Mates Always Work Out

A few days later, I sat beside Sophie, watching as Colton and Keegan packed the car and said their goodbyes to the friends they had made.

Colton shook hands and laughed with a few of the other teenagers while Paul and Keegan stood with their backs to us, discussing something in private.

Alpha Vex walked over to Colton and grinned. The alpha clapped Colton on the back and handed him a bottle of vodka. “A parting gift!” Vex declared.

Colton thanked the alpha and stored the liquor in the trunk of the car.

“For three people, you guys certainly packed a lot,” Sophie joked. Her voice was light and didn’t have enough conviction to make me laugh.

I smiled even though it hurt, too, just to make her feel like she got through to me.

“We just packed clothes and supplies for your pack,” I told her. “Not too much.”

Sophie laughed. “It sure is taking them an awfully long time to pack.”

I frowned and tilted my head to the side. I had noticed the same thing.

I watched as Keegan would walk back and forth from the car to the tent without carrying anything. Sometimes he would try to catch my eye.

“They better get on the road before it gets dark,” I said absently, my heart hurting. I didn’t want to watch Keegan leave. I wanted him to stay beside me.

Sophie took my hand and squeezed it. “Are you sure you don’t want to go with your mate?”

The way she asked the question made it obvious that she already knew the answer. As always, Sophie was patient.

“I don’t want to be separated from Keegan,” I told her honestly. “But I want to feel safe.”

It was true. I couldn’t imagine going back to Cole’s abusive pack after experiencing a different way of living.

Sophie frowned. “Can you return to your father?”

I shook my head, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. That was another topic I had thought hard about.

“No, that’s impossible now.” I looked at her and explained. “I’m too much of a sympathizer to be able to smile and nod along with what he preaches.

“Besides, there’s a chance I could shift and I couldn’t do that around him unless I was intending on dying as well.”

Sophie shook her head. “Your father wouldn’t shoot you.”

“I think he would,” I said numbly, “if he saw me shift.” The ease with which I declared this sent a shiver through my body.

Sophie frowned. “Keegan isn’t interested in staying with our pack?”

I hesitated. “He is. It’s just that he also feels like he has to fulfill his duty to his alpha and the command from the king.

“I don’t think he’s ready to feel safe yet, not while the war is still going on and he’s been such an integral part since the beginning.”

Sophie nodded. “I’m sorry then, this must be painful.” She gestured toward Keegan and I grimaced.

It was painful to watch him pack up his things. I wasn’t sure if I would ever see him again. The thought hollowed me out.

“We both want different things,” I told her. “Things don’t always work out.”

“Mates do,” she said with confidence. “Unless death is involved, mates always work out. I know from experience.

“The whole time I snuck around with Paul, I was sure we would be caught and one of us, or both, would be killed for it.”

I smiled. “But you were both sure you wanted to be with one another.”

She frowned. “You don’t want to be with Keegan?”

“I do,” I amended. “But there are parts of me with doubts.”

“I see,” she murmured. “The fear is still there.”

I nodded and didn’t respond. How else could I respond without using the same excuses I had already said a million times? Keegan and I were raised to hate the other. End of story.

“Maybe he will come back for you after the war,” Sophie said.

Her words only made me feel worse. So far, the war had lasted my entire life. Neither side would give up what they thought was theirs: freedom.

“Maybe that will be a long time,” I said solemnly. “Maybe I’ll be waiting my whole life.”

Sophie grinned. “Werewolves live long lives.”

I frowned. “Then what will happen when you age and Paul doesn’t?”

Her smile was ghost-like and her eyes were suddenly empty. I could tell this was a fear she thought of often. “Paul will raise our children and be strong without me.”

I stood up a little straighter. “Roughly, how much longer do werewolves live?”

She shrugged. “It varies but most werewolves will age one year for every ten.”

I turned and stared at Keegan. How old was he? “When does that start?”

“Eighteen or so,” she answered. “Paul looks about twenty but is closer to forty.”

“But—”

“Lux?” I looked up to see Colton standing over me. His eyes were shifty. I stood, too, and Sophie left us. I pressed my palms into my thighs. My heart was hammering.

“Are you saying goodbye?” I asked.

He nodded. “The car’s been packed for an hour. Keegan just didn’t want to leave.” My heart found its way into my throat and my eyes found their way to Keegan, who was still talking to Paul.

“Be safe,” I told him. “I don’t want your mother to kill Keegan, so make sure you’re unharmed when you get back to her.”

Colton’s smile wobbled. “I wouldn’t let my mom kill Keegan. He’s my only friend, remember?” Is it possible for your heart to become so heavy that you are unable to move?

My lower lip wobbled. “Thank you for being so understanding,” I said as I pulled him down into a hug. “I’ll miss you.”

He squeezed me back. “Can’t you come back with us, Lux? Maybe I can talk to my dad and we can figure out some way to convince—”

I pulled away and shook my head. “No, Colton, I don’t think that would be possible.”

The look on his face told me that he knew I was right. No one back West would accept the daughter of Stan Freeman into their pack. I was a disease in their mind.

“I wish things were different,” Colton told me, his voice heavy.

I smiled and straightened his flannel shirt. “If they were different, I would never have met you guys. We would live in different states and wouldn’t know the other existed.”

He shook his head. “That’s not true. Somehow, mates always find one another.”

I looked down and felt my chest tighten. “I guess they don’t always stay together.”

Colton sniffled a little and shoved his hands into his pockets. “You changed the way I think about humans, Lux. Thank you for helping me see life a little clearer. I hope you come back to us.”

Colton hugged me quickly once more and then walked over to the car, waving before he slipped into the passenger’s seat and disappeared.

I crossed my arms over my chest as Keegan clapped Paul on the back, shook his hand, then turned to face me.

The moments it took for him to reach me stretched out into an eternity as my mind worked hard to document every part of him. It was crucial that I committed every inch of him to my memory.

He cleared his throat roughly when he reached me. “I guess we’re saying goodbye.” I looked down and didn’t answer. “I wish you would come with us.”

“I wish you would stay with me.”

He swore and rubbed the back of his neck. “Lux, it’s not as safe here as you think it is. The East is hit harder by the war than the West. You’d be safer back in Oregon with me than with this pack.”

“But here I can make friends and speak my mind and move around freely. I can help people and be useful. Back in Oregon, the only thing I’m allowed to do is your laundry.”

Keegan looked as though he’d been hit. “I didn’t treat you badly.”

I sighed. “No, you didn’t. But I can’t go back to pining for you from across the room underneath the glares and stares of your pack mates who see me as dispensable.

“I can’t go back to my old life either, so my only option is to stay here with Alpha Vex.”

Keegan bristled. “Are you choosing him over me?”

“I’m choosing freedom over oppression.”

“No,” he growled. “You’re choosing danger over safety.”

“Freedom isn’t free,” I replied. “I’m aware of the risk.”

Keegan shook his head fiercely. “I don’t think you are, Lux.

“You’ve never seen a human raid on a werewolf camp, you’ve never seen a wolf killed. You don’t know what kind of horrific things happen when humans attack.”

“I can take care of myself!”

“No, you can’t,” he snapped. “You may be one of the strongest people I know, but you cannot defend yourself against bullets and twisted killers, Lux.

“You’ve been through more than anyone I know, but you won’t survive an attack by trained humans.”

“You don’t know that the West won’t be attacked,” I said stubbornly, grasping at straws.

“I don’t,” he admitted. “But I know that the East is attacked far more and that I’d be there to protect you if Cole’s pack was targeted.

“Who is going to save you here? Alpha Vex will be too occupied trying to save his wolves to look after an insignificant human.”

That hurt. “Why don’t you just go? You’ve made it clear you don’t want to stay, so why are you delaying? I’m not changing my mind. I can’t go back and be a slave.”

I shivered as the thought of Doug Lott’s touch came to me. I wouldn’t go back to that.

“Please, Lux,” he begged. “*Please*.”

Refusing him was the hardest thing I had ever done. “No.”

He was frozen for a second, almost not sure if he had heard me correctly. But after a moment, he nodded and then turned away from me. He moved with jerky motions toward the car and started the engine.

My cheeks were wet by the time the car was in motion and I was sobbing by the time his taillights disappeared.

Keegan was gone and I was alone. The one person who was supposed to love me unconditionally was now gone from my life before I even got to know him.

I wiped at my cheeks with the palms of my hands and took a few deep breaths, trying to get myself under control.

My breath came in hiccups and then subsided to short gasps. I dabbed at my face again, hoping it wasn’t splotchy, as I heard footsteps approach from behind me.

“That was incredibly brave,” Alpha Vex said. “Not many wolves would willingly be left behind by their mate.”

I bristled. “I’m not a wolf.”

“Not yet,” Alpha Vex responded immediately. “But soon.”

I sighed. “Keegan was the only one who made me feel like shifting and now he’s gone, so maybe I’ll remain human.”

Alpha Vex shrugged casually but his small eyes were serious. “Maybe. But I bet that your wolf will show herself when you really need her.”

“We’ll see,” I replied.

What I really wanted was to be alone. I was grateful to Alpha Vex for allowing me to reside with his pack, but I was also without a mate and future.

I had to grieve that loss and I wanted to do it alone.

Alpha Vex smiled. “You’re a strong girl, I think you’ll be all right on your—” Alpha Vex stopped talking and turned his head slightly. “Did you hear—?”

A scream broke the silence, Alpha Vex ran off, and I was alone.

My ribs strained to contain my heart as I started after him, panic threatening to take me over and shut me down.

When I got to the center of the pack grounds, all I saw was horror. People ran carrying supplies and children, their faces full of terror.

Unlucky people lay on the ground, their bodies smeared with blood and their eyes unseeing. I choked on bile and forced my feet forward, aiming to get to my tent across the clearing.

I tripped and fell over a body, horror choking my throat. I bent down as a bullet whizzed over my head and hit a man who was trying to run to safety.

I scrambled to my feet and ran for my tent, desperate to reach safety.

When I crashed inside the tent, I saw a woman kneeling over the body of a girl, a knife flashing in her hand. The woman looked at me and smiled, then stood and wiped her blade on her shirt.

When I looked at the body on the ground, my knees began to shake. Sophie.

She had been slashed across the base of her throat, staining her white dress a horrifying red. Her skin was like snow, her hair was splayed around her, her forest eyes were blank.

I looked from Sophie to the woman and shook my head, raising my hands in front of me. “Please,” I gasped. “Please, I’m a human.”

The woman tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. “You look familiar.”

Relief washed through me. Was I going to be saved by my name? “Stan Freeman is my father.”

The woman’s grin widened. “I heard you were a sympathizer.”

Bile crawled up my throat. “I… No… Please…”

The woman twirled the blade in her hand, then started to advance.

I walked backward until I was outside of the tent and then I turned and ran, ignoring the screams of pain, the howls of anguish, and the shots of bullets.

I threw caution to the wind and turned to look behind me as I ran, straining to see Sophie’s murderer.

Instead of seeing anything, I ran into something, hard. Hands clamped around my shoulders, stopping me from falling over.

I looked up at Paul. His whole face was splattered with blood and his eyes were layered with worry.

“Sophie?” he asked urgently. All I could do was shake my head. “I need to know where Sophie is.”

I shook my head again. “Gone.”

He shook his head slightly and stumbled backward, using his hand to brace his body against the nearest tree. I sucked in a breath as a bullet shattered the wood above his head.

Paul was too distracted to even care.

“Paul, you have to—”

“Where is she?” he rasped, desperate.

I pointed to my tent and lowered my eyes. “She’s there.”

Without another word, Paul was gone and I was alone again. I turned around and surveyed the area, spotting the humans through the trees carrying long guns and assault rifles.

I couldn’t locate anyone familiar to me. Alpha Vex was gone. Keegan had been right; I was alone. No one was going to help me out of this situation.

I almost laughed at the irony of it all. If I had gone with Keegan, I would be safe. Now, my life was in peril.

I smelled smoke and heard screams seconds later. Someone had started setting the tents on fire with people still inside.

I screamed when I saw my tent on fire. The tent that both Sophie and Paul were in.

I watched as the fire spread to the trees and my tent crumpled to the ground. The smoke came next, rolling over the clearing like a looming storm cloud and obscuring my vision.

I coughed as the heavy substance made its way into my lungs and never left. I started walking dazedly, tripping and scratching my hands.

I got back up and walked a little quicker, worry and panic now propelling me into a run.

Through the heavy smoke, I saw two bright lights, and then there was a loud crack as someone smashed the butt of their gun into the back of my head.

I fell to my knees and then onto my stomach before passing out.

Leaving her behind was the stupidest thing I had ever done.

Colton and I were silent as we pulled out of the pack territory, leaving behind safety and Lux.

I swallowed hard when she disappeared from my rearview mirror as my wolf howled in some distant portion of my mind.

Colton looked out the window, unusually quiet. He had been different since he found out Lux and I were mates.

I trusted him with the truth but I wondered how the truth had changed his perspective. How could he hate humans when he cared for Lux?

“Are you all right?” I asked him, trying to distract myself from thoughts of Lux.

He sighed and shook his head. “I have a bad feeling,” he admitted. “We shouldn’t have left her behind.”

Swallowing is impossible when knives are lodged in your throat. “She made her choice, Colton. I made mine, and unfortunately, we both needed different things.”

He looked over at me, openly curious. “What was it that made you leave her? Loyalty to my father or to the king? Personal duty? Family ties? Responsibility? Or just plain idiocy?”

I laughed but it only made me feel worse. “The farther we get from her, the more I’m inclined to believe I left her for the last reason.”

“Why don’t we turn around?” Colton glanced over his shoulder with a sad look in his eye.

“She won’t change her mind,” I told him. “Lux is—”

“Turn around, Keegan.”

I frowned and shook my head. “Trust me, we can’t convince her to do anything that—”

“*Turn around.”*

I looked in my rearview mirror and slammed on the brakes. The blood rushed to my head as I threw the car into reverse and spun so we were speeding toward Alpha Vex’s territory.

Colton’s voice shook. “Is that smoke?”

“Too much to be a campfire,” I told him, my heart racing. It was too much to be anything but an attack.

My own words from earlier rang in my ears. *“You cannot defend yourself against bullets and twisted killers.”*

I had left my mate in the middle of an attack.

“Can you go faster?” Colton asked urgently.

I shook my head, foot urging the gas pedal as far down as it would go. “This car was made for distance, not speed.”

Colton swore and kept his eye on the large plume of smoke that rose eerily into the air.

It took us minutes to cross pack boundaries, but as soon as we entered the forest, we had to slow our speed down to a crawl because of the smoke.

I swore and leaned forward, squinting to try to see better through the thick black smoke that hung in the air.

“What if Lux—?”

“Don’t,” I barked, my voice breaking. I couldn’t afford to think that she was already gone.

If I did that, I wouldn’t be able to put one foot in front of the other. I wouldn’t be able to inhale oxygen. I wouldn’t be able to go on.

“There!” Our headlights illuminated a small shape a few feet away. The figure was too short to be anyone but Lux.

I watched in horror as a man ran up behind her and slammed the end of his gun into her head, causing her to crumple and fall.

A snarl ripped itself from my throat as I exited the car and threw myself into the air, shifting before my paws hit the ground.

I growled and approached the man slowly, enjoying the fear that rolled off him.

Colton had shifted too and flanked my right side, his teeth bared and muzzle dripping in saliva. He barked at the man who jumped and raised his gun with hands shaking.

My eyes darted to Lux, who hadn’t yet moved, and then to Colton, who was inching his way toward the man.

A loud bang echoed in my ears and Colton lunged, his teeth snapping through the air.

I threw my body forward, so that Lux was underneath my legs, and sunk to the ground, my hackles rising as I let out a territorial growl.

Gunshots popped around the clearing, wolves growled, humans screamed. Colton bit the human’s arm and the man dropped the gun, looking terrified. It took me one strike to kill him.

Colton looked ready to jump in and help the pack under siege, but the blood that smeared his left side made me bark at him to return to the car.

Colton sent me a meaningful look, but I only growled, telling him we had to go.

I wanted to help Alpha Vex but his pack was dying and I couldn’t risk Lux.

I wasn’t a warrior and this wasn’t my war. Not anymore. Not when my mate was a human. Not when I couldn’t stomach violence.

I shifted and picked up Lux as Colton circled us, limping slightly but able to move.

My eyes glanced over at the man who hit Lux, and guilt twisted me for one moment before I forced myself to become numb. I couldn’t feel bad for killing the man who hurt my mate.

I put Lux in the backseat as fast as I could and then ran to help Colton into the car before jumping into the driver’s seat and throwing the car into reverse and speeding away.

I didn’t look back until we were ten minutes away, and the plume of smoke rising from the territory was insignificant in the distance.

Colton was breathing heavily beside me, and his entire side was drenched in blood. He looked at me with distressed eyes.

“I think the bullet is lodged in one of my ribs.” He winced as the car hit a pothole, and his body was jostled.

I swore. “I was hoping the shot grazed you.”

He shook his head, quick and fast. “No, there’s something wrong.”

I moved to the shoulder of the road and pulled on a pair of shorts before walking around the side of the car to examine Colton’s left side. I looked for an exit wound but didn’t see one.

My next instinct was to place a hand on Colton’s head. The fever was obvious and fast-acting.

I swore again and opened the trunk, pulling out the tiny first aid kit, a knife, and the bottle of vodka from Alpha Vex.

I moved back to Colton, who was starting to shake. “You have to get that bullet out,” he told me. “I think I might pass out.” I glanced fleetingly at Lux, wishing she was awake to help me.

I gritted my teeth and poured some of the vodka over the knife, my hands, and the wound itself. Colton grunted out a swear word and clutched his seat, his skin paling.

“Damn,” he swore. “Couldn’t the Goddess have given us the power not to feel pain?”

“Then we wouldn’t have empathy,” I told him, taking a few deep breaths.

Colton gritted his teeth as I pressed the tip of the knife into the bullet wound. He yelled as the blade entered his skin, and I wriggled around, looking for the bullet.

I pried the wound open a little wider and a fresh flow of blood ran down his side. I flashed him a quick look of apology and swore as I saw the bullet wedged in his flesh.

I pressed the skin around the edges of the wound back farther and reached in with my finger to draw the bullet out.

After a few minutes of prying and teasing the bullet, it eventually came free and Colton was able to breathe a little easier.

His eyes lolled as he came close to passing out, but he managed to right himself.

“Stay with me,” I urged him. “Don’t fall asleep.” I cleaned the wound once more with the last of the vodka and wiped my bloody hands on my shorts.

His voice was a croak. “I was shot. I think that warrants some rest.”

I laughed. “Not until you’re bandaged.”

Colton grunted as I had to pull him forward to get the gauze around his back. I wrapped the material around him a few times, pulling it tight and securing it.

Colton’s eyes slipped closed. “My mother is going to kill you.” He passed out then, flopping against the back of the seat and going still, besides the tiny movements in his chest.

It took me a few minutes to get everything cleaned up and back in order. I closed Colton’s door carefully, making sure not to shut the door on any toes or fingers.

I then went around the other side of the car and pulled open the back door, adjusting Lux so she was in a more comfortable position.

I started driving again, both of my passengers unconscious and injured. Guilt ate at me in the silence, attacking every cell of my body.

Guilt over leaving Lux behind, watching her be struck, watching her fall. Guilt over killing her attacker, guilt for not saving Colton from being shot, guilt for not helping Vex’s pack.

I hit the steering wheel and then hit it again, frustration and anger winding my muscles so tight that the only thing I could do was scream through gritted teeth.

What did loyalty to an alpha mean when the ones you cared about the most were injured?

What did it matter that the king asked you for a favor when you were incapable of keeping those you loved safe?

What was the point of personal duty when you were alone in the silence? Why didn’t I stay with her?

I looked at Lux in the backseat and felt the same anger building inside me again. The anger was like a river in a storm that slowly rises until it breaks its banks and ruins the surrounding land.

An image of Lux dead on the snow came back to me and I realized that today I had been moments away from living my worst nightmare. Moments away from watching my future die.

In some horrible way, I believed that today had been necessary. Without the danger, I would’ve left my future behind.

I swore to myself that I would never make that mistake again.