

## Chapter 11

Jasper

I stood on the dock, watching the fish swimming carelessly below the surface of the water. Their bodies twisted gracefully around each other, and I wondered what it would be like to live in their world. My eyes caught a streak of orange, and followed the huge Koi enter the swarm. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out the fish food I always brought and tossed some in. Instantly, every fish swam to the surface, their little mouths gobbling the treat. I smiled.

This was my favorite place. Mainly because it was private, and nobody ever really came here. Years ago, I'd stumbled onto an abandoned cabin in the woods, only to learn later that it was just outside Blood Moon pack lines. It was rundown when I found out, the windows broken, the log siding overgrown with vines and the land with weeds and grass. The roof had holes, and the inside was a mess. The pond that was nestled to the side had a broken, unsteady dock that was half swallowed by the water.

It took me years to fix the place up. Sometimes my dad would come and help, after he followed me one day to see where I kept disappearing to. Now I had my own little getaway, one I no longer feared would come down on top of me. Sometimes I would come by and find a rogue or two, but I never kicked them out, and they never stayed anyways. Rogues had a habit of always being on the move, especially when they were close to a pack. Only once it turned into a fight, and thank Goddess Dad was here that day, or it might have ended differently. In the end, we ran him off.

I sat on the edge of the wood, my bare feet dipping into the coolness below me. My eyes reflected in the water, and for the millionth time I thought about them. My mother had had brown eyes, chocolate brown. She always

told me I had my dad's eyes, my real Dad. And that I should be proud of them. But how could I be? The man didn't even acknowledge my existence. I wasn't proud to have anything of his, even his eye color. Still, the silver in them was unusual. Like metal gleaming on a knife in the moonlight.

Mom, my adoptive Mom, said it was my eyes that drew the girls to me. Maybe that was true, but I didn't care. I had no interest in any of them, save for one.

Violet.

Her face flashed in my mind, and I watched the smile grow in my reflection. Now her eyes... a blind man could get lost in them. I know I did. Often. She was the definition of beauty, with her long black hair and her creamy skin. Her attitude turned people off from her, but not me. She was strong, opinionated. Not afraid to call you out on your bullshit. Yet, she was kind, caring, the kind of person who would take a bullet for those she loved without thinking twice. And the amount of respect she held for herself was incredible, and still she gave the same respect to those around her. I'd never met anyone like her.

I laid back, my face being warmed by the sun and thought about the first time we'd met. I had just started school, the new kid in class. Everyone else had been there since kindergarten, all part of the pack, so I was especially the odd duck. A boy had taken my drawing, making fun of it. Looking back, he might have had a point- I couldn't draw worth shit, even now. Still, Violet had calmly gotten out of her seat, walked up to us, ripped the paper out of his hands and given it back to me before punching the kid in the face.

I laughed as I remembered what she'd screamed at him afterwards.

"You're a bully and a cheesedick!"

To this day, I have no idea where she heard that, or if she just made it up. But it made me smile every time I thought about it. After that, we never really became friends, being the introverted kid that I was. But I was nice to her, and her to me. I greeted her every day, always excited to see her. As we got older, I started seeing her in a different way. I started seeing every girl in a different way. The glories of puberty had me noticing all sorts of things about the opposite sex that I never paid attention to before. And apparently, they started noticing me too.

Too scared to ask out the girl I really liked, I started dating Melissa Smith, who turned out to be my first kiss. Then Rebecca Lang, my first time getting to second base. Then Shelby Hughes, my first time. By that time, the rumors about me were notorious; I don't think she even realized I was still a virgin. But I never could stop myself from thinking about Violet. Even after the greetings stopped, and we were no longer nice to each other, she was still the most beautiful girl to me, outshining all the others.

I checked my phone. About four hours until the ceremony started. I'd been out here all day. Sitting up, I threw the rest of the fish food into the pond before getting to my feet and locating my shoes. My hands trembled slightly, the anxiety taking over again. I closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing.

"Everything is fine. It's going to be fine." I repeated it over and over until I was calm.

I could feel my body was getting ready for tonight. And once again, I felt a pang of longing. How I wished my mother could be tonight, encouraging me. But I assured myself she would be, from the Goddess's realm. It wasn't exactly the same, but it was enough. I ran all the way home, about forty-five minutes. I was pretty proud of that; I trained hard, and still held the record for being the fastest of my group. I slowed to a walk when I got to my street, seeing my little sister Elena playing in the front yard.

"Hey squirt."

"Jasper's home!" She yelled. I held out my arms, and she launched herself into them giggling. "Where did you go?"

"Out for a run."

"Because your shifting tonight!"

"Yup."

She squealed. "I can't wait!"

I set her down on her feet and she took my hand. Even though Elena was my adoptive sibling, I loved her like my own flesh and blood. She was an adorable five-year-old, with a sharp mind about her. She'd already skipped a grade, and was reading at a sixth-grade level. I was immensely proud of her.

"You know you can't come Elena. You'll be in bed, and the shift gets a little scary." I told her.

She gave me her most serious face. "I'm not scared. I'll be the toughest she-wolf ever when I shift. You won't hear me make a sound!"

I chuckled. "Wanna bet?"

"How much you got?"

"I'll bet a hundred bucks that you cry in the first ten minutes."

She stuck out her hand. "Deal. You better have my money."

We shook and I laughed.

"What have I told you about gambling Elena?" Mom came down the front steps shaking her head. "And you shouldn't be encouraging her." She said to me.

I held up my hands. "I promise I'll put her in rehab if she becomes addicted."

Mom sighed. "What are you betting on anyways?"

"Whether or not she'll scream during her first shift."

"I won't!" Declared Elena. Mom looked at her with wide eyes before turning back to me. "Put me in for fifty." She said in a low voice. Elena's draw dropped and I laughed hard.

"Vicky is on her way." Dad said as he came out the door.

Elena pouted. "Do I have to stay with Aunt Vicky?"

"Yes." Dad said.

"But she smells like vinegar! All the time!" She complained.

"Elena. Don't be mean." Mom scolded.

I bent down and pulled her in for a hug. "I promise I'll shift for you tomorrow so you can meet my wolf. Okay?"

"Fine."

Aunt Vicky's blue sedan pulled up, parking on the curb. The strong scent of vinegar hit my nostrils as she got out and Dad and I shared an amused look. Aunt Vicky cleaned houses for a living, and she always used homemade cleaning products. Sadly, most of them were vinegar based. Elena scrunched her nose up as Vicky gave her a big hug. Then she turned to me.

"Good luck tonight, Jasper. I'll be rooting for you."

"Thanks." I gave her a smile.

"Alright guys, let's go." Mom clapped her hands together. "Vicky, I left some money on the counter for pizza. You know her schedule."

"Thanks Linda." Elena gave us all a sour look as she led her into the house.

We didn't live that far from the packhouse, so we decided to walk, and I was grateful. I was just coursing with adrenaline. Dad threw his arm over my shoulder, giving me a squeeze.

"You ready?" He asked.

I chuckled. "Nope."

"You'll do just fine." Mom said on the other side of me.

I stopped on the sidewalk, making them stop as well.

"Uhm, listen." I rubbed the back of my neck awkwardly. "I just wanted to say thanks to you guys. For everything. Taking me in, helping me with school. Giving me a family, you know? I know I'm not always easy to deal with but... I love you guys. And I'm really grateful that people like you are by my side tonight."

I looked at the ground, crossing my arms. It wasn't easy for me to say all that, but I wanted them to know. Suddenly, a pair of arms went around me, and then another. We stood on the sidewalk in a mini group hug, and when Mom pulled back, she had tears in her eyes.

"You don't have to thank us sweetheart. When Luna Lily brought you to us, we knew you would just bring more love into our house. And ever since Elenas been born, you've been the best big brother. You complete our family, and we couldn't imagine it without you."

"We love you too son. So much." Dad added with a smile. I returned it.

"Come on."

Together, we walked down the street. If they thought my rare admission of feelings was surprising, they were going to be really surprised later.