

## Mesmerized

Riley POV

I was shoved, hit, ridiculed, spat on, and kicked whenever I passed by someone. My father was blind to all of this, or he condoned it. I didn't try to go to him with complaints, after all, why would he care? As it was, I lived each day in fear that I would be told that he had sold me off to be a breeder or to an Alpha that required an heir. Sometimes I thought it would be preferable to living in this pack. Other times I contemplated leaving this pack, the only way I could see out, staring down at my wrists and wondering how much it would hurt to cut them, wondering how deep the cut would have to be in order to end my life without healing myself rst. It was morbid, it was dark, but it was the only way I could see the pain and torture ending.

Today, my brother and father had left to visit another pack. One that was being targeted by rogues and growing weaker by the day. I had heard rumors that the pack, was being forced to make a decision. To join the Blood Moon Pack or have the pack taken by the Alpha himself. My father was going to see if the rumors were true. I didn't care. It meant that he and my brother weren't around to abuse me and while the pack members and patrol would keep a close eye, I was free to wander around and do what I wanted. A day of freedom, without the freedom.

I chose to go to the lake. Set a little ways in the forest, it was far enough from the pack house to give the illusion of privacy, while still being under careful watch of patrol. I could sense eyes on me, but I ignored them. The water called to me, as it always did. I could never get enough of the lake and the coolness of the water as it touched my skin. I stripped down to my underwear and then slowly walked into the shallow end, shivering slightly. I closed my eyes. I jumped and dived into the deep end. I swam. For hours.

There was something about swimming in the water that soothed my soul. I had never had swimming lessons but I had been coming to the lake since I was small and I had taught myself. I swam like a mermaid. It was like I got a new burst of energy when I went swimming. I could hold my breath for an extraordinary length of time beneath the water and all my wounds would begin to heal even quicker. I loved the water. I didn't get to visit the lake as much as I liked, but when I did, it was like nothing else existed. Just me and the water. Hours could pass and I would have no notion of time.

I surged to the surface, my hair ipping back, water droplets spraying the air. I felt exhilarated. My pain was gone. The cold was gone. I tread the water and look around me, disconcerted to discover that hours have passed. I hear the sound of footsteps approaching and cringe. But they aren't as loud or as hard as my father's and I glance upwards as a member of patrol approaches with a scowl on their face.

"Your father is approaching the border" he snarled "if I were you I would go and change before he sees me" he added.

Was he warning me? Was this a gesture of kindness? My lips parted, but the patrol member shook his head and strode off before I could sign the word for thank you. I hastily got out of the water, feeling goosebumps ripple across my skin, and grabbed my clothes, donning them quickly. My hair was smooth and long down my back. For a moment, I could have sworn that it glimmered, but that had to be my imagination. I began to trudge back to the pack house, making it to the grounds, just in time to see my father striding out of the forest, a pissed expression on his face, my brother following behind silently. Both were just wearing a pair of pants, that had been passed to them by patrol.

"That Alpha Jaxon has some nerve" my father hissed, running a hand through his hair and giving a low growl "impudent son of a b\*\*\*h. Thinking that he can just take over a pack like it's nothing."

My brother looked nervous. "But father, he does have a reputation for being ruthless and he is one of the strongest Alphas in the country" he pointed out as my father turned and glared at him "so he isn't blung. Even if we offered assistance to the other pack, there's no chance that we'll win" he added.

My father snorted "I have no intention of offering any assistance" he practically shouted at my brother, stunning him into silence "I just wanted to conrm the rumors for myself. That Alpha Rowan is a moron. He's always been weak" he scoffed "he's lazy, his patrol is weak at best, his warriors are not prepared for a ght and he has no Luna. Don't even mention that infuriating daughter of his" he exhaled.

"But shouldn't we do something?" my brother said as they stopped in the middle of the grounds.

"What do you propose we do Damien?" My father asked with a heavy dose of sarcasm "put ourselves in the ring line? Has it not occurred to you that if Alpha Rowan's pack is taken, ours might be next? We have our own problems to deal with. Besides" he pointed out gravely, his eyes glittering, his face scowling "what has Alpha Rowan ever done for us?"

My brother fell silent. I stared at the two of them, disgusted with their attitudes. They only cared about themselves, but it was not unexpected. I had met Alpha Rowan before and did not like him, so I felt no sympathy for the man losing his pack. But I thought my father might at least show some compassion towards the man who was facing a dicult decision.

My brother and father nally became aware of me and turned sharply. "Have you been eavesdropping on us?" My father snapped as I stood there and mutely shook my head, trying to deny it.

I would have tried to go into the pack house, but I had been frightened that any sudden movements would have drawn their attention.

"The little murderer was listening to both of us" my brother said, glaring at me.

I shook my head a little more forcibly. It would have been dicult not to have heard them considering they were practically yelling at each other. Their voices had carried across the grounds. My father's eyes narrowed and he looked at me closely.

Shit. He knew. I don't know how, but he knew. He always knew. His lip curled back. When he spoke it was lled with contempt. "You've been swimming in the lake again" he said evenly.

I stared at him, the blood draining out of my face. What gave it away? I was dry. The wind had dried the water in my hair and on my clothes. There should be nothing to show I had been anywhere near water. But my father looked at me with anger.

"How many times have you been told not to go swimming in the lake?" he asked in a dangerous voice.

I didn't understand the reason I couldn't. Why did he continue to demand I stay away? Why did he try to make it forbidden? I had tried. Really tried to stay away, but my body craved the water with such desperation that I couldn't stay away, no matter how hard I tried to. No amount of punishments or beatings prevented me from doing it. The urge to be in the water, to feel it against my skin was much too strong.

"How many times" my father said in a louder voice.

I trembled and stared at the ground. He moved towards me and I waited for the inevitable. I could barely feel any of the wounds that had been on my back. In fact, I thought frowning, I couldn't feel them at all. My father grasped me by the chin. "I would beat you, but it does no good" he spat out "you continue to defy my orders" he growled "and you continue to look more like her" he paused, his eyes beginning to blaze "like her every damn day" he growled.

By her, he meant my mother. I stared at him deantly as he tightened his ngers on my chin, my eyes welling up with tears. I felt the hard slap against my face as he used his free hand to strike me. I blinked. He let go of me with an expression of anger.

"Stay away from the lake" he roared "or I swear to god, I won't be responsible for my actions Riley" he added ominously "I will do anything it takes to prevent you from becoming..." he trailed off.

Becoming what? What was he keeping from me? He shut his lips, his jaw clenching, as though he was aware that he had already let slip too much.

Damnit. It was frustrating. I just wanted answers. Damien shot me a cold glance and then strode past me, shoving me with his shoulder and causing me to stumble.

"Murderer" he hissed.

"Let's go, son, we need to over our defenses and strategies," my father said callously, storming towards the pack house with Damien in his wake.

He glanced over his shoulder at me "Get your ass inside and start helping to prepare dinner" he snapped "and keep your head down. I don't want to see your face if I can help it."

I bowed my head and began to make my way toward the pack house after them. For the rst time, I had gotten away from them relatively unscathed, but it still begged the question, what was the secret they were keeping from me?