

My Mate, My Enemy

A Loaded Gun

My father buckled slightly, his eyes wide with betrayal and his mouth puckering as though he could taste my mother's cruelty.

And then he laughed. The sound was unhinged, hysterical and made the hairs on my arms stand to attention. "Kill me," he repeated. "Kill me?"

Natalie didn't waver. "Yes."

My father opened his arms out wide. My eyes followed the line of his arm to the gun in his hand. It was pointed in Keegan's direction. My wolf growled.

"You see that, folks? That's the true nature of werewolves." He met my mother's eyes and then, strangely, mine. "What most people don't know is that the bitches are the ones with the worst bite."

Natalie smiled, but behind it, her eyes were glassy. She loved my father, loved Eric. But she didn't know Stan Freeman. Anyone who did knew that loving him was impossible.

"When are you going to give all of this up?" Natalie asked, walking forward slowly.

My dad brushed the underside of his nose. "Guards!" he yelled, unaware they were all either dead or unconscious.

My mother kept walking toward him.

I suddenly became aware of the power behind me. Wolves had gathered. I spotted the other four alphas and their packs behind them. Alpha Ebony winked at me in support.

"You were never a ringleader, Eric. That was always Lance. You don't belong in this role; it isn't you."

My mother was almost at the edge of the stage now, and my father looked panicked. Something about his expression made me move forward, despite Grant's warnings.

My father's lip curled. "Stop. Everything you told me. *Everything* was lies."

"I never lied about loving you, Eric," Natalie said. The audience stopped screaming loud enough to gasp. Finally, the dirt on my father was in the spotlight. He had loved a werewolf.

My father put his hands on his head.

I knew what he was feeling. To know you shouldn't be near your mate but desperately wanting to be. It was a physical ache, and the more you ignored it, the more it hurt.

My father looked at the camera. "I don't... We aren't here to..."

I looked at Keegan. He was sweating under the intense lights. But beyond that, he was wearing an obvious look of confusion mixed with an undertone of relief.

I hedged toward him, skirting around the cameras while keeping an eye on my parents.

It was a shame really. All I had wanted since I was little was for my parents to be together. Finally, after all these years, they were in the same room.

But they wouldn't be for long. Not if either one got their way.

Natalie walked up the far steps and onto the stage before moving toward my father. He held up the gun, pointing it directly at her chest as she approached. She didn't stop, didn't hesitate.

"I'll shoot you," my father warned.

My mother snorted. "Going to put me down like a dog, Eric? Is that what I deserve?"

A look of shame crossed my father's face. It was the first time I had ever seen him wear the expression. He was ashamed of what my mother had heard him say.

The alphas had been right. Natalie's presence was throwing him off his game.

He lowered the gun. "Fine, tear my throat out on national television. Let the country see what you really are, Natalie. Shift for them. Let them see the monster under your pretty skin."

Natalie glared, one eye defaulting to the camera.

This was the part of our plan that we hadn't thought through. Even if we killed my father, there would be other humans to take his place. There would still be a war.

I was almost at Keegan now. I was close enough to catch his scent. I looked back at the packs to see them slowly spreading out over the floor, creating a semi-circle around my parents.

"How can you keep up this charade, Eric? Lux—"

My father held up a hand. "Don't."

Natalie was relentless. "Our daughter, Eric. How could you say all these things when you know what she is? How could you do that to her?"

My father's expression was livid. "I can fix her."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Lance Bay was crazy. We both know it."

My father snapped. "Then I'll have to kill her." The audience gasped in horror.

But the words rushed over me, barely touching me at all. I was used to my father speaking about me like that. I wouldn't let it bother me now.

Natalie's eyes slid over my father to rest on me. He followed her gaze, freezing when he spotted me sneaking onto the stage. He backed up a few paces, looking like a cornered animal.

"I will kill you, Lux," my father said, a tear slipping down his cheek. "I will."

I smiled, though my face was heavy with sadness. "I know."

Natalie captured his attention, moving close enough to touch him.

A few of the pack wolves started growling, growing impatient at the slow pace at which things were progressing. I imagined they wanted to see my father lying in a pool of his own blood.

I bent low to look at Keegan, who was watching my parents. "Keegan!" I hissed. He didn't respond. I called to him louder, "Keegan! Are you injured?"

His head didn't turn, his eyes didn't meet mine. I frowned and tried again. Nothing.

"She's our daughter, Eric. *Ours*." I was surprised to see that Natalie was crying.

"You held her in your arms after she was born. You taught her how to walk. Her first word was *daddy*. How could you say that to her?"

"Because she's an abomination!"

Natalie recoiled. "No, Eric. You are."

"Keegan!" I hissed. I didn't want to spook my father. He still had a gun in his hand and I didn't like the glint in his eye, but Keegan wasn't responding to my calls.

I decided to bite the bullet and ran to him, hunched over as though I could hide from the blinding lights.

When I reached him, he nearly jumped out of his skin. I pulled back. Hadn't he heard me coming?

"I've only tried to protect my kind!" my father screamed. "Humankind!"

"By eradicating another?" my mother challenged.

"We've lived among humans for centuries and no one was the wiser. We lived with you, protected you, cared for you. How can you twist that companionship? We are human, just more."

Keegan looked at me with eyes impossibly wide.

"Keegan?" I whispered, my neck prickling with worry. Something was wrong. His eyes were sort of clouded, his brow creased. It was like he was thinking hard about something.

"Lux?" I pulled back slightly. His voice was different.

I pulled at the chains and realized they were reinforced. I needed the key. I put my hands on his neck to check for wounds. "What happened to you, are you okay?"

I realized what was different. He wasn't looking at my eyes. He was watching my lips. Horror spilled over me. I remembered when I'd seen him lying on the ground, cold and broken.

His ears had been bleeding.

I looked at him and felt my heart racing. "How bad?"

He touched his left ear and shook his head. "Nothing."

My tears stung my eyes. "And the other?" He shrugged with a heavy smile on his face. My eyes flicked over his head to my parents. "Was it my father?"

He shook his head. "The explosion at the raid," he said. "I was too close."

I forced myself to push the problem out of my mind. I could think about it later.

For now, I needed to get him free. I needed to make sure he was safe and I needed to make sure my mother did what she was here to do.

But all my plans vanished from my mind when I saw one of the wolves shift, its hackles raised and teeth bared.

I followed its line of sight. It was staring at my father, who was completely unaware of the danger. His eyes were fixated on my mother.

I don't know why I did it. I think, looking back, I never had the choice. He was my father and I loved him and there wasn't anything else to it.

I jumped through the air, shifting midway. I landed in front of my father, my tail tucked low as a snarl clawed its way out of my throat, warning away the approaching wolf.

It snapped its jaws at me, challenging me. I stood up a little taller, pacing defensively in front of my father.

I heard Keegan yelling my name. And then, closer and sharper, my mother's cry. I was completely focused on protecting my father from the wolf that I didn't even hear the gun click.

But I certainly felt the bullet.

I didn't hear Lux come up behind me. I felt her touch and nearly jumped out of my skin.

More than anything else, my wolf hated being caught off guard and with no hearing, it happened often.

I looked at her, reading her expressions. She was confused, hurt, and relieved. "Keegan?" she whispered. Her tone expressed all those emotions and so many more.

"Lux?" I whispered back. She noticed the change in my voice instantly. Now that I couldn't hear myself completely, I supposed it was affecting how I spoke.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Lux pulled at the chains, frowning when she realized they weren't going to budge. She needed Henley.

There was a moment of silence as she figured it out. "How bad?" she asked, her voice shaking and her lips trembling.

I touched my left ear and shook my head. "Nothing."

Her face almost crumpled and her eyes turned red. "And the other?" I forced a smile.

Her eyes skimmed over me to rest on her parents. I knew what she was thinking. "Was it my father?" she said.

"The explosion at the raid," I told her, straining to hear myself over the noise around us. "I was too close."

Lux pulled away, slipping into her mind for a split second. I knew she'd seen what I had. I didn't have the time to warn her before she took off, shifting to protect the father that didn't deserve it.

The other wolf snarled, challenging Lux's strength. She stood firm, tucked her tail in, and lifted her lips to snarl. As she paced, she eyed everyone present, assessing all threats.

I shifted my gaze, assessing for threats of my own. Stan looked shell-shocked at the sight of his daughter in her shifted form.

His face lost all of its color, so he looked pale and sickly. Deranged, even.

I yelled her name, knowing what was going to happen before it did. It didn't matter that I couldn't hear my voice; I yelled as loud as I could.

I pulled against my restraints when Stan clicked the safety off the gun.

Lux's mother started yelling but Lux was too lost in her wolf to notice. She had one thing on her mind: protection.

Her father had one thought too: attack. Stan's hand didn't shake as he lifted the gun. His eyes didn't flinch when he shot her either.

The audience screamed and most of them rocketed to their feet out of horror. The pack went into a frenzy: alphas barked orders as people started exploding into their wolves.

As for me; I was still. Completely and utterly frozen.

Lux twisted into herself, folding her body around the wound on her side. She fell to the ground, shaking like crazy, and her wolf made high-pitched whimpers that cut through me.

I heard her cries clearer than anything. She shifted seconds after it happened.

Lux's mother reached out for her daughter with shaky hands.

The gun slipped from Stan's hand as he stared down at Lux in horror. He knelt beside her, putting a hand on her side. His fingers came away red.

I pulled against my restraints; my vision blurring as my wolf fought me for control. I felt hands on my wrists a moment later. Henley was releasing me.

The guard worked as fast as he could, unlocking my right hand first. "I'm sorry," he grumbled to me. "You aren't an animal."

As I was free, I ran to Lux. The whole room seemed to be on a downward tilt, disorienting me further.

Lux was in her human form when I got her. Still shaking. Still bleeding. Still whimpering.

Stan was on the brink of passing out. "What...? Is she...? Did I...?"

I growled and Stan backed away, his entire upper body drenched in sweat. I turned my eyes back to Lux, my heart hardening into a lump of stone. She wasn't shaking so badly anymore, but I was.

My vision clouded with another image. An image of Lux lying in the snow with blood trickling over her midriff before sinking into the earth. The image of Lux in the dreams I'd had weeks earlier.

I gritted my teeth and shook my mind, trying to focus.

Lux looked much the same as she had in my dream. Her skin had lost its little color. Her face was covered with sweat, her pale hair stuck to her soft forehead, and her fingers curled around empty air.

Lux's mother was panicking. "Lux?" she cried. "Lux!"

The moment I pressed my hands on the wound, her eyes opened. A strangled sound came from her throat, somewhere between a cry and a twisted human howl.

I tried not to react, tried to keep pressure on the wound, but I was unnerved and unraveling quickly.

I felt a presence over my shoulder and turned to see the pale boy from before. He glowered down at me, assessing the situation with a trained eye. This wolf had seen battle, I was sure.

"I'm her brother, Grant," the boy said. "And a White Wolf."

I moved as far away as I could while keeping my hands on Lux's abdomen. Grant pressed his fingers to her throat, checking her pulse and other vitals I knew nothing about.

Lux's mother was trying hard to keep her calm. "Grant, what's wrong? Is she going to...? Will she be all right?"

I blinched hard. Images of the Lux from my dream were starting to bleed into my reality. For a moment, I even imagined snow had begun to fall.

I growled at myself. If there was a bad time to lose my wits, it was at that moment.

I heard Alpha Cole's muffled voice. "Do not attack!" he was screaming. "Do not attack!"

I couldn't look over my shoulder. I didn't want to see what kind of chaos we had created. I had to focus on Lux.

But even that was proving to be difficult. The longer I looked at her, the more I was sure she was lying in snow.

"I can't—" Stan mumbled, his eyes hollow. "I..."

"Why don't you go and get a doctor?" Grant snarled. "Do something useful!"

Stan, up until that moment, had been frozen, but now he was shaking. If he had been a wolf, his tail would have been so far up his ass, it would have never come down again.

Stan looked at Grant, and then at his mate, his eyes holding a question. "What—?"

"Doctor!" Grant snarled. "The daughter you shot is bleeding out."

Stan nodded, scrambled up the stage, and disappeared behind the curtain.

Grant turned to me. "Keegan, right?"

I read my name on his lips, then I nodded.

He grunted. "Better press hard into that wound. I'm pretty positive the bullet was laced with wolfsbane, and maybe moonseed, too, I can't be sure."

The only perk to being drugged with wolfsbane was that it disconnected you from your body. I looked down at Lux, praying to whatever goddess there was that she felt nothing.

Colton was across from me, and his eyes were wide with alarm. "Can we move her?" he asked, looking from me to Grant rapidly.

Grant shook his head. "Not unless you want to risk that bullet worming its way into her spine."

My wolf howled inside of me, clawing at my skin to the point where I had to hunch over from the pain.

Colton swore. "Then we're going to have a problem."

I followed his gaze to the floor of the theater.

The pack wolves had formed three rows with about half having shifted and half still in their human form. They growled and shouted warnings at the soldiers who were starting to leak into the room.

The audience was trapped in the middle.

I dropped my head between my shoulders. Lux's breathing was turning shallow and the back of her throat was becoming clogged with blood. Grant lifted her head to try to keep her airway clear.

"If we don't get her some help soon, the wolfsbane could leave her totally immobile. Not to mention, she is in serious danger of bleeding out. I've seen it a thousand times."

Grant's voice was hard but there was emotion underneath it. He cared about Lux.

I tried to think. Tried to see past Lux in the snow. Tried to cut the screaming out of my eardrums.

We needed help but who could help us?

The wolves were facing off with the human soldiers and there wasn't a clear way out of the theater.

I was suddenly cast into shadow as a figure hovered over me. I looked over my shoulder and felt relief pour over me.

Henley was stood with his large hands hanging at his sides. The guard tried to soften his features into a smile. "I will help."

I looked at Grant. "I know where we can take her to get help. Just tell Henley how to lift her."

Grant thought this over, grinding his teeth as though he were chewing on his ideas.

After a moment, he looked at me and frowned. "You'll have to keep pressure on the wound. Natalie, hold her head up. Hold her spine firm and make sure she doesn't move too much."

Colton piped up. "And me?"

"Shift with me, we're going to watch their backs."

Not a moment later, Grant exploded into a pure white wolf and shook out his pelt, spinning to growl at any nearby threats. Colton shifted next, not as impressive but equally motivated.

Henley slipped his hands underneath Lux, lifting her back next with surprising dexterity. I wondered idly how long he had been serving the Freemans.

Lux's mother, Natalie, braced her daughter's back next while murmuring sweet nothings in her ear.

I kept my hands pressed to Lux's wound, doing my best to ignore the blood seeping between my fingers. I pressed my hands tighter still, earning a soft moan of pain from Lux.

She tried to clasp my hand but her fingers went slack as soon as she made contact.

We moved as a choreographed unit. Henley, Natalie, and I worked to keep Lux as stable as possible, while Colton and Grant fended off any unwanted attention from pursuers.

I led the group, shouting out directions as best as I could and swearing when we reached the backstage area and I was confused about where to go next.

We stopped walking while I tried to find my bearings. I hadn't paid attention when Henley and Perks had dragged me onto the stage.

I looked at the bodyguard, ready to share my intentions, just as Stan ran up to us.

"No doctor?" Natalie shrieked.

Stan shook his head. "No one can get into the building. Our medical staff was outside and the police have them on lockdown." He looked at Lux. "Whatever help she gets, it has to come from inside."

I growled at Stan. I had to take a moment to swallow my disgust and hatred. I couldn't let it cloud my judgment.

"The makeup room," I all but snarled, "lead us to it."

Stan didn't question me. Instead, he turned and started walking right away. Back to business.

Henley gritted his teeth as we walked. The weight of Lux on his outstretched arms was starting to affect his muscles.

"Hang in there," I told him. "We can't be far."

We weren't. Stan stopped in front of the right door, opened it, and held it so we could slip past him.

The makeup artist was exactly where she had been before I was hauled away. On the couch, listening to music.

She jumped up as soon as we entered, ripping her neon earphones out. Her purple lips formed a look of astonishment when she saw Lux, naked and bleeding, being lifted into the room.

"What the—?"

"Couch," Henley barked. Sweat had broken out above his lip and brow.

The makeup artist dumazed around the room, clearing the couch of clothes and magazines as Henley leaned over to place Lux down as gently as he could. Lux made a small sound, pathetic and desperate.

My hands were still on Lux when I turned to the makeup artist. "We need that Moon Path, whatever's left. I need some sort of gauze too... Shit."

I looked down as Lux tried to sit up. Her eyes were open but blind and her movements were causing blood to surge out of her wound.

Natalie pushed her shoulders down while swallowing her sobs. "I've got her," she assured me, her nose running. "I've got her."

Grant had shifted and was pulling on a pair of pants from the collection of clothes the makeup artist was harboring in the small room.

Colton followed his lead, grabbing some jeans and tugging them on as quickly as he could.

Henley turned to the makeup artist, who was still staring at Lux. Her mascara was already running.

"Sadie," he barked, "it's now or never."

Sadie jumped into action, grabbing the IV stand and wheeling it to Lux's side. Grant and Colton rifled through Sadie's things to find gauze.

The sound of ripping plastic echoed in my ears as Sadie opened up a sterilized needle and attached it to the machine.

"Hurry," I growled. Wolfsbane worked faster on smaller wolves and Lux was tiny in comparison to most.

Sadie's fingers were shaking. "Sorry, I just... I almost..."

Natalie smoothed out Lux's arm, providing a place for Sadie to insert the needle. The makeup artist struggled; she poked it into Lux's arm four times before she found a vein.

As soon as the needle was in, Sadie spun, hit a few buttons on the machine, and exhaled a long breath. Her eyes were wide when they rested on me.

Her smile wobbled. "How long has she been exposed to the wolfsbane?" she asked quietly.

I gritted my teeth. We both knew the answer.

"Too long."

Grant appeared over Sadie's shoulder, holding a handful of white material. He held it toward me. "It's not gauze but we don't have a choice."

I reached out and took what was in his hand. A ripped t-shirt.

Swearing, I pressed the material against the wound in Lux's stomach and secured it as best as I could with my hands. I looked at her and heard my wolf howling. She deserved better.

I spoke while looking at Lux, but my words were meant for Colton, and somehow, he understood. "I need you to check on the theater to see what's happening. Lux may need more help than we can offer."

Colton took off, my ears losing him as soon as he was out of the room. Before, I would have been able to hear the fighting from here, but now, I couldn't even hear Lux as her breath rattled.

"What else can we do?" Sadie asked, moving her eyes from person to person.

Natalie moved her fingers through Lux's hair. "Nothing," she said, her voice impossibly soft.

Grant was monotone. "We have to wait and see how her body reacts. She should be starting to heal."

Surprisingly, Henley spoke up. "What about the bullet?"

It was like lightning had struck.

I peeled away the t-shirt as Grant moved to my side, swearing repeatedly.

Sadie was quick on her feet, grabbing a pair of scissors and tweezers from her makeup table. Henley looked around, too, and found a bottle of antiseptic.

I was nudged away as Grant took over. His hands were steady as he peeled away the portion of Lux's skin that had started to stretch over the wound.

My head spun from watching. Everything was crashing in on me and I wasn't sure if I could handle it.

Grant gritted his teeth. "The bullet could already be at her spine."

I swore. "Work quickly. Get it out of her."

He spun toward me and growled. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"Boys," Natalie chastened, "fighting is the last thing anyone needs at this particular moment."

I was frantic. I felt like my heart was beating in my throat and the sound in my right ear was overwhelming.

"You need to work faster," I yelled at Grant, watching his hands move slowly over Lux. "You need to—"

Grant snarled. "If you're going to be a hot fucking mess, then get out!"

I felt Sadie's hand on my arm and nearly jumped out of my skin. She frowned, then pulled her hand away and moved to stand behind Henley.

I felt Natalie's eyes on me, wide and pale. I looked at Lux, whose eyes were still closed. My breath came and went too quickly. I felt like the oxygen wasn't getting to my brain.

I staggered and tripped backward. Someone's hands reached out for me but I pushed them away. The room felt like it was tilting under my feet, and I went rushing toward the wall with my hands out.

"Keegan?" I didn't know whose voice it was.

My wolf growled when more hands landed on my shoulders. I looked up to see Stan's face cutting through my confusion. I pulled back violently, removing myself from his grasp.

The hairs on the back of my neck raised as though they were my wolf's hackles and a guttural growl ripped its way out of my chest.

"Keegan, you need to keep it together," Stan informed me.

I reached out, desperate to pound his face in. "I fucked you," I screamed. "You're the one that shot your daughter when she was trying to protect you! You're a despicable—"

"I know!" Stan yelled, his voice coming apart. "But this isn't going to help her."

I was coming apart at the seams. The tethers that held my sanity together were fraying. For some reason, a memory of my father came to me. I thought of his journal entries. Of my mother.

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.

Keegan means fire.

I looked up at Stan Freeman and saw nothing but red.

But I wasn't fire. I was a loaded gun.

The first punch came with only one thought. *This is the man who engineered the war.*

When I kicked him in the stomach, I saw my father's face. *This is the man who drove werewolves out of hiding and onto a battlefield.*

Stan's eye started to swell as soon as my knee connected with his flesh. This was the man who made me an executioner.

My hands wrapped around his throat as my mind ground out one last thought.

This is the man who hurt my mate.

I didn't hear everyone screaming at me. And I didn't feel it when Henley tossed me off his employer and Colton locked his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him.

My ears neglected to pick up on the spluttering cough coming from Stan Freeman, but I did see the blood that spilled from his lips.

I sucked in a deep, stabbing breath.

Looking over at Lux, I watched her pale arm fall from the couch. I observed the blood that had soaked into the white couch, trickled onto the floor, and snaked its way along the length of the room.

Natalie was hovering over Lux's face, whispering words as her tears fell.

Grant was peeling away layers of skin and muscle, looking for the bullet Stan had shot her with.

Sadie dabbed the edges of Lux's wound, trying to keep the area as clean as possible for Grant.

Henley was crouched over Stan, who was wheezing and broken.

Colton was talking about...something. Rambling on about things I couldn't hear.

And I disappeared.