

Mated to the Alpha twins novel by Jane Doe chapter 46

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Only when Kade and Alec stepped into the room, did I realize the horrible mistake I had made.

I had kept an image of them in my mind, committing it to memory so that I might never forget them. They looked different from that image, their eyes dark and haunted. I could see the toll my leaving had taken on them, and felt horrifically guilty. Part of me wanted to run into their arms, the other part of me wanted to cower and beg for their forgiveness.

Kade's hair remained the same, short on the sides and long on the top. Alec's hair had grown, almost grazing his shoulders. Apart from the pain in their eyes, they had remained the same. Their scent filtered into the house, relaxing some of my nerves as it registered with my senses.

Sage stood behind them, nodding at me encouragingly, but I couldn't force myself to move. I felt absolutely ridiculous standing here, a floor length nightgown draped over my body. If the twin's noticed my attire, it didn't show. Neither one of us moved, simply taking in the fact that they—we were here, together.

“Oh, go on!” Sage chuckled, and the light sound helped pull me from my stupor.

Thalia propelled me forward, making me stumble horribly as I practically leaped at Alec and Kade. Neither one seemed to be expecting it, as they remained stiff and unmoving when I barreled into them. I slammed into

the two of them roughly, my hands grasping at their shirts as I held them close.

Happiness so strong I wanted to sob coursed through me as I clung to the twin's—to my mate's. A surge of relief barreled through me, and I knew the emotion hadn't come from myself. I could taste the twin's fear on my tongue. I could taste Alec's gut-wrenching relief coupled with Kade's suppressed fear. Their emotions were a storm within me, and I savored each one as it crossed my senses.

'I can feel their emotions.' I murmured to Thalia, unsure what was happening.

'You accepted them.' Thalia sang, 'You accepted our mates.'

A sob escaped my lips as Alec and Kade wrapped their arms around me, tightening as they heard the sound leave my lips. The coil that had been wound within me the day I moved in with Melissa had finally come undone. Even as we said nothing, their touch was the only thing I needed. The warmth radiated from their body, and I hadn't realized I had been so, so cold. Their heavy breaths felt like music to my ears, and for the moment, I had forgotten why I ever left.

"I hate to intrude dear, but we have some things to talk about." Sage's gentle voice filled the room, reminding me we were in someone else's house. For the moment, I had forgotten everything other than Alec and Kade.

I could feel Kade's irritation at having to pull away from me, as well as Alec's reluctance to let go. Giving the two of them a watery smile, I pulled away and faced Sage. Her eyes were soft, but proud. I was sure she knew I had accepted them, had finally accepted what I was. Running

was no longer an option, as I wouldn't be able to pull myself away from Alec or Kade a second time.

“Sit with me?” I asked, leading the two of them over to the couch Miles had once placed me on. The two of them let me lead them, tugging at their hands so they'd follow.

The urge to be near them was overwhelming, and I knew the feeling was mutual. I wondered how long it would take them until they let me out of their sight, if they ever would. I sat smushed between Alec and Kade's huge builds, but I hadn't felt this happy and relaxed in—well, nearly my entire life.

While I was still horribly inexperienced with guys, and incredibly nervous around the twins, the close proximity between us felt right. I slipped my left hand into Alec's and my right into Kade's, enjoying the feel of their calloused skin against my own.

Their surprised ran through me, reminding me of little iridescent bubbles. They hadn't expected me to truly miss them, to be happy that they came for me. They also hadn't expected me to accept them, to allow them to touch me so freely. I knew without prying, that they blamed themselves for my leaving, and would for quite some time. That fact made guilt spiral within me and pain pierce my insides.

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I could feel my face heat as both of them had their eyes glued on me, but I refused to balk under the pressure. I knew if I met their eyes, I would crumble so instead, I let my head fall against Kade's shoulder and smiled as his chest rumbled in approval.

Sage watched the three of us with clouded eyes as she took a seat in the arm chair. Miles emerged from the darkened hallway and stood beside his Mom, looming over her as though Alec and Kade were threats. Neither Alec nor Kade noticed Miles presence, as they were both focused on me.

“Let’s start with what brought you to my house, child.” Sage smiled softly, catching my eye. “Your mate’s need to know.”

I ignored the stiffening postures of Alec and Kade, but returned Sages smile with one of my own. Even though I had just met the woman, I knew I could trust her. She had kept her own existence a secret for years, and I knew she’d extend the same curtesy to me.

“A couple men tried to kidnap me. They were werewolves. When I shifted, I managed to get away. They injected me with wolfsbane, but I managed to make it here before I passed out.” I frowned, remembering the disabling pain of the wolfsbane as it coursed through my body. I glanced at the worried faces of Alec and Kade. As their anger flowed through me, I could taste it on the tip of my tongue. Cinnamon and clove, yet it singed my flesh as the emotion swirled within me. “When I shifted, they saw what color I was—they saw that my wolf was white.”

As I finished, Alec and Kade’s bodies stiffened, becoming hard as stone. Their emotions battered me senseless, giving me the start of a headache. Surprise, shock, anger, hate, acceptance. Each one had a unique taste, though it was hard to focus on one.

“You’re a white wolf?” Alec was the first to break the silence, his dark eyes burned into my own with fierce possessiveness. His voice echoed in my mind, deep and alluring. It had only been a week since I heard their voices, but it had felt like years.

“As am I.” Sage countered, meeting the twin’s eyes with a certain kind of authority. “I sensed something coming, so I stayed up late. If only I had known it was another white wolf, I might have been more prepared to counteract the wolfsbane.”

“You were the little girl from the Bright Moon Pack.” Kade pointed out, surprise laced in his tone. His voice was a little deeper than his brothers, but just as alluring and addictive.

This time the surprise rushing through me was my own. There was no way Alec and Kade knew Sage personally, as she was double their age, and yet Sage smiled softly, her eyes misting over as she remembered a time before hiding.

“Yes, I was the little girl from the Bright Moon Pack.” Sage murmured. Miles placed his hand on her shoulder, squeezing lightly. His face was hard as his eyes flitted between the three of us.

“You saved our Dad’s life.” Alec scoffed, his eyes widening as he looked at Sage. “Alpha Dixon from the Dark Moon Pack.”

“That’s a name I haven’t heard in quite some time.” Sage chuckled, a gentle smile on her face. Her eyes moved over the twins before settling on me, “Would you like to hear the story, child? It is not a happy one, though my action ensured the birth of your mate’s.”

“I would like to hear it.” I nodded; my voice soft.

I remembered how Sage told me of the death of her family, and the death of her mate. I knew Alpha Dixon’s story tied in with that of her family and mate. For a moment, I nearly refused. I could see the lingering pain in Sage’s eyes, but I could also see the blazing strength.

“I was sixteen years old. My family had lived in the Bright Moon Pack for many generations. It was a small pack, but we were fiercely loyal to one another. The Bright Moon Pack was one of the oldest packs known to our kind. When I first shifted, I told my parents, who in turn told the Alpha. The entire pack kept my secret until their final breaths.” Sage began, the fire beside her crackling and spewing embers. “Alpha Raymond’s territory was vast, but he craved more. As you have seen, my abilities stem from the earth itself. Our land was thriving, and Alpha Raymond grew jealous. He sent spies onto our land whilst gathering his army. I was young back then. I hadn’t known how coveted white wolves were. One of his spies saw me, watched me as I shifted with my mate. Little did he know, I too had seen the spy. I told our Alpha just in time, and he called on every ally he could manage. One of those allies were Alpha Dixon.”

“He told us the story, but never quite like this.” Alec murmured, entranced by the tale Sage was telling. “He had always said it was his duty to help your pack.”

“Even back then, Alpha Dixon was a good man. He was a young, untested Alpha. He raged onto the battle field with his army, tearing down enemy after enemy. Our pack worked in sync with his, we saved each other that day. My Mother and Father told me to stay in the house, but my mate was on the battle field as well. I left the house, but I hadn’t come in time.” Sage’s voice turned low, and my heart ached as I felt the pain within her words. “My Mother and Father had already been killed, my mate too. Alpha Dixon was fighting against another wolf, but Alpha Raymond wasn’t one to fight fair. He crept up behind Alpha Dixon, ready to land a killing blow. I felt something break within me that day. The earth opened, hearing the pain in my voice as I screamed and wept for my family. I directed that anger at Alpha Raymond, and watched as the earth swallowed him whole.”

I hadn't realized tears leaked from my eyes until Alec turned and wiped them from my face. His eyes were soft, as were his hands as they grazed my skin. Those gentle sparks caressed my face, reminding me that my fate would be different from Sage's.

"It was a beautiful tragedy." Sage murmured, "Many lives were lost and gained that day. Alpha Dixon was spared, able to find his mate and produce children. Unbeknownst to my parents and mate, I found out I was pregnant shortly after the battle. Miles is the last piece I have of Anton, and I cherish every day with him."

As I looked into Miles eyes, I tried to imagine a boy around the age of sixteen. His eyes were soft as he looked down at his Mom, at the woman who had given and lost so much, and yet somehow managed to remain kind.

"We'll keep your secret, Sage." I smiled softly, meeting the eyes of the woman who spared my mate's father. Without her, Alec and Kade wouldn't exist. "No one will know about you, or this place. You have our word."

I spoke for Alec and Kade, but I knew I had their agreement. Sage had suffered more than most, and deserved whatever slice of heaven she could manage. If she wished to remain in hiding, then we would do everything possible to help. Should the time come where she wanted to step from the shadows, she'd always have a home in their—our pack.

"Thank you, Aurora. You are nicer than most. It seems us white wolves have painful lives; I do hope yours turns out differently." Sage murmured; her eyes soft as she looked at the three of us. "You're welcome to stay here for the night. I'll have dinner ready within a few hours, and there's a spare bedroom upstairs."

“Thank you for your hospitality, Sage.” Kade murmured, giving her a nod. “We will leave in the morning.”

“Go on and get yourselves settled in. I’ll start dinner.” Sage smiled, some of the light and joy returning to her eyes. Miles seemed to relax a little bit. I wasn’t sure if he was beginning to trust us, but it felt better than having him glower all the time.

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My heart sputtered in my chest as I realized Sage had meant for the three of us to share a room. Even after accepting Alec and Kade as my mates, the thought of sharing a bed with them made me horribly nervous. It took a couple deep breaths for me to realize, I wasn’t sure I wanted to sleep alone. I could feel the twin’s relief as they came to the same realization as I had, and knew they felt the same. My week away from the twins had felt like years for all three of us, though they seemed to have suffered worse than I. I wondered if I’d ever forgive myself for leaving them, even if they managed to forgive me first.

The room was filled with an uncomfortable silence as Alec and Kade’s dark eyes settled on my face. The air was full of tension as they looked at me, thick with longing and jagged with pain. I opened my mouth and then closed it, realizing nothing I said would excuse my actions.

A large bed sat against the wall; a maroon quilt draped over the top. I was thankful for the size of the bed, as sleeping with two large males would have proved difficult for anyone. A fireplace was built into the wall, though it looked unused. The room itself was large, but had little

furniture. The walls matched the shade of the quilt, and the carpet felt soft beneath my feet. Two armchairs and a coffee table sat at the other end of the room, followed by a bookshelf.

I had forced Alec and Kade from my mind, as if was the only way I could bring myself to leave. I had spent my life not trusting a soul, only to be given two soulmates. It took the wise words of Sage to finally realize that I could trust Alec and Kade above anyone else.

‘Besides me.’ Thalia chimed in, ‘You can always trust me. Even if you were mean in the beginning.’

‘Can you blame me?’ I chuckled dryly, ‘I spent my life thinking I was a human, only to find out the voice in my head is a wolf.’

‘I don’t blame you.’ Thalia shrugged, ‘Though, you could have made it easier on all of us.’

Sensing the panic rising in my gut, Thalia sent a wave of comfort and courage through me. She helped soothe the turmoil in my stomach, helped me find the words to say to Alec and Kade. When I was finally able to form my thoughts into words, I opened my mouth to speak.

“I don’t know if you two can ever forgive me, but I had my reasons for leaving.” I grimaced, hating the sound of my fragile voice.

Alec glanced at his brother, and I could feel the tension within them. The two of them were riding on my words more than I knew. It seemed they both worried I would change my mind, demand that they return me to my life without them.

“We know, doll.” Alec spoke softly, despite the roughness of his voice. Both sets of dark eyes were soft as they looked down at me, filled to the

brim with understanding and pain. “We know why you left, we just—we just wish you would have trusted us.”

“I didn’t want to trust anyone.” I confessed, feeling the knot within my stomach slowly unravel at the confession. “I didn’t want this life, this responsibility. Pushing you two away meant I didn’t have to deal with it all. I had planned to leave once I graduated, but—things changed.”

My voice spiraled to a halt as I remembered the person who was directly responsible for the hastiness of my plans. Grace had been a huge motivating factor that caused me to flee town, she had even offered money to help. As I felt pure, unadulterated rage course through the twins, I knew Tori had told them after all.

“We know, Tori told us.” Kade’s voice was lower than Alec’s, and was hard with fury. I resisted the urge to shudder, and felt a shred of short-lived sympathy for Grace. “She has been taken care of; she won’t hurt you again. No one will.”

I wanted to push, to ask what had become of Grace, but the murderous look on Kade’s face stopped me in my tracks. I knew without asking that no punishment would be enough to satiate his fury towards Grace, that neither of them would be satisfied until she was wiped from the earth.

“I’m glad you came for me.” I spoke softly, searching both pairs of their eyes. A brown so dark it appeared black, beautiful and full of depth. “I know I can trust you both, and—and I don’t want to leave anymore.”

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I stepped towards Kade, wrapping my arms around his stiff form. His anger burned the tip of my tongue, yet I savored the taste. His body

radiated warmth, and there was no hesitation as his arms wrapped around my torso.

“Don’t leave us again, sweetheart.” He murmured; his lips pressed against my head. I could hear him inhale deeply, committing my scent to memory as though I might slip away in the night.

“I won’t.” I promised, marveling at how easy the words had left my lips. I had been made for both Alec and Kade, just as they had been made for me. My instincts told me to remain with them, to cherish and grow with them. Leaving had been an act of sheer effort and will, but staying—that was all too easy.

I stepped from Kade’s arms when his anger had all but dissipated, seeking Alec’s embrace with equal fervor. Alec did the same as his brother, planting a kiss at the top of my head. The sparks licked my skin, and I devoured every caress.

“I know we came off strong in the beginning, but we just couldn’t resist. We tried—but that only lasted so long.” Alec mumbled against my hair.

I could feel the peacefulness my touch had brought them, and wondered if they could feel the emotions, they ignited within me. I was not yet in love with the twins, as I never experienced that particular emotion before, but I knew how easy it would be to fall for them. After all, I had been destined to love them.

At the time, I had thought they were pushy, and yet my body responded to every touch, to every bite, lick, and caress. Somehow, my body knew what they were to me, even if I refused to accept it myself.

“You set the pace.” Alec continued, a wry smile on his face. “We will try to contain ourselves.”

“Speak for yourself, brother.” Kade scoffed, a dark eyebrow raised at Alec. ”Self-control is not my strong suit.”

Things were far from over, and I knew underlying tension was still there from my leaving. The wounds that had formed within Alec and Kade wouldn't heal instantly, but I was determined to be the balm that soothed their souls. I knew little about the twin's and yet I felt like I had known them my entire life.

Kade was more serious than his brother, his anger greater and more uncontrollable. Alec was the more practical brother, thinking things through instead of acting on blind emotion. The two of them were opposite sides of a coin, and they both belonged to me.

The three of us headed downstairs for dinner, the smell of roasted chicken, carrots, and mashed potatoes filled the air. Dinner at Sage's house was anything but formal. Sage sat in her usual armchair; a plate of food perched on her lap as she smiled at the three of us. Miles sat at a small dining table in the kitchen, his eyes on the three of us as we descended the narrow staircase.

Alec and Kade headed into the kitchen before me, leaving me alone with Sage. A gentle smile had formed on her face as she looked at me. How one woman could withstand so much pain and manage to smile was beyond me, but I appreciated every moment I had spent with her. I knew how lucky Miles was to have her, and knew she had given him every ounce of love she contained. I had long been jealous of that, of missing that with my own family. I now knew that what my family lacked, Alec and Kade would give me. They would give me a home, comfort, safety, and perhaps someday, a family of my own. In that quiet moment, with the fire crackling and heat rolling in gentle waves, I promised myself that I would stay with Alec and Kade, that we would brave the upcoming storm together.

Kade handed me a plate of food as Alec followed him from the kitchen. My eyes widened at the heap of chicken, vegetables, and mashed potatoes on the plate. The food on my plate was enough to feed a family of four, but my stomach rumbled merrily at the sight.

Noticing the surprise on my face, Kade smirked. The butterflies that fluttered in my stomach brought blood rushing to my face. My blush deepened as I watched the muscles in his arm move as he handed me the plate.

“You need to eat more, now that you’ve shifted.” Kade’s voice held amusement, but also a gentle fondness that made my toes curl.

With a look of natural skepticism on my face, I plopped down on the couch and dug into my food. Alec and Kade sat on either side of me, taking up most of the couch with their towering build. Even with the limited space, I enjoyed the close proximity. Much to my surprise, I had finished nearly the entire plate, and watched with interest as Alec and Kade went for seconds.

We stayed downstairs with Sage for the next hour or so, and I listened intently as Alec and Kade talked about their Dad, the man Sage had saved. They told her how good of a Dad he was, and the good he had done for his pack. Sage seemed to enjoy every word, proud that she had saved the man who fathered my mates.

With my head against Alec’s shoulder, my eyes continued to grow heavy. My stomach was full, and my body warm. The safety and security I felt lulled me to sleep. I was vaguely aware of the feel of a hard chest against my cheek, and the delicious scent of Alec filling my nose. His thumb moved in idle circles as he carried me up the stairs, and over Alec’s shoulder, I caught Kade’s gaze.

“Sleepyhead.” Kade purred, the corner of his lips turning up with the hint of a smirk.

I poked my tongue out at him and nuzzled deeper into Alec’s shoulder, feeling awe rush through me like a gentle caress.

When my eyes fluttered open, I was laying in the middle of the bed, the covers bunched around me. I watched with renewed interest as Kade slipped his shirt off, tossing it onto one of the armchairs. Alec slid in the bed behind me, making me jump from the sudden touch.

“See something interesting, doll?” Alec asked, making Kade turn to meet my eyes. A vicious heat returned to my cheeks, but I couldn’t peel my eyes away from Kade. A few scars lingered on Kade’s chest, but it only added to his feral beauty. Creamy skin and rippling muscles caught my eye, and I wondered how I had become so lucky. I had been gifted two mates instead of one, both identical yet completely unique.

As Alec settled into the bed, his arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me against his body. The heat that radiated from him penetrated the thin nightgown I wore. Even with my lack of experience, it took little effort to dissolve under his touch. Kade slid in bed shortly after, turning to face me. His eyes were dark, yielding no emotion and yet I could feel the comfort radiating from them both. This was the best either of them had felt in a week, and neither wanted it to end.

“By the way, nice nightgown sweetheart.” Kade smirked, plucking at a piece of the sheer white fabric. The nightgown was old-fashioned, reaching down to my ankles, but I was grateful for the set of clothes. I grimaced at Kade’s obvious amusement, choosing to bury my face into the crook of his neck. A sigh left his lips, one he had been holding since I left.

His arms wrapped around me, both of them holding me close as we all fought sleep. None of us wanted this to end, to go back into a world of danger and deceit. They could feel the peace Sage brought, and none of us wanted to part with it. Slowly, as their breathing evened and I leaned into their embrace, the cold that encompassed their hearts began to thaw.

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“Time to wake up, doll.” Alec murmured; a gentle hand pressed against my shoulder.

“No.” I groaned, grasping at the warmth that remained in bed.

My source of heat was coming from the other man in my bed, the one who curled his arms around my waist, nuzzling his face into my hair with a content groan. The heat seemed to radiate from the twins in waves, and I noticed the thin sheen of sweat that coated my body. Kade smelled of citrus and wood, a crackling bonfire, comfort and safety. His scent lulled me into sleep, only for Alec’s voice to tug me into awareness.

“We have a long day ahead of us, doll.” Alec chuckled lowly, another gentle shove to my shoulder.

I mustered up the strength to open my eyes, giving Alec a half-hearted glare. Kade snored softly, his dark lashes fanned out against his cheeks. All signs of stress and anger had been wiped from his face, making him look peaceful and angelic. Kade groaned at the sound of his brother’s voice, and I watched in awed silence as his eyes fluttered open. For a moment, disbelief coursed through him at the sight of me, sleeping in his

arms. The next emotion to plague him was irritation at his brother, the one forcing us from this comfortable bed.

“Ten more minutes.” Kade huffed, his voice deeper in the early hours of morning. He wrapped his arms tighter around me, his face buried in the crook of my neck.

“Thirty minutes.” I chimed in, pushing my face into the soft pillow.

“It seems I have another person to fight in the morning.” Alec smirked; his eyebrow cocked. I watched as his eyes softened, and I could feel his resolve snap like a weak thread. With a defeated sigh, Alec slipped into bed behind me, entangling our limbs once again.

Alec let us sleep in for another thirty minutes, refusing to leave Kade or I alone until we were up and moving. The top of Kade’s hair stood at a funny angle as he wiped the sleep from his eyes, shooting his brother a dirty look.

The scent of food wafted from the first floor, and I found myself surprised that I could pick out each individual note. Maple, garlic, pepper, freshly cooked eggs, sausage, toasted bread and jam. Each scent swirled through my nose, unique yet blending together perfectly. My stomach howled in response, the perfect motivator to pull me from bed.

“It seems food is enough to get you both up and running.” Alec snorted, an incredulous grin on his face as he watched my movements increase in speed. His eyes felt like weights as they grazed over me, running my body slowly as if to make up lost time.

“Food is a valid reason to leave bed.” I shrugged, giving him a soft smile.

As Kade sat on the bed to put his shoes on, I walked over and stood in front of him. I savored the taste of Kade's tangy surprise as it coated my tongue, running my fingers through his unruly hair. Kade's large hands wrapped around my wrists, his eyes darting up to meet my own.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" He asked, that morning growl still lingering in his words.

"You had bed head." I pointed out, nibbling on my bottom lip as a light blush stained my face.

Kade released my wrists, placing one of my hands back onto his head. I smiled softly to myself, running my fingers through the strands of his hair until they remained in one place. Kade's satisfaction from my touch rumbled in his chest, and I needn't feel his emotions to know what he was thinking.

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"Keep doing that, and you'll have him wrapped around your finger." Alec whispered in my ear as we walked downstairs.

I turned to meet Alec's eyes, reading the softness that hid within his gaze, reserved for only me.

"And what about you?" I asked sweetly, my voice thick like honey.

Alec's eyebrow lifted, his lips twitching into a smirk. "You've already got me wrapped around your finger, doll."

Sage had made us a mountain of breakfast to say goodbye, and I found it hard to part with the shred of comfort I found in her home. With Alec and Kade here, I couldn't imagine a place more perfect. I wanted to

stay—I wanted to let Sage help me discover my abilities, to hone my senses and figure out the details of my destiny.

“We have responsibilities—Alec and Kade have responsibilities.” Thalia murmured softly, “We won’t be alone, not anymore.”

I fought against the tears that made my eyes ache, fought against the pain in my heart as we turned from Sage’s door. Miles walked out behind us, covering our scent as we walked down the road. Miles thought it might be smarter to stray from the forest, as the wolves who had attacked me might still be sniffing around.

Alec and Kade had a car nearby, only an hour walk from Sage’s house. They had stopped in town, searching for my scent, letting the mate-bond guide them. It took them an hour away from Sage’s house, to the forest I had ran through. From there the mate-bond was stronger, much easier to pinpoint my location.

“I need to stop by the bakery in town. I worked there while I was here. Beth—the girl who owns the bakery is probably worried sick right now.” I frowned, pleading silently with the two of them.

“We’ll stop by.” Alec nodded, glancing from the road over to my face. “Kade and I wanted to look around, see if we recognize any scents. The wolves who tried to take you won’t be stopping anytime soon. Especially now that they know you’re a white wolf.”

The bakery had been easy to find, as it was located in the heart of town. Everything looked so much different during the day, the colors lively and the streets bustling. The familiar smell of Beth’s pastries filled the air, and I smiled at the line milling outside the store. I felt horribly guilty for leaving Beth hanging like that—just as I had left Tori.

I hopped from the car as they pulled against the curb, surprised as both of them followed me to the bakery. I looked between the two of them, noting the serious look on their faces. Their gruff expressions and the largeness of their build made them look like two very intimidating body guards.

I passed the line of customers with a sheepish grin, anxiety boiling in my stomach. As I walked into the shop, I could make out Beth's irritable yell. She snapped at Jake, who in turn yelled something back.

Jake's eyes latched onto my face the minute we walked into the bakery. While I couldn't feel Jake's emotions, I could see them openly flash across his eyes. Surprise, shock, relief, happiness. Each emotion lasting longer than the previous.

"Beth! Beth! Aurora's here!" Jake shouted into the back, and I watched as Beth's head popped from around the corner, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Where in the hell have you been, girl!" Beth shouted, and I instinctively flinched at the tone she had used.

I wasn't worried that Beth would hurt me, but I had heard her use that tone with Jake countless times. Even Jake was afraid when her voice took on that raspy demanding quality, as it was usually a sign of Beth's patience coming to an end. I found myself surprised as her body slammed into my own, her arms wrapped around me in a friendly hug. When she pulled away, a glare full of malice was directed towards Jake.

The customers in the store stared on in silence, confused at the scene unraveling before them. Beth let loose a long sigh as she looked me over, her eyes burning with concern.

“God, when Jake told me he hadn’t taken you home—and then, you didn’t show up for work.” Beth’s words were rushed, forced from her lips along with the remaining oxygen in her lungs. “I thought something bad happened.”

“Something bad did happen.” I pointed out with a weak laugh. “You don’t think I would just flake out, right?”

Beth’s eyes widened as she noticed the two large males that flanked me, each staring unwaveringly at Jake. I jabbed my elbow into Kade’s side, who continued looking at Jake as though he were fresh meat. Alec peeled his eyes away from Jake, giving Beth a polite but tense smile.

“Aurora, can I talk to you for a minute?” Beth asked quietly, her voice a raspy whisper. I knew Alec and Kade could hear her anyway, but I nodded as though they were oblivious.

“I’ll be right back.” I told the two of them, giving them both a small smile.

I followed Beth into the back, the smell of pastries filling my nose. A rack of croissants was out too cool, the crust a flaky golden brown. Even after my large breakfast, my stomach rumbled at the sight of her pastries. As a whole, I wouldn’t miss this town. I would miss working at Beth’s bakery, the scent of icing sugar in the air, the sound of Beth and Jake taunting and tormenting each other. This and Sage’s house had truly been bright spots in an otherwise dull situation.

I could feel Alec and Kade’s worry swirl around me in an angry storm, lashing at my insides without mercy. They were both terrified I would leave, that I would find some way to escape and that last night meant nothing. Two men who had probably rarely felt fear in their lives were terrified at the thought of losing me.

“Those two—they’re not the ones you were running away from, are they?” Beth whispered, her wide eyes darting out to where Alec and Kade stood. When I gave her a look of denial, she continued speaking. “Obviously you ran away from home, I’m not that stupid. I just want to make sure they’re not here to drag you back.”

“No, they’re not.” I chuckled, shaking my head. I knew Alec and Kade wanted me back more than anything, but I also knew neither would force me if I truly wanted to stay. I wasn’t sure I would physically be able to stomach the pain that would cross their eyes if I had refused to leave, refused to be with them. “I left for a lot of reasons, Alec and Kade weren’t part of it. They came to talk some sense into me.”

“And did they?” Beth frowned, looking somewhat disheartened. “Are you going back home?”

“I’m sorry, I really am.” I frowned, hoping I hadn’t lost the first friend I made in this town. “They were right, I shouldn’t have left.”

“You care about them, both of them.” Beth noted, an eyebrow raised as the word ‘both’ left her lips.

“I do.” I nodded, swallowing my obvious nerves.

“Are you sure about this?” Beth asked, “You won’t be going back to whoever made you leave, right?”

“Not a chance.” I shook my head, reminding myself to talk to Alec and Kade about that. “They’ll take care of me. You don’t have to worry.”

“Oh, I’ll still worry. Jake’s my brother, worrying is something I’ve done for years.” Beth snorted, “Speaking of, feel free to chew him out for not taking you home.”

“Somehow, I have a feeling you’ve already chewed him out pretty good.” I snickered, glancing over at Jake who seemed somewhat disturbed at the glare Kade was throwing his way.

“I deny nothing.” Beth grimaced, “What exactly happened to you? I know you wouldn’t miss work like that. I called the police, but they wouldn’t do anything until 48 hours were up.”

“I basically almost got kidnapped.” I shuddered, “It’s a long story, but I got away.”

“Here, take my phone number.” Beth shouted, darting over to one of the silver prep tables. She pulled a pen from a little wicker basket and grabbed a sheet of paper from the printer in the back. “I’d like an explanation someday, if you don’t mind. Maybe Jake and I can visit! Is there a bakery in your town?”

“Maybe someday.” I giggled, “Unfortunately, there isn’t a bakery. The town could definitely use one.”

“Why not open one yourself?” Beth smirked, her eyes darting over to Alec and Kade. “See if your boyfriends are willing to fork over the money. I’m an amazing business partner.”

Even though I already had enough responsibilities on my plate, an image formed in my mind. A life with Alec and Kade—helping them take care of their pack, my downtime spent running a bakery that I owned. Something I could put my heart and soul into, something Melissa, Frank, or Garrett couldn’t touch—couldn’t ruin. It wasn’t a picture-perfect scenario, but it was my life—my family.

“That’s not such a bad idea.” I smiled softly, pulling Beth in for one last hug. “Thank you, for everything. You’ve helped me more than you know.”

Beth gave Jake a break from the register, taking over so I could talk with him. Guilt was evident on his face, but I hadn’t an ounce of blame to place on his shoulders. The werewolves had found me in this town, and sooner or later they would have made their move. Nothing would have changed if Jake had taken me home.

“Your friends are intimidating the customers.” Jake pointed out, casting a brief glance at Alec and Kade.

Both of my protective mates had their eyes on me, Kade’s lips twitched into a frown. Judging from their influx of emotions, neither knew what to make of Jake. A friend, co-worker, boyfriend, something...more? They hadn’t a clue what I was up to the week I stayed in this town. The strange glimpse I had into their emotions helped me understand their actions, understand that they weren’t being intentionally overbearing and protective. They were both still hurt from my leaving, and those wounds wouldn’t heal overnight.

“I think my friends are just intimidating you.” I snorted, my eyes narrowing as a group of giggling girls passed Alec and Kade, their eyes roaming over every inch of skin. “The customers seem to love them—well, some of them do.”

“Jealous?” Jake chuckled, “Now I see why you’ve turned down every guy whose asked you out. Two guys, really Rory? That’s kind of weird.”

“It is, but I wouldn’t change a thing.” I shrugged, a crimson blush staining my face as Alec and Kade picked up on my words. Their eyes snapped over to where I stood, Jake long forgotten. I slapped Jake’s

shoulder, a flimsy glare on my face. “And I told you to stop calling me Rory.”

“And I stopped listening when you told me to stop calling you Rory.” Jake shrugged, a lopsided grin on his face. The grin only lasted a couple seconds before it fell entirely. “I’m sorry about the other night. I should have—I should have taken you home.”

“Don’t worry about it, really. This would have happened either way, it wasn’t your fault.” I reassured him, a friendly smile on my face. “I’ll see you around sometime. Do me a favor, try not to piss Beth off too much while I’m gone.”

“You couldn’t have asked for something more realistic?” Jake grumbled, pulling me in for a somewhat awkward good-bye hug.

I left the bakery feeling as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, even though I was returning to a town where most of the population disliked me. Alec and Kade provided me with a sense of safety I had never felt before, only solidifying the guilt that had been looming over my head.

“You’ve made friends here in such a short amount of time.” Alec spoke softly, his voice out of place with his muscular build. “Are you sure you want to leave?”

Alec and Kade were experiencing guilt of their own, among other emotions. Alec felt as though they were tearing me away from happiness, when in reality, they were my happiness. Now that I had accepted them as my mates, I wouldn’t be able to find happiness in this town without them. I wanted to be with them—to go wherever they went.

“I made the mistake of leaving the first time.” I admitted, the guilt in my stomach coiling and uncoiling as I looked between my two mates. I could see the hurt deep within their eyes, the hurt they both tried to cover. “I won’t make that mistake again. Wherever you go, I go.”

Some of that hidden emotion leaked through their eyes, and for once I wished we weren’t outside on a crowded street. I wished we were alone, just the three of us. I wished I could wipe the hurt from their eyes, the guilt from their veins until there was nothing left, until I was the only thing left.

I slipped a hand through each of their own, squeezing gently as I pulled the two of them to the car. Something across the street caught my eye, a familiar face. The guy who had accompanied me on the bus was standing just across the street, a cellphone placed to his ear. Even from this angle I could make out his face, the features that kept me company for that long bus ride.

“Justin?”

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“Justin?”

“Another friend from town?” Alec asked, his eyes glued to Justin who hadn’t yet noticed us.

“No.” I shook my head, my voice filled with unease. “I met him on the bus leaving town. He said he was coming from Florida, and that he was heading to Virginia. I wonder what he’s doing here.”

“This is a long way from Virginia.” Alec grunted, his eyes narrowing.

Just then, the wind shifted. A thick breeze wafted across the street, and I watched as Justin’s short hair ruffled under the current. His scent hit me like a ton of bricks, and I wondered how I hadn’t noticed it before.

“Justin—he was one of the guys who tried to kidnap me.”

My words set many things in motion. Justin’s head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine, filled with what looked like surprise. Kade was across the street before I could blink, moving faster than I thought possible. Justin turned on his heel, his cellphone clattering to the ground as he took off through a crowd of tourists. Kade barreled through the humans, sending them scattering into the grass and onto the road.

My heart jumped in my chest as the two of them vanished in a thick crowd of people, heading towards the dense forest that surrounded this town.

“His phone, he dropped his phone.” I scoffed, grabbing Alec’s hand and darting across the road.

The cellphone was somewhat beat up from its fall, but remained in full working order. I swiped the screen with my thumb and grimaced as it asked for a four-digit password.

“Crap.” I sighed, “It needs a password.”

“Let me see it.” Alec replied, “We have a friend back at the pack who’s good with electronics. He might be able to get into it.”

I handed the phone to Alec and turned my eyes to the remaining crowd of people. They had all long forgotten that Justin and Kade practically bulldozed through them and resumed meandering through town.

My shoulders were tense with worry, my eyebrows creased at the thought of what might happen. Even though I accepted Alec and Kade as my mates, I knew little about them as people. I hadn't a clue if Alec or Kade could defend themselves, though I hoped their huge builds weren't just for show. Would I know if something happened to Kade? Would I feel it like I feel their emotions?

"Don't worry, Aurora." Alec faced me; his voice incredibly soft though his eyes burned with rage. "Kade will get him. You're sure he was one of the men that attacked you?"

"I'm positive." I nodded, meeting Alec's hardened eyes. "I hadn't noticed on the bus, but when the men attacked me, they smelled—different."

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I stepped into his arms, pressing myself against his side for support. Anger rippled through him, burning the tip of my tongue as his emotion wafted over me. I could feel his rage ebb and flow under my touch, my presence taking the edge off the razor-sharp emotion.

Alec turned his head to where Justin had once stood, inhaling deeply, a grimace etched onto his face. Justin's scent still lingered, as the wind had not yet chased it away. At first smell, it was the normal scent of a male. Musky, and somewhat earthy. As I focused on the thick layers of Justin's scent, I could pick out something—odd about his smell, like he needed a really good bath. It wasn't quite body odor, more like the smell of a dirty animal.

“He’s a rogue.” Alec grimaced, his eyes flashing murderously. “What would a group of rogues want with you?”

“I don’t know.” I admitted, “They said their boss wanted them to pick me up.”

“That could be anyone.” Alec sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Alpha’s—really any werewolf who needs something done can employ rogues. They’ll take bare minimum payment for whatever you need done.”

“So, it could have been anyone who hired them.” I sighed.

“And worse, they know you’re a white wolf.” Alec’s words came out in a low growl, “They’ll never stop now that they know what you are. You’re worth too much.”

I couldn’t help but tense up at what Alec had said. I had made my decision, and knew running would solve nothing, but it was somewhat daunting to realize what my life had become. I would be hunted for the rest of my life, just like Sage, for something I had no control over.

As though he could feel my stress, Alec turned and held me close. His intoxicating scent filled my nose, manly and rich as it calmed my frayed nerves. Butterflies danced in my stomach at the close proximity between us, along with the rush of gentle calm that flowed from Alec.

“It’s not your fault, doll.” Alec murmured, his lips against my forehead. The sparks that danced across my skin, paired with Alec’s soft voice, soothed me further. “We’ll keep you safe. They won’t get their hands on you.”

“I trust you, both of you.” I sighed, “It’s just—I used to be normal, well as normal as I could be. I’m not complaining anymore, but it’s still a lot to get used to.”

“I know.” Alec’s hand cupped my face, lifting it so my eyes met his. Dark and endless, he stared at me with an intensity that made my toes curl. “Kade and I will be with you through it all. We’re not going anywhere, Aurora. You don’t have to go through any of this alone.”

Alec had a certain kind of gravity around him, one that pulled me in and claimed me as his own. I found myself wanting to be closer to him, to seek comfort from him in any way I could. Maybe it was the mate-bond pulling us closer, I wasn’t sure, but I wanted more of him.

They both had come all this way for me, yet neither had forced me to return home. They respected my decision, and despite the hurt that lingered within them, they understood why I had left. That was more than anyone had ever given me, and somehow, I knew they weren’t done giving. They both would give me every last piece of themselves until they had nothing left, and what scared me the most was I was willing to do the same.

I stood on my toes, raising myself closer to his towering height. Alec’s surprise danced across my skin as I grazed my lips against his. Alec and Kade had been my first kiss. At the time I had been completely overwhelmed by their attention, but now I craved it, all of it.

The sparks tickled my lips as I brushed them against Alec’s, and I smiled as his arms wrapped around me protectively. Alec made no move to further our kiss, letting me explore his lips with my light inexperience. When I pulled away, a breathtaking smirk had formed on his face. A light happiness danced in his eyes, and as the sun hit his dark hair, I

realized how startlingly beautiful he looked. Like he was chiseled from stone, created just for me.

“You’re going to make Kade jealous, doll.” Alec murmured softly, tracing his thumb along my bottom lip. “An Alpha’s jealousy is much worse than your average werewolf.”

“I’ll have to owe him one.” I said somewhat breathlessly.

“Believe me, he will hold you to that.” Alec smiled, a genuine smile. It was like a light shined within him, breathtakingly beautiful.

The high-pitched chime of a phone went off, and the two of us stiffened, the care-free moment between us vanished with the cool caress of the wind. Justin’s phone was ringing, a restricted number popped onto the screen.

Alec answered the call, pressing the speaker phone button as the two of us listened in anticipation.

“Did you find her?”

The voice was that of a male, rough and deep but also raspy. The voice wasn’t as deep as Alec or Kade’s, but it was clear the voice came from an older male. I glanced at Alec; whose face darkened. I saw no recognition in his eyes, no indication that he knew who was speaking on the other end of the phone.

“No, and you never will.” Alec snarled, “But we will find you, and you will have wished you never touched what was ours.”

The mystery guy ended the call, and the two of us fell into silence. Alec held his rage within him, a murderous sort of calm falling over his features.

Once again, a phone rang, this time belonging to Alec. He answered the call and placed the phone against his ear. I could hear Kade's rough voice on the other end. Their conversation lasted a total of thirty seconds before Alec hung up.

"He caught him; he's got Justin." Alec smiled, though it was one of murderous anticipation. "He's going to head back to the pack without us. There's no way we're letting Justin within sniffing distance of you."

"What will happen once Kade brings him back to the pack?" I frowned.

I knew little of this new world, but some things were blindingly clear. Alec and Kade had a sort of feral dominance that radiated from them in waves. Werewolves took care of their own, and seemed to live by their own set of laws. The title of Alpha wasn't just for show, which meant Alec and Kade's word was practically law. They wouldn't be lenient on Justin, and there certainly wouldn't be a trial. They would exact their own form of justice on Justin, and anyone who dared try to hurt me.

"He'll be questioned, and if he's smart, he'll talk." Alec grunted, placing his hand on the small of my back as we crossed the road and headed to the car.

"Will he be tortured?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Alec paused, and though his eyes were hard, they softened as they caught my uneasy gaze.

“Yes, he will be tortured.” Alec nodded, “This might make you uncomfortable, but we’re different than humans—we run things differently.”

Alec held the passenger door open for me, letting me climb inside before shutting it. I sat in silence for the entire drive to the airport, mulling over what he had said. What I hadn’t told him is that the thought of Justin being tortured hadn’t made me uncomfortable. I found it somewhat sickening, and wanted to be far away when it happened, but a large part of me expected it—and worse, accepted it. Somewhere deep within me, I knew werewolves weren’t lenient, that they didn’t believe in simply imprisoning someone for the rest of their lives. Punishment meant death.

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Alec and I drove the hour to the airport in comfortable silence. It gave me plenty of time to stew in my anxiety. Not only had I ran away from Alec and Kade, but I had left Tori. Part of me desperately hoped she would forgive me, but I wouldn’t blame her if she couldn’t. After all, she had done nothing but support me, and I had still left.

Alec and Kade seemed to understand my reasons for leaving, though the pain still echoed in the back of their minds. I hoped Tori would understand as well. It was a reunion I was both anticipating and dreading. I hadn’t given much thought to Garrett and how he would feel about my leaving, nor did I care.

He had gone about everything completely wrong. From using me for my future position, to breaking the news that I wasn’t human. From the very

beginning, he had never been a father figure in my life. He had never wanted to see me, just me as I am. He wanted the werewolf version of me, the version where I stepped up and took control of his pack. I couldn't—I wouldn't go back to that, to being controlled and used.

"I have one condition if I'm to return." I cleared my throat.

Alec's head snapped over, his eyes searching my own. I had his full undivided attention, which I would have appreciated if it weren't for the fact that he was driving down the interstate. The intense look in his eyes made my stomach flutter. I had never captured someone's full attention before, rendering everything else useless.

"Name it." Alec nodded, his eyes flickering back to the road for just a second.

I could feel a slight twinge of worry that bounced around in his head. He was worried he couldn't fulfill my condition, that I would make him turn around and bring me back to Beth and Jake. He would, I knew that much. If I asked, he would turn right around and take me back.

"I'm not living with Garrett." I shook my head, "Or Melissa and Frank. I'm not going to be used by anyone ever again."

"We never planned on bringing you back to them." Alec shook his head, the corner of his lip turning up in a smile.

A single dimple appeared on his left side, and I basked in the sight. His eyes had a sly glint in them, one that made me curious. I could feel his relief at what I said. It swirled around his mind and soothed the jagged edges of the worry he had been feeling.

“I assume Garrett won’t like that.” I snorted, “Melissa and Frank won’t care. They probably haven’t even noticed I left.”

“Melissa noticed.” Alec replied in a tight voice, the muscles in his jaw working. His irritation scratched at the back of my throat, and I wondered what had happened while I was gone. “I’d be surprised if Frank noticed much of anything. Garrett will not be happy, but his happiness is irrelevant.”

“She noticed? That’s a surprise.” I chuckled dryly. “I do have some things at Garrett’s house that I’ll need to get back.”

“Kade and I will come with you.” Alec nodded, his eyes softening. “We won’t let you go there alone.”

“Isn’t there any way I could—I don’t know, refuse taking over his pack?” I frowned, “He has another daughter, she can have the pack.”

“Unfortunately, you can’t.” Alec frowned, “As strange as it sounds, you’re bound to his pack through blood. You’re bound to our pack through the mate-bond.”

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“I don’t want to rule a pack.” I sighed, “I never wanted to.”

“You won’t rule alone, Aurora.” Alec smiled softly, “Kade and I will be there every step of the way. We’ll help you with it all. That’s what mates are for. I think you’ll surprise yourself. Ruling is in your blood; it would come naturally to you.”

“You’ll both help me?” I asked. Somehow the prospect of ruling an entire pack sounded more reasonable with Alec and Kade. I wouldn’t be

expected to do everything alone, to learn everything on my own whilst being a pawn to Garrett. Alec and Kade had experience, had parents who had once done the same. If anyone could help me without using me as a pawn, it was Alec and Kade.

“Of course.” Alec smiled; a genuine smile that made the dimple on his left cheek appear. “Our parents ruled the pack long before Kade and I were born. We grew up learning how to handle it all.”

The words unspoken drifted between Alec and I, bouncing around my head. Any children we might have, they would also be raised learning how to run a pack. The thought made my stomach twist, though it wasn't a bad feeling.

“If you want, we could combine the two packs.” Alec continued, “It would be completely up to you. Instead of watching over two separate packs, they would become one. Our territory would mix with his, his people would become our people.”

I thought over what he said for a few moments. Out of all the people in my life who tried to manipulate and control me, I had never gotten that feeling from Alec or Kade. My instincts were telling me to trust them, to rely on them for whatever I needed. Even in the midst of all the confusion in my head, that one thing was clear. I could trust Alec and Kade with absolutely anything.

“I would like that.” I nodded, giving him a genuine smile.

“Usually the female would become Luna, while the male becomes Alpha. You're the sole heir to your father's pack, which makes your future mate the Alpha.” Alec explained, “We wouldn't take total control of the pack, it would be the three of us making decisions.”

“I trust you both.” I nodded, and no words had ever felt more right.

Relief washed through Alec like a cool tidal wave, and I smiled to myself as his hand found my own. His hand was warm as it grasped my own, and I could feel the comfort the touch brought to both of us.

We arrived at the airport within the hour, and Alec booked us the earliest flight back home. Back home—it had never been a home before, but that had changed without my knowledge. I was sure Alec and Kade could take me to Antarctica and that would quickly become home. Anywhere with Alec and Kade was home, regardless of who else waited.

“So, you know about my family. Tell me about yours.” I questioned, settling into the comfortable seat of the plane.

Where I had just enough money to book a flight out of town, Alec had paid extra for better seats. I didn’t want to know how much first-class tickets were, and I hadn’t asked. I wondered how being an Alpha of a pack made you wealthy, and I added it to the long list of questions I already had.

A television was bolted into the far wall, playing some soundless talk show. There weren’t many people in this wing of the plane, just a few lounging back in their own seats. A woman pushing a cart had stopped at our seats, and I happily took a bottle of soda from her hands. Alec took one for himself, flashing me a smile that made my toes curl.

“We have no other siblings, but we do have quite a few cousins on my Mom’s side.” Alec shrugged, “Mom and Dad ruled the pack until Kade and I stepped up. Usually, you wait until eighteen to take over, but Kade and I were ambitious. We took over around a year ago. For the longest time, our parents didn’t know what to do. Twins are highly unusual for

werewolves, even more so for an Alpha and Luna. They weren't sure who was going to take over."

"Werewolves don't usually have twins?" I asked. It wasn't a common occurrence for human's, but sometimes it happened.

"No, never." Alec chuckled, "Kade and I are the first set of twins born from a Luna and Alpha. Kade's older by a minute, so they assumed he would take over as Alpha."

"Why didn't he?" I asked, my tone curious.

"Kade and I have always been inseparable. We've never fought, and always shared everything—except for women." Alec grinned, "It's hard to explain, but we were both meant to take over the pack. The fact that you're both of our mate's proves that even further."

"Do your parents know?" I cleared my throat uncomfortably, "Do they know about me?"

"No, not yet." Alec shook his head, a gentle smile playing at his lips. "We'll have to tell them once we arrive home. Kade and I will not hide you from anyone. You're their Luna, they will love you regardless."

Anxiety churned in my gut as I had yet another reason to worry about coming home. Tori would inevitably be angry with me, Garrett would continue trying to control me, and I had to meet Alec and Kade's parents. Would they react the same way? It was unheard of for two men to share a mate, and here I was.

"They will love you, Aurora." Alec smiled softly, his rough hand grasping my chin as he brought my gaze to his own. "You're family now. Melissa, Frank, and Garrett can't reach you anymore."

Family. That word reverberated in my mind, warming my insides and soothing my fear. Family had been something I always wanted. My Grandma was family, though my time with her was brief. Melissa and Frank were the farthest thing from family. Even Sage, in a way, felt like family. I held a connection with her that went far beyond blood ties or friendship. Sage and I were the same, and my soul recognized that as much as it recognized Alec and Kade.

I could feel the truth of Alec's words circling my heart, and felt a sense of relief I hadn't experienced in many years. I was no longer stuck in a miserable, inescapable situation. I didn't have to run or hide myself from anyone.

High on the sense of freedom I never had before, I leaned over and placed my lips against Alec's. His surprise was tart like a lemon, followed by happiness so sweet, I pressed myself closer. This time Alec took control, his lips moving against my own with such tenderness. His hands cupped my face, drawing me closer. I smiled as his teeth nipped at my lip, gasping when his tongue followed suit. We pulled away when our lungs burned, begging for oxygen.

Alec's eyes were blown wide, awe bleeding through his gaze as he looked at my flushed cheeks and swollen lips. His hands remained on my face, tracing gentle circles along my cheeks and jaw.

"Now you owe Kade two." Alec chuckled, earning a genuine smile in return.