

## Chapter Five

It's ten o'clock, darkness has fallen and my father is waiting at the bottom of the stairs to take me up to the packhouse. I've been polished and primped to my last nerve and forced into this ridiculous wine red velvet dress and heels by my mother.

No amount of reminding her that I'm going into a goddamned forest, in the dark, where there is mud would dissuade her from this outt so instead I'm tottering down the stairs looking like I'm going to a prom, everyone waiting at the bottom for me.

My mum is crying again, Bailee gives me a thumbs up and cheesy grin, Philip has his head in the TV and doesn't even turn around and Lauren bottom lip is poking out as tears start to ll her eyes.

'Oh don't cry!' I say, hurrying over to her and dropping to my knees as my little sister falls against me.

'Watch the dress! Don't crease it!' my mother's strangled voice echoes behind me.

'I don't want you to leave' Lauren mumbles as I rub her back.

'I'm not leaving the pack' I reply, pulling back and wiping my thumbs under her eyes, 'it'll be no different to me living at the pack house.'

She looks at me uncertainly, 'but you'll have a mate, you might not want to hang out with me anymore' she whispers. 'What if he's more fun than me?' She asks nervously, biting on her lip.

I give her my best horried expression, 'as if!' I gasp, 'are you telling me that some werewolf out there can skip for as long as you can with a rope? That he'll know exactly the right macaroni shapes to put on a necklace? That he'll have better movie ideas than you? I don't believe it! It's simply not possible.'

My sister let out a reluctant giggle as I shake my head emphatically and I pull her in for another hug. 'I'll be back over tomorrow for our Saturday morning playdate' I promise, 'and we'll make ice cream sundaes OK?'

Lauren nods, wiping her eyes as she lets me go, 'you can stay with your mate till eight thirty' she says reluctantly.

I nod as I stand, pressing my hand to my heart, 'that is beyond generous, I shall treasure the extra thirty minutes in bed.'

Turning back to my mum, my eyes shift to my dad who is blinking rapidly. Is this what it's like for human parents with their weddings? Dad's acting all tough and mums blubbering into hankies?

Making my way to the door, I reach for my thickest winter coat, shouldering it on, ignoring my mother's disapproving look.

'It's cold out there, I'm a werewolf, not an Eskimo and you know I need the hood' I sigh. I'm more taking a damn coat to keep me warm as I sit in that bloody forest alone rather than the ritual but my mom can't argue with a ritual requirement, so I'll stick with that excuse.

Stepping outside, I don't look back as a lump builds in my throat, why am I getting emotional, I'll see them all tomorrow! Dad pulls the door shut quietly behind us and we walk in silence toward his car, sliding inside quickly as the chill of the night air bites at my exposed skin. Werewolves run hot my ass!

Sinking into the comfort of my dad's passenger seat, I take a deep breath as he starts the engine, moving slowly down the driveway and out onto the road. We could run across the eld in ve minutes, but by road, it's a good fteen to get around all the houses and back to the packhouse again.

As I'm the only person going out tonight, the Alpha pushed back the meeting time. Usually, there are at least a dozen girls from both our and other packs, it's odd I'm the only one to fall into this full moon. Pushing my thoughts aside, I glance at my dad whose driving slowly, and I reach out and tap him, smiling as he glances at me. 'If you go any slower, we'll be heading back home' I tease softly.

Dad lets out a gruff chuckle, 'just getting you there safely, I don't want to hit a pack member by accident do I?'

I laugh loudly, 'Dad, everyone is locked down in their rooms, the only people out are patrol and the forest guards, the chances of one of them running in front of your car is minuscule. Plus if you actually did hit someone, we are werewolves, we heal in seconds.'

My father doesn't reply but I do notice that the speedometer creeps up to ten miles an hour.

Crawling to a stop in front of the pack house I look up at all the windows, light streaming through the cracks in the curtains and I falter. I know everyone who can, is watching me because I did it when I was curfewed each full moon too. Everyone wants to see how many girls are here, if they can make out what they are wearing, guess at who will get who for a mate.

'Come on JJ' my father says from beside me, me drawing my gaze to him, nding him watching me intently. Not trusting my voice, I just nod before pulling on the door opener and going to step out.

'Hood up JJ' my dad orders, and I quickly pull my hood tightly over my head, blocking out as much moonlight as I can, technically my wolf shouldn't call out before midnight when the moon is at its highest, but we've had a few eager beavers over the years and it wasn't good.

The Alpha waits for us on the stairs, his smile brightening as I step into the porch light and he gets a good look at me.

'Lee, you look beautiful' he gushes, holding out his hand for me to take and twirling me when I accept it. He and my dad have been friends since kindergarten, so I know he feels like it's his own daughter that's going into the forest tonight.

'Thank you Alpha Scott' I reply quietly, ghting myself not to let my gaze roam to the black forest nearby that has shadows of warriors looming around it.

'Well, normally this part takes longer' Alpha Scott chuckles, 'but as you are the only she wolf coming of age this full moon and no packs approached us to join our claiming it should be quick.'

I nod, keeping my gaze on my Alpha as he turns my hand over so that its palm upwards and pulls out the ceremonial dagger for initiating new pack members.

Pricking my skin, he glances toward the heavens as I wince from the sharp nick. 'Moon Goddess, this woman offers you her blood, a scent to help you guide her mate to her. We pray that you will help her wolf's voice carry far and wide, so that these two souls can be united as you wanted.'

My hand is already healed and it drops to my side as he releases me and checks his watch.

'It's time' he murmurs as two warriors walk up behind me and stop on either side, not looking at me.

My father steps closer to me, wrapping his arms around me as I ing my arms around his neck, suddenly nervous. 'You are going to be ne JJ' he whispers in my ear, 'whoever your mate is, he's a really lucky guy.'

A small sob catches in my throat as I nod, pulling back, he cups my face with his hands, 'I'll be right here with the Alpha, I'm not leaving. So you be sure to bring this young man straight to me so I can threaten him properly to treat my baby the way she deserves.'

I half sob half laugh as he smiles at me, kissing my forehead and letting me go.

Each warrior takes one of my arms, turning me around and escorting me toward the forest that is nothing but a black void in front of us.

Panic seizes me as the two men anking me walk briskly forward, why are they holding on to me? Do some of the girls run?

We pass by the silent warriors who don't even look in our direction, their gazes solely on the packhouse behind us, alert and tense, waiting for anyone who might run toward them.

Entering the forest, I'm struck with how eerily quiet it is, the trees blocking out what few sounds there are coming from behind us. Normally the area is teaming with noises from warriors putting in late night practice and wolves taking a run, howling at each other.

I stumble slightly as my toes catch a root buried in the ground at my feet, the warrior to my left lifts my arm instinctively, stopping me crashing to my knees.

'Thank you' I whisper, feeling like it would be wrong to speak any louder in the silence around us.

The guard grunts as he and his friend continue to lead me to one of the clearings. Stepping out of the darkness, I nd the space brightly lit by the moon above me, still in the shadows, I can feel my wolf stirring, sensing the moonlight and I know she's feeling the need to call to our mate.

In the centre there is a fallen log, and the warrior who stopped me falling points to it, 'you need to sit there' he comments gruy.

Nodding I make to step out when he stops me, 'you need to wait until we leave, give us ten minutes, and then go toward your spot.'

I give him a funny look and he sighs, 'as soon as you step out into the moonlight, your wolf will start to call out. If your mate arrives before we are out of the area he might see us as a threat and attack.'

I blink at his words, 'you are mated though' I mumble confusedly.

The warrior smiles, the rst emotion I've seen him display, 'it doesn't matter Beta Lee, if he's been waiting a few years he won't stop to check my mating status, anyone near his mate could be seen as a threat by his wolf. We prefer to err on the side of caution, it's why we keep everyone locked up until midnight, to stop any wolf being in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

This was a protocol implemented early on after the introduction of the Claiming, it was also to stop other wolves from trying to claim what was not theirs. Too many times in the beginning, fated wolves had arrived to nd another wolf sinking his teeth into the neck of his fated mate as the pair had been lovers before that night.

Giving me a supportive smile, he and his emotionless friend back away from me, the darkness eating them us and leaving me alone.

Checking my watch, I shift from foot to foot, impatiently waiting for my ten minutes to be up. I want to sit down, these stupid heels are killing me, I wear sneakers to work for Goddess's sake!

Watching the second hand tick down, I close my eyes, giving myself a pep talk before pulling my hood off and stepping out into the moonlight, heading to the log.

As soon as the light hits my hair, I can feel Skarla's attention focusing, her whole demeanor lazer sharp as she scratches at my mind.

Sinking down onto the log, a warmth comes over me, the hairs on my arms rising as a musical sound ll's my ears, it's beautiful, and soulful, making me want to dance and spin, but also curl up and cry as feelings rush over me.

I don't know how long I sit there, I'm too lost in the euphoric sound, swaying gently, a small smile on my face, my eyes closed, wishing I knew the melody so I could hum along.

My thoughts are snapped back into focus as the sound of running hits me, and panicked, I twist around trying to nd the cause behind the noise. To my right a huge gure bursts out of the trees, his chest heaving as his gaze focuses on me. The moon is behind him, throwing his face into shadow but the howl in my head from my wolf tells me who he is.

'MATE!' He growls loudly, his voice rumbling through the pack lands as I shiver. I know that voice, I've heard it nearly every day since I was a baby.

'Caden?' I whisper, my eyes widening as he turns slightly, throwing his features into sharp relief. My mind is reeling, the guy who torments me every day? He's my mate? But my body is completely at odds with my mind, yearning to get closer to him, bury my face in his chest and breathe him in.

As he strides toward me, his dark eyes shining gold, telling me his wolf is at the surface, there is a rustle to my left and I barely manage to spin around when a second voice growls 'MATE!'

What?