felt or how I was handling my mate rejecting me?

“Give me your phone, dear,” she said before I could ask.

I found myself handing over my cell phone without thinking.

She typed something in quickly. “You call me if you ever need anything, okay? I’m here for you. And I have a funny feeling that you’re going to want to talk to me again.”

When she gave me my phone back, her number was programmed in.

“I—” I started.

“What are you doing, Belle?” someone said, cutting me off.

My attention swung around behind me. Standing by the door of the kitchen was Bert, staring at me with a confused expression on his face.

“Oh, I, uh, was just having a meal with—” When I looked back at the seat in front of me, I was shocked to find that it was completely empty.

“Where did she...?” My gaze scanned the diner, but Evangeline was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you eating some random people’s leftovers?” Bert continued.

I looked down at the half-eaten meal in front of me. “What? No. You made this for me and the woman I was just sitting with.”

Bert’s eyes fell on Evangeline’s plate of untouched food and empty seat, raising a brow. “I think you might be losing it, sweetheart. I haven’t gotten any orders for the last three hours.”

“But...No, I swear there was this woman—”

“Look, I’m honestly too tired to care. It makes no difference to me. Listen, I promise not to tell the boss you’re stealing from the kitchen if you agree to close the diner on your own tonight so I can get home.”

“You want to go home now?” I asked. “But the diner doesn’t close for two more hours. I don’t think I’ll be able to waitress and cook...”

My voice trailed off as I looked up at the big clock hanging over the kitchen window. It read 2 a.m.

I reared back. I had been talking to Evangeline for two hours? That couldn't be right. It felt like half an hour at most. I didn't even have time to finish my meal, for goodness sake.

"I, uh..." When I turned back to Bert, he was looking at me like I had a screw loose.

"Talking to people who aren't there, eating random strangers' scraps, hallucinating about what time it is. That's three for three, sweetheart. I think you could use a good night's sleep 'cause you ain't functioning correctly."

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was losing it. All of my sleepless nights and time spent missing my former mate must've been getting to me.

"So you gonna close for me?" Bert questioned again.

I found it a bit funny that he was just saying how much I needed sleep but then was asking me to stay later for his benefit.

I ran a hand down my face, trying to clear my confusion and exhaustion. "Yeah.

Sure. I can close tonight."

It wasn't like I was going to be getting any sleep tonight anyway. Might as well avoid my night terrors full of a red-eyed Grayson for as long as possible.

He grinned widely. "You're a doll."

I hadn't even realized that he was ready to go until he was marching out the door, leaving me completely on my own.

I slumped down in the booth I was sitting in, looking back at Evangeline's untouched plate of food.

I was still extremely confused about what the hell had just happened, but honestly, I just didn't have the energy to think too much about it at the moment.

All I cared about was cleaning up the diner and kitchen so that I could get home and at least try to get some sleep since I was opening the diner tomorrow morning too.

I groaned when I realized I would have to be back here in less than five hours.

I guess anything was better than sitting in my rat-infested, one-bedroom apartment with nothing to do other than trying to ignore my pain and not think about him.

Speaking of pain, it occurred to me for the first time since realizing Evangeline had disappeared that I still wasn't experiencing any of the agony that came from my starving mate bond.

My body felt at peace for the first time in months, with no aches or pains or blinding headaches. Evangeline said she had taken it from me, but how? And would it return?

She said she could only hang on to it for so long.

Deciding to take advantage of the situation while I still could, I stood and began clearing off my table and the other ones that still needed to be scrubbed down, then walked to the kitchen to do the dishes.

I sighed when I saw that Bert had left me with all the dishes. Hadn't he said he hadn't had any orders for the last several hours? What the heck had he been doing out here all of that time?

Welp, it looked like I was going to be there for a little while longer.

BELLE

I was practically dragging my feet as I walked down the sidewalk back to my apartment once my shift was finally over, almost completely overtaken by exhaustion.

My eyes drooped, and my body ached. I needed sleep more than anything, but who knew if I would be getting any.

Guilt ate at me over how things had gone down with Liam earlier. After all, he was just trying to be a good friend, right? He was trying to look out for me.

I just hated that he had assumed his friends and I wouldn't get along. Was I that horrible to be around?

It was cold out, and the June air was nipping at my bare legs, forcing me to pull my jacket tighter around me.

I actually wished that I had Liam's warm car to ride in rather than walking home alone in the dark. Too bad I had ruined everything.

I felt strange. Something was off. Dull tingles were shooting up the back of my neck, and I had the odd feeling that I was being watched.

But I shook it off, convinced I was just paranoid after my talk with Liam earlier today.

Then the wind picked up, and something sounded behind me, making me jump. My mark prickled, and a sudden pressure began to form in my head. I groaned in dismay.

I knew what that meant. Grayson was trying to get into my mind again.

A loud crashing noise came from behind me. I whipped around but didn't see anything.

With my head pounding, I kept walking, moving a little faster now. I was suddenly very eager to get home.

There was another loud bang. My nerves only grew when footsteps started behind me, very obviously following me.

So Liam was right, I thought bitterly. ~I'm about to get murdered.~

My walking picked up into more of a jog.

"Beeelllllee," a singsong voice said right next to my head.

I jolted and held back a scream, snapping my head to the side to look for the source.

I was met with an empty alleyway lined with trash cans.

I bit my lip and jogged faster, pulling my coat tighter around my form.

It's just the wind, Belle, I told myself. ~Everything is fine. You're just being paranoid.~

Right, wind that sounded exactly like my name.

The pounding in my head increased as Grayson pushed harder to break through my mental barrier. I grit my teeth together. Why now?

It was like he knew I was in a stressful situation and thought it would be funny to mess with me some more.

"Fuck off, Grayson," I whispered as if he could hear me. "Get out of my head."

The pounding only got worse.

Suddenly, I heard a high-pitched laugh coming from above me. My head jerked up.

Crouching on the top of a building, like some sort of knock-off Spiderman was a hooded figure. The person was looking down at me, but I couldn't make out any facial features through the darkness.

"Grayson can't help you now, Luna," the person said.

Um, so, yeah, fuck that.

I turned on my heel and started sprinting away. My exhaustion from earlier was long gone now, replaced with adrenaline and fear.

I had no idea who that person was, but there was no way I was going to stick around to find out. The moment the words “Grayson” and “Luna” had come out of their mouth, I knew I had to get far, far away.

Without any warning, a hand wrapped around my hair, tugging me backward into a dark alleyway. I screamed in terror. My hands grabbed onto my assailant’s arm, digging my nails in.

It did nothing to loosen their hold on me.

“Oh, come on, Belle,” the voice said, yanking my hair harder, so I was forced to release my grip. “There’s no need for that. Let’s play nice.”

It all happened so quickly. Faster than I could even comprehend, I was shoved up against a wall, grunting when my head smashed against the hard concrete.

I was finally able to see the face of the person holding me. My eyes widened.

“Adalee?” I whispered.

She smiled. “Surprise.” She grabbed my head and slammed it back again. My entire world rotated, and white-hot pain expanded over the back of my skull.

“I will say, I’m a little shocked you remember me, considering the fact that we only met that one time,” Adalee continued, her tone laced with malicious amusement.