

Hating Hope

It was while they were eating cake in the dining room that Lily felt the first sign of her shift. She felt a strange and painful twinge in her stomach, and she couldn't help but let out a surprised gasp. The others all turned to her with looks of concern. A more painful spasm made Lily drop her fork and clutch her stomach as she folded over in pain.

"Lily, are you okay?" Amanda asked.

"Yeah...just a weird pain in my stomach," she explained as the feeling faded. "Do you think my shift is starting?" Her voice held some worry.

"Yes, but we have lots of time to get you to a safe place," Eli reassured her.

Eli and Amanda had planned to take her and leave her in the forest, where she would be able to shift without putting anyone in danger. A werewolf's first shift was painful and drawn out, which made them extremely dangerous to anyone but their mate. During their first shift, a werewolf is in such a vulnerable position that they would attack anyone who might pose a threat.

Unfortunately, there was no way to know what time the shift would start because every wolf was different. Some started to shift right after the sun set, but others might only shift after midnight. Lily's shift had started quite early since it was only around eight o' clock.

"If it's starting, then we better head out. I'll drive you there and Eli can stay with Bella," Amanda said. She stood up and started clearing the table.

"Lily, are you going to be okay?" Bella asked softly. She looked as if she were close to tears, which made Lily feel terrible.

"Of course, pumpkin," she replied comfortingly. She got up from her seat and kneeled in front of the small girl. "It's just a bit sore, but I'm going to be ne."

"You promise?" Bella asked, her eyebrows furrowed in concern.

"I promise," Lily agreed, stroking Bella's brown hair soothingly. She had to hide her grimace as another shot of pain went through her though.

"Okay," Bella sighed with a nod.

"I love you, pumpkin." Lily smiled at the sweet girl who was so worried over her.

"I love you too. You're my bestest," Bella said, wrapping her arms around Lily's neck.

Lily pulled her in for a hug, so thankful to have Bella in her life.

"Okay Lily, it's time," Amanda said, breaking the moment. She was standing over them holding her car keys and purse and looking down at her daughter with such love.

Lily gave Bella one last squeeze and then stood up and took a deep breath in. The pain in her stomach was becoming worse and had started to spread to her chest and shoulders. It wasn't too bad yet, but she knew it would become unbearable soon.

"I'm ready," she said, trying to sound brave.

"I'll be back soon, Bella," Amanda told her daughter, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Dad's going to be here with you though, so you guys can nish reading 'James and the Giant Peach'."

It was clear she was trying to get Bella's mind off of what was going on, and it seemed to work, because her daughter's face lit up at the thought of nishing another Roald Dahl book.

"Cool! I'll go get into my pj's," Bella enthused, running off to her bedroom.

Eli chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Who knew the promise of a book could get a kid into bed so quickly," he joked.

"Bella's special like that," Lily replied. "She's going to be a genius with how much she reads."

"God, I hope so," Eli said seriously.

"She's already a genius," Amanda said with pride in her voice, and Lily couldn't disagree. Bella was extremely smart for her age.

"I doubt she'll be able to sleep until you're back, so I don't think we need to worry about her bedtime tonight," Eli said to Amanda.

"That's okay. She can sleep in a bit tomorrow and just be a bit late for school," Amanda replied.

"Alright." Eli turned to Lily with a worried frown. "Remember what we discussed. We'll pick you up in the same spot tomorrow morning. It's going to be a long night, but you'll get through it. You're strong," he said adamantly, as if it were an absolute fact.

His words bolstered Lily, making her feel ready for what was to come. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said with a determined nod.

She walked out of the house with Amanda and the two of them got into the car together. The drive was silent, which Lily appreciated because she wanted the time to think. She was desperate to nd her mate that night but was nervous to get her hopes up. Hope was a dangerous thing and she didn't know how much more disappointment she could take in her life.

Too soon, they were driving down a dirt road that was leading them deeper into the forest. Amanda pulled over when they couldn't go any farther. She had put two ashlights in the glove compartment, one of which she handed to Lily. They both stepped out of the car and used their ashlights to nd a reasonably clear path through the trees.

The crescent moon didn't provide much light, so the forest around them seemed impenetrably dark even with the beams of light from the ashlights. They had walked for what felt like more than fifteen minutes when Lily junched over in pain. Her body had been getting increasingly sore, but it felt as if her ribs had just cracked. She screamed in agony, unable to handle the pain quietly.

"You need to go Amanda," she said through gritted teeth. The pain was only intensifying, and she didn't want the woman to be in danger.

"I'll see you soon, Lily. I promise you're going to be okay." Amanda didn't risk giving Lily a hug or comforting her in any way, unable to help Lily in any other way but with her words.

Before Lily could reply, another strong wave of pain shot through her body and she cried out. She heard Amanda leaving, and although Lily wished she could have stayed to help her through the shift, she was glad that the woman would be safe. Lily still had the

ashlight gripped in her st, which she was relieved about because the forest seemed even darker and more eerie now that she was alone.

The pain from her broken ribs was still radiating through her body when she felt and heard a bone in her arm snap. After yet another stream of pain, her throat felt raw and tender, adding only another element of pain to her body. She wished she could pass out from the pain, but she stayed conscious through it all—through the dislocated shoulders, the broken and reforming ngers, and the stretching of her spine.

As the minutes passed and more bones broke, she started to become aware of something that was a part of her but had been hidden inside of her until now. The wolf side of her was waking up, but it wasn't separate from her human side like she thought it would be. Instead it was as if she were discovering a new part of herself that she had never known about before. Unfortunately, that meant that the wolf side of her also felt the pain her body was going through.

Slowly, her senses began to get stronger as her wolf and human sides nally met. Her eyesight and hearing became sharper and her sense of smell stronger. Even as she writhed in agony, she couldn't help but be amazed at how much clearer the forest looked around her even at night—at how well her ears could pick up even the slightest whisper of the wind and leaves, and how she could smell the earthy scent of the soil.

She was sweating profusely and curled up in a pitiful ball, when she heard footsteps approaching her. The sound seemed much too loud with her improved hearing. Lily tensed up, only making the pain in her body worse. The sound of crunching leaves had her grabbing her ashlight with shaky and weak hands. She swept the light around her, trying to nd the source of the noise.

"W—who's there?" she called out weakly. Could it be my mate? she wondered. Her mate would have sensed her shifting by now and could have found her.

A tall gure stepped into sight, making Lily scramble back in fright. Her lengthening and reforming bones ached at the movement, but fear let her move away from the person. Even with her sharp eyesight and the beam of light shining his way, it took Lily a few seconds to recognize the man standing above her as Kyle.

"Kyle?" she said in shock.

He walked forward and knelt next to her, bringing their faces close together. A sense of calm enveloped Lily as their eyes met and the realization that she would no longer be reacting to his close proximity, she could only stare at him in wonder.

"I can't believe it," he whispered in awe while shaking his head. He reached his hand up and stroked her cheek, sending a warm and pleasurable spark through her.

Lily leaned into his touch, loving how his thumb traced circles on her cheek. He was her mate—there was no question about it. Hope ached in her chest at the gentle way he was treating her and the amazed look in his eyes. The pain was still there in her body, but it had been reduced to a more manageable level. She felt the femur in her left leg bend and break in two, but this time she did little more than inch.

"I really can't believe it," Kyle repeated, only this time his voice had a hard edge to it.

Lily's eyebrows furrowed in confusion at the change in his tone. "Kyle?"

He tightened his grip on her face, digging his ngers into her cheeks as he brought their faces even closer. "I can't believe that I got stuck with a hit like you as my mate," he spat at her.

The words stabbed into Lily's chest, spearing her with their cruelty. Any hope she had of getting a mate who loved and adored her vanished instantly. The wolf part of her shriveled up in despair at the hateful words from her mate, and the rest of her followed behind it. She couldn't help the tears that fell down her cheeks at the realization that life had been so cruel as to create a mate bond between her and someone like Kyle.

She couldn't believe that she had been so lost in their bond that she had forgotten what he was really like. She may have had a harmless crush on him, but after his numerous verbal attacks and the physical attack on Monday, she had realized that he was the worst kind of person. His words after discovering they were mates were only further proof that he couldn't be trusted. That didn't mean that Lily didn't feel the immense loss of not having his affection though.

"You can't really be surprised that I wouldn't want you, right?" he asked cruelly, still gripping her face roughly.

When Lily didn't respond, he shoved her away from him. She landed on her back and her already aching spine spasmed in agony. Now that her mate was no longer touching her, the pain was back in full force, and she cried out as she hit the ground. Just as she thought the suffering couldn't get any worse, Kyle spoke the six worst words a werewolf could hear.

"I reject you as my mate," he said calmly, permanently severing his connection to her.

The re that spread through her chest at the words was a hundred times worse than the pain she had been going through before. It felt as if he had physically reached between her breasts and ripped out her heart. She was in so much agony that she couldn't even get the words out to reject him back like she wanted to. Instead, all she could do was scream endlessly as the re grew and spread through her.

At some point Kyle left, but she didn't even notice with the paralyzing pain coursing through her. Her bones kept on snapping and lengthening as her body reshaped into her wolf form, only adding to her torture. Her first shift lasted hours, and by the time she had fully shifted, she didn't even have the heart to do anything but lie in the dirt and the remnants of her torn clothes, and whimper miserably.

She had enough energy and curiosity to tilt her head to get an idea of what she looked like as a wolf though. She had light brown fur that matched the color of her human hair, but her paws had white socks on them. Had the circumstances been different, she would have loved the cute effect of her paws being a different color to the rest of her. As it was, she didn't care enough to do anything but rest her head back on the ground.

All she had wanted was to be loved and accepted, but that hope had proved to be her downfall. She had held too tightly onto the belief that things could change and she was paying for that mistake. As a werewolf, her life should only just be starting, but as a person, all she wanted was for the suffering to end.