

My Mate, My Enemy

My Daughter Is Gone

It took us the entirety of the following morning to find a car that was suitable for our needs and easy enough to steal without drawing attention to ourselves.

Once we were moving, we moved with ease, crossing state lines and checkpoints without issue.

Colton sat in the back seat and slept on and off for the entire drive while Lux sat beside me, nearly chewing off all of her nails.

I could feel she was nervous about returning to Oregon but I owed it to Cole to at least explain why before I left his pack.

The night before, I had laid awake, listening to Lux's breath mingle with the sounds of the forest and I had realized that the only thing I could do now was to part ways with my uncle and Cole.

I had to leave to protect my mate. It was simple.

Lux looked out the window, watching trees and buildings pass by. I knew she was uncomfortable in her own skin and even more uncomfortable with her own thoughts.

How could somebody be expected to process two traumatic events back-to-back?

I reached for the radio and turned it on, hoping to soothe Lux's nerves with the sound of voices.

I figured that sitting in silence wasn't going to help distract her from whatever thoughts were making her upset.

She flashed a smile at me, looking pained but beautiful. Always beautiful.

After a moment, recognized the voices, so I reached for the stereo, ready to turn it off.

Lux's hand caught mine, her head shaking slowly as her eyes grew wide. "Leave it on," she whispered, our attention caught by the sound of her father's voice.

"The next step is an increase in attacks. We need to rid the East of werewolves, reclaim our metropolitan areas, and either eradicate them or push them north."

My hands tightened on the steering wheel.

The radio host made sounds of agreement. "What is being done to push the beasts out of our land? What kind of enforcement is the government sending out to take care of the problem, Stan?"

Lux held her breath.

"Look, ever since werewolves became public, humans have been volunteering and training and are willing to protect their families and country.

"At the moment, the government is supplying groups of freelance raiders with the weapons they need to take out the wolves."

Lux's eyes closed and I could hear her teeth grinding.

"And what about the West?" the host asked. "What's being done there? All we hear about are our great triumphs along the Atlantic coast but what about the Pacific?"

"I know that troops have been deployed in that area," Stan said slowly. "I'm not sure which states they're targeting but the government is eager to reclaim that portion of the country as well."

"So, just to be clear," the radio host said, "we're going to reclaim our golden beaches?"

Stan chuckled, causing the hair on my arms to stand at attention. "Yes, I think it's safe to say we will have the West within the next year or two.

"To be perfectly honest, the only land the government is willing to sacrifice is the North, and this is only temporary."

"You have to feel bad for Canada at a time like this," the host laughed. "Their population is outnumbered five to one by werewolves."

"Better them than us," Stan said. "Our population is greater, so we need the space back."

The host cleared his throat. "Time to get serious, Stan. The entire country is eager to hear about your daughter, Lux. We all grieved when you released the tragic news last week."

I looked over at Lux, watching as what little color was left in her face disappeared. Her eyes met mine; there was a haunted look in them.

Stan took a moment to reply. "Burying a child is a hard thing, Larry. It wasn't something I ever wanted to do."

"I think I speak for our viewers when I say that we were all hoping for a different outcome," the radio host said.

"Nobody hoped more than me." The radio was dead for a moment. "I think Lux would have wanted people to heed the warning from what happened to her.

"She was mur... She is gone because werewolves hate humans. Simple. Those beasts killed an innocent child. All sympathizers should remember—"

Lux slammed her fists against the radio until her father's voice was cut off and there was a dent in the dashboard. For a moment, she stared through the windshield before she closed her eyes.

"Stop the car, Keegan," she ordered, her voice shaking.

I looked around, noticing the dark clouds above us and the traffic on the highway. Pulling over would create suspicion, and that was the last thing we wanted.

"I don't think—"

"Pull over." I looked at her face, recognizing that she was close to exploding.

I pulled over swiftly, making eye contact with Colton as I did. I assumed he had woken up early enough to have heard what Lux's father had said.

Before the car came to a complete stop, Lux threw herself out of it, leaving her door hanging open as she stumbled forward a few steps and then collapsed on the grass.

She covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook as she cried.

I battled between going to her and giving her space, not sure what it was that she needed at that moment.

I watched her from the car, wishing I had turned off the radio the moment I'd heard Stan Freeman's voice.

Lux wound her fingers into the grass, screaming out as a few drops of rain hit my windshield.

I shivered a little and got out of the car, closing the door behind me and jogging over to Lux as the rain started to get a little heavier.

"Lux," I called her name, but she didn't respond. I touched her shoulders, trying to lift her. She fought me off, pushing my hands away instead of accepting my help.

"Lux," I tried again. "It's raining and we have to go back to Oregon."

Lux looked up at me, her gray eyes pale and clear and achingly beautiful in a way that chilled me to my core. "I can't take it anymore, Keegan," she rasped. "I can't take any of it."

I frowned. "Lux, you can. You just have to—"

"No," she shook her head, her pale hair sticking to her face as the rain dampened it. "No, I can't anymore. I can't go back to Oregon, I can't be like you, I can't.

"Not when Sophie's gone, not when my father... Not when I don't even know *who I am* anymore."

Her breath picked up as she started to panic. I crouched down in front of her, throwing a cautious glance over my shoulder. "You're going to get through it all, Lux, you're strong, you can—"

Her voice broke me. "I can't."

"Lux—"

She didn't flinch as the rain pelted her face. "I can't do it anymore, Keegan. I don't have a family, I don't have a home, I don't have anything.

"Sophie's dead, Paul's dead, countless others are dead. I watched them bleed out or burn and I couldn't do anything and I don't know if they're all dead or if people survived."

"You were knocked unconscious," I reminded her softly.

She rambled on, becoming increasingly frantic. "And now, I don't know what I am. I'm a werewolf and I'm being hunted and my father has told everyone I'm dead."

She sobbed a little and covered her mouth with a shaking hand. "And my brain isn't working right anymore. I can feel the wolf there now and I can't do it anymore."

I swallowed back tears and bit down on my tongue, wishing I could do more than whisper nothings and rub her back.

I wished I could steal away all her awful memories. I wished I could give her a safe home. I wished I could pluck all the troubles from her life.

But I couldn't, and nothing had ever made me feel so useless before in my life.

After a couple of minutes, I picked her up off the ground and walked her back to the car, trying to ignore her labored breathing and shaking frame. I had to get her warm, comfortable, and safe.

And then, I had to go to Oregon and say goodbye to Cole. After that, if we had to go north to be safe, then we would.

Colton handed me one of the blankets I'd stolen the previous night and I wrapped it around Lux, who curled her fingers around the fabric and brought it up to her nose.

She closed her eyes as she continued to shake.

I slipped back into my seat, turning my windshield wipers on and pulling back onto the freeway. After a few moments, Lux was sleeping, and for the time being, I was able to think with clarity.

Colton spoke quietly. "You aren't going to stay with my father anymore, are you?"

I shook my head, voice thick as I met his eyes. "I don't think so, buddy."

Colton looked down. "What if I convince him to let Lux stay?"

I smiled faintly. "You heard her father. Soon, nowhere will be safe."

"I think she'll be okay," Colton said after a moment, his eyes falling on Lux.

I followed his gaze. "I hope you're right."

A few hours later, I pulled off to the shoulder of a quiet road and cut the engine, deciding it was best to camp out in the car instead of running the risk of Lux being identified at a motel.

Lux had slept the entire afternoon and continued sleeping into the night, her body desperately needing to catch up on her rest.

She may have thought she'd fooled me in the forest, but I knew she wasn't comfortable enough in the woods to sleep more than a few hours at a time.

Colton passed out almost as soon as the engine turned off. His snores filled the space and his mouth hung open lazily.

The wound on his side was healing slowly, which meant that I was certain to hear a long spiel from his mother.

I tried to sleep, too, but rest was elusive. Instead, I pulled my father's journal from the glove compartment and turned on one of the overhead lights above my seat.

I'd been lucky to keep hold of the jacket I'd worn from the start.

I'd shifted to get away from the cops, but before we left to steal another car, I had doubled back to retrieve the journal from among my shredded clothes.

I unwound the string from the journal and watched as the pages fell open; the book spanned the width of my lap. My fingers hummed as they brushed the pages, as if feeling a connection to my father.

I looked at his handwriting, remembering times I'd watched him scribble in the book as a child.

He had been dedicated to documenting his thoughts, convinced that when the war was over, only personal journals would tell the real story of his species. I agreed.

I flipped to a random entry at the beginning of the large book, noting the date as May 7:

Her eyes captured me the moment I met them. How can one gaze can make you realize you've been living your life as half a man? I spent my entire life believing I was whole but one gaze ended that.

I flipped to another entry, my heart hammering. November 19:

Clara is pregnant, and the pack doctor believes she is carrying a girl. I could not be prouder or more content than I am at this moment. I'm going to be a father.

My breath caught in my throat. I didn't have siblings. I flipped past a couple of entries, my eyes scanning my father's words until I found what I was looking for. February 3:

Clara lost the child. My brother, Eric, was the one to find her. I am filled with such indescribable sorrow. I can't

I frowned as the entry ended mid-sentence. I leaned back in my seat, feeling the blood rushing to my head.

My parents had tried to have children before me. How could I not have known that? I continued reading. April 8:

It has taken months for Clara and me to reconnect after the loss of our daughter. We lost our future with that child, and that is not an easy blow to recover from.

I saw her smile this week and I can only hope this means that part of her is beginning to heal.

Tensions between the packs are rising and Alpha Cole fears their carelessness will lead to tragic consequences.

Queen Serena pushes for our kind to reveal our nature to the humans. A small part of me agrees with her. I have faith in the humans but I am also wary of their power.

Sadly, my beliefs do not reflect that of the majority.

I didn't know what to think. I read on. September 30:

Clara is two months into her pregnancy and stronger than she was before.

The pack doctor has assured us that we're having a boy. I want to name him William after his grandfather but Clara wants the boy to be named Keegan.

I tell her that William is a strong name; she tells me that Keegan means fire. I tell her she can't always get what she wants, even though I know, I would give her the world.

I cleared my throat as my eyes watered and my chest became tight. I flipped forward to my birthday. April 25:

He's here. He's beautiful. He's healthy.

When Clara first looked at me, I'd realized I wasn't a complete person. When our son looked at me, I realized I wasn't yet a man, I'm whole now. I'm a man now.

We named him Keegan.

He has her eyes and my charm.

I'm a father. And I could not be prouder.

I shoved my hand into my mouth, biting down on the skin until it bled. I closed my eyes as grief grabbed me and dragged me downward.

I fumbled around in the glove compartment and grabbed the flashlight that was there before exiting the car and taking a deep breath.

I leaned against the car and used the hem of my shirt to dry my face. After a moment, I cracked the journal open again and clicked the flashlight on, finding another entry. December 1:

Keegan's beginning to take his first steps but I worry it's not soon enough. Packs are fighting, the royals are divided, the White Wolves are all but useless without a proper alpha.

Things are coming to a boiling point and I worry my son won't be ready.

I worry that none of us will be ready.

I skipped a large portion of entries, fast-forwarding years of my father's life as curiosity overcame me. June 10:

The world is in chaos. Rallies and riots have torn down cities, burned forests, killed innocents.

After thousands of years of secrecy, werewolves no longer hide in the books of myth. We roam the streets, stalk the woods, fill the towns.

This is something humans cannot tolerate. I fear that a war has started.

Keegan looks at me with a naive expression. I scold him for staring even though I'm not upset at him; I'm afraid for him.

He's not yet a man; he's only just shifted. What will he do if there is a war and I must leave to fight it?

I ran a hand along my jaw, remembering when my father yelled at me that day. I couldn't seem to forget the way his voice shook, the desperate look on his face, the misplaced anger.

I flipped past the parts I knew. November 18:

War has torn our pack apart. We are divided on everything, and unfortunately, the line is drawn between myself and my brother.

Eric despises the humans for their blind hatred but can't seem to understand that he does the same thing they do.

He fights with me because I have no interest in killing them.

I don't believe fear is a cause for violence, but I don't believe in slaughtering an entire species because fear has ignited their sense of self-preservation.

We can't see eye to eye on anything.

I tensed my jaw as I read on. April 30:

Keegan is now thirteen but is still a child in so many ways. I am torn between shielding him from the horrors of the war and exposing him to them to make him stronger.

Clara begs me to protect him, but I'm no longer sure what that means.

Eric continues to love me, I disputes every word I offer to Cole.

I watched him kill a weaponless human last week and haven't been able to see him the same since. I believe he senses the change between us. His glares wound me.

July 2. I tense, my father didn't live long after this.

Eric cannot see reason; he sees what he wants to see. I just don't understand why.

He told me to leave and threatened my son. I just wish he would listen and understand that humans aren't the real enemy... I have lost my brother.

I couldn't stop myself from continuing. Curiosity and fear overcame me, moving me faster. August 9:

I have asked Eric to meet with me tonight. I have to address him before Clara and I take Keegan and leave. I have to try one last time to reach out to my brother before we head North.

Clara doesn't want me to meet with Eric as he scares her, but I know I will be fine. After all, we're brothers.

I flipped forward and felt my entire body freeze.

That was his last entry.

I kept my father's journal on me at all times, refusing to tell anybody about what I read last night.

As a result of reviewing my father's thoughts, I couldn't seem to get out of my own. Colton and Lux chatted every few minutes but the majority of the car ride was spent in silence.

I caught Lux peeking at me from time to time, her expression showing her concern.

I kept my gaze away from her knowing that as soon as I looked at her, I'd have to tell her everything, and I wasn't ready to share my father's thoughts with anyone yet.

Not until I'd figured out what happened to him.

I had to speak to my uncle.

"I thought I'd be happy to see something familiar," Colton said as we entered Oregon. "But I can't shake the feeling that nothing good is going to come from us returning to the pack."

His confession surprised me enough to drive thoughts of my father to the back of my mind. "What do you mean, Colton? Your father's pack has always been safe and—"

Colton shook his head. "That's not what I mean?"

Lux turned in her seat. "What's wrong?"

Colton took a deep breath. "I'm a different person now. Maybe it sounds stupid, but the last couple of weeks have changed me a lot."

"I'm not sure if I can go back to being voiceless and following my parents around without question."

I didn't think he sounded stupid; this trip had changed all of us. Colton had gained perspective. Lux a new identity. Me, clarity.

Colton no longer lived under the haze of false security and propaganda.

Lux no longer existed as a human thanks to her father, and thanks to her mother, she was a werewolf.

And I knew that I couldn't let transparent loyalties and vague trust keep me from the life I wanted. The war wasn't my battle to fight. I didn't have a place in a war that I didn't believe in.

Lux's smile was ghost-like. "I understand."

The tension in Colton's body seemed to vanish as he sunk back into his seat. He winced a little, telling me he was still in pain.

It was only a few more hours before we reached the pack boundaries. The sun was just starting to set as we left the car behind and ventured into the forest.

Colton led the way with ease, comfortable in his surroundings for the first time since we'd left these woods.

Lux slipped her hand into mine as we walked, and I felt the tension roll off her body.

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it, shooting her a quick, reassuring smile before picking up the pace.

We had agreed it would be best to drop Lux off in my tent before we went to speak with Cole. I could only hope that he wouldn't notice her changed scent on my clothing and anything.

Hopefully, no one would be interested enough in my return to head for my tent.

I looked at Colton and was reminded of his sister, Deelia. Before we'd left, she and Jude, the peacemaker, learned of the bond between Lux and me.

I prayed to the Goddess that Deelia hadn't said anything. I knew Jude wouldn't.

Colton and I dropped the few things we had in my tent and turned around Lux was safe before turning to leave.

Before we exited through the front of the tent, Colton turned around and hugged Lux fiercely. "In case I don't see you again," he said, "I just wanted to thank you for opening my eyes."

My wolf growled in my mind but I brushed him off, knowing this wasn't the type of contact to be jealous over.

Lux touched her head to his shoulder for a moment before pulling back and smiling. "Maybe you'll end up coming north one day too." It was hard to tell if she believed that.

Colton's smile wavered. "Maybe."

We turned and left, making our way across the makeshift village toward the alpha tent. It felt weird to be back home when I wasn't sure if I could call it that anymore.

People stared, waved, or whispered as we passed them, all seemingly interested in our return. I wondered if they knew what had happened back East, or what Stan Freeman was planning for the West.

We reached the alpha tent and entered unannounced. Our presence stopped all movement in the room and stunted the conversation.

All eyes were on us as we hesitated in the doorway, not sure where to go.

"Colton!" Luna Livy raced forward, desperately reaching for her son. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down to her height, burying her face into his skin and shaking with relief.

Livy pulled back and searched her son's face, her eyes sharp beneath the brim of her baseball cap. "I'm so glad you're home. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Colton said thickly. "I'm all right."

As if driven by some motherly instinct, Livy looked directly to the place Colton was injured, staring through his t-shirt.

"You're injured," she stated. Livy's eyes met mine and narrowed. "He's injured."

I nodded. "Colton was very brave and saved, uh, saved a wolf from death. He was clipped by a bullet but has recovered vastly and—"

Livy's face contorted with worry. "Thank the Goddess, you're all right!" she exclaimed, clamping her hands around her son's face.

She turned and glared daggers at me. "I told you to return my son to me safely, not with a bullet hole in him!"

"Mom!" Colton whined. "I'm all right. Keegan probably saved my life by getting the bullet out. It was laced with wolfsbane and would have—"

"Wolfsbane!" Livy repeated, looking flustered. "What are—?" She was cut off by her husband's deep voice.

"You need to learn when to withhold information, Colt." Alpha Cole walked past his mate and hugged his son firmly. "It's good to have you back. We heard about what happened to Alpha Vex's pack."

I kept a straight face. "We left before... Did anyone survive?"

Cole shook his head and a heavy silence pressed down on us all.

"Hey, Colton," Deelia called from across the room, waving lazily. She flashed me a look halfway between curiosity and pity. "Keegan." I nodded to her in return.

I looked around the room then, noting Jude, who smiled at me, and Sam, who was sitting at the table with a few enforcers and lookouts.

Deelia leaned against a wall and Livy's brother, Jay, stood next to my uncle, Eric.

My body tensed when I met his eyes.

"Welcome back, Keegan," he said quietly. "I'm relieved to see that you are okay."

I couldn't find my voice to respond. All I could think of were the words written in my father's journal and the lies my uncle had fed me.

Why hadn't he mentioned my parents' failed pregnancy? Why hadn't he told me my father was a human sympathizer? Why hadn't he admitted that he and my father weren't on good terms before he died?

What was he hiding?

I looked directly at Cole, not wanting to waste any more time.

"Can we speak privately?"

Cole looked a little surprised but followed me out of the tent. "Thank you for getting my son back to me. I hoped the trip was educational for him. How did he perform?"

I was honest. "Colton was extraordinary. He took everything in his stride with courage and bravery. Having him with me was a pleasure and an honor."

"If you were to ask me, I'd say that Colton lived up to his last name."

Cole smiled. "I can't describe how happy I am to hear that."

I waited until we were completely alone before turning to face Cole. I searched his face for a moment, wondering how much I could trust him with. I decided to play it safe with the alpha.

I cleared my throat. "We ran into an unforeseen problem on the trip."

He cocked his head to the side. "You mean besides the loss of a pack?"

"And not just any pack, but the pack we needed to house stranded wolves. The pack we needed desperately to keep the fight in the East going."

I licked my lips. "Yes, besides all that."

Cole's face revealed nothing. "Go on."

"My servant," I said, causing Cole to tense. "Something happened to her."

"I hear she's dead," Cole said bluntly.

I stomped out my frustration before it could surface. "I can assure you she's not."

"Well?"

My heart pounded against my ribs. "She shifted."

Cole was silent for a long while. "She shifted?" he repeated, sounding dumbfounded.

I nodded. "Apparently, Stan Freeman is bitter toward werewolves because of a broken heart, not because of fear."

Cole rubbed his jaw, looking increasingly confused as the seconds passed.

"Stan Freeman was once with a werewolf, has a halfling child, and still preaches all his anti-werewolf bullshit? How does that work?"

I shrugged. "I don't think we'll ever know."

"There must be a point to you telling me all this," Cole said carefully, his eyes wary.

I nodded. "I'm leaving. You know as well as I do that she will never be accepted, not by humans and not by werewolves. She's stuck between the two and that's scarier than anything."

"I can't stand by and watch her be executed or hunted. I'm taking her north."

Cole looked shocked. "You're needed here."

"No, I'm not," I protested. "I'm not a fighter. I was needed when no one wanted to fight. I re-sparked the fire in their hearts but the increase in raids will do that now. You know I'm right."

Cole didn't argue. "Why would you volunteer to take her?"

I shrugged. "I'm tired of all this and she's my excuse to leave. You've known from the beginning how hard it was for me to send wolves to their deaths."

"I can't do it anymore. Raids are supposed to increase, and like I said, I'm not a fighter."

Cole didn't look happy. "What will King Sebastian say?"

I grinned transparently. "Hopefully, thank you for your service."

"And your uncle?"

I tensed, and Cole didn't miss it. "He knows how I feel. How I've always felt."

"When will you leave?" Cole asked, his jaw tight. I could tell he wasn't happy with my decision but that he respected me enough to let me make it.

At that moment, I almost wavered from my feelings of loyalty to stay. All it took was one fleeting thought of Lux to bring that idea crashing down. I had to leave. For her.

But I still needed answers. I needed to speak with my uncle. I needed to know what he knew. I needed him to fill in the gaps in my father's journal.

And if I was honest with myself, I needed Eric to prove to me that he wasn't the one who had killed my father, because, at that moment, it was a growing suspicion.

"Tomorrow night."