

Bad Moon Preview

Chapter One

Chapter One

Pack is protection, belonging, and acceptance. They provide a home comprised of like-minded people willing to lay down their lives for one common goal—family. The driving desire to band together, watch each other’s back, and defend against outsiders is instinctual and pure. Over time, even clean things can become corrupt. The White Creek wolves are being invaded by a cancerous growth, spreading through, decaying, destroying, and ravaging all in its wake.

Joss watched the white-robed pack members gather in front of the area where the Alpha, Ian Eberstark, would appear like royalty.

Too blind to see Ian and the White Creek compound for what they truly were, they looked to the older man for answers. He was charismatic and powerful. In his early fifties, he wore his thick salt and pepper hair pulled back from his face, showcasing a widow’s peak. Thick brows framed his bright blue eyes. Sharp cheekbones were highlighted by a neatly kept beard and thin mutton chops. Without saying a word, his presence demanded respect. Six foot four, and muscular, he cut an impressive figure and stood above most in a crowd. Ian resembled a mountain man from times gone by. Perfect white teeth and warm brown eyes helped hide the cold, calculating, and narcissistic soul encased in the kindly packaging he presented.

*You have no idea what darkness lurks in that man’s heart.* Disgusted, she turned away from the growing sea of white lemmings and eyeballed the twelve-foot-high corrugated iron privacy fence surrounding the compound. The shiny barrier was broken up by the honeyed spruce posts. Beyond that fence lie more than freedom.

It led to the outside world, normalcy, and the anonymity associated with not being known. Her heart rate increased. Longing pulled her along like a magnet. Helpless against the attraction, her feet guided her closer. Reaching out, she ran her fingertips over the smooth, cool surface. *It’d be so easy to slip away once the ceremony went into full swing*. *I could disappear into the night, leave everything, and never look back.* Closing her eyes, she imagined a life void of responsibility, familial ties, and lies.

The once pleasant scent of pine rose dispersed. Her stomach protested, rolling like a stormy sea. The clean scent that represented Christmas, hot chocolate, and presents in her youth had been bastardized. Warped and twisted by White Creek, the aroma became a symbol of an impending *ceremony*. Joss kept her back to the crowd, and pulled her hood down farther to hide her expression. Struggling to regain a blank façade, she breathed deeply. Angering the alpha lead to agony and humiliation.

Phantom pains shot through the faded scars on her back. Trapped by circumstances, her existence was likened to a rat in captivity, observed and used by scientists. She scanned the scene covertly over her shoulder. Fires flickered in the night, dancing wildly in the wind, their flames contained by hand built stone fire pits. Huddled together, the followers spoke in hushed voices. A wave of excitement swept through them, expanding as time slipped by. Their exuberance scented the air—a living, gut-wrenching thing she could almost see like an oily sheen that distorted her vision. People stood taller. Anticipation tinged their words. It looked like a fraternity or sorority event. *If only it were so harmless.*

She continued farther down the fence line, away from the others gathering in clumps. *Walk out and don’t look back. You don’t have to play this role any longer,* the rebellious voice inside of her urged her. Despite her misgivings, she pushed on, placing one foot in front of the other, feeling lighter with every step. Her heart slammed against her ribcage, echoing in her ears as she fell into tunnel vision. What would life be like free of White Creek’s rules, secrets, and practices? She hadn’t tasted that flavor of liberty since she was ten years old. At twenty-five, she was beyond ready to experience life on her own terms.

Images of a job in a quiet town by a lake where no one knew her danced in her head. Perhaps she could find a new pack or live solo? Being a lone wolf resonated strongly. *I’ve had enough togetherness to last a lifetime. At this point, I prefer wolves to werewolves.* For a moment, she allowed herself to forget about everyone who depended on her. An imaginary shiny, gold hoop hovered above her, glinting in a tantalizing manner. She wanted to grab it with both hands and bail.

Watching her new life play in her mind, she crept silently forward on bare feet. Thirty seconds later she was dipping into her bank account and purchasing a new apartment. A minute later, she was decorating and making friends with the quirky girl next door who had no clue she turned furry once a month. *I’m so close.*

“Headed somewhere, sister?”

The smug baritone acted like an icy bucket of reality delivered by an enemy. Pausing in mid-step, she steeled herself for the confrontation. Showing her stepbrother, Isiah, emotion equated to tossing gasoline into a fire and expecting it to die down. She turned to face him, coolly arching a brow.

“Did I miss the memo declaring traveling alone an illegal activity?”

His smirk drew attention to a plump lower lip and perfectly sculpted upper lip beneath his impeccably groomed close-cut beard. Soulful brown eyes glinted with mischief and menace. She couldn’t deny his rugged beauty. Not with his square jawline, deep-set eyes, and spiky, dark brown hair that spilled across his broad brow. His refined, upturned nose added to an imagined elegance. He looked studious and sensitive. *Maybe, that’s how he lures people into his web like a hungry spider. Thank God I know better.*

“No, but you had a look about you.”

He stepped closer, breaching her personal space. She tensed. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Leaning down, he whispered into her ear, “The one people get when they’ve had enough, and they’re contemplating doing something stupid.”

“You’d know that look well then, wouldn’t you, *brother*?” she mocked, widening her eyes.

He chuckled. “I love it when you let the claws out.” As his breath tickled the sensitive flesh of her ear, she fought to stave off her desire to shudder and move away. “You’ve got an endless supply of strength and courage hidden behind that demure persona you assume. I know it’s not who you really are. I’ve seen that fire burning deep down over the years. No matter what Daddy does, he can’t put it out completely.” He chuckled. “It infuriates him. We share that honor.” He inhaled deeply. “After all of this time, you *still* smell like honeysuckle and lavender. It makes me wonder if you *taste* sweet.”

“Enough.” She drew her boundary with the clipped word.

He pulled away, flashing her a wide grin. “Ah-ha There she is. The woman I can’t wait to *bend* to my will.”

She sneered, “You wish you held that type of power over me.”

Sighing, he shook his head. “Why fight it so hard? We know how this will end, Joss. You’ve got the waning moon birthmark, and I have the waxing moon. Our destinies are entwined. We’re children of the prophecy.”

“Nowhere in that prediction, did it mention a requirement of romantic involvement.” She clenched her jaw.

“But I want it,” he whined, curling a lock of her thick, wavy, strawberry-blonde and auburn locks. “I always get what I want. Eventually.”

“Indeed. It’s why you have such poor character.” She shook her head. “It’s a shame really. Poor little spoiled rich boy has been deluded into thinking he runs things.”

“You never let me get away with anything, do you?” He grinned widely as he beamed. “It’s okay. I like that. I enjoy the fight.”

“I won’t even dignify this,” she gestured between them with her pointer finger, “with anything that comes close to being described that way. You don’t rate it.” Acid dripped from her tongue. She wanted to burn him. To peel back the thick skin he wore and injure his pride.

“Ouch. Touchy words.” He winced. “Except,” he held up a finger, “we both know the pack’s magic is the only thing keeping Step mommy alive and well. Is her only child truly going to leave her to fend for herself?” He clucked his tongue. “I wonder what she’d think, if she knew how *effortlessly* her own flesh and blood could abandon her.”

“She’s the Alpha’s mate,” she deadpanned, determined not to allow him to provoke her.

“No.” His harsh tone caused her to flinch. “She’s his *wife*.” His voice turned into an arctic breeze. “There is *no* equality there. Your mother is weak-willed and frail.” He scowled. “It’s not a secret. A better woman than she is could be ruling at his side. Yet, Father has always insisted on her.” He scratched his beard “Do you suppose that has to do with her daughter being the chosen one?”

The words were a direct hit, preying on her fears and the heavy weight that encircled her ankle, keeping her bound to the life she loathed.

“Who’s to say he doesn’t love her?” she asked with a flippant shrug of her shoulders.

“Love will never outweigh his vision for White Creek.” He placed a hand over his heart. “Don’t take my word for it. Leave and find out for yourself.”

“Without her, you’d have no hold on me.”

“Yes, but you’re such a sweet, devoted daughter, aren’t you?” He pinched her cheek. She nipped at his finger, and he laughed. “People will continually hold you back, Joss. You should remember that.” His joyful countenance faltered. “I learned the hard way with my mother.”

“What happened to your mother?” she whispered.

His toothy grin and dead eyes chilled the blood flowing through her veins. The mania was there for all to see. They didn’t call Isiah Eberstark “stark raving mad” behind his back for nothing. The bottom dropped out of her belly. Fear crept in, pushing aside her boldness. Suddenly, she really didn’t want to know the answer to that question.

“Smart girl.” He caressed the side of her face with his knuckles. “Your time dodging me is running out. You’re twenty-five. You know what’s coming soon. Heat. Being Moon Maiden won’t save you forever. The time for you to pick a mate is coming. How you’ve managed to avoid it for so long is a mystery.” She stepped to the side, and he countered, pressing her body back against the gate. She could feel the long, lean length of him through her robe. His muscular frame dwarfed her own. Palms up, she pressed against his chest, forcing him back, regaining space between them. “You must realize by now, even if you tried to pick someone else,” his voice dropped an octave, “I’d never allow it, Joss.” Leaning in, he pressed his lips to her cheek.

“You’re a repulsive tyrant.”

“It’s nice to know you’ve paid attention to me. I’m a man who was born to rule. Don’t worry, little wolf. My time will soon be at hand.” Her gut lurched. When he took over the pack, she’d lose all of her leverage. “Things are already in motion. Younger leadership is the next logical step. I wonder, would you deny our people, who’ve stood by us and waited patiently, with such inspirational devotion, that natural progression?” His voice was honeyed perfection, oozing over her ear as he spilled sweet words.

“You have a silver tongue.”

“All the better to please you with.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“It’s never worked on me.”

“You’ve never given me the chance to try.” He nuzzled her forehead with the tip of his nose. On the outside looking in, they were having a *moment.* His pheromones swarmed her. Musk, vanilla, and dark spices blended together.

“And I *never* will.”

“Hmmm. Never say never.”

“Maiden. Beta.” The reverent tone drew their attention to the pale woman who curtsied a few yards away.

“Adaline.” Isiah turned on his megawatt smile. The thin, blonde blushed; her round cheeks turned red.

“Hello, Addie.” Joss forced a smile. Addie beamed before she rushed off to join the group of girls watching the interaction with wide eyes. The gaggle of teens giggled as they moved toward the area where the ritual would soon take place.

*Lambs being led to slaughter, each and every one*. They swallowed the propaganda pushed by the Alpha hook, line, and sinker. *And I’m a willing accomplice who knows better. That makes me worse than all of them who believe blindly.*

She’d spent her tenth year watching her mother deteriorate as she slowly lost the battle with the cancer ravaging her body from the inside out. The chemotherapy stole her lustrous blonde hair, strength, and the weight that rounded her cheeks. She’d been a living skeleton clinging to life, without actually living. The Alpha fixed that. *How can I even consider returning her to that fate*? *It’d be a death sentence.* With her father six-feet deep, she owed it to him to look after her.

“Smile, precious, your mom is on her way over, and we wouldn’t want to upset the queen.” Isiah stepped away, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her to his side. His charm ratcheted up to eleven as he morphed his body language. A chameleon, her step-brother was a master at being what others needed to feel comfortable.

“Mother,” he said jovially.

“I should’ve known I’d find you two together.” Her mother smiled. “Come. It’s nearly time for us to begin.”

Caught in the limelight once more, Joss put on her mask. She wiped the anger and frustration from her aura, and focused on exuding calm. Straightening her spine, she stood tall, falling in step with Isiah. They came to stand by the Alpha. Flanked by his betas, she should’ve felt protected. Instead, she silently suffocated.

“Tonight, we have much to celebrate. Odin has kept us safe for another season. Our harvests are plentiful, and the pack is strong. We all feel the tension rising. The time we’ve prepared for is coming soon. Have you heard the rumors swirling among the supernatural communities? They claim vampires are walking in the sun, wolves are able to change without the moon, and the witches wage their own internal wars.” Murmurs of agreement mingled with gasps, and whispers coated with fear sprang up like stalks seeking the sun. “I don’t take any pleasure in the plight of others,” the Alpha said gravely. “Though it proves what we’ve always known. A war is coming. Today we pray for strength, understanding, and blessings as we move forward into the winter season.”

The Alpha stepped back. Isiah removed his tentacle-like arm and took the drum from the beta, James. The hollowed-out log had deer hide stretched taut across the opening. Sinew thongs lashed the sides together. The drumstick was made from a branch from the same tree. The head of the stick was wrapped in deer hide filled with sheep’s wool. White Creek took bits and pieces from multiple sources, most notably, however, was the Native Americans who lived off the land and used natural products. It fit with the prepper lifestyle the Alpha pushed.

The steady rhythm Isiah drummed, signaled the start of the ritual. Silence settled over the crowd as the followers formed a line.

“Maiden, take your place in the center of our circle. Use your influence to bend Odin’s ear. Help us usher in a new season and ask for blessings.”

Head held high, she walked to the center of the field lined with stones painted white and placed in a circular Nordic design. Sinking to the ground between two silver chalices, she tucked her legs under her, closed her eyes, and hummed. She rocked back and forth, descending deep into a trance-like state as she let everything else fall away. Drawing strength from the moon, she raised her arms above her head.

“We come to you humbled and grateful for your blessings, Odin. We ask that you smile on us once more as we gather the last of our harvest and prepare for the bitter winter months. Fortify our warriors. Make us sharp-minded and guide us where you will. We bring offerings of food and drink. Grant us this boon, if it is your will.” Opening her eyes, she blinked rapidly to adjust to the brightness. Gathered around her with flaming torches, the members of the pack faced away from her. Rising, she picked up the chalices and began to travel in the divots created in the land, along the *path.* As she passed behind those who stood, each turned to *witness* her journey. Lowering their torches, they acknowledged her power and importance.

Their powers reached out and wrapped around her. Packs had their own brand of magic. They were, after all, magical beings at the core, despite their intense connection to nature. Ending her journey at the opening flanked by the Alpha and Isiah, she walked between the two of them. They escorted her to a set of steps carved from stone. Turning toward the group gathering, she held up the chalices as Isiah resumed his steady drumbeat. Once they were all lined up, she turned to stand by the statue of Odin with his wolves carved in Cedar.

Bowing low and reverently, she spilled a small bit of the fine whiskey at the base of the statue and straightened. The Alpha approached, taking the chalices from her, and finished pouring the offerings over the statue. Smoke rose up as if he’d extinguished a fire. He had the theatrics down, she’d give him that.

He turned dramatically. “Odin has heard us.” Deafening cheers rose up.

She cringed internally. The Alpha stood taller as their hero worship inflated him. She ground her teeth, biting her tongue to keep from speaking out. *Look pretty, stay under the radar, and remember this will all be over soon.*

“Today we have much to celebrate. It’s been revealed to me in dreams. My reign will be coming to an end.”

Whispers rose. The scent of fear and apprehension soured the air. She wrinkled her nose. Bile crept up her throat like slimy slugs.

“I told you,” Isiah whispered in her ear. The self-satisfied purr made her claws itch to be released. She wanted to rake her nails down his handsome face.

“Don’t worry, my friends.” He waved his hands in a downward motion. “This won’t happen all at once! It’ll be little by little. Isiah is a strong wolf who knows what needs to be done to survive the tough winter ahead. I will be elevating to my next position among us as Spiritual Advisor. You can come to me with your worries and concerns, and I’ll continue to steer White Creek in the right direction.”

*Less work and more praise and worship for yourself. You’ll let your little psycho do the dirty work because he enjoys it.*

“This is all in preparation for the times to come. We will be even more vigilant than we were before. Now is the time for strength and bravery.” He smiled, expertly steering them away from the source of their panic. “We all need to do our part, pull our weight, and ascend to the best version of ourselves for the pack.”

She felt the Alpha’s gaze lock onto her like lasers. *Message received, Alpha.*

He was done with her defiance. Most wolves her age were mated. Her position had protected her, until now. They were expected to keep the pack healthy. That meant breeding. Horror struck her. Did they expect her to lay down and start creating pack members with Isiah?

Isiah slithered his way beside her and kissed her cheek. It felt like a betrayal, a Judas kiss before she was bartered off for coin.

“Come, we will celebrate the changes together,” Ian crowed, soaking up his final days as Alpha as the crowd moved forward like a wave.

Her mother preened. Joss wondered for the millionth time how much of her joy was authentic.

“Smile pretty, Moon Maiden, your adoring public approaches.” The tentacle arm returned, wrapping around her waist and constricting like a snake.

“It was a beautiful ceremony, Moon Maiden.” The elderly silver-haired woman patted her hand.

“Thank you, Mrs. Constance. I simply put the energy you lent me back into the environment.”

“She’s so gracious, Raymond. Won’t she make a beautiful queen?” Mrs. Constance asked.

“I happen to agree with you,” Isiah chimed in.

Constance patted Isiah’s cheek. “So sweet. You’ve only had eyes for her all of this time.”

“You should tell her that.” He pressed his head against hers. “I don’t think she believes me.”

Raymond gave Isiah’s shoulder a squeeze. “The good ones always give you a run for your money, son.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Isiah said as the couple moved on.

“Look,” he cooed, hugging her. “They think we’re cute.”

“There is no *we*,” Joss whispered quietly out of the side of her mouth.

“That’s not what they think, and we know how much perception shapes reality.”

More well-wishers approached, preventing her from responding. They gushed over them, ingratiating themselves to Isiah, like wolves showing their soft bits in deference to his upcoming position. The line of people thinned as the party started. Beers were brought out, and music began to pour through the compound speakers.

He pulled her to him. “Which name do you like best, wifey … mate, or maybe queen?”

“Fuck off, Stark,” she said through her teeth.

He chuckled. “Oh, we’ll do that, too.” He licked his lips.

“Over my dead body.”

“It’d be over your mother’s actually.”

She growled.

“Stop teasing one another, and mingle,” the Alpha commanded.

Grateful to escape Isiah’s clutches, she pulled from his lax grip, and wove her way deeper into the crowd, pausing to chat occasionally before she found her way away from the celebration toward the path that led to her home. The die was cast. She had to choose the moves that would guide her to freedom while keeping her sanity in check.

\*\*\*

Joss ran her fingers over the deep yellow, downy soft petals surrounding the dark brown center. Sunflowers were her favorite, and White Creek Country Store was known for its massive blooms. The fertile soil yielded monster stalks yearly, and people bought them by the bundle. The smooth butcher’s block counter on the island was clean and ready to create upon. Its three shelves were stocked with floral foam, twine, butcher paper, and ribbons. They kept things rustic and simple, but it was no less beautiful. The superior quality of the flowers spoke for itself.

White Creek County Store was a haven. A safe place where she briefly escaped the madness that descended the moment she entered the compound. For at least eight hours, she was free to mingle with the outside world, and pretend to be one of them. Even more so, the floral station was a slice of heaven on earth. Buckets full of freshly cut flowers yielded a heady scent. Their bright splashes of colors never failed to improve her day.

Slowly positioning the sunflowers in their black display bucket, she milked the re-stock for all it was worth. Mingling with her co-workers wasn’t high on her priority list. Here, she fled from the whispers and stares that dogged her every step since the ceremony weeks earlier. People waffled between kissing her rump and avoiding her like the plague. *This is what it feels like to be a pariah.*

“Are you done hiding among flora and fauna, Thumbelina?” The silky alto of her best friend, Brook, made her sigh. Joss met the steady light-brown gaze of her narrowed, wide-set eyes fringed with dark lashes. Arms crossed beneath her bosoms, and hip cocked, Brook embodied the word fierce. Her pointed toe black boot tapped against the wooden floor. Black skinny jeans hugged her lithe six-foot-one frame.

Joss shrugged and stepped away from the sunflowers. “The store needed restocking.”

“For over two hours, though?” Brook replied with a deep frown.

“I stopped to help customers, too.” The excuse sounded flimsy to her own ears. Regardless, she clung to it like a drowning victim clinging to a life preserver.

“Uh huh.” Brook pursed her thin lips. “Well, it’s just us now, Rapunzel, so you can climb down from your tower and be straight with me.”

“I wasn’t aware I was crooked,” Joss mumbled.

“Cute, Joss. Real cute.” Brook shook her head.

Joss’s eyes darted around the tiny store in quest of a distraction. The six aisles were neatly arranged. Handmade jam and jelly jars lined the shelves, label out. The floor was clear of any debris and shone from a fresh coat of lemon-scented wood polish that filled the air. The clean smell blended with the odor of freshly brewed coffee, and her mouth watered.

“You’ve been busy.”

“I have. Now, are you ready to talk about what’s eating you alive? Or do we get to endure more uncomfortable silences and brooding? You’re going to give your forehead wrinkles if you keep it up.” Brook tapped her forehead.

Joss dropped her head and allowed her shoulders to slump. “Why voice what you already know?”

“Humor me.”

“You heard the Alpha. He all but announced my betrothal to Isiah.”

“Almost isn’t the same as did, Joss,” Brook said gently.

“In a normal, healthy, functioning world, yes. Not so much in White Creek.” Joss held up a hand. “You know I’m right.”

“Most are afraid of the impending change. People want to know where they stand. Stark hasn’t fooled all of us. We see his love for cruelty and manipulation.”

“And yet, they’d marry me off in a heartbeat to save their own hide.”

“That’s human nature, babe. They think you’ll be able to temper that mean streak. You forget one important fact, though.”

“What’s that?” Joss asked glumly.

“You have to give consent. Nothing can happen otherwise.”

She bit the inside of her lip.

“You’re not thinking about saying yes, are you, Joss?” Brook asked, horrified.

“There’s a lot more at stake than you realize, Brook. This is about so much more than just me.” She exhaled.

“You’d die inside. That’s all I need to know about this situation.” Brook’s outrage warmed her from the inside out. She’d found a true friend in the sassy pack member. The bell above the door rang. “We’re finishing this talk later,” Brook warned before turning to smile at the family coming in. “Welcome to White Creek Country Store. How can we help you today?” Brook asked.

Forty-five minutes away from the compound, this store was one of their many fronts. The small town saw them as a commune of hippies who strove to live off the land. While odd, they were deemed harmless.

The rumble of a truck pulling up outside signaled more to restock. Joss hurried out the front door, eager to do busy work that would keep her mind occupied. Isiah opened the passenger door. Her excitement wilted like a flower with no water and too much sun.

“Sissy,” he cried, waving madly like a toddler who’d just learned the meaning of hello.

“Isiah,” she said blandly.

He lifted the aviators and pushed them into his hair. “Long day?”

“It is now,” she said sweetly.

“Careful,” His eyes darkened with malice. A moment later he was grinning. His duality scared her most of all. He was unstable.

Shoving her resentment down, she straightened her shoulders and walked toward him, accepting his hug.

“Did you miss your big brother?” His breath blew her hair away from her face.

“The same as I always do.”

“Such a clever little tongue. I can’t wait to put it to better use.” He squeezed her tighter than necessary, and then released her. “We brought you goodies.”

“And I appreciate it.” She watched as the stocky, russet-haired beta climbed down from the truck, and walked around to the back. “Hey, James.”

“Hi, Joss. How’s work been today?”

“Steady.”

James grasped the hand, turned, and raised the liftgate.

“I’ll get everything ready for you in the storage room,” Joss said, swiftly excusing herself. She walked into the store stiffly with her heart lodged in her throat.

“What’s going on?” Brook asked.

“Our delivery arrived along with the mayor of crazy town,” Joss whispered.

Brook’s jaw dropped. “Jesus, he doesn’t quit, does he?”

“It’s not like he’s all there.” Joss tapped her temple as she swept past Brook and into the back room of the store. Breaking down the few boxes left over from restock, she made a clear space for the new product. Isiah entered the back room alone and closed the door behind him.

“Where’s James?” Joss asked.

“I asked him to give us a minute.” He shrugged.

“Why?” she asked cautiously.

He shoved his hands in his front pockets. “’Cause I wanted to ask you something.”

She studied him. He seemed jovial enough. The boyish grin turned his lips up at the corner, and his brown eyes sparkled with light-hearted humor. *This is good Isiah.*

“Okay?”

“Go on a date with me?”

“What?” She spun away from the table.

“A date. You, me, romantic setting.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

Paralyzed by uncertainty, she studied him carefully. Was this a trick? Some test she needed to pass? “And if I say no?”

“I wouldn’t.” The steely tone silenced her sarcastic response. “Why do you continue to fight this? It’s going to happen one way or another. Why not make it easier for us both?”

She swallowed, to moisten the desert-like cavern of her mouth. Her gut told her rejection now would be a bad idea. “When?”

He stood up straight. “I’m glad you reconsidered your position.”

*Like I have a choice?*

“Do not read too much into this,” she cautioned.

“I’ll pick you up tonight at eight.” He stepped closer. “I’m going to change your mind about me.” He brushed a kiss onto her forehead and stepped away. A knock sounded at the door, and Isiah answered it.

“Let’s get everything loaded in and leave this beautiful woman to her work.” Isiah winked, and hell froze over.

Sickened by her choices, she worked mechanically, helping them settle the produce and dry goods before bidding them good-bye.

“Are you okay?” Brook appeared in the door frame soon after they departed.

She sighed. “I’ve officially hit rock bottom.”

“What did he do?” Brook’s eye flashed.

“Asked me on a date.”

“Oh my God! You had me worried.” Brook shoved her gently.

“I said yes.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” Brook squawked

“Because I was afraid of what he’d do if I said no. God. I used to be so good at managing him. Now it’s out of control.” She spread her arms out, shrugging off her frustration.

“You need to choose a mate, Joss.”

Joss balked at the word. “No.”

“Then what?” Brook challenged. “Because you have to do something everyone will understand and respect. You know how the pack operates.”

“So, I guess I’m screwed then.” Joss wrapped her arms around herself.

“Stop. There are plenty of strong, attractive wolves capable and willing to provide for you. You’re in a better position than any other she-wolf. You have your pick.”

“None of them are for me,” Joss insisted.

“Once you go into heat, you’re going to lose the ability to choose with a clear mind. Why are you so stubborn?” Brook threw her hands in the air, letting them fall down and slap her thighs.

“Because none of the wolves are for me,” she snapped

Brook jerked back. “And how do you know this?”

Joss glanced away.

“This is about *him*, isn’t it? Your dream man?”

“I didn’t say that.” Joss had never been one for fairy tales and dreams of happily ever after, but the man she saw in her sleeping hours felt more real than anything else in her life ever had after her father’s death. How could she feel so connected to a person she’d never met? She’d asked herself all of the questions. *What if he wasn’t real? What if he was? Would they ever meet?* None of the answers ever deterred her.

Brook rolled her eyes. “You didn’t have to.”

“All I want is the ability to choose my own path. We all deserve that. I’m going to fight for it.”

“Even if it’s a fruitless endeavor?” Brook asked softly.

Joss balled her fists. “Especially then. If no one ever challenged the status quo, nothing would ever change.” *Brook’s right. I need to come up with a plan. It just won’t look like anything she’d envision*. She wouldn’t play by the rules when they were made by a fervent, self-inflated narcissist who had a messiah complex. Playing the game would buy her time. So, she’d go on the date, make nice, and find a way to ensure he’d never get his slippery hands on her.