

## Chapter 13

Lexie ran until it occurred to her that running was ridiculous. Archer was not pursuing her; no one was. Each pace only reminded her of the beast she now was. A creeping disgust seized her for taking such profound pleasure in something so wrong. She wanted to slough off this skin like a sunburn. She didn't want this new body to fit, though she knew it did. She was disgusted with herself, a feeling she had known years before but tried to forget, a perverse pleasure in the midst of something very wrong.

Her thick paws bit deep into the dirt as she ran, and her muscles flexed and stretched against her bones. The breeze blew the tiny hairs on her neck. She felt beautiful. It unnerved Lexie that her body needed such a transformation to feel right.

In the distance, Lexie could hear the rushing of the Rogue. She had run northwest, up into the mountains where the air smelled like clouds and salt. She arrived at the cusp of the forest and the mountain, where a wildfire years before had obliterated all the foliage, leaving a black-scarred tract of rock and char. Tree trunks, as naked as match sticks, stood tall and ashamed, mourning the bounty they once possessed. A thousand questions poured through her mind, but she could not bear to face any of them. Alone in the vast landscape, she felt bound and gagged by circumstance.

The night deepened and expanded, while Lexie remained still and silent in the void. She tried to silence her mind like the charred tract, empty, stoic and dead. Though the woods behind her bore the hiding places and infinite dark instincts of fierce creatures, here in the dead zone at the cusp between the trees and the alpine lichens, she felt more vulnerable than she had ever felt as a girl exploring the forests near her home. She considered turning back and heading home to Wolf Creek but shunned the thought immediately. How would she get there? Run the seventy-plus miles? And once she was there, she would surely be shot on sight. No. She'd have to stay here, hidden until this witchcraft was sure to burn off with the sun.

The silence grew oppressive as she mourned the loss of her human frailty, of her belief in only the things she could see and understand. Staring sadly at her furry feet, Lexie realized that the universe was filled with things she could never understand, menacing her in the darkness, chiding her foolishness. She was clumsy and plain, painfully tiny in the face of the malevolent grandeur of the world. Her anguish struggled to form tears, but none came, a

cruel byproduct of her new biology. Her throat clenched, like forcing a cough to save oneself from choking. The clench became a gag, and the gag a lupine whine as her sadness begged for release from her body in any way possible.

A tiny growl formed from the struggle and revved into an engine of sound. The sound reverberated through the echo chamber of her throat and clattered out of her mouth in a long plaintive wail. The sound knocked her head back on her neck, stretching her skull to her spine and exposing her throat to the full white light of the night. Like a hundred unclenching fists, her muscles eased and released. The howl felt like the first breath after surfacing from a great and deadly depth. Her lungs expended, she ballooned them again for a second, palliative bellow that echoed off the barren mountainside, shattering into rays of her despair. The high note of her wail descended a slow, arcing scale, where it trilled on a few notes before fading into emptiness.

The last echo ricocheted off the mountain and rolled back toward town. Lexie wondered, ruefully, if Renee could hear her howl and was priming her crossbow now. With that thought came a dozen others like it. She recalled nights when she would listen through an open window to the packs roaming just outside town. Her father had killed a couple rare wolves when he was on the job. Despite the namesake of their town, Ray, like all the working folks in Wolf Creek, held a particular distain for this odd breed of wolf. Not a lumberjack or hunter was sympathetic to the creatures, which killed or injured several humans each year. Lexie always imagined the mauled men were inexperienced fools, seeking pelts for glory and overcompensating for their lack of efficacy with oversized guns. She had kept such thoughts to herself, however, knowing her father and all the other people of her town would consider her disturbed for siding with the menacing creatures rather than her fellow, innocent citizens.

Now, her own fur coat ruffling in the quiet breeze, the irony of her past was obvious. More damning was the horrifying truth that these creatures were no more animal that she was, and that the villainy attributed to them was really being cast on her neighbors. And Archer. And now herself.

As her howl faded into the distance, Lexie groaned at the realization that Blythe and the rest were right. They didn't hunt men, but werewolves. The Pack that she had hoped would become her family now looked more like her enemy.

That her consciousness was untouched by the transformation chilled her. She was no

more a violent creature now than she was the day prior, though her body was now endowed with its own weapons. The wolves the Pack killed must have died with the minds of men intact. Why would the wolves attack humans if their minds remained? Was Archer ever one of the culprits?

Lexie shooed the questions again from her mind, having neither the energy nor the peace to confront them. She sank on her belly and wished for sunlight and for the clattering conversation of the Pack to distract her thoughts.

From the forest, Lexie heard the soft crunch of dead leaves beneath a paw. The step was tentative, downwind, like the slow approach of a hunter. Perhaps Archer had followed her after all and sat watching from a distance as Lexie's world tore apart. Lexie was ashamed but relieved that Archer had followed to witness to her complete breakdown. She stood to face her lover, emerging from the forest's edge.

Another soft footstep accompanied a slow growl, an unmistakable warning of the teeth and claws to come. From the shadowed guard of the trees emerged a wolf, lips curled back baring white teeth. It stepped towards her, ears back flat against its skull, head low in line with its shoulders, tail swaying like a charmed cobra. Its deep growl shook her ribcage and its yellow glare froze her in place. Behind its eyes was the urgent lust of a predator cornering prey. A chill tickled Lexie's skin as the hair along her back rose in spikes. She stepped back, clattering across burned wood and sharp charred rocks.

She had never seen one of the rares alive. Until now, they were merely pub tales or crude drawings accompanying newspaper stories. The rare looked like a normal gray wolf, but larger, heavier, nastier. Each paw was articulated, each claw able to move independently of the others. Its legs were long and lean, holding the bulk of its body five feet above the ground. Everything else was pure wolf.

Lexie tried to shout, but the sound that came out was a quick, sharp bark. She barked again, and once more, each yip backed her farther up the slope of ash, each step matched by her hunter.

Its growl crescendoed into a thunderclap, stunning her heart into a moment of bloodless shock. The wolf recoiled on its haunches and launched itself, bridging the fifteen feet between them in one great bound. It knocked Lexie onto her back with its thick skull and pinned her. Her paws battled against its snapping jaw. She drew back her lips to bare her own teeth, each claw tearing at her attacker. She pushed with all her strength, but its weight

pinned her as if beneath a tractor, all rusted steel and menacing moving parts.

Then it relented, falling back for one merciful moment. Lexie whipped back to standing. Her fur bristled up her neck and down her spine, the chilly air dripping in between the tufts, pulling at her skin. Her tail made her feel longer and larger, and she swung it over her back in a mocking facsimile of a pageant queen's wave. She let a growl echo through her throat, proud of the way the sound filled the space between them.

The wolf did not waste a moment rebounding towards her, but this time Lexie allowed her instincts, both lupine and human, to guide her. She recalled stalking the woods with her father, matching orange vests over flannels, matching rifles at their sides. With a silent finger in the air, her father would delineate the tender places on a quadruped to aim, shoot, or slice for a clean kill. When the beast leapt again, she met it in the air with open jaws, sinking her teeth into its throat and jerking it to the ground. A gurgled cry surged from its mouth as it wriggled free, rolling onto its back and then to its feet to regroup. It growled again, pacing in a circle. She spat fur from her mouth.

Lexie's heart thudded through her ribcage. Its odor was more earthy than Archer's, more wild. It smelled masculine, like musk and meat.

Saliva dripped from his exposed fangs as he sized up his opponent. His snarl widened into the parody of a smile, then he bounded for Lexie once again. Knowing nothing else to do, she let him overtake her, rolling onto her back, hindpaws raking his exposed belly. Her head tucked back into her neck, guarding her tender flesh, while her mouth opened wide to grasp whatever limb or chunk of flesh might stray too close to her jaws.

The male's leap was imprecise. His lower legs landed on her torso, knocking her breath out, but leaving her flesh intact. Lexie snapped at his bony foreleg, crunching her jaws around it like a vice. The bone chipped like rock candy. He yelped as the warm, salty ooze of blood seeped into her mouth. It tasted sustaining, alive, and delicious. Greedily, she clamped down harder, jerking her head left and right, still supine but at a great advantage. Bone flaked in her mouth and flesh tore in her clenched jaw.

The male leapt and thrust his hind legs out like a rodeo bull trying to buck its rider. He squealed, but Lexie's jaws were locked, her head following each desperate kick, tearing and cracking his debilitated leg. She was getting dizzy from the adrenaline and whiplash. The wolf's flails set her teeth in deeper. He feinted a snap of his jaws at her eye, and she shied back, releasing him just as he flailed a last, desperate kick. Lexie flew, landing on a mass of

jagged rocks. Her eyes swayed in her head.

The wolf took two paces from her and turned, a hateful look in his yellow eyes. He clearly knew this fight, the life or death struggle intrinsic to his kind. Blood seeped from his leg wound, like juice from a split pomegranate. Lexie's brain was overridden by the wolf blood coursing through her veins. She should flee, be sick and horrified by this living nightmare. But none of those urges were real, merely remnants of a quiet life no longer lived. She felt only one true thing now, the need to survive.

The massive wolf gathered his haunches for a last, deadly attack. He wouldn't make another mistake. Lowering his head in line with his shoulders, he prepared to drive his weight at her like a battering ram. His brown, bristled tail swayed, and his growl elevated into a barking, snap-jawed war cry.

Lexie's heart seized in her chest. She shivered as the blood rushed from her limbs to her protect her vital organs. She tried to steel herself for the freight-train impact, which would tear her body asunder, limbs, viscera, and bone scattered in the wake of a barreling six-hundred-pound mass of muscle.

In the moment before he charged, Lexie noticed with a perverse sort of pleasure a cool breeze that came out of the forest from the south. It smelled rich and cleansing, like the air near a waterfall. The beast caught a whiff, too. It stole his attention, giving Lexie a sweet moment of reprieve with which to collect her punch-drunk wits. The male's back bristled, and his ears twitched forward to the trees.

Seeing her chance to flee, Lexie flexed. The wolf barked a command. She froze. He swung his massive head back to the tree line and sniffed again. Now Lexie heard what he did, a crunch of running feet through underbrush. The oncoming creature was at least two hundred yards away, but it was closing in swiftly. Lexie and the strange wolf both sniffed, but the breeze had shifted back, once again carrying their scents southward. Her attacker growled a low warning to whoever might interrupt his onslaught and steal his prey. Lexie was trapped and terrified both of the beast before her and the fiercer one yet to reveal itself.

The footfalls barreled through the brush. Both predator and prey held their breaths and widened their stances, prepared for blood.

The great beast burst through the trees with a ferocious roar that was half tiger, half wolf, and all deadly. Its potent odor was unmistakably Archer. She was nearly the size of the male and Lexie's eyes widened with relief and awe. The male snapped the air in a half-

hearted attempt to fend her off. Archer landed between the male and Lexie. She growled, the sound echoing off the mountainside to create a chamber of low, chilling vibration.

She leapt so quickly that Lexie could barely keep her eyes fixed on that mottled gray body. In a flash, Archer was on top of the male, claws and jaws decimating flesh, scraps of torn fur drifting in the air. His voice moved from snarls to yelps to gurgles. Lexie inched forward to see beyond the muscles of Archer's back to the doomed male beneath her.

It became clear to Lexie that this was no fair fight, even less so than the wolf's attack against her. Archer roughed him up, when she could just as easily take his throat in her jaws and pull.

Lexie struggled to speak, to tell Archer that it was enough. She remembered the Pack's attack the night before, and the pleasure the women all took in the torture of the bound man. It was as if they, by beating the male into submission, could unravel the karmic bindings that ensnarled so many women, each blow seeking to even the score. Now, watching Archer toy with the great beast like a cat teasing a rodent before the final attack, weariness gripped Lexie's heart. She took a tentative step and placed her forepaw on Archer's back. Archer stopped.

The male seized the opportunity. With a yelp, he burst from beneath Archer's heavy paws and fled. Before Archer righted herself, he was gone.

Riding on adrenaline, her pupils dilated such that her eyes looked uniformly inky, Archer shouted, "Why did you do that?"

Lexie lowered her chest to the ground, tail between her legs, ears flat against her skull. Archer panted at her, waiting for an answer. Lexie's mind retreated with her body, back-stepping up the mountainside, wishing for an edge to disappear behind.

"I'm sorry! I just couldn't watch you . . ." Lexie stammered. "You were torturing him."

Archer rolled her eyes as though she were dealing with a stupid child. "Blood loss," she whispered.

Lexie shook her head, not understanding.

"Blood loss," Archer repeated. "It's important. Other werewolves can smell it, and it sends a message that there are bigger and badder wolves out here. The blood loss works in our favor. I wasn't torturing him. I was bleeding him to protect us."

Lexie gnawed at her lip, wanting to howl again, to release the swirling anxiety.

"Hey," Archer said, calmer now. "Come here."

Lexie came, head low, shivering with fear, her tail still stuck firmly between her back legs. Archer licked at Lexie's muzzle, cheeks, and ears, ridding her of the sticky blood that clung to her fur. The full moon bathed them both in the succor of its silvery light. Once Lexie was clean, Archer stepped a pace away and sat.

*Fuck!* Lexie tried to scream. Her throat clenched on the word and it came out like a croak before a retch. *Fuck!* She tried again. Her larynx seized against the word. She tried to scream her pain without articulation and it came out in a stream of whines and groans. She strained against the sounds, a simultaneous clench and release as if preventing herself from vomiting. Her shoulders heaved and she dug her black nose into the ash. Her tongue lolled to the ground. She released a snort and sigh. She croaked again, desperate to cry or shout or scream but her physiology resisted.

Her paws clenched at the dirt, and she tried to regain her breath, her mind, her forepaws locked and holding to the earth.

Archer held still as a stone lion. "Howl, Lexie," she whispered.

Lexie winced, her eyes pleading with Archer to immolate this new form, to take this body away.

"Howl."

Lexie strained, her throat burning, her muscles not knowing how to behave. She heaved a sound, a squeal over a groan. She inhaled to the breadth of her lungs, her larynx shocking her with its capacity. Her exhale fought against her insides and knocked her head back on her neck. Her forepaws clutched the earth and she released a bellow that shook her ribcage, shook her skull, shook the bare branches of the denuded trees. She pushed the howl out, though she didn't have to--this anguish would leave her body with or without her consent.

Her howl moved out of her in undulations, in waves. It shattered her consciousness and let it fall to the ground like a million shards of glass. She tried to follow the ribbon of sound but it defied her, cascading beyond even her new, keen senses.

Her head threw the last of her breath in one heave. The sound ricocheted off the mountainside and Lexie swooned.

She fell into the warm, dark recesses of her mind where she was just a girl, who only a week ago was falling in love with a stranger, struggling over a midterm paper thesis, wondering if her new friends liked her enough. She wanted to return to that girl and stay there in suspended animation, before the kidnapping, the beating, and the uprooting of all

rationality and reason.

But something better lurked beyond. It seduced her away from the safety of her own head with promises of new scents and tastes and the feeling of pine needles beneath her paws, of exaltation of the gorgeous gloaming like some people admired the sunrise, and of companionship with the exquisite creature sitting on the rocks before her, patiently awaiting her return. Out there it was night, and Lexie wondered if it would be night forever. If she were to return, there would be tears in her flesh and fur on her body, and questions would pour from her like blood from a gash. Yet there was also the promise of a new power within her and a new magic in this land. Even if she could go back to the girl from last week, doing so would mean returning to life of complacent stagnation in which nothing was new or unbelievable--a life of hourly wages and nothing stalking in the darkness.

She had traveled a mere sixty miles from home to create something extraordinary for herself. That sixty miles may well have been to the moon, so much mystery crept in the periphery. Lexie whimpered deep within her mind, the howl of anguish had long since echoed away from the mountainside. Now she cried for wishes granted and preconceptions shattered. She cried for her future and the life yet to come. The moon sat above the tree line in the west when Lexie blinked back to reality. The first thing that came into focus was Archer, lying with head resting on crossed forepaws, her gaze focused on something far in the distance, deep in her own thoughts. Her tail curled next to her body, fluffy and clean. Her nose was wet, like a river rock against the silty beige of her muzzle. Lexie sighed, the beauty of this beast in the moonlight overtaking her. She tried to speak, and her voice box vibrated a trill of sound.

“Archer?” Lexie croaked through a hoarse throat.

Archer’s ears perked, and she jumped to all fours. The sides of her mouth curled into a smile, and her pink tongue unfurled from her jaw to loll to one side. Lexie walked to her, and they entwined their necks, nuzzling. Archer pulled her face away and licked at Lexie’s muzzle, cleaning the last traces of blood from her fur, grooming her.

“There’s skin stuck between my teeth,” Lexie whined.

Archer wrapped her forelegs around Lexie, squeezing away the snarling, the saliva, the jagged teeth and claws. Archer was a bulwark of warmth and safety; her body was a sanctuary for them both, regardless of the monsters beyond, soothing like a sister and holding like a lover. Archer’s strong neck draped over Lexie’s shoulder, warming her core,

hiding her face from the chill of the forest. Her exhalations cycled in the enclosed space between their bodies, warming them both.

Archer smiled with tender eyes. “Let’s get you some water and some rest.”

She whispered into Archer’s chest, “I’m sorry.”

Archer lapped at her shoulder, shushing the confession away. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I couldn’t let you kill a man.”

“Shh . . .” Archer nuzzled her. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

“You’re a werewolf,” Lexie whispered.

“Yes,” replied Archer.

“And me too.”

Archer nodded. Stating it so plainly should have shocked Lexie, but her nervous system had adapted by refusing to engage any further. An eerie peace crept across her skin, gripping her with ghostly fingers, forcing her heart rate to slow and her breath to deepen. It was a disconcerting calm, her thoughts sharp and empty.

“Did you do this to me?” Lexie asked.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know. I can only guess.”

“Guess, then.”

“Last month, at the Full Moon Tribe. When you ran, you fell and drank from a puddle, yes?”

Lexie nodded.

“There is lore, that the footprint of a pureblood, beneath the light of the full moon can create the change, though I’ve never seen it happen.”

“Until now?”

“I suppose.”

“What’s a pureblood?”

“Me.”

“And?”

“Only me,” Archer sighed. “Or so I thought. But that footprint wasn’t mine.”

“Pureblood. What does that even mean?”

Each question was a hydra; for every one Archer answered, ten more sprang forth in its place.

“It means a lot of things,” Archer said, drawing back and placing her paw over Lexie’s. “Listen, I know you have many questions, but you’re also hurt and tired. Let’s take care of that first, okay?” She nuzzled the soft, spiky fur at the base of Lexie’s triangle ears. “Things will look different in the morning.”

Lexie nodded, still seeking answers in Archer’s particolored eyes, so unusual in a woman, but well-suited to a wolf. Everything about Archer seemed better suited as a wolf, from her dispatch of the rogue wolf to the way she had licked Lexie’s muzzle clean of blood, to the way she comforted by rubbing her forehead against Lexie’s trembling neck.

Archer turned, looking over her shoulder in invitation--or command--for Lexie to follow. Lexie loped after her.

The silent journey gave her opportunity to observe Archer, a great wolf who mere hours ago had loved her as a woman, who had cradled her body in her long, lean arms and tasted her flesh with human lips. Her eyes were the same as a both human and wolf: the left like candle-lit brass, warm and organic; and the right, clear blue as an icy lake, preternatural and uncanny. Archer’s mouth curled at the edges when she grinned her lupine grin, similar to the shrouded smile she carried on her human face. A ridge of mottled grey fur ran from the tip of her nose up her forehead, along her back, and all the way to her fluffy black tail. Her cheeks were beige, and small rings of short black fur circled her eyes, as though traced by kohl. Archer’s articulated paws were broad, almost twice the size of Lexie’s. They moved agilely, more like her human hands than not.

Growing up, Lexie shared the local assumption that the rare wolves were a product of the environment. A chill of nauseous guilt gripped her throat as she wondered who those wolves, those people, may have been before the locals dispatched them with guns and blades. She wondered how Archer had survived and if long ago she had been a normal girl like Lexie. She was gripped with the same uneasy wonder that had accompanied the sensation of Archer’s body on top of hers, that everything was terrifying and everything was perfect.

Lexie loped to a stop beside her lover. She studied Archer’s face, marveling at the subtle colorings and shades along her muzzle, wondering what they were for, if anything.

Archer waited through Lexie’s perusal, letting her soak in the magic of what was

occurring now. The fur on her throat rippled when she spoke.

“Are you okay?” she chattered to Lexie in a language that sounded so natural Lexie wondered why she had never heard it before.

Though she didn’t know the answer to Archer’s question, she suspected that she had no real choice but to decide. Lexie lowered her head to her forepaws, stretching the lean bands of muscle on her legs and across her back. “Yes,” she asserted, the decision making it true. “I think I am.”

Archer bounded into the tree, and Lexie followed. They climbed together to the treehouse, so warm and welcoming, high above the cruelty of the forest below. Weariness overtook Lexie as the calm of the space enveloped them. She curled down upon the sheepskin, tucking her nose beneath her foreleg, hiding from the lingering moon rays. To Lexie’s lupine figure, the fleece was a sensual delight. A sound came from her mouth that she had not yet heard, a mixture of a guttural sigh and a satisfied snort through the nose. Seeing that Archer was watching her, Lexie rolled onto her back, exposing her pale belly. Archer padded over and nuzzled Lexie’s belly, snuffling along the soft fur and flesh.

They pressed tightly against one another, wrapping legs, rubbing their faces together. Their panting deepened. Archer licked Lexie’s face and ears. Lexie lost herself in the sensation of Archer’s touch. She had to ask Archer one question, and placing her paw against Archer’s chest to stop her, she whispered, “Archer, what do I look like?” The sides of Archer’s mouth curled into a broader grin, and she rested on her forepaw, using her other to stroke the side of Lexie’s face.

“Your fur is light brown, like honey. Your eyes are the same, rich hazel. Your mouth curls into a smile at the edges, here.” She traced the curls of Lexie’s mouth with the tip of her paw. “Your cheeks are pale, like mine. Your snout is the color of peanut butter.”

“Peanut butter?” Lexie laughed.

“Yes. You are beautiful. And delicious.” Archer buried her face in Lexie’s neck, making snorting sounds that tickled Lexie’s whiskers and made her giggle aloud.

They rolled together on the blanket, wrestling, licking, playing and giggling.

“Am I going to be okay?” Lexie asked.

“You are going to be magnificent.”

Lexie couldn’t make sense of any of it, nor could she think of the future; it was all too deep and unknowable, but she resisted escaping into her head. She’d lived there long

enough.

Instead, she stared into her lover's eyes. She would trust Archer. She would love her. She seemed to have little choice. They locked gazes, learning to trust one another by looking as hard as they could. Then Archer leaned in and pressed her mouth against Lexie's. Their moist noses touched, sharing breath.

As the sky moved from violet to deep blue, Lexie drifted off into a deep and cozy sleep. She dreamt of running, mouth open wide, with Archer at her side. It felt like freedom. It felt like love.

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