FOUR | THREE WEEKS

Luca

“Why don’t you take a week off and go home to see Colin? Or have him come up here? I think you need to take your mind off of things. Does he know what’s going on?” Gio asked, referring to my best and oldest friend.

“He knows, and like everyone else, he’s pissed off with me.”

“Any good friend is going to tell you the truth, so he’s just doing his job. Either way, you need to do something besides mope around here all day.”

I hadn’t been doing much work the past few days, I just passed the time playing with my new nephew and watching trash TV, and I was sure that both Gio and Jenna wanted their space back.

“Maybe I’ll do that; I’m sure my condo misses me. But I want to spend some time with Gabby before I go, so I think I’ll head over and see what she’s up to.”

I left Gio in his kitchen, then walked over to the cottage. Gabby was sitting on the front steps enjoying the sunny day, so I took a seat beside her.

“How have you been?” I asked.

“I’m getting better. I didn’t cry myself to sleep last night, so that’s a step in the right direction,” she smiled at me and said.

“I’m so sorry. That was a stupid question.”

“It’s fine, Luca. How are you?”

“Miserable. I miss you, and I feel terrible for what I’ve done. And it’s so hard not knowing if you’ll ever forgive me or if we’ll ever be together again,” I honestly replied.

“Yeah, I know the feeling.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes before she turned to me and took my hand. The warmth and sparks immediately brightened my mood, and a small smile graced my face.

“Can I ask how long you’d been feeling unfulfilled? Every time we were together, you seemed genuinely happy, so was it all an act? Why would you suffer in silence and not say something to me? We’re supposed to be able to tell each other anything,” she said.

“I was happy, Princess. Nothing in the world made me happier than making you smile and making sure you were okay,” I replied.

“If that’s true, then what happened? Was it something I did?”

“One day, you’ll learn that once a wolf has s*x, there is this deep dark desire just below the surface to do it again, and again. I swear I wouldn’t be surprised if I found out that we’re a species of nymphomaniacs. But when I found out what happened to you, I knew that I would have to take things slow and be gentle, and I was more than willing to do that.

Over time, your needs became more important to me. When I felt an urge, there was no way I could upset you by saying something, so I’d go to the gym, or go for a run, anything to burn off the energy. I swear I had every intention of running that night, but I needed new running shoes. I went into town to grab some, bumped into the girl on the way out, and that was that,” I said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see you. I was so caught up in myself and my problems that I left you out in the cold. This is as much my fault as it is yours.”

“That’s not true. You can’t be blamed for something you didn’t know about.”

“I knew about your past. I knew you were a man, and I knew how much you had to fight to keep your composure when I would go into heat. That had to have been brutal.”

“You have no idea,” I replied with a small laugh.

The first time Gabby went into heat after we were together, Jackson lost his mind. It was like my wolf was trapped in a haze of lust and the only thing that would cure him was to take our mate back, to back, to back. I had to leave the house for the few days she was on; otherwise, I did not doubt that Jackson would have taken over, regardless of the consequences.

That became our ritual every month. When Gabby would feel her heat coming on, I would leave, and she would somehow manage to suffer through the intense burning until her hormones leveled out again. We both hated it, but there wasn't much of an alternative.

"I was ready. On Wednesday, when I made you dinner, I wanted to end the night with us, finally marking each other. I was done with waiting or feeling guilty, and more importantly, I was done with 72-hour ice baths and cold showers," she said with a chuckle. "But when you told me, I immediately felt that all the waiting and suffering was for a reason. You didn't deserve that part of me, and I was a few hours from making the biggest mistake of my life."

Why did the universe hate me? If I had shifted that night and ran in wolf form, I wouldn't have needed to get the new shoes, and I would never have met Rachel. Or if I'd gone to a different store in another part of town, I could have avoided this. But something wanted me to screw up, and I did.

"I don't even know what to say, Princess. I wish I would have done things differently, and I wish I could turn back time. So badly," I replied.

"My next heat cycle starts in a little over three weeks, and I'm not sitting in ice water this time around."

I looked at Gabby, confused as to what she was telling me.

"You've got three weeks, Luca. Three weeks to prove to me that this is real. If you can't do that, then we'll go our separate ways as friends."

"But what about your heat? If we separate for good, who's going to break it for you?" I asked. Jackson was itching to know as well, but deep down, we already knew what she was going to say.

"Who knows. Maybe Blaze will put me out of my misery."

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Gabby

I didn't expect to give Luca the ultimatum I did, but at the same time, I was tired of suffering every month. I'd done so much to prepare to give myself to him, and when he told me about the cheating, it was like I was being hit from multiple directions.

I wanted to experience that first time with my mate, but if he wasn't meant to be the man to take that part of me, then so be it. Maybe Blaze was. And as I sat with him at the best restaurant in town, telling him how Luca and I'd gotten to where we were, I was secretly wondering if he really was the man I'd waited for.

"I'm sure you remember what went on with 'The Duchess' while we were in that hole. Well, if Matilda's original plan would have taken place, it would have been me and Marisol being sold like cattle together. But Marisol, being the incredible woman and friend she was, spared me and took all of the abuse on herself. She knew what my purity meant to me and how important it was to me to save it for my mate, so she sacrificed her body to save mine."

I took a sip of my wine and wiped a stray tear from my eye, and I tried to compose myself. It had been a long time since I'd discussed The Badlands, but if anyone would understand, Blaze would.

"107. That was the number of times my best friend was taken against her will, and every time I cleaned her up, my heart was ripped to shreds. My obsession with my virginity had done that to her, and when I finally found my mate and I felt the urge to let go of it, finally, he slept with someone else. So there you have it. Luca cheated on me because I was too damaged to sleep with him this past year," I stated.

"I'm so sorry to hear that, sweetheart. Neither you nor your friend deserved the way you were treated; I wish I could have helped you," Blaze sadly said.

"You didn't know us, and I'm sure that sticking your neck out for someone in there wasn't the smartest thing to do. Besides, we had the cavalry on the way, even if we could have used him a few days earlier," I said with a small smile.

"How are you now? I have to admit that even I still have nightmares. I wasn't a good person when I was inside, and I hurt more than a few people. A place like The Badlands sticks with you forever."

"I have my good days and my bad days. Sometimes a sound or smell will trigger a memory, and I shut down, and other times, it's all just a distant memory. It's the luck of the draw, and honestly, I feel like Luca got a bad draw getting such a damaged mate. Maybe it's my fault that he slept with that girl; I haven't been the easiest person to live with." I admitted.

"I find that hard to believe. Now, a year is an insane amount of time for any man to wait, especially when the woman he's waiting for is you, but that doesn't mean the cheatin' is justified," Blaze replied.

“Is it an insane amount of time? How long could you wait?” I asked. I knew I was stepping into dangerous territory, but I wanted to deflect a little from my situation while also seeing what Blaze was all about. Was it possible he only wanted to be friends?

“I wanted you the second you dropped from the ceiling into Tyson’s arms the night y’all escaped. No, actually, it was the first time Matilda matched you through the rec area, and I smelled the roses drifting from your pores. I’d never seen anything so perfect in all my life, and I’d gladly wait my entire life if it meant I could spend it with you.”

I wasn’t ready for his honesty right off the bat, and I’m sure my eyes bulged out of my head a bit when I heard his words.

“Did my answer surprise you, darlin’?” Blaze asked.

“Yes. You’re a handsome guy, so I know you don’t have a problem getting a woman. Why wait for me?”

“You’re the only woman I’ve ever met who took over my thoughts without us ever saying a word to one another. My motivation for breaking out the night you did was to keep you close and hopefully make you mine, and that’s probably why it was so terribly planned out, but it was you that drove me to it. No woman has ever been able to force my hand that way, so I knew you were something special.”

“This is grossly unfair,” I replied, throwing Blaze off his game.

“What is?”

“You and Luca. Both of you have this sexy masculine pull that draws women in and holds them there. You two can say the simplest things, and it’s like hearing a word from the Gods. How is any woman, especially me, supposed to fend that off?”

“Sexy, huh? Well, thank you, but I don’t have an answer for you. I will say that I’m not trying to lure you into a trap or anything crazy like that, I just want to spend time with you, even if it never goes anywhere further than sharing a meal or two.”

“Let's change the subject. Why don’t you tell me about yourself? How old are you? What was life like before you became the man you are now? Tell me a secret,” I smiled and said as I leaned in close on the table.

“We’re going to have to save the secrets for date number three; I can’t have you running off so soon. But, answer number one: I’m 29,” Blaze replied, making me frown.

“What’s that for? Am I too old for you?”

“No, it’s not that. Are you really 29? Or do dragons have a different method for counting the time?” I asked.

“365 days makes one. Multiply that by 29, give or take a few months, and that’s how long it’s been since I hatched. I can live for hundreds of years, but it’s only been 29 so far.”

“So you’re essentially still a baby,” I excitedly said, making him laugh.

“No, ma’am. I’m a grown man in every single way, especially the ones that count the most,” Blaze replied, making me blush.

I took a sip of water to give myself a moment to calm down before I could continue with the questions. When I looked back across the table, Blaze had a cocky smirk on his face that said he knew the effect he was having on me, and he had no intention of letting up. I was in trouble.

“Where did the name Blaze come from? Is it a family name?” I asked.

“No. I didn’t become Blaze until I left home when I was three and-”

“What?! You left home when you were three? Are you kidding me?” I cut in. “Who lets a toddler leave home? What the hell?”

Again, he smiled and laughed, obviously enjoying my reactions to his life story.

“Relax, sweetheart. It only takes three years for a baby dragon to become an adult; we grow up very fast. Once we mature, we’re free to set off on our own, and that’s what I did.”

“Oh, my goodness! I was ready to lose my mind! The thought of a child that young being alone broke my heart,” I admitted.

“I was exactly the way you see me now, just with a few more scales. Again, a grown man.”

“Got it. So what were you saying?”

“Before I set off to find my way, I was Micah, but I wanted a name that was a little more fitting a man of my size and talents, so I became Blaze. It’s got a nice ring to it, I think.”

“Micah? That’s beautiful; can I call you Micah?” I asked.

This time it was his turn to frown.

“Now, why’d you have to go and ask me that? I'm not too fond of that name, but I can’t say no to you. Now you’re the one not playing fair.”

“That works for me,” I replied with a small shrug. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell the whole pack, it will just be our little secret.”

“That’s so kind of you; I do have a reputation to uphold.”

I took another gulp of my drink and squared my shoulders. It was time to go in for the kill.

“So, I’ve been thinking about something, and building up my courage to spit it out,” I said.

“You can tell me anything you’d like, don’t be afraid.”

“Well, I was wondering. What are you going to be doing in three weeks?”