

My Mate, My Enemy

Stan Freeman's Broadcast

By some small miracle, Colton noticed nothing amiss between Lux and me. Whether that was due to her newfound indifference toward me or superior acting skills, I wasn't sure.

All I knew was that every time I looked at her, my chest seemed to burn more and more.

Once we were sure that the police had cleared the area, we took the long route out of the city and managed to slip by a sleepy night guard at one of the checkpoints.

After that, the drive to New Jersey was a straight shot.

Lux sat in the back of the car, her lips pursed together, her hands clasped in her lap, and eyes trained on the war-torn country flashing by her window.

When Colton asked her questions, she'd shrug or nod, or smile occasionally if his question warranted such an action.

Other than these small movements, Lux made no attempt to communicate.

At night, she slept in her bed, and by the time I woke up, she was ready and packing to leave.

I watched her constantly.

Watched her muscles tense when we made eye contact by accident, watched her hair fall over her shoulder when she bent over, watched her eyes fill with tears when we passed bodies on the ground.

Wolf or human.

Whenever we drove by a billboard with her father's face on it, I would fix my eyes on her face, waiting for her reaction.

But it was like she was made of stone. Her light eyes became glassy, her features hardened and smoothed, becoming immovable. Her body tensed slightly and stilled.

It was like she was trained to keep all reactions to her father under lock and key.

The closer we got to the packs of New Jersey, the more nervous I became. I wasn't prepared to see her treated as a servant, looked down upon by others, scrutinized, and exploited.

I was lucky with Colton. The kid was too kind-natured to abuse her. I somehow knew that my luck was going to run out.

I peeked over at Colton who had his jaw hanging open as we passed by the new landscape. His eyes had remained wide the entire trip.

Sometimes he'd point out things to Lux, directing her attention to whatever he thought would impress her.

My gut twisted with nerves as I refocused on the road. Maybe I should be more worried about Colton. What would he do when Lux was thrown around by the wolves of New Jersey?

My fingers tightened on the steering wheel as I fought my wolf for control. How would I stop myself from breaking whatever fingers touched her skin?

"How much longer until we're there?" Colton asked as we zoomed by a drab stretch of farmland.

I shrugged. "Only about half a day I'd guess."

He seemed thoughtful. "My mother traveled this entire distance herself when she was rejected by my father.

"She was just a kid and she was that brave. She left her home and went across the country, on her own, without anyone to help her."

Lux shocked me by speaking. "She sounds incredible."

Colton turned to her and smiled. "She is," he told her. "Sometimes, I feel stupid because I'm nowhere near as brave as she is. I sometimes wonder if I disappoint her."

I turned to him, my jaw slack. "Colton, you can't think that."

He seemed to fold in on himself. "Think about it, Keegan," he started, face turning to watch the crops pass by. "My father's an alpha, my mother's a White Wolf. Even Deelia is stronger than I am."

Lux slipped a pale hand onto Colton's shoulder. "I know what that's like," she said quietly. "To feel as though your parents look at you and wish you were someone different."

I stared at her through the rearview mirror, wishing it was me she was confiding in.

"Do you not get along with your parents?" Colton asked her.

Lux's eyes were careful. "My father's very famous to the humans. He's also famous to the werewolves, just not in a good way.

"Fame comes with a lot of pressure for everyone it touches. Sometimes I believe that he doesn't think I handle that pressure well enough."

Colton's eyes were sincere. "And your mother? What does she think?"

Suddenly, Lux wore the most peculiar smile. "Wherever she is, I hope she doesn't think of me often."

The car grew silent as Lux slunk back into her seat. She turned her head away and sewed her lips shut once more.

We remained silent until the next checkpoint.

By now, we had passed through hundreds of these stops, and we were able to get through easily, our cover holding out despite the number of times we had used it.

"I think we should pull into a motel for the night," I said. "I'm getting pretty tired and don't want to drive through the night."

When no one disputed, I pulled into the nearest motel and ran up to the front desk, grabbing a room and paying upfront.

The three of us shuffled into a room, piled our things in the corner, then separated.

Lux started to unroll the cot she would be sleeping on while Colton headed for the bathroom, set on a shower. I flicked the television on and climbed onto one of the beds, watching Lux work.

She pulled her white-blond hair back and finished rolling out her bed before kicking off her shoes and curling into a ball. She had her back to me, and her eyes were glued to the television.

I changed the channel and landed on the local news.

Immediately, I recognized the face of Stan Freeman. I changed the channel quickly, my eyes darting toward Lux who hadn't moved.

"Put it back," she whispered. I stared for a heartbeat longer before obliging.

"Werewolves have ravished our country, forced us to become monsters, isolated us to the metropolitan areas," Stan said.

"It isn't fair that these creatures have uprooted our society. We were here first and we want to stay, it's really as simple as that."

He looked fierce as ever. His eyes held determination and were close to the same shade as Lux's. Stan's jaw was tense, his shoulders pulled back, his chin tilted up in defiance.

But at the same time, he was waning around the edges.

I could see a spot on his neck where he most likely nicked himself while shaving, his collar wasn't fully turned over, and his hair wasn't perfectly gelled.

And behind the determination in his eyes was tiredness I couldn't understand.

The news anchor nodded along with everything Stan was saying and then pursed his lips, folding his hands on the table.

"Stan, it's been nearly a month since you were in contact with your daughter, am I right?"

He hesitated. "Yes." Lux made a small noise.

The anchor trod carefully. "Do you have any idea where she might be?"

Stan swallowed, his eyes becoming glassy. "I haven't the faintest idea where L—" He paused and looked down. "Where my daughter is."

"There was a rumored sighting only a few days ago, yes?"

Stan nodded. "I traveled to that city and found no trace of her. The establishment she was rumored to be in did not have clear enough cameras for me to identify the woman in the video as my daughter."

The anchor looked sympathetic. "Do you miss her?"

There was a long stretch of dead air.

The anchor repeated the question and waited patiently. Stan's face slowly reddened, his eyes darting toward the camera and then back to the anchor. "Is this relevant?"

Lux's body tensed.

"Are you sure you don't want me to change the channel?" I asked. She didn't answer.

"Is there any chance Lux was taken by werewolves?" the anchor asked.

Stan's hands clenched the table's edge. His voice was gruff when he answered. "That is what the police suspect happened, yes."

I had no love in my heart for Stan Freeman but watching him be grilled over his daughter was stirring pity in me.

"If she is listening right now, what would you like her to know?" Lux sat up in her bed.

Eventually, Stan licked his lips and looked into the camera, giving the answer millions of humans wanted to hear. "If you've sympathized, don't bother returning."

I clicked the television off as Lux darted from the room, slamming the door behind her just as Colton exited the bathroom.

"What's going on?" he asked, towel in hand.

I shook my head. "Stay here." I got up and ran after Lux, following her scent around the side of the building to the open field where she sat.

I walked up behind her slowly, not wanting to startle her or give her the chance to send me away.

I sat down beside her, pulling my legs into my chest and draping my arms over them. She stared straight ahead, watching cars pass on the highway as her eyes reflected the light of the moon.

"He didn't mean what he said," I told her quietly, hoping to reassure her.

Her smile was ghost-like. "Yes, he did."

I swallowed. "You don't sympathize, though."

She glanced up at me and held my gaze, really looking at me for the first time in days. Her face softened as she stared at me, her lips wobbling. "Yes, I do."

My breath caught, my heart started to pump faster, my hands became clammy.

"It's just the mating bond," I told her, wishing she would deny it.

She shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. "It's not just the bond, Keegan. It's the similarities between humans and werewolves. The same insecurities, the same relationships, the same worries.

"When I speak to Colton, I just see a scared teenager, I don't see a bloodthirsty monster. I don't see the image I fear to try to paint. And I don't see it because it isn't true."

"Werewolves and humans aren't the same," I told her gently.

"I know that," she responded. "But we're not that different either. Maybe you turn into wolves, but the rest of the time you're just like us. You have good and bad in you, so do humans."

"Humans are selfish," I countered. "They only think of themselves."

Her mouth twitched. "Is that why I sold you and Colton out at the first checkpoint? Is that why I left you at the hotel when I was recognized?"

I paled. "You're different."

"I'm human," she said softly. "Raised by a human."

I licked my lips. "You aren't like them."

"I could say the same thing about you if I compared you to Doug Lott." She searched my face before continuing. "Both werewolves and humans are villains if you judge them by their worst.

"But everyone forgets the people like Colton, who worry about disappointing their family and make stupid jokes.

"No one thinks about the human kids who laugh and play around, running into their houses when the sky grows dark."

I looked down. "Do you think your father meant what he said?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"And if he did?"

Lux turned her gaze skyward, looking at the moon with an odd expression. "Then I'm not sure if I ever want to see him again."

By six in the morning, we were on the road again. I watched out the window as we entered werewolf territory, my nerves prickling.

I had no idea what to expect. I had no idea how humans were treated here.

Keegan seemed nervous, too, as he poked his head in the forest and turned off the engine. His eyes darted around, and I noticed his face had grown pale.

He motioned for us to get out of the car, and we did so hesitantly, his eyes finding mine.

We walked down a long pathway between the trees, the three of us sticking close together. After a few minutes, Keegan held up a hand and told us to stop. He looked around, his eyes darkening.

I heard a heavy breath and searched the forest, finding a pair of eyes staring at me.

I backed up until I was pressed next to Keegan, who raised both hands, keeping his eyes locked with another wolf watching us from afar.

I swung my gaze around, noticing that we were now surrounded.

After a few tense moments, Keegan decided to speak up.

"My name is Keegan Stone, I'm here with Alpha Cole's son, Colton, and my human servant. I was sent by King Sebastian Winchester to speak with the packs in this region."

One wolf huffed and stepped forward, raising its head to its full height. Without any sort of warning, the wolf shifted, becoming human, and stood before us naked.

I blushed and looked away, not sure if I'd ever become used to the candor of werewolves.

"We were warned of your arrival," the man said as he inclined his head. "Welcome." The man was terrifyingly tall with hair shaved so close to his head that I had trouble determining its color.

His eyes were small and sharp; his nose and jaw, strong.

Keegan, in turn, lowered his head. "Thank you for receiving us so graciously."

The man didn't smile. Perhaps he was naturally uptight or the Feral War had made him that way. "I'm Alpha Vex, welcome to my territory."

The man started to walk and we followed. As we walked, I was acutely aware of the eyes that followed us.

Alpha Vex brought us to a village where people mulled about, hanging laundry on lines, talking in hushed groups, and laughing while kids chased one another around the legs of their parents.

Watching this isolated group brought a smile to my face.

We were ushered into a large tent, where a desk was set up in the middle of the room. Alpha Vex was handed clothes that he pulled on quickly before sitting down.

I was careful to keep my eyes downcast as we stood before his desk.

"You wish to speak to my pack?"

Keegan nodded, hands tense. "Yes, King Sebastian asked that I make the urgency of unity known to this portion of the country."

Alpha Vex narrowed his eyes. "Does the king not find my pack to be a united one?"

Keegan didn't miss a step. "It's not your pack he is concerned with, but those around you, Alpha. The war has torn here and King Sebastian is eager for any displaced wolves to find new homes."

Alpha Vex waved a hand in the air. "We do not have the resources to take in a flood of wolves. You are right, our territory has been tarnished. The humans have burned a large portion of our forests."

Keegan frowned. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said sincerely. "But these wolves need a pack. They need a strong alpha. They need somewhere to belong."

Alpha Vex expected me to materialize food from thin air?"

The man behind Alpha Vex snickered. "Perhaps the king wishes us to find shelter in the charred woods?" He bore long scars on his arms and a cold look in his eye.

"This is my beta, Paul," Alpha Vex introduced.

Keegan inclined his head. "Beta." I racked my brain, becoming almost certain that beta meant he was the alpha's right-hand man. Similar to the president and vice president.

Paul didn't seem interested in Keegan; instead, he looked at Colton. "Which alpha do you hail from?"

Keegan swallowed. "Alpha Cole near Astoria."

Paul nodded, keeping his cold eyes on Colton. "The one who's mated to the White Wolf?"

Colton nodded this time. "Yes."

Paul snickered. "The son of an alpha and a White Wolf and you're this unremarkable?" Paul laughed as Colton paled and lowered his eyes in submission.

My heart pricked for him as my face heated up in anger. Humans and werewolves weren't that different.

"Please, Paul," Alpha Vex said, sounding almost bored.

Paul kept laughing. "Not a spark of fight in you, huh?" Colton said nothing.

"Shut up," I barked.

Everyone went silent, including me. I tried not to show my panic. How could I have slipped up? I stared at Paul, not bending despite Keegan's obvious distress.

Luckily, Paul was only amused. "No spark in the pup, but there is in the bitch?" For some reason, I looked up at Keegan, gauging his reaction and finding his eyes inky black.

Alpha Vex leaned back in his seat, his small eyes focused on Keegan's face as well. "Paul, I believe you have insulted our esteemed guest."

The alpha's eyes flickered to me. "Perhaps you could explain to your mate that betas do not take kindly to insults."

Colton turned and stared at Keegan. "What?"

"She's not my mate," Keegan growled through clenched teeth. "She's a servant. I just prefer it when my things aren't tampered with." I bit down on my tongue at the mention of me as an object.

Paul smirked. "Awful touchy about your servant."

Keegan's smile was tight. "I've had others try to take her away, and she's a good help. Doesn't moan and whine as much as others do."

The alpha's smile was cold. "We wouldn't know. There are no servants in my pack."

Keegan looked as though he had been hit by a truck. "What?"

Paul's smirk faded as he transitioned into a more serious role. "We don't believe taunting and teasing and torturing the humans is a very humane thing to do."

"Humans test on werewolves all the time," Colton offered.

Paul growled. "We aren't humans. We don't enslave living creatures. That's a human habit they've been unable to break for millennia."

"If you weren't sent by the king, we might have punished you for capturing this young human."

I felt as though a weight had been lifted from my chest. They weren't going to hurt me here. They weren't going to treat me the way Doug Lott had done.

I shivered at the memory. The feel of his massive body on mine was a memory I was eager to forget.

Alpha Vex was still watching with keen interest. "We kill humans when they attack us," he explained in a distant voice. "Much kinder than subjecting them to humiliation, disgrace, and pain."

All at once, I was cold again.

"Unless they find their mate among us, come to us for asylum, or decided to join our ranks," Alpha Vex continued. "But we don't steal them from their homes or force them into a life of dishonor."

Keegan bristled. His eyes were evaluative as he tried to gauge the best way to move forward. "I mean no harm to my servant."

"Perhaps not," Alpha Vex agreed. "But that doesn't mean no harm is inflicted." His beady eyes moved to mine as he raised his eyebrows.

I realized a moment too late that he was waiting for me to speak. "I—"

"Paul?" We all turned to look at who was speaking. When I saw the face the voice belonged to, I stilled as my mouth grew dry.

Sophie.

I would recognize her anywhere with her long dark hair, soft green eyes, and heart-shaped face.

The beta softened and his cold eyes warmed. The transformation made the scars on his arms look more sad than intimidating as the harshness was drawn right out of him.

He moved to Sophie, scooping her into a hug and kissing her cheek.

Jealousy stabbed at my stomach as I snuck a glance up at Keegan.

But the superficial emotion evaporated the moment Sophie met my questioning gaze. She stilled in Paul's hold, her mouth popping open with an audible sound.

"Lux," she whispered, her voice incredulous. Everyone in the tent turned to look at me.

"You're alive," I stated, my heart hammering. "We all thought..." I hadn't seen Sophie for over two years since she disappeared.

We had been close before she vanished. Close enough that I was the only one who knew something was wrong a week before she went to the store and never came back.

Paul seemed confused. "Soph?"

Sophie stared at me like I was a ghost. I was sure I looked at her the same way. She was the same, but at the same time, she was a complete stranger.

The Sophie I knew would have never gone without shoes into a forest, didn't have a crescent-shaped scar on her neck, and would have never have never embraced a wolf.

My stomach dropped.

"Lux was my friend," Sophie said quietly, almost like she didn't believe it herself. "We were close before I found you." Sophie looked up at Paul with an expression of complete openness and trust.

I was confused. Had Sophie willingly left us?

"Who abducted you?" I asked.

Immediately, Paul growled and crouched forward, Keegan took a half step to cover me and reached out a hand toward the beta. "No one abducted her," Paul spat harshly. "She's my mate."

I stared at Sophie. "You just left without saying anything?" Keegan's eyes were hard on my face.

Maybe he wanted me to stop talking but I couldn't. I couldn't count the number of times I'd wondered about my friend. It had become too constant that, eventually, I'd just pretended she didn't exist.

Sophie tucked her hair behind her ear, her cheeks warming.

"What would you have said, Lux? What would my family have said if I told them I was in love with their enemy? I thought it would be better to disappear without breaking your hearts."

I almost choked. "You did break my heart. Your parents' too. They cried and... We all cried."

My vision was clouded by the hurt and tears and wondering. I closed my eyes, trying to see things from her perspective and failing.

"Lux," Keegan said softly, pulling me from my reverie. "Maybe you should discuss this at a later time."

I looked up at him, wishing I could hug him. Wishing I could touch him with the same liberty Sophie stole touches at Paul.

I watched Sophie curl into Paul, leaning her cheek onto his chest and wrapping a careless hand around the curve of his back.

She closed her eyes, content in their relationship, comfortable in his company. Both leaned into the other, each one drawing strength from their partner.

I pined for that kind of bond. The kind that's unbreakable, real, wholesome, true. The kind that only werewolves can form.

Their bonds are beautiful in their simplicity. The only criterion is to love one another.

But whether by nature or nurture, Keegan and I weren't wired to just love. I had been brought up to hate werewolves, to hate myself.

Meanwhile, Keegan was a major factor in the Feral War; the one responsible for the rallies of hate that rivaled my father's. And I knew now that this made him resentful of himself as well.

I took a step away from him, finally accepting that there was never going to be a bond between us. There was never going to be the easy connection mates seemed to share.

We could never love each other until we loved ourselves.

How could I love myself when the messages I had been receiving all my life told me to fear and hate a dominant part of myself?

I closed my eyes as my father's words swarmed through my brain, attacking my senses until I heard every syllable.

*"They are a menace to our society and in my belief, they must be eradicated."*

*"They are not human; they simply wear the mask of one."*

*"I think they are animals that belong in cages."*

*"If you've sympathized, don't bother returning."*

*"Don't bother returning."*

*"Don't bother."*

*"Don't."*