

Hope(less)

By Melissa Haag

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**(Mis)fortune**

by  
Melissa Haag

## Chapter 1

I knew the locations of the people around me as if my head came equipped with a giant fish finder. When I focused, a vast darkness opened in my mind. Instead of blips on a radar, tiny sparks of light shimmered, matching the location of people in the area immediately around me. The colors of the lights, always a yellow center and dark-green halo, never varied. Except for me. My spark had a vibrant orange halo, making me unique and alone. Always alone...

I stood at the entrance of the park while the bus pulled away with a screech of hydraulics. Dusk had already settled, casting shadows. Before walking my usual path through the park, I opened my senses to make sure it was as deserted as it seemed.

Though no sparks decorated the darkness in the area around me, I kept my senses open. The void was endless, but my sight did have a maximum distance. So I monitored the area around me as I walked the path and started thinking of the homework I still needed to do.

Distracted, I didn't at first notice the pale blue light with a bright green halo lingering near the pond. There had never been a color variation before. My steps slowed. Perhaps this new color meant I could see something other than humans, maybe animals. As interesting as that would be, the idea of my sight suddenly changing worried me. What if it wasn't an animal? What if it was someone like me? I could keep walking, and whatever the spark was would never know I saw it. But, I was too curious and hungry for answers to walk away. I stepped off the path to investigate.

The lawn muffled the sound of my approach. Near the edge of the pond, I spotted a shadow moving. It was much too large for an animal. I moved closer. The shadow continued to move, and in an instant, I identified the shape. A man. I froze in shock. He stood close to the water's edge.

His presence didn't freak me out as much as the lack of the normal yellow-green life-spark. In its place shimmered the oddly tinted spark. I'd actually found someone like me—a person who had a uniquely colored life-spark. Excitement built even as caution reined me in. What could this odd coloring mean? I'd never run into any variations before. Stay or run? Investigating a color I thought could be an animal was one thing, but approaching a strange man in a dark park? Not the best idea...yet my curiosity won.

As I edged closer to the grove of trees, I recognized the older man. I'd bumped into him, literally, a few days ago at the hospital. The man, who had kind brown eyes, a friendly smile,

and grey hair, had apologized for bumping into me and continued on his way. That's why I remembered him.

Typically, men didn't just continue on their way after seeing me because, along with the ability to see those life-sparks, I also had a certain pull. Just on men. From adolescent to grandparent, I unwillingly drew them to me. The degree in which I affected them varied. Some just studied me like a puzzle that needed solving, but forgot about me as soon as I disappeared from sight. For others, I became an obsession.

I crept forward as I watched the man sit and remove his shoes and socks. But, I stopped when he began unbuttoning his shirt. What was he doing stripping down in the park? Given his apparent age, perhaps he suffered from some type of dementia. Maybe he thought it a good place to take a swim.

When he stepped behind the trees for a moment and reemerged completely naked, I began to think he might have more serious issues than dementia.

Still debating whether I should call out to him, I gasped when his silhouette collapsed. I automatically moved forward, thinking he had fallen. My feet covered some of the distance between us before I saw he had dropped into a low crouch with his fingers touching the ground. I skidded to a stop so abruptly the grass tore up beneath my feet.

His skin rippled like sand in a current. Immobilized, I watched his body contort and fold in on itself in some places while it stretched in others. What would make him move like that? Was he sick? Something contagious? I couldn't make myself move away. If he was hurt or sick, he needed help.

Then the sounds started. His knuckles cracked and popped, and his thumbs shrank from the rest of his fingers. I took a step back and then another. Other joints began popping in earnest. It sounded painful. Through it all, he remained silent. My pulse pounded, and I eased another step back.

His skull grew larger, longer than it was high, and his nose and mouth extended with it. I forgot to keep moving. His ears shifted higher. A grey down emerged from his exposed skin, and grew into thick fur. He shook it out when his slow transformation from human to large canine completed.

My mind screamed *werewolf* even as it denied the possibility. Werewolves were legend, myth.

His head swung in my direction. His eyes glowed eerily from the distant lights. My paralyzing shock left me, and I ran. The park entrance beckoned in the distance, but I knew I would never make it. Thanks to my second sight, I saw him rapidly closing in on me.

Rather than being attacked from behind, I spun to confront the big, grey beast bearing down on me. One well-placed kick to its throat, that's all I needed to get in before it mauled me to death. Yeah, I was going to die. I braced myself.

As soon as I turned, the beast slowed to a trot. Within ten feet, it slowed to a walk. My breath still tore through my throat in ragged, terrified gasps.

A yard away, it sat on its haunches. I stared at the creature, poised to run again. Intelligent blue eyes watched me. For several long moments, neither of us moved, and a debate raged within me. What did it want? Should I run, or should I wait to find out?

Holding its gaze, I slid a foot back. It stood. I froze, heart hammering.

The creature began to circle me. I pivoted, following its progress. Finally, we stopped when it had positioned itself between me and the north side of the park—the way home. Then it began to stalk forward, backing me toward the pond. My breathing spiked again. I didn't want to go back to the darker area of the park. Yet, I moved backward fearing what would happen if I didn't.

Just as I considered making another run for it, the creature sat down. What was he waiting for? Suddenly, it yipped. The sound scared the breath right out of me. As if that breath had been the signal he'd waited for, he trotted around me to his pile of clothes. There he morphed back to the man he'd been before; the transformation took less than two heartbeats.

Without perversion, I watched him dress, still too stunned and afraid to look away. I thought about running, but couldn't ignore the fact that he and I shared a connection. Unique life-sparks. I feared what that meant for me.

While buttoning his shirt slowly, he looked up and met my wide gaze. I tried to calm down. Was he like a real canine? If he smelled my fear, would he attack? I'd been afraid since he'd changed into his fur, and he hadn't attacked me then, so I supposed he wouldn't now either.

My rational thoughts fled when he paced toward me with his hands in the pockets of his khakis. I tensed to bolt.

He removed one hand from a pocket and held it up, palm out, signaling I should wait. Right...

"My name is Samuel Riedel, but calling me Sam suits me just fine. I'm sorry for the scare, but showing you was the only way for you to believe."

Believe I'm crazy? Done. I took a few steadying breaths before talking.

"Why did you show me? What do you want?" I fought hard to keep my breathing under control. My mind continued to race.

Sam smiled, turned, and walked toward a bench near the edge of the water. He sat and motioned for me to join him. A small noise of disbelief escaped me. He'd just changed into a dog large enough to pass for a pony. I stayed in the not yet dark shadows of the evergreens.

"You're different, but not as different as I am," he said, keeping himself turned so he could watch me.

He knew something about me? I fidgeted with the strap of my dark brown messenger bag. He could have the answers I needed to explain why I saw the lights in my head or why men acted so differently around me. The temptation of learning something, anything, rooted me. Yet there was also the possibility that he knew nothing of my gifts, that what he knew was something completely different from what I already knew.

"What do you mean I'm different?" I decided I had to be sure we were talking about the same thing before I could reveal anything more.

"You smell different. You're not exactly human, but you're not a werewolf either."

Having him say "werewolf" aloud made everything I'd just witnessed surreal. How could werewolves be possible? How could I be possible? At least, I now knew I wasn't a werewolf

like him.

I still stood exactly where I'd been, yet I felt like the entire world had just changed while the crickets continued their night song.

"For clarification...no, I don't need a full moon. No, I don't eat raw meat, although I do enjoy medium-rare steak on occasion. And, no, silver bullets won't kill me any better than regular ones will." Sam chuckled while he moved over on the bench, making plenty of room, and patted the empty space invitingly. "You, dear, are not a werewolf," he repeated.

I blinked at the absurdity of his invitation to sit with him.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, not bothering to acknowledge his invitation. I still didn't understand why he'd shown me at all.

"You may not be a werewolf, but you are still special. How old are you?"

At five feet five inches, with a slight build and few curves to speak of, I looked young. The freckles sprinkling my nose didn't help me look any older either.

"Sixteen," I answered absently. "How exactly am I special?" I shifted my bag to the other shoulder.

"I was drawn to you. You have a certain scent that calls to my kind. I couldn't name the smell for you other than to say it's interesting, unlike anything else you've ever smelled."

"Is that why guys don't leave me alone?" What if I'd been born with more pheromones than the average person? I'd learned about them in biology. Pheromones attracted the opposite sex. It would explain the pull I had on men and why it'd grown stronger as I'd matured.

I couldn't pin it on anything about me physically. I had straight, shoulder length ash blonde hair, a medium complexion, and hazel eyes like a million other girls. My nose fit my face well enough, neither too wide nor too long, and my mouth wasn't so generous it'd give a guy dirty thoughts. No, it had nothing to do with my looks. Something else pulled them, and I wanted to understand what. Having extra pheromones didn't explain the lights though.

"What do you mean? What guys?" He sat forward too quickly for my comfort.

I flinched back a step and eyed him warily. When he moved like that, he looked a lot younger than his grey hair and weathered skin indicated. So, although he kept his tone light, I remained cautious.

"Guys under sixty and boys over ten."

"Well, you're young and pretty, so I'm sure it's not unusual for men to be attracted to you, dear." He settled back with a laugh.

He'd said it easily and without inflection as if he'd made an observation and stated a fact, reaffirming the pull I had on men didn't seem to affect him. Did that mean he didn't know about my gift and might not understand? Part of me deflated a little. Should I try to explain it? If I smelled different to his kind, it might still relate to my gifts. Confiding in him might be worth the risk. Besides, he could hardly run around telling people that I had special abilities when he'd just turned into a wolf in front of me.

I took a step closer, partially forgetting caution.

"No, it's more than that... A boy in school, extremely shy, picked on by jocks to the point of physical cruelty, nudged past those same jocks to wait by my locker to ask me on a date. A

man shopping with two kids stopped me in the grocery store to ask if I'd consider dating an older man once I turned eighteen. The eighteen bit he threw in after my foster mom gasped in shock." I inched closer, becoming more animated as I spoke, trying to make him understand. "When I turned him down, he went back by his kids, red-faced and told them that he'd just been asking for grandpa who wanted to date again. I knew that wasn't true." I paused a moment then added, "Those are just examples of what happens to me every day."

Sam studied me for a moment.

"What's your name, dear?"

"Gabrielle Winters. I prefer Gabby."

"Well, Gabby, I don't know why men act the way they do around you, but I'd like to help you figure it out. Few people would believe what I've shown you tonight, and I ask that you not try talking anyone into believing. I revealed myself to you because you're special and worth the risk."

He stood and approached me. With the pond reflecting dimly behind him and the warm breeze ruffling our hair, I knew that memories of this night would stay with me for a long time.

"There is so much about werewolves that you need to know. The first is that I'm not the only one."

My heart sank. I didn't like the sound of that.

"I'd like to meet your foster parents, and I'd like to get to know you better. I want to be there for you if you ever need anything." He stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on the heels of his brown-laced shoes while I considered his words.

"You said that I smelled good to your kind. Does that mean I'm going to be run down by other werewolves?" The prospect scared me, but I managed to keep any tremor from my voice.

"It's unlikely, but precisely why I would like to be involved in your life. I can help guide your introduction to our world, so it's not as scary as tonight."

He waited quietly while I thought it over. I watched him closely. I liked that he maintained eye contact. It was a refreshing change since the majority of conversations with men occurred while they tried to discover, visually, what about me attracted them.

He offered me an opportunity. With his help, maybe I could find out the reason behind my abilities. And given his condition, I felt certain he'd be able to keep my secret if I decided to tell him about the lights. Could I trust him? Not blindly, but I could start small.

"I'm willing to get to know you better, but I'm not ready for you to meet my foster parents." I wasn't sure if I ever would be.

I wanted to protect Tim and Barb Newton from what could be a monster. They were the first set of foster parents I actually liked. But, if I wasn't willing to bring him home, then just where would we get to know each other better? Dark nights in the park were out, and I had more brains than to suggest his place. He still scared me. Did I think he was going to hurt me? No...he had plenty of time to try to hurt me tonight and hadn't, but I barely knew the man so anything was possible. Safety in numbers. Somewhere public. Then, I remembered he already knew I volunteered at the hospital thanks to our run in.

"Let's meet Wednesday nights at the hospital café. Around six?"

“That sounds good. I look forward to seeing you next week and am truly sorry for scaring you tonight.” He held out his hand for a handshake.

I looked at him closely and ignored his hand. Instead, I decided to go for blunt. “You’re not going to turn creepy uncle on me, are you, Sam?” I honestly didn’t expect him to admit it if he did have that planned. I just wanted to see his reaction to the question.

He barked out a laugh and dropped his hand back to his side. When he saw I remained serious, he sobered.

“I suppose that’s a fair question, given what you’ve just told me. With me, you’re safe. Honey, I’m older than I look. Heck, I’m probably old enough to be your great grandfather.” He looked at me for a moment. I mean really looked at me, studying my face as if he could read all my secrets there.

“When I look at you, I see a young girl I want to help. I see a grandchild I could have had if only I’d met my one and only. And I see hope.”

Fair enough. I’d wait until next week to pass any further judgments.

“All right, then. I’ve got to get home. See you next week.”

He nodded his goodbye.

Reluctantly, I turned my back on him. Fear skittered along my spine as I walked away. My feet whispered through the grass until I reached the paved walk. When I looked back, he no longer stood by the pond, but I monitored his progress with my other sight as he left the park.

My already complicated life had just gotten more so. I took a huge risk meeting with a complete stranger, but how could I refuse? Learning about him and his kind might give me more insight, if not actual answers about my abilities—abilities that had caused me so much grief over the years. I really wanted an explanation.

When I got home, it was later than I thought. Barb and Tim waited for me in the kitchen. They fed me dinner and sat with me at the table while I explained what kept me. I didn’t mention a werewolf, just an old friend of my grandfather’s I’d bumped into.

I mentioned my plans to meet up with him at the hospital the next week to talk some more. Barb looked at Tim with worry a moment before Tim asked when they’d get to meet him. I asked for their patience and said I wanted to get to know Sam—again—first.

\* \* \* \*

Three weeks later, I exited the sliding glass hospital doors with Sam. We both eyed the dark clouds. The imminent downpour had cleared the usually bustling sidewalks, but the charged air filled me with anticipation.

I turned to Sam. “What do you think? Still want to go? We will probably get wet.”

Sam, dressed in his unusually trendy attire for an old guy, continued to study the sky as we walked toward the bus stop.

He had been kind and informative during the first two meetings, telling me as much as he could in such a public place about his “relatives” in the hour I allotted for our meetings. Wary of outsiders, many of his kind chose to live in a closed community across the Canadian border. It had plenty of land, and the rural population of the surrounding area allowed them more space

to roam freely. It also had a few old buildings that, up until twenty years ago, had been more for show than living.

After the marriage of their leader, things changed. The leader's new wife helped the community see they'd slipped too far from society and that their only chance to survive was to adapt.

A few people agreed and left to help reintegrate. A few more stayed in the buildings and started making small improvements. However, several of the structures needed larger-scale remodeling and, collectively, Sam's "relatives" just didn't have the money for it. Although remote, a few of the community's members ventured out to find work in nearby towns and supplemented the income needed to support their not yet fully self-sufficient way of life.

Gradually, those who'd denied the need for change started seeing the reality of what they'd become...a dying species...and more of the men not yet married went out looking for work. When the leader's sons were old enough, they too left.

Sam had been sent even further from the community to get the lay of the land in a more urban setting. Trying to blend, he'd decided he needed to dress more like the people of the area. At that point in his narrative, I'd wondered what he'd been wearing. Furs? When he'd gone shopping, he'd asked a sales clerk's advice regarding what to buy. The sales clerk had been about my age, which explained Sam's trendy choice of clothes.

It amazed me how much I'd learned about the man walking next to me. The compassion for his people's plight impressed upon me his selflessness, and watching him interact with other people around us, showed he had a sense of humor. Those defining characteristics had decided it for me—it was time to introduce him to Tim and Barb.

We'd reached the bus stop without a drop of rain.

"A little rain never hurt anyone," he said answering my earlier question.

Another thing I liked about Sam. He sensed when I was lost in my own thoughts and let me be.

"Okay, I'll text Barb and let her know you'll be coming over. They've been asking about you every week." He looked at me questioningly.

"I mentioned you that first night we met in the park. They wanted to know why I was late. I said I ran into an old acquaintance, a friend of my grandfather's."

A city bus drew to a halt in front of the sheltered bus stop. Sam and I waited for the other passengers to board. He surprised me by pulling out his own city bus pass to pay. The familiar driver looked at me curiously when I took my normal place behind him and slid over on the worn grey vinyl seat to make room for Sam.

Sam and I didn't talk much on the bus ride. Instead, I watched out the window, waiting expectantly for the rain.

At our stop, Sam stood and exited. He didn't offer me his hand. After only knowing me a short while, he knew I didn't like to be touched. It wasn't that I didn't like being touched. I didn't like growing attached. When you touched people, you developed attachments. Then, when they left, it made it harder to say goodbye.

He waited for me to hop down from the last step then fell in beside me as we made our way down the paved park path. Although we still had an hour of daylight left, the dark storm

clouds writhing in the sky above cast the city into an early dusk. Ever since Sam had revealed himself to me, tension drove me to walk quickly through the park. Particularly in the dark. I liked having someone to walk home with me, even if that someone had started the whole thing. In Sam's company, I didn't worry as much.

"You're certain I won't disrupt things at home just popping in like this?"

"I don't think you can disrupt it any more than it's been," I said. "Barb, my foster mom is pregnant, which really is a good thing. Barb and Tim have been trying to get pregnant for years. Thinking they'd never have kids of their own, they decided to foster."

We were halfway across the park. Sam slowed to give me more time to talk. I hadn't mentioned any of this to him before. The swings in the abandoned playground to our right started to sway in the increasing winds, their older chains squeaking slightly with each forward swing.

"They own a cute little two bedroom house. If she carries the baby to term, there won't be enough room, you know?" I kept my eyes focused on the path, not wanting to see his expression. "Because she hasn't yet passed her first term, they haven't notified my social worker."

I had no regret. I really did feel happy for Barb and Tim, and I'd moved around enough in foster care to know the drill. Plus, I counted down the days...months...until I turned eighteen, legally free from anyone's guardianship.

Sam remained silent beside me.

Leaving the park, we turned right on the sidewalk. The phone in my bag buzzed, and I quickly searched for it. The rain still held back, but the sky overhead rumbled ominously. I checked the message and smiled at Sam.

"Barb said she's very excited to meet you, and since you and I just ate, they'll have cake and coffee ready."

Sam nodded. A fat raindrop splattered on the sidewalk in front of us and without a word, we both started walking faster. When we turned the last suburban corner, I pointed out the Newton's house to him, not pausing the brisk pace we'd set.

Barb and Tim both waited for us on the front stoop. Tim had his arm wrapped around Barb's shoulders as he peeked around the awning to look up at the clouds. When Barb nudged him to point us out, he looked our way and waved.

They greeted Sam enthusiastically and invited him in. I could see Barb sizing him up and finding him acceptable. In a rare twist, Tim did most of the talking that night and asked Sam about himself. When Sam said he originally hailed from Canada and managed the family business investments, I figured he stuck as close to the truth as possible. They did ask him about my grandpa, and he wove a beautiful tale about them growing up together. Since I never talked about my grandfather, the Newtons didn't know any differently. The skill with which Sam lied made me a little uncomfortable. If he could lie that easily to them, how easily could he lie to me?

The rain stopped before he finished his second cup of coffee. Sam stood and smiled at Barb.

"The cake and coffee were wonderful. Thank you for letting me drop in like this." He

extended a hand to Tim. "I won't overstay my welcome or the coffee."

Tim clasped Sam's hand with a warm smile as the adults all laughed.

"It was a pleasure to meet both of you."

"We appreciated you stopping in," Barb said, already collecting the cups to bring to the sink. "When Gabby said she ran into you, we were both very curious."

"I can imagine. Now that I found her, I don't want to lose track of her. If it's all right, I'd like to stop by now and again to check in on her."

"We insist you do." Tim patted Sam's back in a manly display of affection as they walked to the front door. I quickly helped Barb put the dishes in the sink so she could follow them. Barb was a little compulsive and couldn't walk away from a dirty kitchen.

"What about dinner next Wednesday?" Barb asked, raising her voice from the kitchen as she washed and dried her hands at the sink. She hurried to the front door where Sam bent to put on his shoes.

"That sounds like a good idea." Sam finished tying his shoes and turned to me. "Is that okay, Gabby?"

Leaning against the arch dividing the living room and the kitchen, I watched the adults interact. In a way, it reminded me of the animal channel. I struggled not to crack a smile at the thought since Sam really did have one foot in the animal world.

"After I finish volunteering at the hospital, it should work for me."

Satisfied they would see each other soon, the adults said their goodbyes and Sam left. Not bad for a first meeting.

Each time I met with Sam, I learned more about his world. Nothing that I could apply to myself, yet. I still had hope though.

\* \* \* \*

Sam visited periodically over the next two months, and life continued as normal for a while. Barb started to show, and the normally reserved Tim couldn't stop talking about it. My time with the Newtons ticked away like the seconds of a clock.

On one of our scheduled Wednesday nights, I opened the door for Sam as soon as he knocked. He didn't show any surprise when I swung the door open after just one knock, but then I didn't expect him to.

Despite meeting at my home where we couldn't speak freely, I'd managed to learn a little more about him and his kind. For example, he had exceptional hearing. He knew when I got nervous or upset by the change in my pulse. He could hear whispered conversations taking place in other rooms as long as the door remained partially open. He could even hear whispers through thin walls. In addition to keen hearing, he also had better eyesight. In the dark, his pupils expanded to a freakish dimension, allowing in as much light as possible and enabling him to see when a normal person couldn't. This explained the way his eyes reflected.

"Hi, Sam." I stopped him from taking off his shoes. "We're eating on the patio since it's nice out." He wiped his feet extra well on the rug before following me through the house to the back patio.

The solid concrete slab patio took up a fourth of their backyard space. The patio wasn't

that big, the yard was just that small. But surrounded with a classic wooden privacy fence, it would make a perfect play area.

We walked onto the patio, and Tim looked up from the grill to our left and nodded a greeting. Smoke drifted lazily upward as he flipped a burger.

“Sam, thanks for coming.”

Barb stopped setting the table and moved to greet Sam with a hug. Sam gave one back with a smile. She long ago stopped trying to hug me.

Tim brought the burgers from the grill, and we all sat to eat while Tim and Sam dominated the conversation with fishing stories.

When Sam asked if I'd ever been fishing, I nearly choked on my bite of burger. “No,” I said definitively.

He put on a mock shocked face. “How can a girl your age never have been fishing?”

“Many have tried, and all have failed, Sam,” I said slightly amused. “I'm not an outdoorsy type.”

His next comment wiped the smile from Barb's face.

“You should come with me for the weekend. I'll take you to the cabin your grandpa and I went to before you were even born. It has indoor plumbing now, so I bet you could talk a friend into coming with.”

I glanced at all the faces at the table. Sam still smiled, Barb focused on me with an alarmed expression, and Tim glanced between me, Barb, and Sam. I took another bite of burger to stall.

In private, Sam had asked about my plans for the future. Barb's baby bump was hard to miss now. He had mentioned he had a spare room at his place if I ever needed it. He'd also mentioned he would like to take me on a trip to meet others of his kind. I felt fairly certain that's what he meant now. Having him ask tonight without any warning took me off guard. I could have done some prep work, like dropping hints that I had an interest in spending more time with him or something. But it did make sense that he asked now. Why try to delay the inevitable? The doctors saw no reason Barb's pregnancy wouldn't go full term this time. School would let out soon, and I had no summer job.

Setting down my fork, I picked up my glass and took a long drink of water. They all waited. I decided to save the adults the long dance around a subject none of them wanted to face full on. I turned toward Barb and Tim.

“I've spent a lot of time getting to know Sam over the last two months and told him about the baby on the way.” I looked at Barb, meeting her beautiful dark brown eyes. “We all know that I won't be able to stay once the baby's here.” Barb started to tear up and speak but I stopped her with a raised hand. “I also know that you want me to stay. I don't doubt that for a minute. You've both been so great to me, and I thank you.”

I turned to Sam. “You said that you live in a three bedroom house and that I was welcome to visit anytime. What about visiting until I graduate?” I didn't want to go back into foster care.

Sam continued to smile at me and nodded.

Barb started to sniffle, and Tim reached over the table to pat her hand.

## Chapter 2

Friday night, Barb and Tim dropped me off at Sam's. Though it was only for a weekend, they knew what it would mean if everything went well. So I willfully squashed my discomfort and endured Barb's hug. Tim, thankfully, settled on a nod and a wave as I climbed into Sam's truck.

I used the eight-hour drive to ask Sam direct questions about werewolf life, and tried to soak up everything he said. I stopped talking when we turned off the blacktopped road onto a deeply rutted dirt lane I doubted saw much use. For a mile, I braced myself against the rough ride. Finally, we emerged from the tree-lined path into a wide clearing.

A large two-story log cabin style structure dominated the space, its wings branching out to connect to outlying buildings. Sam parked on the combination of old gravel, stubborn grass, and plain dirt in front of the buildings.

The werewolf community reminded me of an old wilderness resort, one closed for a few years. If not for the lights pouring from several of the windows, I would have locked the truck door instead of getting out.

I shouldered my bag and trailed Sam onto the covered porch. Sam pulled the solid wood door open without knocking. Inside, an eclectic array of rugs along the perimeter of the large main entry accommodated numerous sets of shoes. Hooks on the walls held a bounty of coats, jackets, and overalls.

"We don't have to worry about stealing here," Sam said when he caught me looking at the mass of shoes. "And it keeps the rest of the place cleaner if we leave our outside things here." He started taking off his shoes, and I bent to remove mine.

"You would not believe how messy this place was thirty years ago," a voice called from the hall.

I looked up from untying my shoes. A tall woman with blonde hair and a gentle smile walked into the entry. I estimated her to be in her late twenties.

"Hello, Gabby," she said coming to stand next to me. "I'm Charlene. Sam's told me about you. I'm so thrilled to meet another person like me." She held out her hand in greeting as I stepped out of my shoes.

Excitement coursed through me. Finally! Sam had mentioned Charlene, another human among the werewolves, during one of our many talks. The possibility that I wasn't as alone as I thought obliterated any hesitation I might have had, and I reached out and clasped her hand.

Charlene's grip was firm and sure, but I barely noticed it. The darkness of my other sight had burst open and the brilliance of the sparks surprised me; their normal soft glow amplified so much that the blinding light obscured their gentle colors. I let go of her hand while maintaining my focus. The lights dimmed considerably so I could again discern their soft colors.

Sam's spark glowed blue with a green halo and hers, while still containing the yellow center like any human, had a red halo. I'd considered the possibility that my orange halo was because I couldn't see myself correctly using my other sight. But seeing Charlene's assured me our uniqueness was real.

Beyond our sparks, I noticed other blue-green lights. Not in the immediate area, but spread throughout my area of awareness. The coloring of those lights matched Sam's. Werewolves then were blue-green, I thought. Color by species made sense, but Charlene and I didn't match. Why?

"Like me?" Her words suddenly penetrated my study of the sparks. Could she see lights too?

"So far, we are the only two humans who seem to be compatible with werewolves," she said, still smiling in welcome.

My hope sank. So we were human and...wait, what?

"Compatible?" I looked at Sam in confusion. I knew that I smelled differently to werewolves, but he hadn't mentioned anything about compatibility. Charlene answered before he could.

"Yes, werewolves choose their Mate—husband or wife—instinctually. They have no history of ever before selecting from humans for their Mates, but here we are. Whatever it takes to become a Mate, we apparently have it, too."

My mouth popped open in shock as I understood. I turned on Sam.

"You brought me here to hook up with a werewolf?"

"No, Gabby. I apologize for upsetting you," Charlene said from behind me. I turned to look at her. "Yes, we're different in that a werewolf might choose us, but that doesn't mean that they must choose us or that we have to choose them. At your age, there will be no hooking up."

She looped her arm through mine and gave me a motherly pat. As soon as she touched me, all the sparks around us brightened again. I didn't even need to focus. The lights just flared and continued to glow brightly without effort. Weird.

She led me toward the hall from which she'd entered. After a few steps, she stumbled and pulled her arm from mine. With relief, the lights in my mind extinguished, and I concentrated on her words.

"I asked Sam to bring you so you and I can talk. As I said, there is no one else like us that we've found. I came here when I was younger than you—long story—and met Thomas, the pack's leader. It was a very hard adjustment with a huge learning curve on both our sides. I don't want you to have to face any of that on your own. We'll introduce you slowly to this new world you're now a part of. If you have any questions, don't be afraid to ask them."

She led us down a second hallway and stopped in front of a closed door. When she

opened it, I saw it led into a very small apartment.

“This is still a work in progress. Let me know if you need anything,” she said, looking at Sam. He nodded.

I took a moment to take in my surroundings as Charlene walked away. The small, main room had only a few mismatched pieces of furniture. The bedroom, which I suspected had once been a walk-in closet, barely held a twin-sized bed, nightstand, and lamp. Sam insisted I take that room as he set his bag on the foldout couch. I didn’t complain. I figured sleeping in a half-sized bed ranked higher than Sam’s sleeper sofa.

A tiny bathroom right off the main living area completed the suite. The apartment definitely qualified as rustic, but I didn’t mind.

\* \* \* \*

Sam woke me after a few hours of sleep.

Despite Charlene’s assurances that my stay didn’t include finding a boyfriend, I still felt leery over Sam not telling me about the compatibility thing. I’d thought I could trust him, and his omission stung a little.

I wanted to excuse it—maybe it’d slipped his mind—but it’d taken eight hours to get here. Granted, most of that time we’d talked about the progress the community had made and the customs, like pack hunts, that they no longer followed. Still, he could have mentioned that doozy. *By the way, Gabby, werewolves will want you as their Mate.* I paused then shook my head at the thought. Yeah, I would have reached for the door handle and tried to jump from the moving truck. Maybe, he’d made an okay call. Only time would tell.

I got out of bed and dressed. Sam already had his bed made when I opened my door.

We left the apartment and he led me to a large room, which he referred to as the commons, to get a bite to eat. The space served as a cafeteria and an entertainment area with sitting arrangements scattered around the room. It even had a pool table set in the back corner.

Charlene saw us and came over to our table. Two young men followed in her wake. She introduced them as Paul and Henry. She thought I might like the opportunity to talk to people my own age. She even suggested we go into the woods so they could show me more about the werewolf way of life. Sam heard my panicked heartbeat, and before I could refuse, he suggested we use the lounge in the commons to get to know each other, instead.

Paul and Henry didn’t treat me the same as human boys did. As curious about me as I was them, they asked a myriad of questions.

“What’s school like?” Paul, the boy with dark hair and a carefree smile, asked while sitting on a padded dish-chair close to me.

“You don’t go to school?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Nah,” said Henry, a short stocky kid with bright blue eyes. “We’re home schooled here. It’s way quicker to graduate since we can study at an accelerated pace because we don’t have to break for holidays or anything.”

“That actually sounds pretty great...what school should be, minus the no breaks part.” I cringed inwardly at the thought of school year round then answered his original question.

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