

CH 6 - Alan

ALAN POV

I stood frozen, my eyes locked on her, and every ber of my being screamed to move, to speak, to do something. But I didn't. Amber's faint scent had pulled me out of the house, a mix of vanilla and something undeniably hers, sweet and soft like a summer breeze. It was a scent I could pick out of thousands, but tonight it carried something else. Something sour. Or maybe... someone. **She better not have brought that prick home.**

My jaw clenched involuntarily at the thought. **Christian.** My wolf, Blake, snarled at the name, as if it tasted as bad as it sounded. I stopped at the edge of the porch, waiting. I knew she was close, hiding somewhere nearby. My patience paid off when her head peeked out from behind the corner of the house. And just like that, I was frozen in place, and for a second, my thoughts scrambled.

Her turquoise eyes caught the moonlight, piercing straight into me. Every time I saw them, it was the same: an obsessive, frustrating pull that refused to let go.

They had no business being that bright, that alive, even when she tried to hide it behind the quiet, ashamed way she looked at me now. Those pouty lips, the rosy cheeks dusted with cold... and whipped cream. **Wait. What the hell?*

She was covered in it, smears on her jacket, her hair sticking together in sticky clumps. I wasn't sure if I wanted to laugh or rage. She looked humiliated. Not the ery Amber who'd spat curses at me the last time I'd icked water at her in the cafeteria. Not the Amber whose glare could burn through walls. Her re was out, and it made my chest tighten uncomfortably.

I clenched my sts, holding in ad much as i could.

Someone had messed with her. Again. My wolf, Blake, growled low in my head, the sound reverberating through my chest like thunder.

"Someone hurt her", he snarled, itching to take over.

I didn't need to ask who started it. I knew exactly where it began—me. This was all my fault.

All of it. The pranks, the taunts, the way she couldn't just exist without expecting someone to screw with her. I started this. Years ago, I set the tone, and my brothers followed. Hell, most of the pack followed. **It's better this way, I'd told myself.** Better she hates me than nothing at all.

At least she sees me. At least she knows I'm there.

My wolf didn't agree.

A knife twisted in my chest, sharp and unforgiving. I couldn't show her kindness now, though. I couldn't let her see that it mattered.

Blake surged forward in my mind, growling at my indecision. My grip on control slipped for a moment, just enough for him to take over. **Fine. Run. Do what you want.**

Without a glance back, my body shifted into my wolf form, fur bursting out as my muscles lengthened and paws hit the ground. Blake sprinted, claws tearing through the frozen forest oor as we darted into the moonlit woods, breaking into a mad sprint toward the lake. The cold air bit at us, the stark white of the snow reecting the light like shards of glass. The silence of the woods was only broken by the rhythm of our strides, the occasional snap of a branch, and the distant call of an owl.

The cool night air burned my lungs, but it wasn't enough. My paws barely touched the ground as I raced through the forest, shadows and moonlight dancing across my vision. The frozen branches cracked under my weight, the crisp snow giving way to my anger.

I reached the lake's edge, its icy surface shimmering under the pale light of the moon. It should've been calming—the way the trees swayed gently, the quiet hum of the night—but it wasn't. Nothing could ease this.

Amber's face burned in my mind, her timid glance, her attempt to hide. The image of her looking so small, so defeated, tore me apart. Someone had stolen her spark. Someone had dared to break her.

And it was my fault.

We ran until the cottage and Amber's scent faded into the background, but it wasn't enough. Blake's anger pulsed through me, his frustration echoing my own. **Why do you care so much? Why do we care? She hates us. That's what we wanted. That's what we chose.**

But it wasn't true, was it? Every time she turned those eyes on me, glaring or not, I felt something crack inside. Every cutting word she threw my way just reminded me that she saw me, acknowledged me, even if it was only to hate me.

The moonlight cast eerie shadows over the frozen surface of the lake as we sped along its edge. The air smelled of pine and frost, clean and sharp, but it couldn't clear my head. The lake was one of her favorite spots. I knew that because I paid attention to things I shouldn't. She'd sit out here with her easel, painting the aurora borealis or whatever the hell inspired her that day. I used to think it was stupid. Now I thought it was...

No. I wasn't going there.

The pack borders came into view, and Blake slowed. His breathing was heavy, his body humming with pent-up energy. Mine too. We stopped just shy of the invisible line where our territory ended and rogue land began.

For a moment, I stood there, panting, watching that invisible line. A ght would help, I told myself. A good brawl with some rogue i***t who didn't know his place. Anything to take the edge off, anything to stop Blake from howling in my head.

Cross it, Blake urged. **A ght will do. Shut me up. Shut you up.**

I took a step forward, then stopped. If anyone caught me out here, I'd have to deal with my father's wrath, not to mention my brothers'. But a good ght? I could almost feel my claws tearing into someone, the satisfying crack of a jaw beneath my paw, the release of all this tension...

"Where the f**k are you?" Alek's voice cut through my head like a buzz saw, his irritation sharp and unmistakable.

Blake growled, annoyed at the interruption. **Couldn't they leave me alone for one night?*

"Rose is burning out my ears asking for you," Alek snapped. "Why the hell did you pick her to bang anyway? Jennifer's daughter? Really? She's the most annoying person on the planet!"

Little did they know, it was just for show. On my part at least, I never did anything more than embrace or hold her hand with her. Sure as hell she started spreading different rumors, telling my brothers hot stories about us. And i just followed the ow. It was easier that way.

Aaron chimed in, whining like he always did. "Yeah, man, she's been calling all night. Take your ass back home and free us already."

"Jeez, so dramatic," I muttered aloud, shaking my head as I shifted back into my human form. My breath came out in frosty puffs as I crossed my arms, debating my options. Go back to the packhouse and deal with whatever fallout Rose was stirring up, or stay here, at the edge of trouble, where no one could nd me.

"You've got ten minutes, Alan," Alek warned, his tone carrying just enough edge to be a threat.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be back in ten," I said through the mind link, turning away from the border reluctantly.

Blake sulked, retreating back into my mind. He hated Rose as much as I did, but I couldn't tell them the truth. I couldn't explain why I'd chosen her as my date, why I'd kept Amber at arm's length all these years, why I couldn't bring myself to let her see the truth of how I felt. **They wouldn't understand.**

I made my way back through the woods, the cool night air biting at my bare skin. The moon hung high above, indifferent to the turmoil raging inside me. **Hate is better than nothing, right? It has to be.** But as Amber's face ashed in my mind again—those turquoise eyes, that reless expression—I couldn't shake the feeling that I was lying to myself.