The Cave

by provocation

Summary

A fix-it fic where Mike goes back to the mountain for Wolfie, and finds other surprises awaiting him. A story about trauma, grief, development, transformation, and love. More detailed content warnings in the notes.

Notes

This tiny idea has bloomed into something unbelievable, and I am eternally grateful to everyone who has helped me with this. The greatest help has come from Parker, my cheer-reader who has put up with a frankly outrageous amount of grousing and brainstorming about this fic. Thank you for helping me create this story.

For the purposes of this story, everything is compliant with the canon "good ending". Here are the butterfly effects: Chris picked to save Josh the first time and Ashley the second, Sam escaped from Josh, Ashley stabbed Josh, Mike's fingers were amputated, Wolfie survived, Emily got bitten but Mike didn't shoot her and Ashley hid what she learned, Matt and Jessica escaped the mines together, Hannah learned the truth about Josh, the eight "survived". The only other major choice I have made about this universe that might throw some off guard is that everyone is Canadian, residing in Vancouver.

Content warnings: descriptions of and references to canon-typical violence, canonical character death, minor character death, sustenance hunting, animal death, cannibalism, characters with anxiety/PTSD/depression/ADHD/schizophrenia/paranoia/hallucinations/suicidal ideation, characters with internalized biphobia, asexual characters, polyamorous characters, non-
binary characters, mentions of & references to sex but no sexually explicit content, prescription drug usage/abuse, recreational drug usage, descriptions of and references to drug withdrawal, brief references to hospitalization, horror themes/references, supernatural creatures/lore, supernatural violence, violence towards a child, unreality in the form of misleading dreams, and in-depth descriptions of the grieving/mourning process.

Finally: the title is from The Cave by Mumford and Sons.

♡

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

“Local Teens Rescued From Blackwood Mountain.

“Earlier this week, a group of seven teenagers were rescued from Blackwood Mountain. Readers familiar with local lore or news will remember that Blackwood is home to many stories: an abandoned sanatorium and a series of intricate mines add to the mountain’s history. On February 2nd, 2014, two teenage girls went missing: Hannah and Beth Washington, the youngest children of the Washington family that legally owns the mountain.

“This year, their brother Joshua Washington invited seven of his friends back up to his family’s lodge for a trip to remember the anniversary of his sisters’ disappearance. Six of them were in college, and one in their senior year of high school. This trip went awry overnight, and by dawn the next morning, the local police had arrived to extricate the remaining teenagers from the situation. The teenagers all had various injuries, ranging from cuts and concussions to missing fingers and infected bite wounds. They are all in stable conditions, with the exception of the host of the trip. The status of Joshua Washington remains unknown.

“What happened to the teenagers on their trip is not exactly clear. The Washington’s lodge has been partially burned down, and a smaller cabin shows signs of forced entry with two smashed windows but has no evidence inside of a robbery. The mountain’s radio tower was demolished, falling over and nearly killing two of the teenagers. Throughout the lodge and mountain, detectives found Native American artifacts, horror film paraphernalia, dead animals, weapons (ranging from firearms to knives) strewn everywhere, and, most tragically, the bodies of Beth and Hannah Washington.

“Whether Joshua Washington orchestrated this entire disaster is also unclear, as he is still missing and several of his friends defended him in their statements to the police. They also mentioned a ninth party; a nameless older man bearing a flamethrower who told them all horror stories about a Native American legend. The teenagers reported that the stranger had died, but as they were in shock at the time, police are still investigating this man.

“Local police have asked us to include a warning in this article to stay away from Blackwood Mountain for the time being, as the entire mountain is effectively still a crime scene. If you have any information, please contact the Editor-In-Chief here at the Crag and Canyon, or contact the police service using the numbers given below,” Chris finishes, voice hoarse by the end.

The room is still for a moment. The seven of them ordered breakfast from one of the few local restaurants that delivered, and they’re all sitting around Emily’s apartment, waiting for their food. None of them want to speak. No one wants to think about what this means for them, for the future, for all the people they’re going to have to explain themselves to.

Emily is the first to break the silence, pushing her hair up out of her eyes. “They didn’t even mention the wendigos. We all told them, right? We all told them about what we saw?”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, a furious glint in her eye. Everyone nods in agreement. Sam, Jess, and Mike are on chairs around the room, although Jess and Mike are practically sharing one. Matt and Emily are sitting together on the couch, leaning into each other like they think everyone cares about their relationship. Ashley sits next to Emily, and Chris is on the floor, propped up against the couch between Ashley’s legs. If Josh were there, he would have made a joke about that.

The status of Joshua Washington remains unknown.
Jess moves under Mike’s arm, and he realizes he’s the only one that hasn’t nodded. He says quickly, “I told them about that thing taking Josh, so yeah.”

“That thing,” Sam echoes, a frown snapping into place. “You mean Hannah.”

They’ve only been off the mountain for three days, but this argument already feels played out. Mike doesn’t even have the energy to glower at Sam, rolling his eyes and spitting back, “I am **not** calling that *monster* Hannah.”

“But it **was** Hannah,” Sam protests. “We can’t just pretend like we don’t know what happened to her. We have to honour her properly.”

Ashley, who’s usually on Mike’s side with this debate, shakes her head. “What, we can’t pretend we don’t know she ate Beth? Maybe some of us just don’t want to think about it, Sam. Maybe it’s easier to admit that Hannah died up on Blackwood long before we went back there, and that that thing that hurt us wasn’t her at all.”

Sam looks ready to physically fight Ashley, and while the old Mike would have paid money to see that, the new Mike wants no part of it. Before he can say anything to deescalate the situation, Matt unexpectedly speaks up, voice stern and final. “We can honour Hannah without making Jess upset.”

The anger disappears from both Ashley and Sam’s faces, and their eyes go wide with concern. Mike turns to his girlfriend, who’s curled up under his arm and not emoting much of anything at all. Jess has her knees pulled up to her chest, and she’s chewing on one of the aglets of her hoodie’s drawstrings. She looks like a child, which would be an unnerving idea if Mike hadn’t thought it so often lately.

Jess has barely spoken a full sentence to anyone but him since they left that police station.

“I’m sorry, Jess,” Ashley says, and her voice is soft and scared, like she’s talking to a rabbit instead of a human. “I didn’t mean to make you upset.”

“We can talk about it later,” Sam says, and her eyes dart over to meet Mike’s gaze. She looks less gentle than Ashley but just as apologetic. The mountain, as fucking awful as it may have been, stoked a different new quality in each of them. It turned Sam into a fucking powerhouse, and it brought out the resourcefulness in Matt and Chris and Ashley. Emily seems kinder these days, more accepting of Matt’s ways— regardless, Mike still can’t bring himself to regret ending things with her.

Mike would like to think that the mountain made him smarter, or helped him realize his purpose, or forced him to accept his role in Hannah’s demise. He’d like to think that having to amputate his own fingers and nearly shoot his ex-girlfriend gave him wisdom, or the ability to find strength in pain. If he could dismiss watching Jess disappear into the darkness of the mines and through a door and Josh getting tugged away through that lake kicking and screaming, then he would do so in a heartbeat. It would be equally selfish and self-preserving. Mike would love nothing more than to forget what had happened, or at least to be able to think it changed him for the **better**.

The truth he doesn’t want to accept is that the mountain instilled fear in Mike. He can’t look at his own girlfriend without seeing her covered in blood, and he can’t pick up a knife without feeling sick. He’s always been scared of isolation, surrounding himself with company whenever possible, but now he has a whole new host of fears to deal with.

And to make it worse, Jessica is arguably handling the mountain worse than any of them. She
rarely talks, and hardly takes care of herself, not bothering to apply makeup or do any of her old self-care rituals. When she does talk, she can’t seem to accept Josh’s death, constantly referring to him in the present tense. That always sets off Chris and Sam. The doctors described her condition as severe trauma-related shock coupled with selective mutism. The detectives had been wary of Mike’s role in Jess’ story. In the end, the evidence that convinced them of Mike’s innocence was how Jess described him in her own interview— full of love and trust. *He came for me.*

Mike cares about Jess, and thinks the world of her, and would marry her in a heartbeat if he thought it might make her better. But he’s not sure it would make her better— and he’s not sure he loves her. Not like he should love his girlfriend, anyway. He mostly feels guilt when he looks at her, all the attraction having evaporated in the few minutes between the flirting and the mine shaft.

Gently, Mike runs his fingers over Jess’ hoodie, and she leans into his side. He observes at the others; Ashley still looks concerned and guilty, as does Chris. Emily is eyeing Jess with something unfathomable, and Matt is staring straight at Mike, not at Jess at all. Startled, Mike raises an eyebrow, and Matt does nothing to alter or explain his gaze. His jaw is set, and Mike thinks—not for the first time—about Matt and Jess exploring the mines arm-in-arm and finding their way out together. *He came for me* might be true but Matt helped save Jess when it might have been safer to save himself. Mike wonders if Matt has a thing for him: that sure would explain why Matt seems to obsess over all Mike’s girlfriends.

The doorbell rings through the apartment, and all seven of them jump. Emily is the first to laugh, untangling herself from Matt and getting to her feet. “Is everyone maybe feeling a little on edge today?”

Jess smiles at Emily’s joke, which might be a first, and Chris laughs uncertainly. Mike grins, and gets to his feet. It’s about damn time they were all scared by something as innocuous as breakfast. Mike would like to be done for life with mountains and monsters and death.

Mike makes it two weeks before realizing he needs to go back to Blackwood Mountain.

The realization comes, as most realizations do, as a surprise. This time last year he was trying to deal with the guilt of Hannah and Beth going missing because of his stupid prank. This year, the first half of Mike’s February is spent trying to deal with the guilt of Josh going missing because of Josh’s infinitely smarter and way worse prank. He also tries to deal with the newfound knowledge that since cannibalistic spirits exist, other magical forces probably do as well. That would only make sense, right?

Last year, Mike had gone back to high school, where there had been a candlelight vigil for Hannah and Beth. It had felt fundamentally wrong to Mike, and he’d even voiced his concerns to the principal— he remembers saying “They’re not *dead*, just *missing*,” over and over again until it became a mantra. Josh had walked by the principal’s office and heard Mike complaining about the vigil, and his withering look had been the end of that protest.

This year, he’s technically enrolled in his first year of university. But there’s no chance in hell of him returning to school this semester, not when Sam found him crying over a half-made grilled cheese sandwich the other day.

(“I couldn’t cut it,” he says to her, sobbing like a child. “What the fuck is wrong with me. I couldn’t lift the fucking kn— the stupid fucking—”)

“Hey, hey,” Sam says, pulling him close like his mother used to do when he’d cry like this. Minus
the comments about how little boys shouldn’t cry, of course, because this is Sam and Sam is above all that crap. “I’ll do it. Don’t worry about it.”

Mike has to close his eyes as she slices through the bread, cutting the sandwich into halves and putting it in a container. He wipes away his tears, furious with himself for showing weakness around the strongest person he knows, and Sam smiles and pats his shoulder.

So he stays at home, and tries to shake off all the bad shit still clinging onto him. His mother comes to pay a visit before the end of the week, and she cries when she sees his hand, but he tells her that it’s not that bad. At least it’s not his writing hand, and it’s not like he was going to use his ring finger for anything, right, ma? Not with his ugly mug, anyway.

Usually when he does his best impression of a mafia gangster his mother smiles, but right now all she does is shake her head gently. Her pinky and ring fingers fold over the amputated stubs on Mike’s hand, and he can’t stop staring at the contrast. “Vena amoris,” she tells him, and when he doesn’t react she explains, “The vein of love. It goes all the way from your heart right here, to this finger. That’s why you wear your wedding ring there, Michael.”

She stays for four nights in his apartment, and it’s wonderful. She doesn’t question him on his explanation of the wendigos, or mention the conflicted look on his face when he talks about Jess. When she asks him about Josh’s funeral and he gives her a half-assed explanation of the Washington family’s problems with denial, she doesn’t push the topic. Instead, she does all his dishes without his permission, and takes one load of his clothes to the laundromat. She returns with two loads and a bunch of new clothes Mike has never seen before, and restocks his fridge and throws out all his favourite expired jars of disgusting things. “I knew you should have lived on campus,” she scolds him as the spinach dip joins the rest of his trash. “This place is a pigsty.”

When his mother leaves, she kisses him on the cheek, standing on her tiptoes to do so. Then Mike kisses her on the forehead, closing his eyes, and then she’s gone, promising to call him tomorrow. He stands there for twenty-five minutes and then goes to his laptop and looks up vena amoris, ignoring the newfound difficulty of typing with eight fingers.

According to the internet and science and human anatomy, his mother is wrong, but according to Mike’s nineteen years of existence, his mother is usually right, so he’s willing to let this one slide. The thought stays on Mike’s mind until he finally decides to do something about it, and he goes out to buy Jess jewelry.

Not a ring, because that is a dozen different terrible ideas wrapped up in the biggest one possible, but something precious. He’s noticed that since the mountain Jess has developed a penchant for playing with random tiny objects: strings and buttons on her clothing, labels on water-bottles, and once, hilariously, Christopher’s glasses. Mike does some research on the behaviour, even getting in contact with one of the doctors who had diagnosed Jess with her condition. He stumbles upon the word “stimming” or “stimulation” and thinks yes, holy shit, yes, that’s exactly what it is. It’s like Jess needs to try harder to feel emotions, to connect with things. The old Jess would have attributed it to something Freudian and made several raunchy jokes; the new Jess can’t seem to help her flighty hands, and it’s sad to watch.

Mike goes to a jewelry store, and he buys Jess a necklace: a silver number with lots of different parts to fiddle and play with. As he’s nervously tapping his debit card against the machine, the cashier asks him if it’s for someone special. Mike nods and says his girlfriend, which feels too mundane to be real. Just seven days ago he watched an entire house go up in flames, evil spirits leaving their vessels to fly off into the world. Now he’s being asked default customer service questions, and answering pleasantly about his girlfriend.
“That’s a nice Valentine’s Day gift,” the cashier says with a wide, toothy grin. “I’m sure she’ll love it; I wish my boyfriend would get me something like that.”

Mike stares at the necklace, feeling the world collapse around him. “Sorry, when… is Valentine’s Day again?”

The cashier’s grin fades a little, and he frowns at Mike. “The 14th.”

Covering up his mistake, Mike nods and babbles out, “Oh, right! Thanks,” before taking his necklace and his receipt and leaving the store as quickly as possible. As strange as it sounds, he really hadn’t thought about this gift for Jess as something romantic. He hasn’t thought about Jessica as his girlfriend in a while— hell, he didn’t even tell his mother about her.

He doesn’t head over to Jessica’s house right away like he’d planned. Instead, he reasons with himself that at this point, he might as well wait to give Jess the necklace on Valentine’s Day. That would be the smart, caring, Good-Boyfriend thing to do.

Actually, he’s pretty sure the smart, caring, Good-Boyfriend thing to do would be to break up with her now instead of drawing things out, but he can’t do that to her. Jess needs him right now, and he’s terrified of being alone, so even though he’s not into her, he’ll make do. That’s what other couples do, right? They make do with what they have, even if what they have is two fucked up people with recent trauma struggling to make sense of how they fit into their own lives.

Right?

Valentine’s Day rolls around faster than Mike could have predicted, and when he hears about what his friends are doing he’s beyond grateful for the cashier’s warning about the holiday.

Matt and Emily have taken a surprise trip out of the province together— Emily’s idea, not Matt’s. They’re going to the States to visit Emily’s family, who Matt has never gotten the chance to meet before. Mike has only met Emily’s younger sister, who is quite possibly the scariest person on the entire planet— including Hannah the Wendigo. Emily is taking this semester off from school just like Mike, to preserve her GPA and mental health. Matt is only taking the week off from high school because nobody really cares if you miss a week of high school, despite how much Matt has over-inflated the importance of his high school sports team’s practices to them all. (Mike’s pretty certain that full-contact lacrosse is a made up sport anyway.)

Sam purchases herself a bouquet of flowers, only to get back to her dorm room and see that three different people have also ordered her bouquets of flowers. She mixes up the four bouquets into one huge vase, and posts an Instagram photo of the entire thing with the caption “Love my friends and my secret admirers and most importantly myself! #acelife #valentinesday #love”, which is just about the cutest thing anyone has done for Valentine’s Day ever.

Chris and Ashley are on the rocks, which is obvious because every time the group hangs out with them they can barely stand to touch. If Mike had to guess, he’d say that Chris picking Josh’s life over Ash’s was probably a pretty good omen that their budding love was not long for this world. Mike thinks that Josh would most likely be pretty sad about his plan to get them together failing, were he alive to witness their fights now. Then again, Mike doesn’t know what he expected— real life doesn’t work like Saw, and real people don’t always stay together after they get together during a crisis. Chris and Ashley are making it work for the day though, if Ashley’s texts to the group chat mean anything. Ashley sends a picture of an extravagant lunch set-up to them with a rainbow of heart emojis and a wish for them all to have “Happy Valentine’s Days”. Chris is visible
in the background of the picture, on his phone like usual, and Mike is sure glad he’s not a third wheel at that restaurant table.

So given that even his friends who are single and who are about to be single are having great days, Mike figures he’d better do something special. He drives over to Jessica’s house to pick her up for dinner, dressed to the nines. When he opens the door, Jess is in a blouse and skirt that looks like something Hannah would have worn. Mike has to struggle not to visibly recoil at the thought.

“Hey, you,” Jess says, a smile spreading over her face at the small bunch of pink and yellow tulips Mike’s holding in one hand. “Those are beautiful.”

“They’re not for you, they’re for your mom,” Mike says, because he might have almost completely forgotten about this holiday but he sure as hell hasn’t forgotten how to be charming. “These are for you.”

As he whips out a much bigger bouquet of white and pink roses from behind his back, Jessica’s smile grows until it’s nearly ear-to-ear. “Oh my fucking god,” she squeaks, and takes a bouquet in each hand, leaning in to sniff the roses. “Mike. You’re too good to me.”

“I don’t think there’s a person on this planet who’s too good to you,” he answers honestly, and Jess stands on her tip-toes to kiss him.

Mike leans into the kiss, because it’s Valentine’s Day, but he doesn’t think he’s felt less invested in a kiss in his whole life. He doesn’t feel bad; he just doesn’t feel anything at all. Jess pulls away, rocking back down onto her feet, and smiles, harmless and blissful. Something in her eyes seems expectant, like she’s waiting on something, but she doesn’t say anything. Mike wants to ask what’s wrong, but before he can say anything, Jess pulls him inside. “Can we do something different? I don’t want to go outside tonight. It’s… dark.”

“That’s okay,” Mike says. He can cancel their reservation for dinner with an easy phone call, and he doesn’t mind the opportunity to save money. “You wanna stay in?”

“Yeah.” Suddenly her voice is softer, and she starts fiddling with the wrapping paper on the bouquet of tulips. “But, uh… can we not have sex? If that’s alright? I— I know it’s Valentine’s Day, but I just don’t think I can… it’s hard to be naked, after what-what happened—”

“Of course,” he breathes. He’s more relieved than he can express because sex hadn’t even come to his mind, which is so, so stupid. Matt and Emily will definitely be having sex tonight, and Chris and Ashley might even make a go at it. Mike must be really fucked up if he hadn’t even considered the possibility of hooking up with his girlfriend on Valentine’s Day. Not wanting to sound too eager, Mike forces a sober expression onto his face, and reaches out to pat Jess’ hand. “That’s totally fine. I understand.”

Jess nods uncertainly, apparently done with talking for the moment. She walks off into her house towards the kitchen, leaving Mike alone in the foyer. He wonders if Jessica’s parents are out for their own date night or if they’ve left the house empty for their daughter’s sake. Mike toes off his shoes and hangs up his jacket, and then follows Jess through the house. He wonders if he said enough about her wanting to abstain, and then wonders if this would be the ideal time to break up with her.

He finds Jess in the kitchen, moving the roses into a large vase. The tulips are already in a crackle glaze vase on the counter, ends snipped off neatly. Mike watches Jess at work for a minute before stepping forward and making his presence known. “Hey.”
Jess jumps, and the vase shakes in her hands. Instead of calling him an asshole or trying to prank him back, she turns around, eyes wide, and whispers, “God. You scared me.”

Contrite, Mike steps forward under the fluorescent kitchen lights, opening his arms. Jess slowly moves towards him, and curls into him. “Sorry,” he says, kissing her hair lightly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she mutters. “I’m such a fucking baby.”

“You aren’t. We’re all still recovering.”

“Well, some of us are recovering faster than others,” she grumbles into his shirt, and Mike can’t help but smile and chuckle.

“What, you mean Emily? I wouldn’t call flying home to see her evil bitch sister on a whim recovered. I’m pretty sure she’s got this idea that if she can try to force herself to act normal then the world will start to feel normal again.” Mike, currently wrapped around his girlfriend that he’s unsure he likes, can relate.

“Sam. Ashley,” Jess points out.

Mike scoffs. “Sam’s struggling too, she’s just better at hiding it than the rest of us. And Ashley’s high out of her mind all the fucking time. I’ve never seen anyone who pops as much shit as she does.”

It’s so quiet Mike almost misses it. “You.”

For a moment Mike wants to protest and say that he’s never done drugs (except once, but weed doesn’t count, and if you’re drunk it extra doesn’t count), and then he understands what Jess is saying. He doesn’t know what to say to defend himself, because the absurdity of the idea is almost impossible to grasp. Jess thinks he’s holding up better than the rest of them.

Every single day, Mike dials the number for a local grief counselor, and hangs up before anyone picks up. He’s ordered more food in the last two weeks than he ever has his whole life, because he feels incapable of going to the grocery store, of standing near a hot stove, of doing his damn dishes. He’s taken to sleeping with a stuffed animal that he hides under his bed where he used to stash porn magazines. He has no idea how on earth he’s going to pay his rent at the end of the month, because he has no job, and every time he leaves the apartment after dark he wants to carry a weapon with him even though he knows there’s no chance of a wendigo being nearby.

The others’ recovery process may be stunted from their own personal issues, but Mike’s recovery has been non-existent. Every night he has nightmares about what happened up on the mountain, and when he wakes up he still has scars, missing fingers, and very real memories. It’s like some part of him is still up on that mountain, waiting for Mike to sever it or come back and get it. It’s horrible, and unshakable, and Mike has no idea how he’s ever going to move on and continue the rest of his life.

Jess pulls away to glance up at him, and Mike realizes that he should have replied. His mouth gapes open like a fish, and he shivers, trying to clear the thoughts or at least postpone them for later, when he’s alone. His voice comes out low when he says, “Jess, I’m fine.”

Jess fixes him with a look. It’s clear that she needs him to be telling the truth, so he repeats himself, voice more stable. “I’m fine. I promise.”

“Good,” Jess mutters, and nothing more is said of Mike’s mental state for the rest of the night.
Bones barely adhering to each other, only held together by sinewy but stretched muscles. The entire frame is shaking, grey and ugly and elongated like a kneaded eraser pulled far past its capacity. If this thing, this aberration, possesses a sole shred of humanity, it does an excellent job of disguising that shred. Its eyes are almost all white, with only faint blue pupils to show off the girl that once had owned the vessel. She’s long gone, pushed out by a malevolent spirit; body twisted into something beyond God’s plan.

The monster screams, jaw unhinging, and Mike can see the sonic waves echoing through the cave. He can understand the monster, which is a new and jarring addition to this familiar fantasy. The monster’s scream is supernatural, bouncing off the water and creating ripples so strong that thousands of dead fish and wolves and Jessicas float to the surface.

Mike is chest-deep in the cold water, and he shoves the leg of a wolf away with his arm. Jessica’s hand takes the place of the paw, reaching for Mike, and he shoves her away. The wolf moans, and Jess moans, and Mike wonders with brief clarity if he’s in the Dead Marshes from Lord of the Rings.

The monster screams “HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY, BITCH,” and it sounds like Emily, and Mike hears a human noise so sad he thinks it must be his own. No one else could sound that sad, that lonely, that misunderstood. His hands fly up to cover his mouth, but the cry continues from behind him, and Mike looks over his shoulder.

Josh is standing there behind him, freezing and terrified and no longer delusional. His cheeks and overalls are stained red and his eyes are dark with tears. Mike wishes that Josh hadn’t chosen to tune back in at all, because he’s had this dream before. He knows how it goes.

He reaches out to touch Josh’s shaking hand, but right before he can take it, the monster screams, “WHAT DID YOU GET ME, MIKE? WHERE ARE MY FLOWERS?” And that’s not Emily’s voice, that’s Hannah through-and-through. Her tattoo is still visible, etched into the skin stretched over her shoulder as a permanent reminder that this is Mike’s fault. Did she get that for me? Was she seriously in love with me? No, Josh, it was just a stupid prank. No, Josh, I’ll find her. I promise.

“I didn’t get anything for you,” Mike shouts, but he finds he’s lost his voice. He turns back to face the monster— the wendigo— Hannah— and all of a sudden his resolve is gone. “I’m sorry, Hannah,” he tries to say, and it comes out as a hoarse whisper. “I’m sorry I did this to you.”

“You didn’t do this, Mike,” murmurs Josh. When Mike turns around to see him, he’s not crying anymore. He’s wearing the Psycho mask with a black hoodie on, but he pulls the mask off and tosses it into the water, and the sweater follows that. “I did this. Remember? You tied me up in the shed because I did all this. It’s my fault. I killed Jess,” Josh explains, calmer than Mike has seen him in years. He’s now clad in only a blouse and jeans, and he starts to unbutton the shirt, big coy eyes trained on Mike. There are phone cameras growing out of the cave walls, and giggling echoing through the cavern. Mike knows where this is going, so he reaches out to grab Josh.

But before he can, someone else reaches out to grab Josh. She snuck around Mike at lightning-speed while he was distracted. “No,” Mike breathes, voice almost gone. “Josh, no!”

The wendigo lifts Josh up, far up above the water, and the cruel laughter is louder than anything else in the mines. Mike tries to move forward, but clammy dead hands are pulling him down into the water. He can’t say or do anything, and he’s forced to watch Hannah drag Josh back to her cavern. Josh is starting to look scared and confused, calling out Mike’s name with increasing
desperation. They get to the other side of the lake just as Mike’s chin submerges, and he watches Hannah’s mouth slowly open, impossibly wide even for a wendigo.

Josh leans forward like a lion tamer and puts his head inside Hannah’s mouth, and Mike screams Josh’s name but his mouth is already underwater. The last thing he sees is Hannah’s teeth close around her brother’s neck before his world becomes blue, and red, and then, finally, white.

Sunday morning comes with all the usual comforts; the yellow light filtering in through Jessica’s window, the blonde hair at the nape of her neck he’d never usually get to see, the softness of her bedspread that Mike thinks he could sink into and sleep in forever. The necklace he’d gotten her already looks familiar against her skin, silver clasp having shifted to the side of her throat in her sleep and pendants all resting somewhere between the pillows and her head. The morning also comes with a sense of relief. Mike forces himself to differentiate between reality and his nightmare, and then breathes easy, looking up at the popcorn plaster on the ceiling.

He made it until dawn again.

He tries to get out of bed without waking Jess, but the frame creaks beneath him as he sits up, and Jess’ light snoring stops. She rolls over to face him, eyes sleepy but panicked. Offering his best cheesy grin, Mike waves at her. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Morning,” she replies, pulling the blanket up to her chin. Her nightwear isn’t exactly revealing—a Disney nightgown with long sleeves and boyshorts is hardly the raunchiest outfit Mike has seen Jess in. But he understands her anxiety, given that he can easily picture the wreck of her body in the mineshaft. He leans over to kiss her good morning, chaste as a priest, and she kisses back. Mike feels something for a moment, and he’s surprised. And here he thought his sex drive had up and left during that night, stolen away from him by one of the wendigos. He presses into the kiss, emboldened by his body’s sudden reset, and to his disappointment she pulls away from him.

Jess’ lips part as if she’s searching for an excuse for moving back from their kiss, but no sound leaves her throat. Her eyes are searching Mike’s, flitting between his left and right pupil like an overwrought hummingbird. Mike is attracted to her, but that attraction is shadowed by another feeling: pity. He moves away, wishing he could erase the fear from her eyes, and Jess still doesn’t say anything.

They sit there in silence, both unable to be false or honest. Finally Jess says, “Your breath stinks.”

Mike scoffs, but he’s the furthest thing from offended. He’s glad Jessica saved the moment, because as often as he questions their relationship, he’s not ready to jump overboard just yet. He leans in to pretend to breathe all over her, and Jess squeaks and squeals the appropriate amount, demanding, “Go fuck yourself!” as she bats at his shoulder harmlessly.

This feels real, so Mike lies back down beside her instead of standing back up. Jess snuggles closer, leaning into his warmth and laying her head on his chest, and Mike puts his arm around her and pets her scalp. This is real—and warm, and good. Mike has already forgotten the gist of his nightmare about Josh, and he runs his fingers through Jessica’s hair. He thinks he might try to fall asleep again. Maybe this time he’ll have a nicer dream.

His eyes have barely closed when he’s jerked upright by a shrill bark from right outside Jessica’s room. “Holy friggin’ smokes,” Mike exclaims, defaulting to one of the minced oaths he uses around his mother. He stares at the door for a second, heart pounding.
Despite all logic, he honestly expects a wendigo to shove the door off its hinges— until Jess laughs awkwardly and pats his chest. “It’s just my dog, Mike.” She untangles herself from their embrace and goes over to open her bedroom door, where a yappy golden Pomeranian impatiently awaits her.

The eight pound animal is most certainly not a wendigo, and Mike focuses on his breathing, watching Jess scoop Bruiser up off the floor and into her arms. His tail is wagging so fast it looks blurry to Mike’s bleary eyes, and he can’t help but smile when the dog tries to lick Jess’ mouth and she pulls a face and holds him away from her body.

“Bet his breath stinks more,” Mike says, and Jess laughs and holds the puppy like a newborn baby, petting him softly. Mike tries not to feel offended that she’d been rubbing his chest the exact same way two minutes ago. If Bruiser is home, that means Jess’ parents are home from wherever they spent their Valentine’s Day, which means Mike will have to make an appearance downstairs soon. He gets up from Jess’ dangerously comfortable mattress, and walks over to reach for Bruiser.

Jess hands him over, and as Bruiser climbs into Mike’s arms Mike is surprised yet again at how small dogs can get. The Pomeranian stares up at him with big brown eyes, tongue lolling out of his mouth, and Mike sticks his tongue back out at Bruiser. Bruiser whimpers softly, and butts his head against Mike’s chest in a strange display of either trust or discomfort.

“That’s so weird, Bruiser usually loves you,” Jess muses.

Mike kisses the dog between its pointed ears. “He still loves me,” he assures her, and pets Bruiser’s fluffy back and sides until his palm is coated in dog hair. “Don’t you, buddy? Yes you do, boy! God, I love dogs.”

Jess smiles, leaning her weight against her doorframe. “You should get one.”

Mike glances up at her to gauge if she’s joking, and then pauses. His instinctive reaction is to say that he had one, but. But. Now that he thinks about it, he forgot to mention Wolfie in his retelling of the events on Blackwood to Jess. He’d told the police all about his animal companion, but Jess wasn’t interested in Mike’s sanatorium adventures beyond comforting him about his fingers. Even the thought of a wendigo still upsets her, so he hadn’t wanted to bring it up… and now it’s probably too late to do so casually.

Mike scratches behind Bruiser’s ear, and doesn’t say anything.

For some reason, the thought of Wolfie irks at Mike for the rest of the day. He makes small talk with Jessica’s parents and takes Bruiser on a walk, but he can’t stop thinking about his dog. Because that’s what Wolfie had been— his dog. The mountain took so much from him (Hannah, Beth, his fingers, their innocence, Josh) but Wolfie was one of the few things it gave him. His companion when he’d been isolated, his guide when he’d been lost.

Mike drives home, and sees roadkill in the middle of the road, obscuring the double yellow line. He frowns, and carefully swerves to avoid it, but his mind isn’t on that dead animal at all. Instead, he’s remembering the remains of another animal— the other wolf. The wolf he hadn’t been able to save from the wendigos. Mike wonders if Wolfie mourned the other wolf in his own feral way, or if Wolfie was grateful to Mike for saving it from the miner-gone-cannibal. Can wolves feel emotion like that, or are those thoughts reserved for humans? Even if Wolfie had the capacity to feel gratitude, Mike doubts that he felt grateful, given that Mike left him behind on the mountain to fend for himself. The wolf led him through the sanatorium, and in return, Mike left him behind to most likely die.
Just like he’d left Josh behind to most likely die.

Mike’s grip tightens on the wheel. He’s reading too much into this. Wolves might not feel grief. In fact, he’d be willing to bet that that wolf probably snacked on the other poor wolf’s carcass one day when he didn’t feel like going out to hunt a rabbit. Maybe Wolfie forgot Mike after a few hours.

When he gets home, he opens up his laptop to do some research. To his dismay, Mike soon finds out that wolves can and do grieve. They’re highly social animals that are meant to live in packs, not all alone up on creepy cold mountains. He also finds out that wolf tails are more expressive than fox or dog tails, which explains why Wolfie is cuter than Bruiser. There’s more capacity for communication.

He wonders if Wolfie is doing okay without his pack, without Mike. Surely the wolf’s creature instincts will kick in and save him. Wolfie held his own against a wendigo; he should be fine up on Blackwood by himself. He should be fine.

A Facebook message pops up on Mike’s screen and he jumps, realizing how close he’s leaned towards his computer. He adjusts his posture, and moves over to the tab where his friend group’s conversation is open. The chat consists of seven of them and Josh, who nobody has had the heart to kick out yet. It would feel too final.

Ashley: any plans for the week? Lmk if any of u want to hang out lmao

It’s safe to assume that Valentine’s Day didn’t go well for Chris and Ashley if she’s already typing like a passive-aggressive tween. Before Mike’s fingers can even touch the keyboard, three others are typing. Messages appear at a rapid-fire pace.

Samantha: I’d love to hang out!!! :
Matthew: we get back on tuesday! Whenever after that
Emily: We get back on Thursday.
Matthew: haha sorry babe lol

Mike sits back and watches the conversation spiral into unnecessary mayhem. At one point he sees “Christopher is typing…” but the dialog disappears without Chris sending anything. He should probably message the guy and ask if everything’s okay, but he isn’t sure he’s equipped to have that conversation. He hasn’t talked to Chris much since what happened, and they’ve never been as close as Chris and Josh were. Just the thought makes Mike jealous, which is absurd, since Josh is… gone.

Instead of contributing, Mike brings one knee up against his chest and wraps his arms around himself to watch his friends make plans.

Ashley: hell yes cant wait to get fucked up!
Emily: Friendly reminder that my boyfriend isn’t 21.
Ashley: freidny reminder that youre not even 21
Samantha: As long as we drink responsibly, it should be fine. Where do we all want to meet?
Ashley: mikes
Emily: Michael
Matthew: mikeee’s
Samantha: Mike’s house sounds good! :
Jessica: I can text him and ask?
Christopher: He’s on Facebook messenger right now, I can see him.
Every action the stranger takes seems predetermined. His jacket is too big for him, and the fur around the collar looks haggard and mangy— like he’d made it himself. Every step he takes is broad, confident, and he never moves unless there’s a purpose. When he leans against the fireplace, his stance is solid and brave, but his shoulders are tense and his good eye is twitching nervously. His blind eye swivels around too occasionally, which is unsettling in its own way; the raised scar that runs through it is ugly but fascinating. He’s missing more teeth than anyone Mike’s ever met before. If he’s been living up on this mountain, it must have been nearly impossible for him to find food to eat— especially while honouring the Blackwood idea of harming no animal. The apparatus on his back is unidentifiable, and if Mike didn’t know he had a flamethrower he wouldn’t have been able to guess. The stranger doesn’t pronounce a single word right, from Washintun to moun’n. He’s not Canadian, which makes no sense at all. His speech is cartoonish, and he doesn’t offer his name or any information about Jess.

Mike trusts him about as far as he could throw him.

But then the stranger starts spinning stories about The Wendigo, cannibal cryptid come to life, and parts of what he’s saying make too much sense. He talks about a creature that moves too fast, about miners who got screwed over and had no other option left to them. With every new detail, Mike can feel his stomach settling a little lower, until it feels like he could dry heave at any moment. He’s been wandering around this mountain for hours, trying to piece together its secrets, and from what this stranger is saying it sounds like he’s already completed the puzzle.

“Oh, crap,” Mike mutters, and the others look to him for an explanation, for reassurance, for leadership. Mike can’t offer any of those things. He can offer half-assed descriptions of the horrible monster he thought he must have imagined, but nothing he says is going to sound convincing. The stranger turns to look at him too, and Mike wants to cower under his creepy gaze. Instead, he forces himself to stand his ground. “He’s right, guys. I think that’s what took Jess. I thought it was Josh,” he addresses the stranger, “or you, but I guess it was the… oh, shit. Josh.”

“The Wendigo,” the stranger supplies, but Mike isn’t listening.

“Guys. I ran off and left Josh because I heard screaming.”

Thoughts are swirling around his head, but none of them make any sense, all draining down into incomprehensible ideas. The one idea Mike can decipher, the one he can’t manage to shake, is that he’s responsible for everything. He’s the reason that Chris can see that Joshua Washington isn’t online— that he won’t ever log on again. And then later on, he was given a chance to save Josh again. He’d cowered behind the rock wall and stayed completely still as Hannah dragged him away. Despite the decisions and actions of the others on the mountain, nobody killed Josh except Mike. Mike is directly responsible for his death.

His hands move on their own to switch tabs back to the article on grieving wolves, and Mike stares at the stock images on the page. Gray wolves with big yellow eyes stare back.
He remembers watching the police interviews, hard-earned evidence he’d managed to bribe the detectives into sharing with him. They hadn’t wanted to let him watch it, but once he’d made it clear that he was not the one responsible for what had happened on the mountain, and established himself as a sort of leader, it was easy enough to convince them to hand over the footage. Mike remembers Sam’s interview with flawless clarity, how she’d described Josh as the picture-perfect mentally ill villain. “I thought we were close… after his sisters disappeared he’d come and talk to me. He said I was the only one who understood him. I thought—I thought we had a connection.” Mike hates her for saying that, just a little, somewhere in the most rotten part of his mind.

His nails are digging into his knee now. He remembers the end of Sam’s interview too, how she’d spit at the detectives that she was fine. “You need to listen to me. I don’t care if you believe me or not. Doesn’t matter, because you will. You need to go down to the mines.”

“What’s in the mines, Sam?” Mike asks his silent, dark apartment. There’s no answer, which doesn’t matter. Mike knows exactly what’s in the mines. The rotted, decaying corpse of yet another friend he couldn’t save. By now, Josh’s internal organs will all have begun decomposition, and his blood will be breaking down and going red. Mike wonders if his teeth have started to fall out yet, or his nails. He wonders how bad the two-week-old corpse smells. Josh, with all his horror movie expertise, would know the answer.

Mike’s eyes refocus on the screen, where the wolves are still staring expectantly at him. Facebook has gone silent for the moment, and Mike’s gaze drifts to the clickbait headlines at the side of the page. One catches his eye: Learn How This Therapy Dog Saved His Owner’s Life.

When the realization that’s been edging in at the corners of Mike’s vision for thirteen days hits him, it hits like a ton of bricks. He realizes what he has to do to make the nightmares stop. Mike remembers Chris reading the warning in the article to stay away from Blackwood Mountain, as the entire mountain is effectively a crime scene. The scene of a murder. Mike abandoned Josh to his murder, and that’s something that he’s going to have to learn to live with. But his abandonment of Wolfie isn’t irreversible. There’s still hope.

It seems like such an obvious decision once he’s made it. Mike uses his good hand to open the Facebook tab and reply.

Michael: Sure, Friday sounds good! See you all then
Ashley: he LIVES. thanks mike
Jess: Okay
Sam: Yay!!!
Matt: you took your time answering gd bro ;P
Chris: See you then!
Emily: See you.

It’s Sunday night, which means he has four days until he has to see his friends. That should be ample time. He closes his laptop, and gets to his feet, looking around his barren apartment. He’s sick of this desolate place, of ordering food online and holding stuffed animals and feeling helpless. He isn’t helpless—not in this matter. He can make an active decision here to be the hero; or to stay at home, lonely and depressed and constantly scared.

“Fuck this,” Mike says to his empty apartment. “I’m getting my dog.”
Chapter 2

Like most impulsive thoughts, the idea of returning to Blackwood is tempting to follow through with immediately. If Mike gets in his car right now and drives, he’ll make it to the edge of the Rockies in less than eight hours. He’ll have plenty of time to question his decision and probably hate himself on the long drive there and back, so there’s no point in delaying now.

He grabs a pair of gloves, a toque, and a down jacket—a new one, not the vest he’d worn up the mountain. All his clothes from his last trip were ruined, which Mike is glad for. He’s not sure he could stand putting that green coat back on ever again. He takes the essentials: his toothbrush, socks and underwear. He can charge his phone in the car.

Mike glances around his room, wondering what else he should bring. “A weapon,” he murmurs, but then instantly crosses out the idea. He’s been too scared to even look at his Swiss Army knife, let alone any kind of weapon that would actually do damage. He wishes he had a baseball bat or something blunt and heavy. Or a gun.

Since there isn’t anything left to be afraid of on the mountain except malevolent deer and unpossessed corpses, Mike decides against making arrangements for a firearm. A metal glint beside his bed catches his eye—he has a heavy-duty flashlight, almost the size of Jessica’s forearm. He knows because Jess has held it up beside her arm and laughed at the comparison.

He reaches for the steel flashlight, lifting it up and swinging it experimentally. He could knock something out with this; but more importantly, it’ll provide light. As much as he’d love to play Tomb Raider here, Mike isn’t keen on wrapping an alcohol-soaked rag around a stick to make a torch. Throwing his supplies into a duffel bag, Mike grabs two boxes of Hot Rods from his barren fridge. He definitely intends on stopping for fast food on the way, but it’s probably a smart idea to grab some snacks.

He begins to wonder if he should buy a bone or steak for Wolfie before going—but the sun has set now, so most pet food stores will be closed. His mind drifts; he could pick up a leash at the pet store too. A kennel, maybe. A dog bed for the backseat of his car. Medication to get rid of the wild diseases that the wolf is no doubt saddled with. He stares at his spare socks and toothbrush and flashlight. He wonders if this idea was a colossal mistake, and then doesn’t give himself enough time to second-guess his plan. Within three minutes, Mike and his duffel bag are in his car.

Last time the trip to Blackwood Mountain had felt like it had dragged on for days. And it had, technically—they’d pulled over at a rest stop so he and Jess could kiss awkwardly over the center console and then nap for a few hours. This time, to Mike’s surprise, the trip soars by. Maybe it’s the lack of Jessica curled up in the shotgun seat beside him, or the fact that he’s heading out in the evening instead of the morning, but the further he gets away from his apartment, the better he feels. Maybe it’s that he’s not heading out to deal with Emily and her new boyfriend, and Josh’s tangled grief and emotional state.

Perhaps this time, Mike’s spirits are lifted because he knows what he can expect from the
mountain. He made Blackwood his *bitch*, mapping out the sanatorium and mines and turning them from uncharted nightmare settings to his own Wendigo hunting grounds. While they were airlifted from the mountain, they had all silently sworn to never go back. Even then, some part of Mike had mourned the loss of potential adventure. He had discovered so much about the lost miners and the illegal medical procedures, and there is still so much left to learn about the native lore and other mysteries of the mountain. Part of him is excited to return there and see what else he can discover.

Or maybe it’s his kick-ass playlist. On the last trip, Jess had commanded the music, breaking the centuries-old rule about drivers and shotguns and cakeholes. This trip, Mike is in control. He blasts Twisted Sister, stays exclusively in the fast lane of the highway, and he exceeds the speed limit just enough to feel like a badass.

“No, we ain’t gonna take it anymore,” Mike informs his windshield, drumming against the wheel with his knuckles and grinning like a maniac. He looks over to the shotgun seat, and tries not to feel disappointed when he doesn’t see anyone sitting next to him. If all goes well, soon he’ll have a wolf with him; his own badass souvenir from the mountain. The only friend he has who knows what he truly went through up there. Mike swallows down the isolated feeling in his throat, and looks back at the road, zoning out as dark fields speed past his window.

As the Rockies loom closer and closer, Mike feels his anxiety beginning to spike. His playlist is still valiantly cycling through his best kick-ass songs, but somewhere between Vancouver and Kamloops he turned the volume down to a less ear-splitting level. He checks the dashboard clock, which informs him in red blaring numbers that it is 1:15 in the morning. Some part of Mike wants to call his mother. Another part of him wants to pull over and curl up in the shotgun seat and return to his journey in the morning. He glances at said shotgun seat and realizes with a jolt that he forgot his stupid stuffed animal.

Mike grits his teeth, and forces it out of his mind. “Good,” he says aloud. “Didn’t need it anyway.” He’s nearly twenty— it’s high time that he ditches the comfort objects and grows up. As scared as he’d been on the mountain, he’d liked the person he’d turned into; someone who could wield a machete against cannibal spirits and carry a gun with steady hands and save the day. Mike wants to find that courage in himself again, and there’s no way in hell that a hero like that sleeps curled up with a tiny beluga whale.

(He tries not to think about the fact that he’s basically trading the stuffie in for a bigger comfort animal.)

Mike ends up pulling over when he gets to Revelstoke, but not to sleep. He exits the highway almost on a whim, and considers the signs advertising various motels and inns. The sun won’t rise until half past seven, and Mike doesn’t see the point in shelling out money to stay for one night only to face his fears again later today. Instead, he steers towards a gas station, and stares up at the unnaturally fluorescent lights. After hours of head and tail and dashboard lights as Mike’s only illumination, the gas station feels bizarre, as if reality is suspended here. Mike puts his car in park and forces his gaze away from the lights.

The cars speeding by on the highway pay no regard to Mike, and nobody else is parked at the gas station. He searches his surroundings for any sign of life and is relieved to see an exhausted gas station attendant standing dutifully at their post inside, flipping through a magazine. The fear inside his chest shrinks down to a manageable size, and Mike breathes easier. He isn’t alone, if even just while he refills his tank.

Mike turns off the engine and suddenly the world is silent, as his sound system powers down and
the white noise of his car ceases to be. A westbound 18-wheeler speeds by and Mike turns to look, unable to read the logo in the darkness. Suddenly, the lights of the gas station seem bolstering instead of unsettling, and Mike gets out of his car. He purposely doesn’t look at the field and ditch next to the gas station devoid of light. He swears to himself he doesn’t see wide white eyes and long bony limbs in the darkness.

Regulating his breathing as he fills his tank with gasoline, Mike keeps his eyes fixed on things he can recognize as safe. The gas pump. His car door. The duffel in his backseat. His hands; no, wait, shit, not those. Not for the first time, Mike twitches his hand, trying to move fingers he no longer has, and just like every time a rush of horror courses through him when he feels his knuckles trying hard to move but no fingers following the impulse.

The gas pump clicks. Mike has paid for way more gas than he meant to. “Fuck,” he says, and takes his finger off the trigger, even though it’s automatically stopped at fifty dollars. Well, at least he’s got a full tank now.

He pays debit, hoping his mother doesn’t remember the password to check his transactions and won’t call him to ask why he’s buying gas in Revelstoke. Mike gets back in his car and fastens his seatbelt, only sparing a cursory glance to the tired cashier—who hasn’t moved an inch since he last looked over at them.

Sam’s voice echoes in his head, “Don’t move!”

Mike stares for a second, and then starts his car. There’s no point wasting any more time.

The first time they’d all gone up to Josh’s cabin, Mike had flown there.

The trip had been preceded by years of Josh promising them how much fun it was up there, and the twins excitedly agreeing. Beth sang the praises of the sledding and shooting they’d get to do, promising them all (mostly Sam) that they would never shoot any animals, just pop cans and balloons and sometimes, if Bob Washington wasn’t supervising, empty beer bottles. Beth’s descriptions of the mountain made it sound like a super-exclusive resort instead of a questionable death trap.

Josh preferred the atmosphere up on the mountain, or so he claimed, anyway. “It makes your thinking clearer,” he’d promised, eyes bright at the prospect. “Your ears pop and you get all flushed because it’s so cold but it’s so nice. You can create up there.” Mike’s pretty sure that the vision of creating with Josh was what had convinced Chris to go up there — or of procreating with Josh. And he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little charmed by the idea himself. Josh used to look so earnest when he talked about going up there; he’d say that he was a different person up there. “The mountain isn’t just for cool, popular kids like us,” he’d assured Mike and Matt, an arm slung around both of them. “It’s for explorers.” In retrospect, Mike wonders exactly how much exploring Josh did by himself to set up as elaborate a scheme as he had.

Hannah liked the ambiance of the mountain, including every winter rom-com trope you could imagine. “The only one of our friends who ever comes up to the mountain is Chris,” she’d complained to Mike, crossing her arms and pouting prettily. She had told him exactly how nice it would be to have someone up there to snuggle with; when the nights got cold, the fire got warmer — as did the hot chocolate, and the blankets, and the good times with “friends”.

So eventually he and the others had given into the Washington trio’s pleas, and they’d scheduled the first trip, back in 2014. Since they all went to high school in Vancouver, it had seemed a
brilliant idea to all buy plane tickets together. Emily had been insistent on getting Mike to come sit with her in first class. Hannah had broken her sister’s heart for probably the billionth time by declining Beth’s offer to sit together in order to sit behind Mike. Mike can’t recall the memories now without seeing stains of what was yet to come, the very beginnings of Beth and Hannah and Josh’s demise all tied into one cruel prank.

They’d all gotten OK’s from their parents and guardians, as long as it was only for a weekend. They’d leave on the Saturday, and come back Monday night before school started. What their parents and guardians didn’t know was that their children were all either instigators or witnesses in the prank. Mike hesitates to even remember it as a prank when a prank sounds like wearing a silly mask or monk costume to scare the people you like. What they’d done had ruined Hannah’s life, and ended the lives of her siblings. Mike remembers exactly how excited Em and Jess were to start the prank, although he suspects they had different motives. Jess hadn’t waited long after the trip to approach Mike, and Mike, wanting nothing to do with Emily after Hannah’s disappearance, quickly fell for her many charms.

Now, he has to struggle to remember those charms despite having seen her only yesterday morning. Why is he attracted to Jess? Is it her attitude; even though he knows that’s fake? It can’t be her body. He hadn’t even felt that attracted to her back in the cabin, back before he’d seen her drenched in blood. Mike feels like he’s too young to have to deal with this many issues, but too old to pass the buck to someone else. When he returns from the mountain with Wolfie, he’ll have to deal with the real world again. For now, he can focus on his goal.

Mike is glad he didn’t fly up the second time, and equally glad he’s not flying up this time. Being airlifted from the mountain has pretty much ruined his experience with aircrafts forever. Mike would be surprised if he were someday able to catch a flight without glancing down at the ground below him and wondering what supernatural creatures were hiding there, waiting to kill him. Being in his car, even though he’s alone, feels infinitely more grounded than flying. Mike can feel the road pass beneath his tires, can feel his car accelerate or decelerate as he shifts the ball of his foot on the pedal. He’s in total control here.

The sky is dark orange now, sublime and burnt and pacific. There’s still a few more hours before sunrise, but he’s making his way into the heart of the Rockies fast. Driving into the mountain range from the coast is starkly different from approaching it from the prairies. When Mike’s mother drove him from Calgary to Banff, the mountains seemed to be distant art, cloudy points on the horizon. Despite the foothills and canyons and hoodoos, it’s impossible to mistake the area around you for mountains until you’ve reached them. But the West is not flat ground, and Mike hardly has time to realize he’s entered the Rockies before mountains have surrounded his car.

The roads become treacherous, and Mike has to actively pay attention to the signs around him—whether they’re warning him to turn slowly or to watch out for avalanches of rocks and debris and snow. There’s snow here too, brilliantly white and untouched by hikers or animals, with February firs and bushes poking through the blankets covering the mountains. Mike hasn’t seen snow since the helicopter rescued them from Blackwood, and his grip tightens on the wheel.

The mountains are breathtaking, and every so often Mike gets drawn in by a particularly spectacular view—and then wishes he hadn’t looked. It’s closer to sunrise, but the valleys of the Rockies are still dark. Even the least creative mind would wonder what kind of creatures lived in these mountains, and Mike doesn’t have to imagine: he’s seen the worst kind of creatures this place has to offer. The feelings of anxiety and isolation that he’d swallowed down earlier are starting to get worse as his car follows the winding, narrow roads through the Rockies. Grinding his teeth, he turns up the volume on whatever’s playing.
Whatever’s playing turns out to be Britney, and Mike grimaces at his own custom playlist before remembering that he’s alone. Nobody is near him, which is terrifying; but also relieving. If Mike sings along, well, there’s no one here to judge him. And if he knows every line to Toxic, well… that’s his business.

The sky is covered by a striking fusion of pink and orange, and slowly, the Rockies are waking up. Although the sun has yet to show its face, each individual tree is growing visible in the low morning light, and birds are calling out to each other far from the highway. But perhaps the greatest untapped beauty known to mankind in these mountains is Mike Munroe’s singing voice.

“Iiiiiiisn’t she luuuuuuuuuuuuuucky;” Mike wails, “this Hollywood giiiiiiiirl!” At some time in the last hour he’s switched from his playlist labelled ‘Driving Tunes’ to the entire discography of pop icon Britney Jean Spears, which he would obviously deny having downloaded if anyone were to ask. “She is sooo luuucky, but why does she cry? If there is nothiiing missin’ in her life, whyyyyy do—Dear mother of fucking Christ!”

Mike swerves, breathing hard, and his car screeches to a stop. Thankfully, there’s no one else around him for at least a kilometre, because otherwise his near-accident would have resulted in a giant accident in the middle of Nowhere, Alberta. Mike doesn’t even think he has cell reception right now to call for help if necessary, but his phone is the last thing on his mind as he stares at his rearview mirror.

The obstacle that he nearly hit is a giant, hulking creature with massive antlers that appears thoroughly undisturbed by Mike’s fast and furious driving. Once Mike’s heartbeat has returned to a more regular pace, he registers that it’s a moose, not a monster that’s wandered here from the last Ice Age. Britney continues to warble through the speakers about how she cries, cries, cries in her lonely heart, but Mike turns the volume dial down, distracted.

Thankfully the moose doesn’t charge his car, which Mike is grateful for because he knows he’d be the loser of that fight. The giant looks at him for a moment, and then apparently decides he isn’t worth its time, trotting peacefully off the highway.

Mike waits a moment to catch his breath, and then decides to go without music for the rest of the trip. Other wildlife might not be so amicable about nearly being made roadkill.

Just before six in the morning, Mike’s phone goes off, startling him. He hadn’t even realized he had sound on, since nobody’s tried to contact him all night. The noise sounds distinctly urban here, and it’s familiar and unnerving at once. He checks the notification, and sees that it’s a text from Jess. “Why are you up this early,” he mutters, and then feels bad for not smiling or being excited or doing whatever stupid shit good boyfriends do when they see good-morning texts from their girlfriends.

Mike is tempted to read the text as he drives, but his mother would magically teleport to his location to lecture him, so he waits. After thirteen minutes, karma rewards his good action with a stop at the side of the road. It’s not a proper rest stop or anything, just an outcropping in the road with a few parking spaces and an outhouse. Mike pulls off the highway, and parks. His fear of the dark night outside is less pressing than his need to piss and to stretch his legs, so after a moment of indecision, he turns off his car and steps outside.

What he’d assumed to be an outhouse is actually a surprisingly clean bathroom, with working
lightbulbs and locking doors and everything. Mike does his business, and then washes his hands—and his face too, for good measure. There’s a friendly sign next to the mirror advertising a fruit stand only a few kilometres north of here, open every March to August. “No offense, but I don’t think I’ll be back,” Mike tells the sign as he runs his hands under the air dryer.

There’s a significantly less friendly sign on the outside of the bathrooms, warning him that this part of the provincial park has known “BEAR AND MOUNTAIN LION ACTIVITY”, all capitalized. Mike scoffs, and some childish part of him wants to go to his car and get a pen to add “AND THE WENDIGO”. That would be a good way to pay respects to that flamethrower guy, right?

Mike doesn’t graffiti the poster, instead walking over to the edge of the cliff his car is facing. There’s a barrier, presumably to stop children and clumsy people from falling over the edge, and a sign with information about his surroundings. Mike scans the sign, leaning on the metal barrier. When the sign yields nothing more interesting than some inscriptions around its margins telling him “ES + MA 4EVR”, “2006”, and “the world is quiet here”, Mike gives up on learning any lore about these mountains. Instead, he looks out over the edge of the cliff, down onto the world below.

The valley of dark coniferous trees looks like a painting of the ocean done in all the wrong colours. It’s a majestic sight, but Mike can’t shake the idea that he’s safe up here, that there’s a reason that the Trans-Canada Highway was built up here on the edge of the mountain instead of down there in the uncharted valley. He knows the idea is bullshit; backcountry hikers and scientists and naturalists and explorers have explored the Rockies. Hell, Sam’s done some backpacking through here on her own.

“But none of them found a wendigo,” Mike whispers. So maybe he is safer up here. After a moment of shivering, Mike realizes that his shoulders are uncomfortably tensed—and have been tensed for who knows how long—and then he remembers that Jessica texted him.

He digs out his phone, and winces at the brightness. Mike is surprised he’s got any connection at all here. He opens the message, and then purses his lips.

Jessica: So am I going to see you before Friday, or not?

The text reads as unnecessarily passive-aggressive, and Mike rereads it a few times, unsure how to reply. He isn’t sure if they should hang out before Friday. He’s been toying with the idea of introducing Wolfie to the gang then, of sitting down and having a big Group Meeting and letting everyone know he’d gone back to the mountain for his dog. He doesn’t think he can sit through that conversation more than once, so his plan had been to let Jess in when everyone else finds out.

Mike frowns as she says nothing more. If he replies yes, that means he has to make it back to Vancouver and settle in way faster than planned. If he says no, then that means he’s practically starting a fight, because that means he has to give her a reason.

Mike is tempted to throw his phone off of the cliff and watch it disappear into the depths of the forest.

Instead, he pockets it, gets back into his car, and starts driving again without replying to her. He tries to imagine why she’s up so early anyway, and then remembers that it’s 6 in the morning on a Monday, and that her mom usually wakes her up for early morning spin class to start off the week right. Jess hasn’t gone since she’s gotten back, but that hasn’t stopped her mother from trying to return her daughter’s life to some state of normalcy.

He pictures Jess lying in her pajamas, waiting on a reply from him. Maybe she’s upset; maybe she
couldn’t sleep, and when her mom came in to wake her up for spin class, she was already awake with tear-stained cheeks and dark circles. Maybe her mom encouraged her to send that text, and now she’s rubbing Jess’ back, comforting her with meaningless words. Maybe her mom will actually convince her to go to spin class today.

Mike pictures everyone else waking up at their own pace. Chris will just be heading to bed now, if his usual schedule is any indicator. That guy sleeps less than any other human being Mike has ever known. It’s beyond alarming, since when he does sleep in, Chris will often sleep until 4 or 5 in the afternoon anyway. Mike has no idea how he’s in college, and on a fast track to graduate early no less.

Emily will sleep in for a few more hours, but Matt will wake up soon to work out. Mike envisions Matt doing pull-ups on the bar in Emily’s doorframe, shirtless with headphones in, and Em watching him from the bed with a pleased smile on her face. Matt will probably be so embarrassed when he realizes she’s awake, but then he’ll put on a bit of a show. Mike remembers putting on a show with his early morning work-outs for her, which had been fun and sexy and validating until Emily’s little sister had snuck up behind him and whacked his ass with a bright green whirly tube. Mike hopes with a sudden burst of vindictive pleasure that she does the same thing to Matt.

Sam might be awake, since she’s a superhuman disguised as a girl. Sam can fall asleep within five minutes of lying down and willing herself to do so, and her internal clock wakes her up almost precisely eight hours into her sleep cycle every fucking time. This led to many pranks being pulled on her in the early days of co-ed sleepovers, but that shit was quickly brought to an end when they all realized Sam would wake up earlier than everyone to wreak havoc on whoever had drawn on her or hidden her bra. Mike likes working out with Sam in the mornings, since she’s always fully refreshed which makes him want to improve.

Ashley is definitely still asleep, and seeing as she’s scheduled all her classes for afternoons this term, that won’t be a problem anyway. It kind of sucks that Chris and Ashley aren’t meant for each other, because they’re so similar in so many ways. Ashley usually stays up late writing, like Chris who stays up late doing tech stuff, and their combined night-owl exploits with Josh would keep the group chat active for hundreds of messages after everyone else had passed out.

Josh’s sleep schedule had been erratic. Mike doesn’t want to think about it.

His hands tighten on the wheel, and he turns Britney back on. Every gnarled tree that flies by looks like an antler, and Mike has to watch carefully to tell the difference between flora and fauna, but it’s worth it to have music on. Distracted driving is preferable to sitting here in empty silence and letting thoughts of his dead friends take over his head.

By the time Mike sees Blackwood Mountain, the sun has risen.

The sunrise is glorious in the same way that all sunrises are, but it’s even more magnificent because Mike knows what the sunrise means. Before, he might have just felt awe at the beautiful sight of the sun rising up over the horizon, and content at the day starting. Now, the sun’s presence comforts him, because the sun means safety. It means that things that go bump and hiss and screech in the night crawl back into their hidey-holes and hide their ugly, evil faces until dusk.

Mike knows they killed the wendigos, but he’s also not enthused by the idea of dozens of wendigo spirits flying around haphazardly, looking for potential cannibals. He clearly remembers the stranger’s warning to them to keep the wendigos alive and trapped— hell, Mike walked through his wendigo prison. But at the time, trapping them simply hadn’t been an option. Besides, the spirits
should remain incorporeal as long as nobody snacks on anybody else’s flesh on the mountain. And if anything were to happen, well. The sun’s up now.

Mike catches a sign in his peripheral, and slows down to read it. This has been recently posted; he doesn’t recognize it from either of his last trips down here. “ROAD CLOSED” is at the top in bold black, followed by a laminated piece of paper taped underneath. Mike scans it briefly, and catches the phrases “recent criminal activity” and “active crime scene”. The sign warns that actions will be taken by either local, provincial, or federal police forces.

“Arrest me, then,” Mike grumbles at the sign, and rolls up his window, driving past it. Despite it possibly being irrational, he still feels furiously bitter that the media coverage on their trip hadn’t even mentioned the wendigo. He supposes he understands why the police would want to keep that information quiet, but all seven of them had brought up the monster. Surely that’s enough of a red flag to mention more than ‘horror stories about a Native American legend’ in passing.

Mike drives up to the mountain, and he sees the gate in the distance. He figures he’d better not park right there, since anyone on patrol could easily look up his car and license plate and figure out who he is. Instead, he drives past it, searching for cover.

There’s a small dirt road that’s barely visible unless you’re actively looking for it, and Mike turns onto it. It turns out to be a dead end, snow-covered logs blocking his path down to what looks like a body of water. Mike can’t see clearly through the trees, but he’s willing to bet nobody’s been on this road in years. Wildflowers have grown over the tracks, and with the exception of the ones he just drove over, most of them seem to be thriving even in winter. This will do perfectly.

Mike parks his car, and grabs his duffel bag before locking it. He slings the bag over his shoulders and lets it rest on his back, making his way to the logs. He’s grateful to his past self for doing those pull-ups in Emily’s room and push-ups with Sam when he finds that lifting the lightest of the logs is hardly difficult.

With some effort, Mike drags the logs one by one to start covering his tracks. He scuffs his shoes in the dirt and snow as he walks, hoping his footprints will look like a strange bear could have left them. He grabs fistfuls of grass and flowers and loose branches to cover the logs, and although he knows very little about the natural growth process for fallen trees, he’s proud of himself when he’s done. If what he’s made isn’t genuine, at least it looks credulous. It’s not like the sheriffs that might see this are Aragorn or Sherlock Holmes anyway; they won’t be looking for anything more suspicious than basic forensic evidence.

Mike wipes off his forehead of sweat, and that’s when his phone starts ringing.

“Fuck,” he says loudly, and then reaches for his phone. His ringtone is incredibly conspicuous in the silent forest, and Bon Jovi loudly howls about being a cowboy for a full seven seconds before Mike can answer. He sees Chris’ contact image, and picks up before even thinking about it. “Fuck. Hello?”

“Hey,” Chris says, voice hesitant. “Did I… wake you up?”

After a moment of looking around, Mike has to resign himself to believing that he’s safe, and that nobody heard. “Yeah. Sorry about that, you scared me. I was, uh, having a bad dream.”

Chris doesn’t say anything for a moment, and Mike hears a mouse clicking in the background of the call. “About the mountain?”

Mike squints, scrunching up his face, and adjusts the duffel bag onto his front. He starts to walk
back to the gates, and then changes his mind. He can find another way up, so that it won’t be necessary to disguise his tracks the whole way. “Yeah, obviously about the mountain, Chris.” What other horrors have we fucking undergone lately, he doesn’t ask.

“Huh.” Mike hears typing sounds, and then another click. “Are you having a bad dream because you’re at the mountain?”

Mike feels the ground fall away beneath his feet, and all the blood in his body seems to run cold. “What?”

“I tracked your phone,” Chris explains, not sounding guilty at all. “Well, everyone’s. I installed GPS locators in everyone’s phone remotely after what happened, ones that could even work if they weren’t checking their phone’s location. I thought it’d be a good way to keep tabs on everyone, but I didn’t actually think you would go back to Blackwood.” The line is silent for a moment as Chris exhales heavily, clearly distraught. “What are you thinking, Mike? Are you okay? Do you need me to come there too?”

Mike thinks about saying yes for a moment, about waiting for Chris to book a plane ticket and then catch a bus from Calgary and come meet him and go get Wolfie with him. He thinks about the way he caught Chris looking at Josh, and how he sometimes wished that Josh would look at him like that, and how sometimes he wished that Chris would look at him like that. But a half-second later, Chris’ words sink in fully, and Mike is overcome with rage. “You… you installed trackers on our phones? What the fuck is wrong with you? I would expect this shit from Josh, not you!”

Chris takes a shaky breath in, and then demands, “Why’d you go back to the mountain?”

“I didn’t go back to the mountain,” Mike says, and regrets it a second later. But now he’s stuck with the lie, so he rolls with it. “My phone must have the wrong location. I was looking it up on the map a few days ago and did some Google Earth shit; that must be what you’re seeing. It’s eight AM. I’m not on Blackwood, Chris.”

Mike hears more typing, and then Chris says, “But—”

“No fucking buts,” Mike seethes. “I’m visiting my mom, dude, in Penticton. Maybe you’re not as good a hacker as you think you are.”

“I don’t think I’m a hacker—”

“And another thing,” Mike continues, “do you just keep tabs on all of us all the time? Do you keep track of when I’m going to Jess’ house, or if Emily sneaks out to visit other guys while Matt’s asleep in her bed? What about Sam? What about Ashley, man? Do you watch your girlfriend’s schedule like this at eight in the morning, or am I special to you?”

The line is silent for a second, and Mike wonders if Chris has hung up. He checks the call, but Chris is still on the line, remaining silent.

Finally, Mike breaks the silence to say he’s going back to sleep but Chris cuts him off with “I’m sorry.”

Mike waits for an explanation as he hikes up the side of the mountain. He pushes a dead shrub out of his way, and has to bite his lip to not make a sound when he sees a family of wild mice curled up under the shrub. Mike cautiously steps over the plant.

“I don’t track you all the time,” says Chris, voice low and hollow. There’s the guilt Mike was expecting. “Just when I get really scared. I was just... after the mountain, I kept thinking about
how if we’d been able to track Josh’s location in the shed then we could have gone and saved him before Hannah took him. I know this isn’t… a good thing to do. I’ll stop. I… there. I deleted it.”

“Thank you,” replies Mike, to both Chris and God: he’s stumbled onto a worn path. This is most likely the work of the stranger, since it’s not anything he recognizes. Since the cable car’s not an option, Mike will have to make his way up the entire mountain without assistance; but having a path cleared for him helps.

“I just didn’t want you to do anything stupid,” Chris confesses. “I... took some Adderall Ash gave me, and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Mike stops him. “Our little Christopher? Doing drugs? I’m not sure your mother Sam will like the sound of that—”

“Hey, it’s not like I haven’t done them before,” Chris laughs, despite the lack of amusement in his voice. “ADHD meds, Mike. Since, like, fifth grade.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just that Adderall hits you differently when you snort it,” he explains, and Mike doesn’t like the knowledgeable tone to his voice at all. “And I took some of Ash’s last night, since my prescription’s up, and I couldn’t sleep, so. I thought I’d check the GPS thing. I’ve only checked it a dozen times since I installed it, but I just had this bad feeling… and then when I thought you were on the mountain, I freaked out. I’m sorry.”

Mike can feel Chris’ guilt, and it’s making him feel like a sack of shit who’s even more guilty, since he’s lying to Chris. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be sorry,” he says, stomach churning. “Don’t beat yourself up over this.” He shouldn’t have yelled. He shouldn’t have lied either.

“No, I am,” insists Chris. “Like I said, I just don’t like the idea of you playing the hero and going to do something stupid by yourself. I’ve… thought about going back to Blackwood myself, actually.”

Mike really, really hopes this is an Adderall-induced goal and not Chris coming clean about a secret desire. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he warns, ignoring the hypocrisy.

“Well, I just…” Chris sighs, and Mike can practically picture him hunched over his laptop, phone pressed to his ear. “I just had this idea. It’s probably stupid, but… did you see him die?”

Mike stops walking, and closes his eyes tightly. “Chris.”

“Because I keep thinking, I know you saw him get taken, but— what if Hannah didn’t kill him? What if she just took him?”

“Chris.”

“Because, nobody’s even seen a body, and I know the detectives announced him as missing and that everyone else has given up, but I just—I don’t think I can make peace with this until I know for sure if he’s really gone or not—”

“Chris, Josh is dead,” Mike shouts. A jay flutters out of a pine tree near him at the sound, flying off to another tree without giving him a glance.

“But how do you kn—”
“Because he’s dead, okay? He’s dead.” He starts walking again, practically stomping. “I saw the wendigo take him, I know he’s dead, I didn’t save him, and I’m sorry, but he’s fucking dead. You need to let go.”

There’s silence for a minute, and then Chris says, petulant, “You don’t know that.”

“I do!” Mike pleads. “You don’t think I wish he was alive? I fucking—” He holds his tongue before he can say something Chris doesn’t know they share. “Chris, he’s gone. And going up to the mountain isn’t going to fix jack-shit. Stop doing this to yourself, man.”

Following another beat of silence, Chris says quietly, “See you when you get back from Penticton, Mike. Say hi to your mom from me.”

Mike opens his mouth to shout something else, but he finds his voice is nowhere to be found, just like in his nightmares. It’s just as well, too, since when he checks his phone screen Chris has hung up on him.

He looks around to see if anyone overheard his conversation, but nobody is there to call him out on his lie. He sighs, the noise coming from deep in his bones, and starts to move forward. He’ll apologize to Chris when he sees him on Friday, and hopefully Chris will be good enough to forgive him for the lie and the screaming, because Mike doesn’t know if he could forgive himself for a dick move like that.

“Playing the hero and going to do something stupid by yourself,” Mike grumbles, echoing Chris’ words. “Yeah, right. John McClane’s a hero. Superman’s a hero. I’m a fucking mess.”

Somewhere in the forest canopy, a magpie calls out to agree with him, and Mike raises his three-fingered hand to flip the bird the bird.

As he continues up the mountain, his spirits are already lowered, and with each new problem they sink further. Mike has lost count of how many stray branches have snapped back to smack him in the legs and chest and face, and he can already see one angry red bruise on his forearm. His delayed exhaustion from his all-nighter is starting to rear its ugly head, and Mike wishes he’d taken a nap or that he’d had the guts to go inside that gas station and buy himself a coffee. That’s how Chris stays up, apparently—just stimulates himself until his brain thinks that he can survive without rest. Mike’s not sure he could adapt to that lifestyle.

The trees he’s passing are blending together, pines all starting to look identical save the occasional wild animal that scurries away at his presence. Despite the lack of any bears being spotted on Blackwood, Mike keeps his eyes peeled for one. Being chased by an actual bear might make Hannah the wendigo pale in comparison. He doesn’t see a bear, but at one point he thinks he sees a robin; which is strange since it’s only mid-February. Mike wonders if his general knowledge of nature has been lying to him about robins and their hibernation patterns.

“Sam would know,” he says, and the words puff out into a small cloud of breath. The morning sun is doing its best to pierce the forest around him, but there’s still snow here and Mike would be shivering if not for his fantastic jacket. The chill just feels bracing at the moment; like he’s a trailblazer instead of a lost lonely youth hiking up a frozen Stairmaster. He thinks about every mountainous survival movie he’s ever seen and hopes he’s not the star of one of them. He would hate to be the only person rescued from Blackwood by helicopter twice.

Talking out loud and thinking about the others somehow makes the trek less surreal and more manageable. Maybe it helps him with his fear of isolation, but whatever the case, Mike continues to think of Sam. “She’s going to kill me when I come back,” he says cheerfully. Or she’s going to
move in with him, to ensure he doesn’t run away again. That being said, he doesn’t think Sam would be such a bad roommate. She’s the cleanest out of all of them, and the most responsible. Her veganism might be an issue, but as far as Mike’s aware, Sam’s morals don’t extend to preventing her friends from eating meat.

Emily would be the worst to live with, as shown by how he’d felt whenever he’d stayed with Emily’s family. She takes pride in dominating every situation, and gets upset whenever she isn’t in control. Mike could easily see her losing her shit over the smallest disagreement. “Oh, and also, there’s the fact that we’re not dating anymore,” he reminds himself. “That might make things weird.”

He doesn’t want to think about Jess, so Mike’s thoughts careen in a different direction as he hikes. Once upon a time back in junior high school, when Mike had devoted all his time and energy into building his personality, he’d privately thought about living with Josh when they went to college. Josh was a cool guy, despite his array of issues that were later revealed to them all. Mike remembers seeing Josh making the girls in their class laugh and blush and play with their hair because of some stupid joke he’d made, and being so jealous and so inspired at once. He’d thought about having that guy as his roommate, and if anyone had found out about these secret plans and questioned Mike, he would have said it was because he wanted someone who’d bring lots of girls around. Mike wanted Josh for exactly the opposite—he wanted someone who could make him laugh like that.

Years passed, Josh changed, and Mike pretends not to think about it as much as he does. He sometimes wonders what life would be like had he stayed close to Josh instead of Chris. Chris could have dated Emily and led Hannah on and been class president, and Mike would have kept an eye on Josh’s declining mental health. Maybe he could have buoyed Josh’s mood sometimes instead of just passing him in the hall and high-fiving him and feeling bad about the bags under his red eyes.

But Mike always dismisses the idea, because Chris would never have led Hannah on or dated Emily or Jess, and Chris would never relinquish his position at Josh’s side, and Mike is never able to save Josh in any of the fantasies he builds. For all Chris’ talk about the butterfly effect and how their actions will have consequences, Mike can’t help but think that their fates are destined, and that his is bullshit. He couldn’t save Josh from spiralling into depression in high school, and he couldn’t save Josh from mania and grief after his sister’s deaths, and he couldn’t save Josh from Hannah, and now it’s starting to look like Chris is at the beginning of his spiral and Mike doesn’t even know where to start with that. He wishes he didn’t feel this crushing responsibility to protect all his friends, but at the same time he knows it isn’t truly debilitating because Mike has never truly been able to protect them.

But maybe that will change now, he thinks suddenly. He stops short, and gives the thought due pause. “Maybe that’ll change now,” he repeats, and something invigorating flows through his veins. Having a pet is a responsibility that he can’t sidestep, and taking the first step to going back for Wolfie surely means he’s growing up, right? He finds himself filled with determination, and begins again.

- Time blends together, his surroundings indistinguishable save the sporadic clearing or memorable anomaly: a bush poking up through the snow that has somehow bloomed, a totem lying on the ground next to a split tree that sends a rush of goosebumps up Mike’s arm. Once, he sees a cavernous gap in the ground, dark and unwelcoming and foreboding. Mike gives the hole a particularly wide berth. He’s spent enough time in mines for the rest of his life. He doesn’t
approach any of the things he notices, set towards his goal: the peak. Or the burnt-down sanatorium, anyway, which is close to the top of the mountain.

Occasionally, Mike will lose track of where he’s going, surrounded by trees with ten feet on him and with no peak to guide him. The first time it happens he pulls out his phone, and despite his newfound wariness of turning on his GPS, he tries to use it as a compass. But his fingers are bright red and don’t work well, and his breath quickly fogs up the screen, making it impossible to navigate. Mike manages to get a general direction of where he’s going, but it’s not exactly like there’s Google Earth here, so for the most part he’s stuck following where he feels is right.

He sees three deer in a clearing, somehow separated from their herd. One turns its head to look at him, and Mike is awed by the creature. He remembers hearing Matt’s story about the elk that had nearly pushed him and Emily off the cliff’s edge, and wonders if this elk is related. It has a magnificent rack of antlers, and almost looks like the moose Mike saw on the road—but much smaller. Mike leaves the deer alone, continuing on his way.

Sometimes he’ll find paths similar to the first one he’d stumbled onto, and he always wonders if these are remnants of the stranger’s time on the mountain. Mike should have asked him for more specific advice on how to navigate Blackwood, but at the time he’d just wanted to get the fuck out of dodge. One such path eventually widens into what could almost be a road, and Mike doesn’t question his good luck, following the slowly winding trail and rubbing his hands together for warmth, cracking his knuckles inside his gloves. His journey becomes significantly easier with the newfound lack of obstacles, which he’s glad for since the sunlight is valiantly continuing on its journey with him, already sinking into the early afternoon. Excepting a few rare animals, Mike is alone in his travels—until he hears human voices.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispers, and dashes off the road, forgetting to cover his tracks, forgetting to be quiet. He ducks down behind a bush, and the branches prick at his back and legs. Mike doesn’t move, however, staying perfectly still save his panicked breathing.

Barely visible through the thick bushes are the outlines of two people, and Mike squints to identify them. They’re both wearing tan jackets and combat boots, and their badges on their chests proudly display them as local cops. A repetitive chorus of *fuck fuck fuck* is playing inside Mike’s skull, but he bites his lip hard to force himself to stay silent. Despite his earlier bravado, the idea of being arrested is not particularly enticing, especially when he has an unbelievable motive for being at this crime scene. Mike already knows he’s responsible for Josh’s death; he doesn’t have to serve jail time to prove it.

One of the cops is telling a story, and the other one has his hands in his pockets, listening keenly. Neither of them are armed, but Mike can see a baton, flashlight, and walkie-talkies on their utility belts. He wonders how often they patrol this mountain, and cranes his neck to try to catch bits of their conversation.

“Back in the day I actually knew the kid,” the one speaking continues. Mike can make out a cartoonish sheriff’s badge on his breast pocket, and wonders if he thinks it makes him look cool. “He and his sisters’d always give poor Bob and Melinda a heart attack with their antics. Hell, last year wasn’t the first time we came up here looking for a lost Washington kid.”

“Serves their parents right, buying a whole mountain,” the other cop points out. “This place is creepy as shit. I can’t imagine wanting to raise your kids here.”

“You know how rich people are. They didn’t raise the kids here, anyway; it’s like a cottage for them. I bet it’s real nice here during the summer.”
“Pretty shitty place to have a cottage. What with the asylum and abandoned mines and all.”

“You’re not wrong,” the older cop acquiesces, and then stops right in front of Mike’s hiding spot, facing away from him. Mike swears his heart is pounding so loudly it’s a dead giveaway, but the cop doesn’t reach for his flashlight or turn around. Instead, he reaches for his pocket, lighting up a smoke and taking a slow, long drag. “We should’ve flown up here.”

The other cop is staring at the cigarette with no small amount of envy. His partner doesn’t offer to share. “That would’ve been a touch better than freezing our balls off as we scale the side of a fucking mountain.”

“I doubt the department would have approved it, though.”

“Motherfuckers. When we find the body, then the department can suck my dick.” Mike’s blood runs cold. So that’s why they’re up on the mountain— this is no routine patrol of a crime scene. These two are looking for Josh’s corpse. The thought reassures and disgusts Mike at once. “How about that?”

“Sounds like a plan.” The sheriff sucks his teeth noncommittally.

The younger cop looks over the sheriff’s shoulder at Mike, and for a moment, there is almost eye contact. The snowy ground is solid beneath Mike’s feet but he feels like he’s kneeling on nothing, ready to fall through the crust of the earth at any second. He knows, Mike thinks, staring into the cop’s brown eyes. He knows. I’m screwed.

Just as Mike is bracing himself for the cop to say something, his partner says, “We should get going. I don’t want to make my way back down in the dark.”

“I thought— hey, uh,” the younger cop flounders, not taking his eyes off Mike. “Don’t you think we should be looking around the forest more? I mean, the body could be anywhere, right?”

The sheriff laughs around his smoke. “What, and get mauled by a bear?”

There is another heart-stopping moment of eye contact, and then the cop tears his gaze away from Mike, shaking himself and grinning. “Or the spirit of the Wendigo.”

Both cops laugh, and Mike is too relieved to feel anger at how stupid they are. They start down the path again, telling each other horror stories scarily rife with ignorance, and Mike counts to one hundred and fifty in his head. By the time he’s at 130, the cops are out of sight, and when he reaches one fifty he breathes out and then sits down, running a gloved hand through his hair. That had been way too close for comfort.

He takes a long moment to regain his breath, losing himself in thought. Part of him hopes the detectives find Josh’s dead body, so that they can confirm him as deceased, and the Washingtons can finally come to peace with their loss. Another part of him violently hopes that they don’t find it, and that whatever Hannah left of Josh is decaying slowly on the mountain in its own natural time, becoming rock and water and bone. Josh went through enough in his life; Mike thinks it’s about time he got to rest.

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By the time Mike sees the Estate, the sun has sunk into late afternoon, and he is absolutely drained. His fatigue has become too powerful to ignore, and he’s getting colder despite the sun beating down on him and making him sweat through his layers. When he sees the lodge, he’s overcome by relief— and then sorrow.
The Washington Estate is a wreck, but surprisingly still intact. Their rescuers had extinguished the fire to avoid creating a forest fire and burning down the whole mountain, even though five exhausted and scared teenagers had been screaming at them to leave the fire burning to kill all the wendigos. In retrospect, Mike’s glad they didn’t torch the entire building to the ground. The lodge has so much intricate history that Mike guesses the Washingtons wouldn’t want it completely demolished, even if it brought them so much grief.

He approaches the doors to the lodge slowly, wary of running into the cops from before. But he seems to be the only person here right now, so maybe the sheriff abandoned his search for the night. Mike stands a few feet away, reluctant to go inside. The last time he’d escaped this place, he’d left it with several bloodthirsty wendigos trapped inside. Mike remembers fire billowing out in the explosion he’d created with Sam, and their handiwork is evidenced by the charred remains of the windows and doors and burnt front wall. But he’s still scared to open the door and see a wendigo.

The front door is not frozen shut this time. There’s also no crime scene tape covering the building, so Mike reluctantly steps forward and places a hand on the doorknob, pushing lightly. Now or never.

The doors slowly creak open, and Mike holds his breath—but what awaits him inside is nothing more than a giant scorched living room. Empty. There are no wendigos, and even their vessels have either disintegrated or been collected as evidence, so there are no bones or corpses. Mike sees ashes where there were couches, burn marks covering the walls and floors and ceilings, and wreckage of what used to be the chandelier. He stares at the broken, barely recognizable pieces of the fixture and forces himself not to picture Hannah swinging from it.

Mike shuts the door behind him. It’s slightly warmer inside, from residual heat or the lack of wind. The mansion’s structural integrity seems to be holding up, and the wooden stairs are ruined but still standing. Mike makes his way over to the stairs, and hauls himself up, testing every step to see if it won’t crack beneath his feet. Half of them do, but he jumps up to the next one in time.

The upper floor is less intact, and there’s an ugly black mark on the ceiling that must have caught fire before the sheriffs could extinguish it. Mike can picture flames licking up the walls to billow onto the angled ceiling, and he frowns at the mental image. His hand covers the banister of the stairs, and for a moment he expects to feel sensation at the tips of all five fingers. Mike’s vision jerks down to his hand when that isn’t the case, and he regretfully shakes it off.

“Not the time,” he mutters, and if he’s crazy for muttering to himself while trying to survive, well then so is John McClane. Mike ignores the creepy remains of Bob Washington’s movie posters staring at him from the walls, and heads into the bedroom that isn’t Hannah’s. He doesn’t think he can deal with all the memories of that room right now.

He expects a guest room, or maybe Beth’s, so Mike is blind-sided when he enters the bedroom. Judging by the posters and piles of laundry and abandoned X-Box, this is Josh’s room. It’s been so long that he forgot. Mike stares at the Fellowship of the Ring poster for about three seconds before turning around and leaving, and slamming the door shut so loud it echoes through the lodge.

Memories flood Mike’s mind, relentless in their deluge. Josh making this room his own, even though the Washingtons didn’t live here—plastering the wall with nerd and horror shit and nerdy horror shit and giving it a personality, a character. Josh showing Mike and Chris and Matt his room with pride, and then declaring no girls allowed—with a special wink to Sam, of course, and then a kick in the leg from Beth. Josh finding out what had happened once they woke him up from his drunken stupor, Josh going out into the forest to nearly get himself lost or killed, Josh coming back
to the lodge with dead, red eyes and shutting himself in his room for a full hour and sobbing like Mike had never seen before. Josh cracking half-hearted, dark jokes when they’d returned to the lodge about renewing his no-girls policy, and wincing even though nobody kicked him. Josh never, ever sleeping in this room again.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Mike steels himself, and then goes to the next room. This one turns out to be the Washington’s master bedroom, which is still creepy but doesn’t belong to anyone who’s dead. Mike goes over to the closet, and finds an assortment of clothes— both Bob and Melinda’s. He ignores most of Melinda’s, but has no problems reclaiming one of Bob’s overcoats for himself. He slides the jacket on over what he’s wearing, and instantly feels warmer.

Mike wants to collapse, but he doesn’t think he can sleep so close to Josh’s room. He loots their closet for a few more clothing items, and stores the duffel bag on top of their collections of shoes. He grabs the flashlight, but leaves the rest with the rationale that he’ll come back for it later. It feels good to not haul around the duffel, and Mike stretches out his back and shoulders and cracks his neck, sighing.

How easy it would be to fall asleep in their giant master bed, he thinks desperately, sparing a glance to the bed that hasn’t been used in years but looks promising for comfort. How easy it would be to curl up beneath the sheets and give up on his mission for the day, to return to it tomorrow. Mike stares at the bed, and finally becomes aware of another sound in the giant, empty lodge— somewhere, a clock is ticking. He reluctantly picks up the mortal coil he’d nearly shuffled off and leaves the bedroom, closing the door behind himself. He’ll sleep when it’s dark.

The thought sends shivers along his spine, and he says aloud, “Stop that shit. There’s no more wendigos here.” The room doesn’t respond, and Mike makes his way down the rickety staircase, nearly breaking every step in the process. He doesn’t like the idea of going outside in the dark anyway, wendigos or not.

As Mike descends into the resort hotel, he has to ask himself two questions.

The first question is: “Why would anyone ever stay at this resort hotel?” He grumbles it several times upon discovering each new terrifying thing about the Washington’s basement. In theory, the idea of staying in a cozy resort in the Rockies is alluring and romantic. In practice, Mike has never been more skeeved out in his life, including when he faced off with several undead spirits at once. The basement might once have been a bustling hub of excellent service, where people could go out to explore the beautiful mountainside during the day and come home to their cozy room at night. Right now, it looks more like the perfect setting for a horror flick.

Mike remembers how excited Josh had been when he’d talked about the reactions to his prank, and how everyone had played up their fear for the cameras beautifully. Despite the many, many reasons to not traumatize your friends, Josh had probably been right about how good the footage would have looked. If he’d stayed alive long enough to edit everything together, they could have made the next Blair Witch Project.

In his curious exploration, Mike stumbles onto several harmless artifacts that intrigue him— diary entries and letters that he and Sam had missed, a viewing room with a tape of Hannah that he watches until the awful jumpscare at the end. He also finds a few things that could have stayed in his nightmares forever, like a dollhouse that depicts them all filming the prank together.

“Really fucking creepy, Josh,” Mike murmurs, looking at the tiny dolls and their ugly, black eyes. He’s glad he’s wearing several jackets because his skin is crawling at the sight. “Excellent work.”
He continues on and reaches the end of the hallway, where light is filtering in through the window. Mike steps forward, and when his foot hits the ground, it knocks something loose. Or not something, someone. Faster than Mike can say “ten thousand thundering typhoons”, a ghostly spectre is swinging down towards him, seemingly out of nowhere. She— definitely a she— has milky blue eyes, dark grey wrinkled skin, long stringy hair, and is bleeding out of several cuts and gashes. Mike jumps back, tripping and falling onto his ass as he shrieks.

The apparition doesn’t move, staring at the space where Mike had been with terrifying stillness. Her mouth hangs wide open, teeth and lips all bloodied and ruined, and when no sound comes out after a long minute, Mike starts to realize it’s not real.

“Holy fucking shit,” he says, although it’s more of a whimper. The ghostly figure stays where she is for thirty more seconds and then automatically begins folding in on herself, and tucking into a space in the adjacent wall. Within the minute, she’s gone— and it’s as if she had never been there. Mike wonders how he failed to notice that before, and then wonders how Josh’s jump-scares are still working after his death.

The second question is why Chris and Ashley suffered so much more than he and Jess did. Mike did not have a swell time on the mountain, but he wasn’t put through the same hell as any of the others. Chris was forced to pick between his friends, and Ashley thought she might die in a psychological torture test— twice. Hell, Sam got chased through the whole lodge down into the basement, and who knows what Josh had in store for her had she caught her. Sam didn’t even take part in their prank on Hannah, and neither had Chris. But Josh had punished them more than he’d punished Mike or Emily or Jess or Matt, who had all been willing and eager perpetrators. As Mike passes an abandoned camera and a bloodstain that could be real or fake, he wonders why Josh set up the prank in such a strange way.

Unless the answer is buried down here somewhere, his hopes of ever finding out why are low.

Mike’s next discovery is considerably less alarming, and turns his stomach in an entirely different way. It’s hard to imagine the resort hotel as a comfortable living space, and the kitchen that looks like it was taken straight out of a Saw movie is doing little to help this place. Despite the lack of light, the room is eerily blue, colour seeping in between different shadows and shades of grey. Mike can see several sharp silhouettes of knives hanging from various racks and hooks hanging from the ceiling holding obscure opaque shadows. A shiver runs down his back.

“Josh really picked the perfect setting for his prank,” he muses, looking around the walls for a light switch. He finds a set of three, and flicks the first one, illuminating half of the room. Mike turns around to face the creepy kitchen, and jumps at what he sees. “Motherflipper! I mean, fucker! I mean, holy shit!”

One of the many hooks is carrying an unidentifiable object that Mike has to pause before he can correctly identify it— as the drained, grey, bloodstained corpse of a pig. Or half of the corpse, to be precise; the pig is missing its legs and tail, as well as several organs and most of its blood. The cut isn’t exactly even and Mike nearly retches at what threatens to fall out at any second. If he has to see that thing’s intestines, he might just turn tail and run right back down the mountain— Wolfie or no Wolfie.

Mike hopes that Josh wasn’t the one who strung up the pig, but he also remembers what he and Sam had learned about the saw prank, and what Chris had told the detectives with dead, sad eyes. Josh would have wanted everything to be perfect— like Leopold and Loeb if their plan had been a prank. He would have practiced the saw bit over and over again, probably tearing into dozens of
animal corpses to make sure the viscera looked right. Mike can only hope that the pigs were dead first.

“I think I’ll pass on the pork special, thanks,” Mike jokes weakly as he walks by the hanging pig, feeling more and more uncomfortable with his options for food here. There are two other pigs hanging, one whole and one in a similar state of destruction to the first. The third one has a few bites out of it, which Mike stops to stare at for a moment. Did Hannah get hungry while chasing them?

Or, his mind helpfully supplies, and Mike grits his teeth against the idea. It’s not possible that the wendigo spirits roaming free could have found new vessels already. Maybe a bear came down here and gnawed on the pig before realizing it had higher food standards (read: anything not rotten).

He smiles mirthlessly, remembering how convinced he and Jess had been that the creature chasing them was a bear. In retrospect, they seem so stupid—the perfect horror movie victims. “A bear took my phone,” Mike titters, rolling his eyes. “A bear grabbed that deer and pulled it into the bush. Yeah, because that makes sense.”

Mike sees a large industrial fridge at the back, and abandons all thoughts of deer and wendigos and bears, oh my. He eagerly makes his way to the fridge, glancing at its warning signs. They don’t seem to be particularly unique, warning him that the fridge is below 4 degrees Celsius and to keep everything labelled. There’s even a charming poster informing him of the kitchen’s FIRST IN, FIRST OUT policy to keep food fresh, and Mike snorts. He opens the door to the fridge with his good hand, and steps inside.

The door has no handle inside, and Mike panics for a moment before he pushes it gently and figures out how it works. He expects the cold to hit him like a gust of wind, but it settles in slowly and makes him shudder. In the summertime, this would have been delightful for the Washingtons—a place to store as much food as they needed where it would stay professionally cold and fresh. Mike imagines Beth and Hannah sneaking down here to steal snacks long after dinnertime, giggling and shushing each other in equal measure. In his imagination of the twins’ childhood vacations, he does not factor in dead pigs hanging from the ceiling.

Josh must have had to feed himself while he was down here preparing for the prank, because the walk-in fridge is fully stocked. More than full, actually—there’s a few crates of limes on the floor next to a stack of shrink-wrapped tortillas. Mike checks them for mold, and they seem to be alright. In fact, most of the food in here seems to be fine. He sniffs a jug of milk that’s definitely expired, as is a huge slab of roast beef and a bulk package of Tofurky sausages. Mike smiles at the rotten vegan meat, figuring Josh must have bought it for Sam. “You really thought we’d stay the weekend, huh,” Mike says softly. His voice sounds canned in the tiny freezer, and there’s no reply from Josh’s ghost or anyone else on the mountain, so he keeps looking.

He finds a bag of mangoes that look passable, but when he pokes one it turns out to be grossly over-ripe. In a stroke of luck, he finds a bag of Granny Smith apples that haven’t gone soft at all, and he takes a bite out of one experimentally. The apples have been perfectly preserved, and Mike is so happy he could dance.

He keeps the apple with him as he goes into the deep freezer, also industrially marked to avoid misuse or injury. “Where were all these helpful warning signs when we were getting our asses chased by wendigos?” Mike asks the freezer, to no avail. He’s shivering after just a few seconds of inspection, and he grabs a container of ice cream and heads out of there quickly.

Mike’s next stop is the pantry, which is infinitely more rewarding for several reasons. The first is the fifth of tequila staring him straight in the face. Mike doesn’t feel the urge to get drunk tonight,
but he can’t shake the feeling that if this was a video game, he’d be judged by other players for not
taking the free loot. Instead of reaching for the tequila he grabs packages of instant mashed
potatoes and bags of pasta, gathering them into his arms with the apple and ice cream. Anything
that requires little to no prep comes with him, and he leaves behind a few moldy loaves of bread
and rotten avocados. As an afterthought, he grabs the tequila too.

“It’s not like you were gonna use it,” he says to the pig on his way out.

Mike returns to the second floor’s kitchen, placing the tequila on the bar and the rest of the food in
the fridge. This one is barely stocked, with only some condiments and a half-empty case of
Tsingtao. He feels significantly less scared about being on the main floor of the Washington Estate
now that he’s been down to the house of horrors in the basement. The only thing on the ceiling
here is a set of fluorescent lights that Mike keeps on while he cooks. Hopefully the power
company won’t notice the minor charge, and if the cops come Mike can bribe them with tequila.

The lodge still has running water so he starts boiling a pot, finishing his apple as he does. It’s the
first time in a long time that he’s cooked for himself, but it’s hard to forget the fundamentals of
making rice. Mike stocks the pantry while the water boils, thanking the Washingtons for not
skimping and buying such a nice, functional oven.

Part of him feels like a squatter, but the other part of him feels like a guest here, and Mike isn’t
sure which he prefers. Accepting that he’s not supposed to be here means accepting that he’s never
going to come back here again, that this will undoubtedly be his last trip to this lodge and probably
to this mountain. The Washingtons should sell it if they can, or make it a historical site. Blackwood
has seen enough tragedy for several lifetimes, as have its owners. Thinking of himself as a guest
here feels wrong too, because of the notable lack of any host for him.

Mike finishes his dinner alone at the bar, and then tucks into the tub of Rocky Road like he’s the
lead in a rom-com. He finishes half of the ice cream, which might feel bad at all if he hadn’t just
hiked up a whole mountain on his own. Returning the ice cream to the freezer, Mike leaves his
dishes in the sink. He’ll do them in the morning—or he won’t. Maybe he’ll let the next person
who decides to wander in here deal with that.

By the time twilight has finally fallen, Mike has been awake for well over twenty-four hours, and
he can’t stop yawning. He makes his way up the broken stairs, using the banister to hoist himself
up like he’s Tomb Raider. He passes Hannah and Josh’s rooms on his way to the master bedroom,
reaching out to touch the doorknobs gently. “Night, Hannah,” he whispers, yawn or sob
threatening to spill from his throat. It’s hard to guess which. “Night, Beth, wherever you are now.
Sweet dreams, Josh.”

Mike’s hand lingers on the cold steel knob to Josh’s door for far too long, and then he goes to the
master bedroom, closing the door. He steps out of his shoes and then climbs into the bed, fully
dressed. By the time the duvet has started to feel warm, Mike’s already asleep.

Deep beneath the Washington Estate, something stirs. It has no need of sunlight—it has made its
home down here in the darkness. It emanates its own light. It is an ungodly shade of pale, white
like the walls of a hospital, like a polished bone. A lifeless body. Nothing has ever been more
unsettling. It stands out from its blue and gray and black surroundings starkly, light harsh in the
dark mine.
Mike hears Jessica’s voice echoing off the walls of the mine, and he knows suddenly where he is. This is the mine shaft she’d disappeared into, the place he couldn’t save her. But he looks into the dark, rusty metal cage and he doesn’t see Jessica’s heaving, bloodied body, he sees a corpse floating in the air.

He tries to curse but words escape him. The corpse’s jaw is hanging loose, and Mike’s own jaw hurts just looking at it. The vision in front of him could just as easily be an angel as a ghost. An enraged angel. The corpse licks its dead, blue lips and speaks, and to Mike’s surprise, he hears no female voice. He hears his own voice.

“Oh, helllllll yeah.”

Mike scrunches his eyes shut, covers them with his hands, and falls to his knees. But unnatural light seeps through the space where his missing fingers should be. He knows where he is now, and he doesn’t want to open his eyes. He knows the script for this part; he has relived it a thousand times in nightmares. After a long moment, he reluctantly pulls his hands away, looking up at the ghost— at Hannah’s ghost.

They aren’t in the mines anymore— they’re in Hannah’s bedroom now, and Mike isn’t on his knees, he’s looking down at the ghost undressing for him. “Oh my god, she’s taking her shirt off,” Jess titters from her hiding spot, and the corpse’s neck snaps to look at her under the bed. Matt emerges from the closet, and Emily reveals herself too, grinning like a jackal.

Mike isn’t smiling. He turns back to the ghost, who’s covering her white chest and looking around in terrifying, terrified confusion. Mike can see Hannah’s pretty face there too, overlaid on the image. If he lets his eyes go unfocused it’s hard to tell the difference between the ghost and the girl — and something else, just barely visible. The wendigo.

Sam bursts through the door to ruin their prank, thirty seconds too late to be the hero. She shoots Mike a furious look, and Mike doesn’t react, because he knows how this plays out. He knows there’s no point trying to stop it. Instead, he says softly, “I’m sorry, Hannah.”

“I don’t care,” Hannah informs him, just before she leaps towards him at a superhuman speed. Sam shrieks so loud it echoes in his ears, but Mike is wholly focused on Hannah’s corpse. A corpse which is slowly turning into a wendigo before his eyes. He closes his eyes, this time for good, and tries not to wince as Hannah tears out his throat.

Mike wakes up, jolting upright in the bed. He hyperventilates, trying to catch up to his escaped breath, and the blankets fall off of him slowly. As reality begins to sink in once more, Mike curls around himself, and forces a slower breathing pattern. That had been a particularly fucking awful nightmare, but he doesn’t know what he expected. His dreams are bad enough when he sleeps alone in his apartment in a different city, a different province. He should have suspected that they’d be a new brand of heart-stopping when he sleeps in the lodge, two doors down from the very room where they’d had the first prank.

Once he’s reassured himself that his throat is intact and that Hannah is resting in peace, Mike looks around the room. The sun is filtering in through the blinds covering half of the window, and there’s a small bedside table with a clock proudly proclaiming it to be 9:45 AM on TUES, FEB. 10. Mike is making good time so far, and if he can manage to find Wolfie today, then he’ll be right on schedule.

He slides out of bed, adjusting his wrinkled clothes and changing out his socks for fresh ones.
Emily always used to chastise him for going to bed with his socks on, talking about how it was important to let his feet breathe or some shit like that. Jess is a fan of wearing long, fuzzy knee-high socks to bed, and would never shame anyone for their nightwear choices. Truth be told, Mike just doesn’t like his feet to get cold. If he was dating someone who wasn’t a merciless blanket-stealer, he could just cover his bare feet and solve all his problems that way.

He pulls on his shoes one by one, and heads down to the kitchen to grab a healthy breakfast of frozen Eggos and beer. The Tsingtao is light against his tongue and feels more refreshing than the tap water, so he nurses a bottle for the whole morning, carrying it with him as he brushes his teeth and gets his jacket. While wine reminds him of his ma and the many wineries she goes on tours of regularly, and hard liquor reminds him of his classmates and all the mistakes and memories made at parties, light beer mostly reminds Mike of golden, quiet nights with his good friends. It reminds him of nights where they sit around and drink aimlessly and share stories of the future like they’re in some kind of teen movie. Beer tastes like Jess laughing too loud at a joke, and like Chris and Josh making eyes at each other and everybody teasing them good-naturedly. It feels like people showing interest in him, and Mike having the guts to kick back and relax a little, to not worry about what anyone might think of him for just a few hours.

When he’s done, he leaves the empty bottle in the sink, figuring he might have another one before getting out of this place. Mike heads out of the lodge through the front doors, carefully closing the door behind him. The minimal research that he has done on wolves has not given him any inkling of how to begin to track them, but if Wolfie stuck around the sanatorium for a few hours while Mike was gone, he might have stayed up near the peak of the mountain.

Mike begins the trek to the sanatorium with a renewed vigor, no doubt due to his food and rest. On his way up to the lodge Mike was exhausted, and yet he’d pushed himself forward to avoid getting lost in the dark forests of Blackwood at night. Now, he has all the time in the world to ascend the mountain, and to appreciate his surroundings.

He follows the path that he and Jess had walked to the smaller cabin until he feels a sense of unease creep over him, like he’s being watched. Mike looks around nervously, but his only company is the snow-covered trees and a curious woodpecker. No cops. No wendigos. Regardless, he decides to stray from the beaten path if only to appease his paranoia, and marches through the forest, always keeping the path in his peripheral vision. Today is warmer than yesterday was, either because of the beer keeping Mike’s heart light or the simple fact that he’s another day into February. He thinks again that this creepy, godless mountain must be beautiful in the spring and summer and even the fall. It’s probably even more beautiful now that all the deadly supernatural monsters are gone.

Mike only returns to the path once the sanatorium is in sight, a broken building in the distance. The hair on the back of his neck is standing up straight, which makes him less worried about what might be in the abandoned mental hospital and more worried about the hair on the back of his neck. Should he shave there? Is it time for a haircut? Mike reaches up to scratch through the baby-soft hair there, wondering if he’s missed a spot and if so for how long.

As he succumbs to his vanity, he walks towards the sanatorium, staring up at what once was a resort spa, then a clinic for cannibals, and now a wreck. Mike’s destruction was thorough, and while the lodge narrowly survived its arson, the sanatorium is completely collapsed. If he’s honest with himself, Mike’s glad to see it burned to the ground. It gives him the creeps—and it took two of his fingers.

He can’t shake the goosebumps rising up along his arms as he approaches what had been the
neglected garden. Chris and Ashley lived out their nightmare in the lodge, and in the shed with the Saw set-up. Emily, Matt, and Jess had all traversed the mines and parts of the mountain. Sam got chased through the lodge and then the mines, but she had not come up here. This place is Mike’s domain on the mountain; this is where he fought his battles, and where he learned the secrets of the wendigo legend before he even knew what they were facing.

Mike gnaws at his lip, stepping over a fallen rusted gate. He wonders if the detectives have even been up here yet, and what they’ll find if they do come up here. Part of him wonders if he should howl for Wolfie, and then he snorts at the thought, breaking the silence.

Almost instantly, a voice yells out, “Hey!” and Mike’s heart stutters. He turns on his heel, tripping over the bar on the ground and falling on his ass. He looks around for the source of the sound, and sees someone storming up the path towards him. Mike’s eyes are wide with fear and obvious guilt as he tries to think of an excuse for his presence here. No, I promise I’m not a part of what attacked those kids. I’m actually one of the kids. No, wait, it wasn’t me, though—

The woman stops several metres away, hands on her hips. Once he’s managed to catch his breath, Mike takes her in. She’s wearing what looks like several outfits thrown together by someone who has the lowest regard for fashion, with moccasins and striped socks and at least three jackets. Her long hair is braided back, and dyed platinum silver with streaks of grey. She looks like a model, or a beggar. Mike can’t quite pin down which it is, but he knows one thing for sure: she looks angry.

Mike scrambles to get to his feet, brushing himself off. The stranger narrows her eyes, and looks Mike up and down, like he’s the one strangely dressed. She takes half a step forward, and then pauses before stepping away again. Mike gets the sense she’s hesitant to come near him, which is splendid, because he’s just as hesitant to get near her.

“Sooo, uh—” Mike begins with eloquence, at the same time as the woman says, “Why are you on this mountain?”

They stare at each other for a moment, and then Mike shifts between his feet. “I could ask you the same thing,” he points out.

The woman tilts her head to the side, unamused. She repeats, “Why are you on this mountain?”

“It’s gonna sound stupid, and you’re probably not going to believe me,” he warns her, and then looks at her with new consideration. “Wait, are you a cop?”

“Do I look like a cop,” deadpans the woman. She’s right, of course; she’s dressed more like a laundry basket than a local police officer. But if she isn’t a cop, what is she doing up here on the mountain? Mike suddenly wonders if she’s related to the other stranger from the mountain.

“No,” Mike laughs uncertainly, and then shrugs. “I, uh, I’m Mike. I came up here at the start of the month with some friends, and, uh, things got a little crazy. If you’ve been listening to local news you’ve probably heard about what happened up here.” The woman doesn’t react. “Yeah, well… that was us.”

“Are you and your friends the ones that burnt down this place?” She raises a hand to point at the ruins of the sanatorium, and Mike winces.

“No! Well… Actually, yes. But that was me, not my friends. But— that’s not why I’m here.” This is the first time Mike has told another person his plan, and he finds himself more nervous to admit why he’s here than he’d expected. “I, uh… When I was up here, there was a wolf. I took care of it, and it sort of took care of me too. I felt really bad about leaving him behind, and I couldn’t exactly
take him in the helicopter with me. So I thought I’d come back and take it back with me.”

The stranger stares at him with confusion, and then suddenly laughs, startling Mike. “You came up here to get a pet back?”

He doesn’t know what he expected, but having someone laugh at his great plan isn’t exactly bolstering Mike’s self-esteem. He shrugs, face heating with mortification. “What about you? Why are you on the mountain?”

The stranger raises her chin slowly, and Mike wonders if she’s going to pull a flame-thrower out of thin air. But then she smiles, seeming to take pity on Mike after his earnest confession. “My name is Shae Randal, and I live here.”

Silence falls between them, and Mike frowns. A bird crows somewhere in the distance. “You live here.”

“Yes,” she says.

“On the mountain.”

“That’s right.”

Mike moves his hands to his hips, mirroring Shae, and fixes her with a look of disbelief. “On this mountain.”

Shae crosses her arms over her chest, glaring. “Are you having trouble understanding what I’m saying?”

“I understand what you’re telling me,” Mike says. “I just don’t believe you.”

Shae’s glare intensifies. “And why not?”

“Because when my friends and I were up on this mountain, we got chased by some pretty nasty creatures,” Mike says. Nasty is an understatement. The legend of the seagull, or several undead banana slugs might suit the word nasty. The wendigos deserve a much more profane adjective. “I don’t see how you could have survived with those things roaming around up here. And where would you even stay? This isn’t exactly the most hospitable mountain.”

“I’m stronger than you,” Shae informs him, which seems unnecessarily competitive. “And I lived in there until you burned it down. Now I… camp.”

Mike squints at her. “You camp. In February.” Shae nods, looking like she’s daring Mike to challenge her on this, so he doesn’t. “I don’t think… I mean, I think I would have seen you when I explored this place.”

“There’s more to this place than you would think,” she says. She stalks closer to Mike, chin still aggressively high. “You— you probably found some books and letters telling you a part of a story about the dead hungry miners, and thought you were a great adventurer. You think you know this mountain? You don’t know shit. I know this mountain.”

With every word, Shae advances more and more on Mike until they’re only a few feet apart. He steps backward, raising his hands. Despite the lack of any obvious weapon, Shae is even more intimidating up close, and Mike really doesn’t want to find out how she defended herself from the wendigos. He pleads, “Alright, okay, I believe you. Damn! Chillax.”
“I will not chillax,” Shae says, voice strict, and Mike believes her on that too.

“Relax,” he amends, raising his hands a little higher. “I didn’t mean to offend you, I just think it’s weird that I didn’t run into you while I was roaming around here. I don’t wanna cause any trouble. I just want to find my dog.”

Shae stares at him for a long moment, and Mike half-expects her to pull a knife or something. Finally she stands down, shoulders evening out as she sighs. “Thought you said it was a wolf.”

“Yeah, my wolf,” Mike says. “Wolfie.”

“That’s a stupid name,” Shae tells him, but Mike can see a smile behind her eyes. Or at least, he imagines he can. “And it’s a stupid idea. Nobody can own a wolf.”

Despite his instincts and wisdom advising him not to, Mike actually thought for a second he could get along with this strange woman. She doesn’t look that much older than him, and if she knows the mountain, maybe she could help him track down Wolfie. And even if she can’t, Mike bets she has some interesting stories to tell about life on Blackwood anyway. But if she’s going to mock him for the whole reason he came here, then he’s done. “Whatever,” he mutters, and turns away from her.

Mike steps over the threshold of the sanatorium, which is hardly different on the inside now. All the doors that he’d spent so long unlocking have fallen apart, and Mike wonders if any part of this place is still intact. The tunnel to the Washington Estate still might be functional; maybe he should use it to head back down the mountain. It might be warmer, if creepier. He looks around the stone foundation, tracing the outline of rooms in his head, trying to build a map. Parts of the walls are still standing, and Mike builds the sanatorium in his mind, placing objects to create the landscape.

“Hey,” he hears from behind him, much quieter this time. He turns to look at the voice that interrupted his planning. Shae is still standing outside, looking at him with an unfathomable expression. She rocks back and forth on her feet, from the balls to heels, and then asks curiously, “Why did you come all the way back for it? I mean— it can’t be easy coming back here since you had such a terrible time. How important is this animal to you?”

Mike hesitates. He fidgets with the ends of his sleeves, and then thinks about Jessica doing the same and opens his hands quickly. “It seemed so unfair that we all got to make it off the mountain, and the only ones that didn’t were Wolfie and…” He takes a beat to acknowledge Josh. “And one of my other friends, who got attacked by the monsters and died. I just couldn’t get over the idea of that wolf up here alone, suffering. I mean, they’re— they’re pack animals, right? It doesn’t seem right. And-and truth be told, I’m not doing so great now that I’m off the mountain anyway. I’m alone too, even though I have friends and family and stuff, so I thought maybe I could help Wolfie survive. That we could help each other.” Mike lifts his shoulders and then exhales, sighing slowly. “I don’t know. You’re right, it’s a stupid idea.”

Shae’s eyes are bright blue, and they pierce right through Mike. She trembles for a moment, and then shakes herself off of whatever thought had possessed her. When she looks back at him, Shae’s gaze is purposeful. “I will help you find your wolf.”

And with that, Shae reaches up to shrug off one of her jackets.

“Oh,” Mike begins, puzzled and lost as Shae lets the jacket drop to the ground and then unbuttons the next one. She’s got more layers than Chris on any given day, and Mike has no idea why she’s decided to strip. “Oh, no, uh, no, I don’t—"
Shae rolls her eyes at him, and unzips a woolly sweater the exact colour of Mike’s old couch. Mike is uncomfortably reminded of his nightmare last night, with Hannah’s ghost undressing for him. He doesn’t have any idea what he’ll do if this strange woman strips naked in front of him. Scream, maybe. Cover his eyes like a child— very possible.

Thankfully, Shae leaves her shirt and pants on. She kicks off her moccasins before digging her toes into the frozen soil, and then rolls her neck around in a way that doesn’t quite seem natural. Transfixed and terrified, Mike watches as Shae reaches up to undo her braid, pulling off the hairtie and letting it fall to the ground. The hair he’d originally assumed to be platinum silver and grey has hidden streaks of brown, and Mike is surprised that all Shae’s hair fit into that one elegant braid, because she has so much hair. It falls down her back like a mane, and then Shae looks up and stares straight at Mike.

Before his very eyes, Shae’s hair starts growing. Her hairline shrinks down, and it might just be the strangest thing Mike has seen all day if not for the fact that Shae’s face is changing too. Her nose is getting larger; no, not growing, disappearing; no, not disappearing, shifting. Her mouth is definitely growing, but her lips are shrinking, and Mike is too enchanted and scared to question aloud what the hell is happening.

Bones in Shae’s shoulders start to move, and by the time she’s pulled off her shirt it doesn’t matter anymore, because she looks like no human woman Mike has ever seen shirtless. She looks like no human, in fact. Her hair is taking over her skin, growing over her back like an infection spreading, like a wave slowly crashing over her body. Mike realizes with a shock that it’s not hair at all, it’s fur.

Shae drops to her knees, letting out a cry that sounds more like a hyena than a girl, and Mike watches as her legs shrink and arms grow, as the shape of her torso changes, and as her face turns into something utterly inexplicable.

Mike recoils, too shocked to speak or think or process. Where moments ago there had been a woman, now a wolf stands before him.

The creature shakes out her-his-their-its fur, and as suddenly as the transformation began, it ends. Mike’s jaw has fallen open, although he doesn’t remember when. The entire process could have taken two minutes or two hours. Mike stares at the wolf— no, not just any wolf. At his wolf.

He chokes out, “You’re Wolfie? You’re… a werewolf?!”

The wolf wags its tail.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The list of content warnings has been updated! Please enjoy safely.

Happy Halloween!

Mike sinks down to his knees in front of the grey wolf, mostly because he thinks he might pass out if he tries to stay on his feet. He stares at the animal, who looks unfazed by his earth-shattering revelation. His whole trip here has been fueled by the need to go back and pick up the dog that he owed a debt to, to pick up Wolfie. He’d thought, abstractly, of kennels and dog food and companionship. And now, he finds out that Wolfie is actually a werewolf named Shae.

Because god forbid Mike have nice things in his life.

Wolfie— No. Shae steps forward, paws sure against the ground, and bumps her head against Mike’s shoulder. Mike reaches out instinctively to pet her, but then hesitates. Everything he knows about animals and dogs is insisting he pet her. But everything he’s learned on this mountain about supernatural entities is telling him to get the hell away from her before she takes a nice bite out of his leg. “This is impossible,” he tells her. “This can’t be happening, it’s… This is— this is too weird, I can’t do this.”

Shae wags her tail again.

Mike is helpless to disagree with that, so he reluctantly pets her side. “It could be worse,” he mumbles. “You could be a wendigo.” The wolf growls, and Mike grins. He feels the same way about wendigos. “I don’t suppose you wanna come back and be my dog?”

Before Mike can make a joke in poor taste, Shae’s side starts to move against his fingertips, and he jerks his hand away quickly. He slides away, putting a few feet between them, and watches the entire horrific process in reverse. Despite him now knowing what to expect, it feels no less peculiar. Shae’s lips shrink, and it almost looks comical; like terrible special effects. Her fur moves too, disappearing in patches. Her claws retract into her nails, her skeleton rearranges itself flawlessly. It is grotesque and riveting at once, and Mike tries to be polite and wipe the disgusted look off of his face.

By the time it becomes apparent that Shae is going to turn back into a naked human, Mike has not come up with a solution, so he settles on just making very intense eye contact. Her eyes are one of the last things to change, and she has to blink a few times before they correct themselves into looking natural. When they have settled, Shae clears her throat, obviously waiting for Mike’s reaction.

Mike doesn’t know how to react. He’s shaking, which has probably been happening for several minutes, but he’s only just now aware of it due to how unnaturally still Shae is. She doesn’t look ashamed of her state of undress, or how she’s kneeling on the dirty floor of a demolished building. She just looks solemnly patient, a trait rarely found in dogs.

After a few minutes, Mike finds his voice. “How did you… how did you…” He bites the inside of
his cheek, hardly willing to believe the sight in front of him. If this was any other mountain, he’d leap to the conclusion that someone slipped a hallucinogen into his breakfast. But here, Mike hates to admit that he knows better. He never ruled out the possibility of other magical life, he’d just actively hoped never to run into it. Finally, he decides to croak out, “You did know who I am.”

“You never told me your name,” Shae says, which is true. Mike had not seen the value in verbally introducing himself to a wolf.

“You never told me you were a werewolf,” he retorts.

“You never asked.” Shae grins, wide and toothy. Her teeth have transformed back into normal molars and canines, and Mike can’t stop staring. She gets to her feet, dusting herself off even though she’s hardly dirty, and reaches for her shoes with no regard for privacy.

“Whoa, hey,” Mike says, throwing up his good hand to cover his eyes. “Does that ever… is that like… a problem for you? Getting dressed?”

Shae doesn’t respond, so he has to peek through his fingers. She is giving him a dry look, and she deadpans, “You’re the only human I’ve transformed in front of in years.”

Mike doesn’t know if he should feel creeped out or flattered by that. He delicately closes his eyes and goes with flattered. “Thank… you?” There’s a long scar across Shae’s chest, but Mike doesn’t dare question it in case she feels like giving him a similar one. Shae keeps dressing herself, pulling on her pants and saving her jackets for last. The old Mike definitely would have taken a glimpse, but the new Mike is too terrified that his new acquaintance will literally eat him alive.

Then again, she doesn’t seem to care that much about privacy. Mike supposes that transforming in front of him was a fairly intimate sign of trust, so after another thirty seconds, he pulls his hand away from his eyes and gets to his feet. If Shae can be mature about this, so can he. She pulls on the last of her jackets, and fixes her hairtie around her wrist, leaving her hair to fall around her shoulders. Now that Mike’s seen that hair turn into wolf fur, he isn’t sure how he didn’t make the connection immediately. It’s the same colour and texture, just much longer.

While buttoning up one of her inner layers, Shae muses, “I thought you’d have more questions. Humans can usually never shut up after they see me transform.”

“I do,” Mike says immediately. “I just… I’m still blown away.” That seems to be the right thing to say, since she beams with pride and ducks her head, so Mike barrels on. “Why’d you stay in wolf form when I saw you for the first time?”

She shrugs. “It was the full moon. And also, I don’t make a habit of trusting humans. That’s never gotten me anywhere good.”

She’s right about the moon cycle, of course, but Mike would never have realized that if she didn’t remind him. In retrospect, it’s easy to kick himself for not having realized she was a werewolf—a lupine companion appearing out of nowhere to guide Mike on the night of the full moon is all too obvious. He’d been distracted by the other circumstances: Jess, the prank, the wendigos, everyone getting lost. Or maybe he had just been too stupid to put two and two together.

“We should go,” says Shae, and Mike’s heart is warmed, if confused, by the inclusion of him in that plan. Especially immediately after the confession that she doesn’t trust humans. She turns to look outside the sanatorium, shielding her eyes from the sun with a hand. As she nimbly steps over what used to be the doorstep, it seems nearly impossible to Mike that she is anything but a human.
He follows her, significantly less graceful. His flashlight bumps heavy against his hip, and he regrets carting it along, but is glad he didn’t grab a bone or pig ear. Shae definitely would have laughed at him. “We?”

“Both of us, yes.” She doesn’t turn to look at him, starting down the path they’d walked up. Shae clearly isn’t afraid of any police officers coming to look for them, or maybe she doesn’t know about their potential existence.

Mike isn’t going to question the newfound comradery. What’s that phrase again? Never look a gift werewolf in the mouth? “Where are we going?” Shae doesn’t answer, so after a moment, Mike tries again. “Why did you turn back into a human?”

She throws a sharp smile over her shoulder. “I don’t always stay a wolf,” she tells him, and Mike feels admonished—as if he should have known this about werewolves beforehand. He wonders how many grievous social mistakes he’ll make due to having done no previous research. In his defense, though, he is dealing with werewolves. “It’s easier for me to live here as a wolf, but sometimes I miss my human form. My thoughts are clearer in this state. So I turned back.”

“But why around me?” presses Mike, and Shae stops walking to look at him. Her gaze is equally calculating and considering. “You said you don’t trust humans, so why not just stay a wolf?”

“I said I don’t make a habit of it.” Shae lifts her chin, observing Mike keenly. He remembers Wolfie looking at him with a similar look. “I trust you, Mike. You’re pack.”

Given all his loneliness, you’d think it would be easy for Mike to accept love. He loves being loved, as evidenced by his time as class president—a fairly worthless title for anyone not in high school, but while he was there, he’d felt like the king of the world. And he still had afterwards, right up until Hannah had pulled Jessica through the glass door by her head. Maybe that’s why he’s had so many girlfriends but been unable to keep any of them. Because when it comes to open, honest statements like this, he’s got no idea how to react.

There is a distended awkwardness between them until Mike finally clears his throat. “I’m not… I don’t understand.” He tries to phrase his question as respectfully as possible. “How can I be a part of your pack if I’m human?”

Shae blinks, slow and thoughtful, like she thinks Mike might be stupid. “I’m grateful to you for feeding me. For saving me from the monsters. And there’s a trust between us, because I saved you too. I was your guide around that place. That means we’re pack.” Mike opens his mouth to protest, and she adds, “And you can’t tell me you don’t think so, otherwise you would not have come back for me.”

He stands still, frozen and speechless, and Shae seems to take it as a sign of surrender. She begins to walk again, and Mike stays still for a moment before hastening to follow her. She’s right—partially. He did come back to the mountain, but for Wolfie, not Shae. “I was going to bring you back to Vancouver with me, but that’s obviously off the table now,” he says. “You know. Now that you’re… a real person.”

Shae snorts, but doesn’t say anything more. They continue down a different path, one that feels uncomfortably familiar. The trees are shorter here, and the path worn, and while Mike doesn’t think he’s been here before he thinks he might have walked it in dreams. He looks around for clues as to where they might be, and doesn’t spot anything illuminating. “Where are we going?” he asks.

“To where I stay,” Shae says briefly. Mike pictures an oversized tent, or a campsite made of tarps and logs. He wonders how often Shae stays in wolf form. If he lived on Blackwood, and he had the
choice between a sleek fur coat and tacky layers upon layers of sweaters, he’d definitely go with the fur. Mike is on the verge of making a joke about a dog kennel when he sees the structure they’re approaching.

“Oh no,” he says, stopping short. Shae glances at him over her shoulder, but Mike hardly pays attention to her. He waves his hands around like he’s lost control of his limbs, and shakes his head vehemently. “Oh fuck no. I’m not going back in there.”

If he tries, he can still hear Jessica’s anguished screams as she disappeared through the door, ringing in his ears like a death knell, like incurable tinnitus that rattles his eardrums even now. He can still picture the shitty Kama Sutra joke gift Josh had left them, and the fireplace Mike had tried to start for so long. Mike can reluctantly acknowledge the value in the Washington Estate; a part of him is glad that building is still standing. He sees no value in the cabin in front of them.

Shae watches him, curiosity evident on her face. “Why not?”

The cabin looks less terrifying from this angle; the broken door is out of Mike’s sight. He forces himself to breathe. The wendigos are gone now. Now, he has to deal with werewolves instead. “I, uh, don’t know how much you know about what happened outside of the sanatorium that night.”

“Not much,” Shae says. “After you burned down the sanatorium, I tracked down your scent to this house. I thought I would wait for you to come find me and then explain what happened, but you didn’t come back.” Her chin is high, but there’s something demanding and disappointed in Shae’s eyes. Mike can just picture her loping around the cabin, sniffing out Mike’s smell mixed with Jessica’s, and wondering where he’d gone.

“I was trying to find my friends,” Mike says, which seems like a pretty crappy apology. “Like I told you, those monsters were hunting us down. One in particular. And she got us trapped in the lodge, and we just barely managed to defeat her in time and get out. The police sent a helicopter to come pick up everyone that survived, so I couldn’t… come back.” He leaves exactly how terrified and traumatized he’d been up to Shae’s imagination.

Shae shrugs with one shoulder, and Mike wonders how long she’s been alone. Was that other wolf a werewolf too? Did either of them actually know the stranger? “You did come back. You’re here now.”

She holds Mike’s gaze for just long enough that he starts to feel awkward, and then she turns away, marching towards the house. Apparently she doesn’t care about his bad memories in this place. Mike unwillingly follows her, and when he sees the front door, his heart stutters for just a second. There’s wood nailed over the broken glass. Mike approaches slowly, wary of the cabin still, but Shae doesn’t hesitate. She pushes the door ajar, and Mike realizes he’s crossed his arms tightly over his chest. So much for playing the hero. Mike unfolds his arms, and follows her inside the all-too-familiar cabin.

Shae has clearly made a home here, although her choice in décor is… questionable. The walls are as bare as they’d been when Mike had last seen this place, but the couch is pushed up against the wall. The floor is irreparably scratched up, hardwood dented and scraped and stained with unidentifiable substances. There’s a large pile of logs beside the fireplace, which Mike supposes is convenient if a little unsanitary. The kitchenette is barren, showing no signs of use at all. Shae waits until he’s closed the door behind him and then shrugs off two of her jackets at once, heading straight to the fireplace to get some heat going.

Rather than being put off by Shae’s messy lycanthropic decorating, Mike is comforted by how different the place looks. It’s practically unrecognizable from the cozy love nest he’d last seen, and
he is very, very glad. He’s almost embarrassed for how intensely he’d reacted to just the sight of the cabin. “I love what you’ve done with the place,” he tells her, only partially kidding.

Shae grins at him, all teeth, just as the fire flares into existence. The kindling catches first, and Mike takes a seat on the couch. Shae sits by the fire, leaning back against the wall. The simple way that she occupies the space is fascinating, and Mike wants to ask her to transform again, just so that he can watch the impossible happen twice. He thinks privately that Josh would probably love to see the transformation; he’d be as transfixed as Mike was.

Mike begins to ask something just as Shae blurts out, “I was thinking—” and they both stammer for a moment before laughing. She runs her hand through her hair, which Mike starts to suspect is a nervous tic. “You first.”

Now that he has a real life, honest-to-God werewolf in front of him, Mike isn’t sure which question he wants to ask first. His head is buzzing with potential inquiries, from whether she knew the Stranger to whether she’s seen Josh’s body. Mike wonders when he’ll get to stop wondering; when life will give him some answers instead of some questions. He wonders if that’s right now.

Awkwardly, he sinks back into the couch. The last time he was on this couch was not exactly a great experience, so it’s hard to feel comfortable here again. “You said that people who usually meet you have a lot of questions, right?”

Shae nods. “Usually they can’t shut up. Or they just don’t believe me.”

“I believe you,” he says without hesitation. “I don’t know if I would have if you had told me, but. The evidence is pretty hard to deny.” Shae smiles, ducking her head to scratch the back of her neck, and Mike takes that as a sign to continue. “How did you become one in the first place?”

With a shrug, Shae looks up at the ceiling, and doesn’t answer. The cabin is already starting to feel warmer, and Mike fights the urge to go sit by the fire with her. “It’s a long story,” she says after a moment, voice clipped.

“We have time,” Mike says, because they’ve got nothing but.

And Shae tells him.

Here is an adaptation of Shae’s story. Her story begins, as many life stories do, with a baby.

This baby was born with glassy blue eyes and white-blonde hair, setting it apart from most of the other infants born in its community. It was also born without a family, or at least without one that’s proper. The Randals, as a name and home and household and support system, never existed. Erika Randal certainly exists; as real as her beating human heart and worn tireless hands. A father, Ron, existed at one point too, but never for long enough to claim his wife’s name or give her his own. His heart beat too, but it was not human, which is something that Erika should have seen and ran far away from.

Instead, she saw what he was, and ran closer and closer until his arms closed around her, impossibly strong. She was pregnant within just a few weeks of their meeting for the first time, and it is honestly wondrous that Ron stayed around for as long as he did. Four long months passed, with fights and dates and bills and the occasional extended family gathering. It was one of these gatherings that finally gave him pause, making him consider the prospect of staying—a prospect he rejected without due thought.
Before Erika hit the middle of her pregnancy, Ron was gone, citing no reason for his departure and no forwarding address. Her family consoled her, telling her they had never liked his piercing blue eyes or the cut of his smile. They told her she was much better off this way, and that they would help nurture and raise the baby.

These platitudes and promises all disappeared when the baby appeared with white hair that neither Ron nor Erika possessed. It was hard for Erika’s extended family to identify what the child was, but they all knew there was something terribly wrong. Erika Randal’s child didn’t cry like their cousins did when they were born. The infant smiled too wide, too exposed. It didn’t seem like a baby girl or a baby boy, but rather something nebulous and beautiful that inspired distrust instead of love in people. Erika was one of those people who was not immediately seized with love for her newborn child. When the infant was born, part of her wanted to give it up almost instantly. She fought through her post-partum depression and kept her child, with faith that her family would help her raise the baby and support her emotionally.

When Erika introduced her to the world, the world was shocked, and demanded answers from Erika about the father and the child’s humanity. Erika fought to defend her daughter—and a daughter it was, because despite their gender-neutral name and bearing and propensity to defy gender roles, Shae Randal was raised as a girl.

Shae looks at Mike at this point in her story like she dares him to question this point, and Mike doesn’t say anything, just shrugging slightly. He’s been friends with Sam long enough to know when to stay in his lane. After a moment, Shae relents, and tension seeps out of her posture.

Erika’s family was not enamored with the child, and her own mother told her she never expected Erika to create an abomination instead of a human. Instead of what might have been easier, Erika forced herself to love her child, and she cut herself off from her family in the process. Some days, Erika would wake up with a heart full of hatred; for herself, for Ron, for her family, for her bastard child.

Other days were better. Shae was gentle and quiet and loved her mother with her whole heart, even if she was clever enough to see that that love wasn’t always reciprocated. She cultivated her mother’s distrust towards her into something malleable, something they could work together on until it resembled something like love. Slowly, love took hold of Erika’s heart, and she began to see her daughter as a miracle instead of a changeling or monster.

Their relationship flourished, grew, and developed up until Shae’s fifth birthday.

Shae didn’t have any friends, and Erika didn’t have any money, so they made do without either and threw a terrible party. Shae’s cousins, aunts, and uncles did not RSVP to any of the invitations Erika had secretly sent, but she got an unmarked check in the mail that would at least cover the cost of a cake. She baked Shae’s favourite: angel food cake, and she garnished the shit out of it with fresh strawberries and whipped cream.

Erika knocked on the door to Shae’s room, balancing the cake in one hand. She waited patiently for her daughter to answer, but when there was no reply after a minute, she reached down to open the door herself. Shae’s room was empty, but her window was wide open, curtains blowing in the peaceful morning breeze.

Carefully, Erika put the cake down, and then dashed out of the room and the house.
She didn’t know exactly what she was looking for, but she had a hunch she couldn’t shake. Erika had only seen her lover transform once, and she’d dismissed the entire thing as a hallucination. He had been handsome even as he’d transformed, majestic as his shape shifted. Erika remembered the sight with awe and fear. The idea crept into her mind during dreams. She had wondered if Shae would be the same; if she would be possessed with the same power. But the years went by and Shae displayed no sign of the supernatural except her otherworldly eyes. Erika let go of the notion that her daughter might be a werewolf.

When she found Shae that day, her daughter was nowhere to be seen. Instead there was a wolf cub, young and cute and covered from paw to nose in fresh blood. There was a corpse a few feet away that seemed starkly out of place in the green grass. It wasn’t even noon on Shae’s fifth birthday, and she’d ripped a human being to shreds. Erika knew instantly what— who the wolf was, and she prayed to gods she scarcely believed in that the wolf would not attack her.

She fell to her knees, calling Shae’s name over and over. The wolf trotted up to her and bumped its red snout against Erika’s forehead. Erika embraced it, curling her arms around the creature, staining her clothes with blood and tears. She closed her eyes tightly, and the shape in her arms began to change, its composition rearranging itself into a familiar mass and volume and person.

Shae, born again in her mother’s arms, cried for the first time in her entire life.

Shae falls silent, and Mike wonders if these memories are too painful to continue. After a minute of Shae silently staring at him, he realizes she’s stopped because of the look on his face.

Mike closes his jaw, wondering when it had dropped open, and leans back into the couch. He forces a more neutral expression onto his lips, even though his head is spinning. He can’t quite disguise the look in his eyes. “Did this really all happen? You remember...” Killing someone. “All of this?”

“My mom told me some of it,” she growls, voice low. Mike is suddenly possessed by the idea that he might be the first person to hear this story.

He stretches his neck out, shaking his head. It’s much too late to ask her to stop talking now, and a chill shoots through his veins as he asks, “Who did you kill?”

Who Shae had killed had been a less than upstanding member of their community, who had often offered to help ease Erika’s depression with an array of recreational drugs. Erika had no desire to indulge, and didn’t trust the lack of an ingredient list, so she always declined his offers. (One part of this story that Shae never learns is that Erika just grew her own pot, which was far more economical and entrepreneurial.)

Despite the man’s sleazy occupation and questionable morals, Erika was devastated to see him murdered at the hands of her child. But there was nowhere for Shae to go; she had driven away all her loved ones by choosing to raise her daughter, and the idea of sending a werewolf to boarding school was too stupidly risky to even consider. Shae was Erika’s responsibility now.

Erika carried Shae inside, brought her to the bathtub, and began to scrub off the blood. Both Randals were crying, and Shae choked out through tears if this meant she was a monster now. Erika reassured her that she wasn’t, but Shae was too smart to not hear the tinge of doubt in her mother’s voice. She internalized that doubt, and it clings to her even now.
They hid the body together because Erika couldn’t lift it on her own, and then agreed never to speak of it again. The next full moon forced both of them to break their promises, as Shae transformed in the middle of the night once more. This time she ransacked their fridge instead of their neighbourhood, which was a welcome relief to Erika. A few missing frozen steaks were much preferable to a missing person.

Next year Shae began school like the other children her age, but there was something that set her apart from all of them. She used to fantasize that they could smell the blood on her, the fur on her. Shae made friends, but those never lasted: she would tell them horror stories about wolves and they would tell their parents and their parents would tell Erika that Shae was not allowed to come over to their house to play, thank you very much. This did not break Shae’s heart; she was strong, and she knew that as long as she had her mother, she would survive.

This hypothesis was proven wrong six years later, when Shae lost her mother and still survived.

Ron’s return was a surprise to both Shae and her mother, and for a moment that she would regret for the rest of her life, Erika trusted him. She forgave him in that instant for walking out of her life while she was pregnant and for abandoning her and her child. Love is a funny sort of thing, inexplicable and unpredictable, and it remained nestled in Erika’s heart somewhere. That love was crushed when Ron privately stated the reason for his return to Erika; he was part of a pack, and had come to take Shae back with him.

Once not too long ago, Erika would have leapt at the opportunity to have her child out of her life. But now that she loved Shae, she was determined to cling to her daughter, whatever the cost. This cost turned out to be her life, and it was a wasted investment anyway.

Shae woke up to visceral, strange noises, and made her way down the hall. She did not see the man who had visited her mother yesterday afternoon; she saw a wolf with sleek black fur and bloody teeth. She also saw a dead body on the floor, unrecognizable in its demise. Where most 13-year-olds might have been too scared to realize who was in front of them, Shae quickly realized with fury that she was looking at her father and mother.

Without the assistance of the full moon, Shae transformed. Rage was pushing her body past old limits to new abilities, but she did not have time to marvel. She acted on base animal instincts and attacked her father. Unfortunately for her, she was much younger and less experienced than the older werewolf, and she was quickly knocked to the ground.

Ron had no desire to kill her, but the wolf side of him had a very strong urge to eat her. He bit her side before he could restrain himself, and the shocking pain turned Shae back into her human self immediately. This caught her father off-guard, and he half-transformed; an inadvisable move for any werewolf.

Shae stared at the half-man, half-wolf before her, a creature stuck in horrifying limbo, and wrath overtook her other senses. She reached for the nearest thing, which turned out to be the leg of their coffee table, and tugged. A regular human would have only pulled the table along the floor. Shae’s superhuman strength made it possible for her to lift the table, and she swung it by its iron leg into her father’s human head.

Glass shattered around them, raining down in a second of hell. In that same second, her father collapsed, and Shae dropped the table to the ground just as quickly. All was silent in their house, and the lack of noise was almost stifling. Shae was shaking uncontrollably, just like the first time she’d killed someone, and after a few minutes she slowly steeled herself to move towards her father’s body. There was an ugly red spot spreading across the back of his hair, and when Shae’s trembling hands pressed two fingers to his neck, she couldn’t make out a pulse.
Shae got to her feet, panic settling in like an old friend. This time her mother couldn’t help her rinse off the blood, so she had to go clean it off herself. She picked glass out of her forehead and tried to stifle her tears. Whatever family Shae had had was gone now, dead on her living room floor. She cleaned herself up, went to her room, and packed a bag. Within the hour, Shae was gone too, with her mom’s ID, her car keys, and all the money that they had saved up in a big glass jar.

She didn’t know where she would go. Ron had not lived long enough to tell Shae his plan, and Erika’s plans for Shae’s future had mostly been “don’t let her kill anyone else”. Shae was free to do what she wanted, even if it was a freedom she wished she had not been thrust into. Despite her father never mentioning his pack to her, Shae had always been fascinated by the idea. The books she’d managed to get her hands on regarding werewolves always referred to a pack dynamic, a found family. Werewolf packs ran deeper than blood, than friendship. It was something altogether more intimate. There was usually an alpha; one werewolf who was stronger than all the others. One who was in charge of the pack. Shae wondered if this had been Ron’s role. She wondered if it could be hers.

Shae began to search for other werewolves, travelling around the rural townships of Alberta to try to find anyone who had a kinship with her. Most people thought she was crazy—some thought she was lost, and called the cops. Shae once saw a Missing Persons ad outside a convenience store with her name and description on it, including where she was last seen. She tore it down, and kept it folded up in the back pocket of her jeans for months. She thought it made her look cool.

What eventually drew her to Blackwood was a recording on a disc she found in a local library titled “Canadian Cryptids- Disk 3”. She stole the disc and went to a local pawn shop to play it, ignoring the looks she got for plugging headphones into a stereo system. The disc held a podcast that was mostly garbage and conjecture about Bigfoot. However, there was an interesting interview near the end, between an anonymous local explorer and the hosts of the podcast, about the legend of the wendigo.

“The stranger!” interrupts Mike suddenly. He ducks his head immediately afterwards. “Sorry. Go on.”

Shae beams at him, and he doesn’t feel as bad for interrupting her. “Yes. He was your stranger. To sum up what they were talking about—”

“What, you’re not gonna do an impression of him?”

The smile slides off Shae’s face, and she glares. “That would be shockingly disrespectful.”

Mike puffs up his chest, and lies boldly, “I’d argue that there’s no better way to honour someone.”

Shae groans, low and guttural, and then tries, “Well, I live up in them there mountains and— No. No! I am not doing this.”

Mike is howling with laughter as she continues.

The recording informed Shae about the existence of wendigos, and all of a sudden it seemed narrow-minded of her to not consider the prospects of other supernatural life. She had been so fixated on what she was that she hadn’t stopped to think about other creatures like her. This wendigo sounded terrifying but fascinating, and Shae wanted very badly to know more about it.
She had that same hunger for human flesh, but it only lasted as long as she was in her wolf-state, and it could always be subdued by eating another animal. She was curious about what it was like to be a full-blown cannibal.

She hitch-hiked to Blackwood, hopping her way into vehicles and buses until she reached the base of the mountain. From there, she had hiked up the side of the mountain much like Mike had, except it took her much less time. She reached the sanatorium, and met with the stranger, who had refused to give her his real name. He’d told her that names had power, and that he didn’t like or trust her enough to give her that power.

Fortunately Shae’s keen eyes had noticed that he kept a pet wolf, and had a soft spot for the animal, so she left the sanatorium. She came back a day later as a wolf, and the stranger suspected nothing and took her under his care. It was strange living with an unfamiliar man and a real wolf, but Shae’s wolf instincts slowly started to overtake her human side. She could still experience conscious, sentient thought, but her mind wasn’t working the same way. She began to rely on the man for food instead of going out to get it herself, and forgot why she would ever want to transform back into a human. She was so much stronger and faster this way, and she had someone to care for her.

All this changed when the stranger came in from the forest one night, eyes dark with tears and face heavy. Concerned for his well-being, Shae listened patiently as he told her and the other wolf the whole story. He told them how he had finally tracked down Makkapitew, the wendigo that killed his father, and how he had meant to trap it but it had picked its next two victims: two daughters of the family that owned the mountain. He tried to save the girls in time, but he drove them off the edge of the cliff. Stricken with grief, he had killed the wendigo and released its spirit.

There was a real possibility that he was lying to her, of course, but Shae saw no reason why he would lie to animals he did not believe were capable of comprehensive thoughts. In addition, she’d seen the wendigos trapped in their cages, and heard their shrieks at night. So she comforted the man as best she could, and sometimes when he was away searching the mountain for Hannah and Beth, she would transform back into her human state, just to stretch her legs out. If the other wolf found anything weird about that, it never let her know.

Mike puts up a hand, and Shae obediently stops talking. “Wait. Wait, wait, wait. You can talk to other wolves?”

“No. I was making a joke,” she says, awkward and stiff. “I can only speak human languages.” She clears her throat, and gets up from the floor. Almost an hour has passed since she started to tell him her life story. “I’m gonna grab water, do you want some?”

“Sure,” he says, stymied by Shae’s story. He watches her walk over to the kitchenette, taking out two dusty glasses and setting them on the counter. The sink creaks and complains before water finally starts to pour out, and Mike is left alone to contemplate all that he’s heard.

He’d expected something like Twilight, even though he knows the bare minimum about Twilight (only what he's picked up from Emily; she used to be a big fan). This is much darker, and much more real. Mike feels guilty for ever having complained about his problems in high school when Shae’s home life during her formative years was pretty much the worst situation imaginable. Mike has never met his dad, but he’s always thought that if he ever met the guy he would have some strong words to say to him. In comparison to Shae’s dad, his dad seems like a fucking saint.

Shae brings over their drinks, and sits next to Mike on the couch. The fire is still crackling away,
and the room has grown much warmer. Mike hadn’t realized how much he’d valued the central heating in his shitty Vancouver apartment until he went without it. He takes his water, nodding gratefully, and has a sip. “So what happens next? You just lived as that guy’s pet dog for a year?”

“Essentially. It wasn’t so bad. Despite his past, he really was a good man. Not everyone who wants a wolf as a pet is a weirdo.” Shae nudes his arm, smirking.

Mike ignores this obvious dig at his super not-weird quest. “He was a good man who couldn’t even tell you his real name? Who is he, Rumpelstiltskin?”

“Jack, I think,” she says. Mike doesn’t feel a shiver run up his arms or the house quake in its foundations, so he assumes they haven’t unlocked any magic spell by uttering the stranger’s true name. “I found one of his old journals where he’d kept a few letters, and he had signed some of them Jack.”

“Jack,” Mike repeats. What a boring, anti-climactic name for a flamethrower-wielding creepy old badass. He’d expected something like Perseus or Tiberius, or at least something funny like Old Man Winters. “Well, I guess that’s one mystery solved. So what happens next?”

“Then I met you,” Shae says, and something warm flares up in Mike’s chest, like heartburn slowed down, or like he’s swallowed an ember. “And since then, everything has changed.” Mike isn’t sure how to cope with the feeling that brings to his chest, so he doesn’t say anything at all.

He looks at the fireplace and sips his water, thinking about all of it. About Shae wandering the countryside like a lost puppy— except she hadn’t been helpless at all, even after everything she knew was killed. She’d adjusted and adapted to her new life, and when that new life changed, she rolled with the punches. She’s a trailblazer; the same sort of hero that Mike has been fantasizing himself to be. Except she actually goes out and gets stuff done.

“You must be thinking what a freak I am,” Shae interrupts his thoughts, and Mike turns quickly to stare at her, startled. “It’s okay. I mean, I know my story is pretty messed up.”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all,” Mike cuts her off before she can say anything more. “I was thinking that I’m sorry for leaving you alone for nearly a month. It must have been tough to be up here alone.”

Mike can read a protest to his apology in her eyes, but Shae merely twists her lips into something bitter and contrite. She acknowledges, “It was tough, but you didn’t know any better. You just thought I was a helpful dog.”

“Hey,” Mike nudges her shoulder gently. “You were a very helpful dog.”

Shae grins at him, and some of the bitterness melts off her face. “Anyway, it won’t be tough now that you’re here. And you could stay here, if you’d like. The mountain is much safer now.”

For an instant, Mike smiles back, and then he realizes the magnitude of what she’s offering. “Oh— no, I, uh, no, I can’t stay. I have a real life.” He shuffles around on the couch. A real girlfriend, too. Shae doesn’t seem interested in him like that— she really does feel like the sibling he’s never had — but regardless, Mike can’t stay up here on the mountain. He has rent and other real-world responsibilities to deal with. What would his mother say?

“This could be your new life,” presses Shae. Her eyes are bright with something Mike can’t place.

“Um, I can’t just pack up and leave Vancouver,” Mike snorts, and when the earnest expression stays on Shae’s face, he realizes he isn’t going to be able to laugh this off. “Look, I’m not… I want
to help you and stuff, but I thought I would be bringing my dog back with me, not moving in with my dog on this death trap of a mountain.” Then an idea strikes him, so simple he can’t believe he hasn’t thought of it yet, and he blurts out, “Why don’t you come back with me? I can introduce you to my friends, the other people who were up here with me. They’re all super nice, you’d like them.”

To Mike’s disappointment, Shae looks unenthused by his awesome idea. “I can’t start a new life somewhere else. This is where I live.”

Mike folds his arms across his chest and frowns at Shae. “Well, how is me moving here any different?”

Shae stares back at him, and says, voice level, “Because I can turn you into a werewolf.”

The fire spits out a spark, and silence floods the room.

“Why would you want to do that?” Mike asks, not wanting to give away his feelings on the matter. His head is practically spinning. He uncrosses his arms to reach for another gulp of water, and tries to tamp down on the vertigo possessing his skull. It’s like the room has fallen away from their feet at just the idea.

“You’re pack,” Shae says, echoing her earlier words. “It would be easier than you could even imagine, and I wouldn’t mind—I mean—” She plays with the end of her hair, clearly frustrated by something she can’t voice. “You wouldn’t have to stay here with me all the time if you didn’t want to, but I would ask that you try it first.”

Mike doesn’t respond, just watching Shae, and she stampedes onward. She looks embarrassed by how excited she is, an emotion Mike has seen all over Ashley’s face before. The two look nothing alike, but for a moment Mike can almost picture Shae in a beanie and hoodie. “It would be easy. There would be no pain— I wouldn’t even have to bite you, if that part scared you.”

“How do you know?” he asks. “You were born a werewolf.”

“I’ve done my research,” she says, and lifts her chin defiantly like she expects to be questioned on this. “There are several ways to turn you that don’t involve biting. We’re not vampires, after all; we’ve got some variations. If you cut off some of my fur, I’m fairly sure there’s a way you could wear it to temporarily change into a wolf. You wouldn’t be a real shapeshifter; you’d practically be a selkie.”

Mike holds up a hand, trying to catch up. “Do vampires and selkies exist too?”

Shae ignores him, moving on. “In any case, if you did experience any pain from the bite, it would be much lessened by your newfound powers. Werewolves are stronger than humans, and our senses are sharpened, and we’re faster too. You could kick ass in whatever sport you chose. Although I’m not sure if that would count as cheating or not… you might have to put yourself at a disadvantage in some other way…”

“Shae,” Mike interrupts.

She brushes him off, continuing her pitch. It sounds like she’s recited this to herself before. “And you won’t only change on the full moon, you’ll be able to change whenever you want. If you want to impress your friends or anything. You will be at your strongest during the full moon, obviously, but you’ll still be in control. I can— I’ll teach you to still be in control. I’m really, really good at being a werewolf. I mean, I’ve had my whole life to practice—”
“Shae,” he repeats insistently. “I’m not—”

“I know,” she cuts him off. “I’m sorry. It’s a stupid idea, I just—we got along so well when we were walking around together, and I missed you when you left, and now that you’re back I—” Shae is hardly taking breaks to breathe, fidgeting with her hair like Jess would. Her hands are flexing, fingers moving back and forth in aimless panic. “I just don’t want to be alone again. I’m… that’s what I hate more than anything else. Being alone.”

Mike swallows his words, staring at the nervous creature beside him, and he feels something he can’t name. He remembers looking at pictures of therapy dogs, driving across the mountains all night, and hiking back up the peak he swore he’d never return to—all with one clear goal in sight. He remembers the person he’d been when he and Sam blew up the lodge, and the person he’s been since, and the unending desire to return to playing the hero. He remembers teachers in high school asking his class to draw what they were afraid of, and he remembers failing several assignments because he had never been able to make the feeling of isolation a material, comprehensible thing. And now he’s here, and he has the opportunity to change himself, permanently.

“I don’t want you to feel pressured into this,” Shae begins to say, but Mike talks over her with a quiet but decisive “Okay.”

Shae peters off, looking at Mike uncertainly, and then her ears perk up like she’s an actual dog. “Really?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Mike reaches out to hold Shae’s shaking hands in his, nodding. If he’s made it this far, there’s no point in turning back now. “I want you to turn me.”

Shae jumps forward, and for a heart-stopping second Mike thinks she’s about to turn him right now, but her arms slide around his shoulders and she collides with him, hugging him tightly. “Thank you,” she blurts out, and what she’d said earlier about never having had any friends strikes a new chord with Mike now. “I promise it’s going to be amazing.”

He hugs Shae back, patting her shoulders gently until she pulls away from him. He’s suddenly jarred by the thought that that might have been her first hug since she was thirteen, but Shae doesn’t seem very emotional. She just seems excited, and her enthusiasm is contagious. All of a sudden Mike wants to feel what it’s like to be a werewolf right now. “So… are you gonna bite me, or do I have to wine and dine you first?”

Shae rolls her eyes at Mike wiggling his eyebrows at her. “Not tonight. Tomorrow is the new moon; we’ll do it during the day so it’ll be easier on you. I wouldn’t want your first time to be bad.” Rising to her feet, Shae grabs her empty glass and heads over to the kitchen. “And also, I don’t have to bite you. Like I said, there are other ways for you to become a werewolf.”

“Suit yourself,” she says, flipping the glass upside-down on the counter to drip dry. “Not mine, obviously. But if you could find some human meat, we could mix it up with the remains of that other wolf, and you can eat that. No biting required.”

Mike shudders. “No way in hell. If I eat dead human meat, what’s to stop me from turning into a wendigo instead of a werewolf? Those spirits are still flying around here.”

“Suit yourself,” Shae replies, and then glances over her shoulder with a smirk. “If I pour water into one of my footprints, you could sip from that, and it will have the same effect.”
Disgusted, Mike pulls a face at her. “That is absolutely revolting. Are you making this shit up?”

Shae laughs and turns back to the counter. Mike has no idea at all if she made that last one up or not. “Fine. Then I’ll bite you tomorrow.”

“Fine,” he retorts, because he’d been fine with biting in the first place. He’d been hungry a few hours ago, but now that they’ve had this nice chat about wolf-human stir-fry, Mike thinks his appetite can probably survive the night without dinner. He takes off his shoes and jacket and leaves them in a neat pile on the floor, curling up on the couch. The fire is dwindling down to its embers, and Mike watches it lick along the black and grey bark.

His heart settles, and he feels more at home here than anywhere else he’s been in the past month. He glances over at Shae, who’s still cleaning the kitchen, and then glances back at the fireplace. His eyes drift shut and images of flickering fire project onto his retinas, kaleidoscopic and impossible.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone leaving kudos/commenting/bookmarking! You all make me smile so much. (Also what is it like to end a chapter not on a plot twist? can't relate haha)

When he dreams, fire is still dancing over his eyelids. He doesn’t want to open his eyes, but he feels a heat creeping up his legs like someone’s submerged them in warm water. Reluctantly, Mike opens his eyes to look down and his fears are instantly confirmed— he’s on fire.

No, he screeches, feet and calves already disintegrated into ash. His knees hurt as they burn, and he imagines he can feel each hair on his leg catch like a new wick. No, no, no!

He sees Sam escaping the inferno, disappearing from the front door of the house and then being blasted forward by a gust of fire. Even as he’s dying Mike hopes she’s okay— and then he sees her get to her feet outside the house. He sees a figure rush over to her side and hold her arm and he realizes with bemusement that it’s him. Mike stares at himself, chest alight with flame, and wonders why they’ve killed him. He isn’t a wendigo; he’s a survivor, just like them.

But then all of a sudden, as fire races along Mike’s arms, he starts to change. He feels white fur growing all over his body, just like it had on Shae’s earlier. Mike looks up, terrified, and sees Sam and himself staring at him in horror. He sees Ashley and Emily pointing at him and he hears Chris yells “Monster!”

Mike averts his eyes in pain and shame as his throat catches. The world around him is red and blue and white, and for some reason he thinks he can hear Josh crying somewhere in the burning house.

Mike jerks awake, heart racing.

There’s a dog lying half on top of him, and Mike is hugging it tightly. He clings to it for a moment, thinking about Wolfie. Then all the events of yesterday rush back to him at once and he realizes exactly who he’s hugging.

Shae.

Mike loosens his grip on the wolf slightly— not completely, since his heart is still going a mile a minute. He looks around the cabin they’re in, and then sighs heavily. Nothing is on fire— the fireplace itself is long extinguished. The sun is filtering in through the planks covering the door, and Mike yawns. The wolf in his arms shudders in her sleep, and then her eyes open, wide and blue and sleepy.

Mike laughs at how drowsy Shae looks, and she stares at him for a moment before she starts to transform. Mike swiftly lets go, pushing her away, and tries to averts his eyes. Shae laughs before she’s done transforming into a human, barking at him and then cackling loudly. She rolls away on the couch, completely naked and unashamed of it, and looks over to grin at him.
“Good morning,” Mike says, a little embarrassed by how nice it felt to wake up holding a dog.

“Morning,” Shae echoes, stretching out. Mike quickly looks away, and she laughs at him again. “Hey, don’t get embarrassed now. You’re the one who’s a cuddle monster.”

Mike begins, “I didn’t…” but then he looks at the pile of clothes on the floor by Shae’s end of the couch and realizes that maybe he did reach out to grab something warm and comforting in his sleep. He can’t bring himself to regret it, not when it cut his horrible nightmare short. “I didn’t mean to cuddle you.”

“Hey, I don’t care,” Shae says. She reaches for one of her baggy shirts, pulling it on and only fastening two of the buttons. Mike wonders, not for the first time, if she’s flirting with him. He’s a little upset by the idea—he wants Shae to be his friend, not to try to be his girlfriend. “Do you still want me to turn you?”

“Oh,” Mike breathes, because for a moment he totally forgot. It feels strange to address it so casually, like she’d asked if he wanted something to drink or clothes to change into. “Yeah. You wanna do it now?”

Shae nods at him, and then shuffles over to sit beside him on the couch. She’s still mostly naked, and it’s impossible not to look down at her. Mike doesn’t feel anything from her presence; no sparks whatsoever are flying, and to his disgust he’s reminded a little bit of Jess’ bruised body. He grimaces, and Shae raises her eyebrows. “Mike, if you don’t want to go through with this, we don’t have to. I won’t think any less of you if you’re human.”

He’s never been good at avoiding impulses, from his past relationships with Jess and Emily to touching the fuse box and bear trap to going on a cross-country road trip to find a wild dog. “Yeah, but I don’t wanna give up the super strength. Go ahead, Randal. Bite me.” He bares his neck, body taut with anticipation.

Shae smiles softly, and leans in close to him. He can feel her breath on his skin, and thankfully it doesn’t smell like dog’s breath. He’d been a little worried about that one. He closes his eyes to brace for impact, but Shae doesn’t tear out his throat like he expects. Instead, she reaches for his wrist, and sinks her teeth into the skin there.

“Holy mother refrigerator,” Mike yelps, and yanks his hand away instinctively. Shae holds on tight, and closes her mouth over the exposed bite marks, lapping up the blood. She licks his wrist once more before pulling away, and then spits for good measure. The new marks sting like a bitch, and Mike presses his other palm down to stave off the rest of the blood flow.

With the exception of his smarting wrist, his body feels just like how it had before he was bitten. He thinks about Emily’s “infection” and how quickly they’d jumped to assumptions with that one, and hopes that this particular infection won’t turn out to be a dud. “How, uh… long does it take? I don’t feel any different.”

Shae frowns, looking uneasy. “I wonder if I did it wrong. I’ve never done this before.”

“What?” Mike gapes at her. “I’m your trial run?”

“It’s not like I ever had anyone else who I trusted enough to turn,” she points out, and slides away from him. She gets to her feet, stretching her legs out. “Here, just… I don’t know, try to copy me.”

Before Mike can protest at all, Shae’s stripping out of her shirt, letting it fall to the ground. The shift happens much faster this time than the first. White fur glides across her body to replace all the
bare patches of skin, and her irises expand until her eyes are all blue and black. She falls to her knees as her legs and arms morph, and Mike tries to imagine his own body doing the same kind of thing, but he can’t picture it.

Shae looks up at him with big puppy eyes, and Mike shrugs, disappointed. He has no idea how to force his own transformation. “Maybe I’m immune or something,” he says, and Shae pads away from him. She walks over to the window, looking up at the bright clear sky. Mike pulls his hand away from the injury, looking at his new bloody scars, and then over at the wolf whose saliva infected them. Shae’s gaze is keenly fixed up on something in the sky, and she opens her mouth to let out a loud and wild howl.

Something deep stirs in Mike, and suddenly his whole body itches. He reaches up to scratch at his neck, giving into the feeling. It’s like a warmth is spreading across his body, distracting him from his disappointment at not turning and his thoughts of immunity, demanding he focus on this entirely new emotion.

The room around him seems to sway, and Shae is trotting back to him but he can’t focus on her. His vision spots in places, colour disappearing from the room around him. Shae’s eyes don’t look blue at all, they look grey like her fur. The dark brown wood of the cabin has turned grey too, and it’s harder to see the wall opposite him.

What this new vision lacks in sharpness is ameliorated by his other senses— Mike can hear a bird calling from outside the house as clearly as if it was right in front of him. He can smell too, and the scent of everything is overpowering. Just by turning his head he can travel from the rich, warm smell of Shae’s fur to the smell of the fireplace to the smell of dish soap in the kitchen, and he swears he can smell shampoo somewhere in the apartment too.

Turning his head back and forth is what brings Mike to his next discovery; his head feels stranger. Longer. He pulls off his clothes in an almost distracted sense, trying to account for the elongation of his limbs and body. It doesn’t feel strange to undress like this— in fact, it feels stranger to be wearing clothes at all. He feels hair all over his body stand on end, and realizes that the goosebumps he’s feeling are actually fur growing everywhere. Mike twists his head as best he can to look at himself and sees dark brown fur covering his new legs and paws, one of which is missing two fingers. He doesn’t know why he assumed his fur would be white, and he’s reassured to see that it isn’t.

Shae walks over to him and nuzzles him, her head pressing against his neck. He returns the gesture, and Shae’s tail wags. Mike wags his own tail and then realizes in shock that he has a tail. He barks in surprise, and Shae barks back, tongue hanging out. She’s smiling at him. It feels so unique to exist in this state that Mike can’t think of anything else to do than smile back and bark once more.

They leave the house together, and Mike doesn’t feel cold despite his fur bristling in the wind. So much of his physiology has changed nearly instantly, and if he had the mental capacity to focus on that right now, maybe he’d try to study it. Instead, he and Shae bound across the snow together, running around and barking excitedly. They startle a bird out of a tree, and Mike barks at that too, not sure if he’s laughing or saying something or just cheering. It feels like such a natural reaction to his environment that he barks again, and a few more birds follow.

Shae shows him the mountain he thought he knew, and they travel through paths that he wouldn’t be able to get to in his human form. The anxiety that Mike has been struggling with is nowhere to be found, and the feeling is exhilarating. Shae was right when she’d said that thoughts were clearer for humans— Mike feels about as able to comprehend higher learning and complex thought
processes as Jessica’s tiny dog Bruiser would be.

It’s not that he’s less intelligent in this state; it’s simply that everything is so distracting. They spend nearly half an hour chasing a rabbit through the trees, and when the rabbit disappears down a hole they spend even longer trying to dig it back up. The scent of meat is irresistible, and Mike wonders that Shae doesn’t try to eat him instead of some flighty prey. But the idea of eating her is equally abhorrent. She is his pack, and he is hers. Mike has never had any siblings before, and he’s happy to start now.

They tumble around together in the snow, barking and yapping in response to nothing at all. Mike discovers why dogs love burrowing through snow so much, and gets his fur all wet and his nose covered in powder. Shae laughs at him, rolling over, and Mike smiles. He doesn’t exactly feel like a dog; something stronger is pulling at him. He looks up towards the source of the tug, and sees the sun high in the sky. The moon is too new for Mike to see it, too close to the sun, but he knows it’s there from more than basic science. He can feel it.

He howls, arching his back to point his whole body upwards. He doesn’t understand the science or logic behind the moon taking hold of his heart like this, but perhaps neither system is influencing him to do this. Shae howls too, and the noise is euphoric. His heart is thrumming, and he can only express the note resounding in his chest by howling helplessly at the sky until his voice peters out. He wants something he doesn’t know.

The sun eventually falls past the horizon and the mountain becomes much colder, snowflakes pricking through the sky as an idyllic stillness falls over everything, enforcing peace. Mike follows Shae to a small cave tucked beneath a cliff’s edge, and thinks that this is where he learns how to turn back into a human. He hesitates to follow her towards the cavern, scared of entering the mines and reluctant to return to his human state.

Shae sniffs into the cavern, nose twitching, and Mike lets out a low, mournful noise. She turns to look at him, and he tries to get across his concerns, but he just ends up whining and ducking his face. The last thing he wants right now is to stumble across Josh’s dead body in the mines and be overcome with sadness—or worse, hunger.

Thankfully, Shae seems to understand his concerns. She steps away from the cavern, leaving whatever she wanted to show Mike there, and walks in an entirely new direction. Mike is too grateful to question her intentions, sparing a parting glance at the cave.

As evening continues to fall into place, Mike discovers a new aspect to his vision he hadn’t even considered. The trees are just as blurry and hard to differentiate as before, but no darker. He can see through the night far better than he could as a human, which is unquestionably awesome. Mike lingers behind Shae longer in some places just so he can use his new night vision to try to observe waterfalls and interesting plants. This ends when he sees a very clear and real skunk that sends him bolting after Shae.

Apparently Shae’s plans for the evening do not involve sleeping, and in fact involve breaking into the Washington Estate. Mike is hardly tired, and in fact feels like he could run a few laps of the entire mountain, but he is starting to feel the first pangs of feral hunger, so he helps her push the doors open.

Where the forest’s stillness was calm, the house’s silence is disarming. Mike’s ears twitch at the
creak of every floorboard beneath their paws, and he can practically follow his scent trail from a few days ago. He sniffs out the beer bottle, sticky and empty, and the food he’d moved into the pantry. Shae follows him, looking around the house warily, like she expects something to jump at them. Mike can’t say he blames her.

The main floor yields no food that catches their eye, and Mike can’t convince Shae without words to try instant mashed potatoes, so he leads her down to the basement. Shae is clearly even less pleased to be down here, and Mike catches her cowering with her tail between her legs a few times. He walks close enough to nuzzle her side, smoothing down her fur with his head awkwardly. It’s pointless, but it seems to do the trick. He still catches her glaring at a few suspicious objects, tail straight and ears pointed forward. When they pass the dollhouse she growls angrily, and Mike agrees.

When they reach the ghost, Shae abandons growling altogether in favour of jumping at the phantom and ripping its throat out. Mike barks in surprise, but Shae pays him no heed, tearing at the curtains and mask and plastic hands until the ghost falls away from whatever contraption was holding it in place in the wall. She tears it to shreds in front of him, and Mike realizes she attacked it to protect him. He feels bad about failing to warn her it would be there, but there’s no way to let her know now, so he continues on. Shae follows him, loyal albeit scared.

Mike leads the way into the kitchen, but has to stop short at the overpowering sight of the dead pig. Or not the sight, he realizes, but the scent— he can hardly focus at all with how the rotten meal is calling to him. Mike is entirely disgusted by his new body’s lack of taste, but apparently Shae doesn’t feel so inhibited. She attacks the pig with the same ferocity as she had the ghost, and tears it off its hook with a horrible noise. Mike wishes he could cover his ears as he watches her gnaw at the pig, obviously delighted to have found an effortless and free meal.

He’s beyond tempted to go join her, but instead he trots over to the walk-in fridge. The metal door is blocking his senses, but Mike can still detect that there’s food inside— and he remembers leaving it pretty full too. After a few minutes of working to open the door, he finally succeeds, using his paws and nose to pull the handle. He tugs one of the lime crates over to hold the door open, and is surprised by how strong his teeth are. Where the human Mike would struggle to bite through a caramel apple, this Mike is struggling to not shatter wood with his canines. Ha. Canines.

Mike leaps over the crate, body narrowly squeezing through the gap, and barks to call Shae over to him. He’s shocked to see that she has already demolished most of the pig, leaving behind whatever she couldn’t chew through. Mike remembers reading that adult wolves can eat more than twenty pounds of meat in one sitting, but he doesn’t remember reading anything warning him how terrifyingly fast they could eat it. That must be a werewolf thing.

Shae walks over. Her jaws and snout and neck are red, and she looks immensely satisfied with herself. Mike goes back into the freezer, and Shae follows. She moves past the various vegetarian options and heads straight to the meat, pulling the roast beef off of its shelf and onto the floor.

Mike shakes his head and growls to indicate that they shouldn’t eat that one, but Shae doesn’t seem to care. She tears at the packaging, making long gashes in the plastic wrap. Once she’s freed it of its wrapping, she pushes the beef towards Mike with her nose.

‘Oh, no thanks, I’ll pass on the rotten roast beef,’ is what human Mike might say. Full shift werewolf Mike, however, can’t ignore his stomach rumbling anymore. He cautiously bites the meat, just to test how bad it’ll be.
Instantly, bliss seeps through him, racing through his veins like he’s taking a morphine shot instead of biting rotten meat. He swallows, and the meat tastes so good he can’t help but growl. How could he have forgotten that wolves are carnivorous creatures? He takes another bite, jaw opening wide to take as much as he can. Before he can even think to share with Shae, he devours the beef.

When he’s done he looks up at Shae, who licks the blood off her jaws and then nods. Mike is panting but it’s impossible to guess whether that’s from dehydration or satisfaction. He guesses dehydration, but he can’t bring himself to care. His tail is wagging, and he’s only certain of one thing right now: he needs to keep eating.

Together they eat through way more of the fridge’s contents than advisable, tearing through everything from neatly marked frozen chicken breasts to Sam’s vegan sausages. Mike hates these, unable to finish more than one. They pale in comparison to the feeling of eating real meat. Shae doesn’t seem to mind, swallowing the sausage links one by one.

They eat other things than meat too, proving themselves to be omnivores. Mike breaks open a package of crackers and licks up the salt and dust from the floor, and Shae discovers the rotten mangoes and bites into them with maniacal glee, clawing their skin up and then licking the juice.

When they’ve finally eaten enough to quash the hunger threatening to take over, they leave the lodge out of an unspoken mutual desire to return to nature. Shae is happier the second they’ve left the building, and it’s not hard for Mike to see why—the forest is where they belong as wolves. He tries to imagine bringing Shae back to his Vancouver apartment and discovers he can’t even recall what his Vancouver apartment looks like, let alone what a dog kennel might have looked like.

The idea is laughably horrific, but thankfully Mike doesn’t need to entertain it for long. Shae whines to get his attention, and he turns to see what she’s pointing at. The fence that runs along the path has tall posts, and atop one of these is a gray squirrel, peering down at them curiously.

Mike exchanges a quick look with Shae and then they both jump at the post, trying to knock the squirrel down. The squirrel evades them, running away along the top of the fence, and Mike and Shae follow in quick pursuit. He dismisses thoughts of Vancouver, of his apartment, and of ownership.

They walk along familiar paths but in entirely new ways, and forge completely unfamiliar paths too. Shae follows the water like a real wolf, looking for prey that might live along the riverbanks and lakes’ shore, and Mike follows Shae. She shows him a lake that wasn’t even on the map of the mountain, and they follow a river connected to it. They walk upstream, and Mike catches a fish with his mouth like a bear, and Shae sucks at catching fish so he shares his trout with her.

He feels like a prince here, or a god. Any wildlife they see is either prey or their court or both, and Mike always entertained the notion that he was good with animals but this is something else entirely. The animals trust him and Shae as wolves more than they would as humans, and Mike sees so much more wildlife than he usually would. He is unchallenged in his position at the top of the food chain— maybe the wendigos would have been a threat, but thankfully they’re not around anymore.

Shae stops to drink from the river, and Mike does as well, stepping into the river to get better access. Drinking as a wolf is more difficult than it would seem. The lack of cheeks means he has to flick the water up into the air with his tongue, and then somehow swallow it without spilling it.
He makes a few bad attempts, and then eventually just submerges his jaws underwater. When he’s had his fill, he shakes himself off, and Shae snorts at him.

Mike looks further upstream and sees a wooden bridge. After a moment of confusion he realizes it’s the bridge that he and Jess had crossed on their way up to the cabin. He stares at the bridge, thinking about Jess for a moment, and then Shae splashes him with ice cold river water.

Mike growls playfully and splashes her back, and that devolves into a full-on wolf water fight. He doesn’t think about Jess again.

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The longer Mike spends as a wolf, things make more and more sense. He grows accustomed to his werewolf instincts, and as the moon waxes he only feels more invigorated. When the sky starts to grow darker Mike realizes it’s evening again, and that one night has passed— or two. He is thrown off by time passing without his notice, but doesn’t let it trouble him for long. After all, it doesn’t seem to trouble Shae.

The next stop in their exploration is obvious, even if it’s a place they’ve explored together before. They go to the sanatorium, and Mike purposefully avoids the room where he knows the bear trap is, not eager to see his decomposing fingers. If he strains himself he thinks he can smell them, and then he quickly dismisses that as his imagination working overtime. Besides, there’s probably lots of other dead things in here to smell.

Shae shows Mike where she had slept and where the stranger had slept, and Mike sees a towering pile of books and journals by the abandoned bed. He wants to read one of them but he knows his paws wouldn’t be able to turn the pages right, so he makes a mental note to come back later. Shae isn’t paying the books any attention at all, transfixed by something outside the bedroom.

Mike eventually walks over to see what Shae’s interested in, but before he sees it he smells it. Where the pig had smelled revolting but delicious, this meat smells tart and putrid, stinging Mike’s nostrils. Slowly he moves to see what it is, and then stops short.

One of the wendigos had eaten the other wolf, which Mike remembers. What he forgot about are the remains, which are now staring him in the face. He stares at the dead wolf and a chill takes over him, and after he’s stared for far too long he turns to look at Shae.

Shae is already looking at him, and her eyes are dull. Mike shakes himself off, nods, and then lopes down the hallway. He gives Shae a good ten minutes alone, lying down and crossing his paws. When he comes back to get her, Shae’s eyes are back to normal, and the remains of the other wolf are nowhere to be seen. Her tail is drooping between her legs and she won’t quite look straight at Mike.

He doesn’t say anything about it, leading them out of the sanatorium. When they’ve put a few metres between them and the building, Shae bumps into his side gently, nuzzling her head against his shoulder. Mike doesn’t know how to react so he doesn’t react at all.

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Mike leads the way back from the sanatorium, partially because Shae still won’t make eye contact. They’re headed in the vague direction of the cabin, although it’s hard to sketch out an exact map in his mind now that he knows infinitely more about this mountain. They take new shortcuts, bounding across untouched snowbanks, and occasionally stop to look at distractions like wild animals or suspicious signage. But they aren’t hungry or curious, so they don’t chase the former or
investigate the latter. Right now their only aim is to put distance between the sanatorium and themselves.

They’re only jolted from their drifting when Shae suddenly lets out a sharp bark. Mike twists to look at her in concern, expecting danger, and sees that her eyes are trained on something in the distance. Before Mike can even ask what it is, she’s off— and he obediently follows.

He starts to smell it, but this smell isn’t like the others. It’s somehow worse than the dead pig in the basement, making Mike feel a powerful unease instead of disgust. Shae makes it there first, and then stops, ears standing straight. She’s looking over the edge of a ravine, and Mike doesn’t want to join her there. Reluctantly, he crawls over to her, and peers over the edge.

There is a mass of bodies, cold and lifeless, none of them human, and for a moment Mike thinks he’s having a nightmare. The sight is unreal— like nothing he’s ever seen out of a horror movie. He can only identify individual parts; an antler there, a leg there. A hoof detached on the other side. Despite the lack of human bodies, there’s a shirt and jacket strewn across the ground a few feet away, the jacket torn beyond repair. The side of the ravine has been gouged out by nature or something faster, and Mike can see a dark crevice a few feet wide that something could easily hide in. He thinks of bears hibernating under the mountain, and then of other things lurking in the mines.

He knows these dead animals, although he couldn’t say how he knows which ones they are. These must be the deer he saw on his way up the mountain. But he’d seen three, and there’s only two mangled corpses in front of him. Shock and aversion suddenly overtake Mike, and he begins to transform. The transformation feels even stranger this time, as his claws retract into nails and his bones realign themselves. In an instant he’s on two legs instead of four, and struggling to catch his breath. The world slides back into colour, and Mike can see how red the snow around the deer is.

Shae transforms too, but her body changes faster than his. She looks almost reluctant about becoming human again after so long spent as a wolf, and Mike can relate. He feels so cold without his fur or any clothing to speak of, and his human self-consciousness about being naked is rushing back to him. He promptly covers himself with both hands, and asks quietly, “What could have done something like this?”

She shakes her head softly instead of answering, and slides down into the ravine. Mike awkwardly jumps down, fighting the urge to cross his legs. He goes straight for the ripped coat, unhappy to see that it’s stained dark red with blood. But it’s not like he has any options here, so he awkwardly ties it around his torso to cover the necessary areas. He’s reminded of Jess in little but her green jacket, and Sam in nothing but her towel. Now it’s his turn to stumble half-naked around the mountain. He tosses Shae the shirt, which looks relatively clean. While she does a much better job of dressing herself, Mike turns to look at the dead animals.

He almost wishes that his human vision wasn’t sharp so that he could continue to see the massacre as a bloody, blurry blob. Instead, Mike can clearly see everything laid out in front of him. The deer have not only been brutally killed; they’ve been decapitated, and reassembled into something disgusting.

He swallows the bile threatening to escape his throat, and looks over at Shae. Her gaze is transfixed on one of the slabs of meat, and Mike prays to whatever werewolf gods there are that she doesn’t find this appetizing. “Shae,” he says, and when she doesn’t acknowledge him he repeats it, a little louder. “Shae. What could have done something like this?”

Shae looks over at him, and to his surprise, she looks guilty. “I need your help,” she confesses, her voice low. It’s the first words she has spoken to him in days, and her throat sounds hoarse for lack
of use. “I know you can’t stay here on the mountain forever, but I need you to at least stay to help me defeat the last wendigo.”

Mike’s heart stops.

“The wendigo threat to this mountain is even older than the starving miners,” Shae begins, seemingly unaware of how Mike has suddenly lost the ability to breathe. “Jack was chasing Makkapitew, but wendigos have existed for far longer than that. You can follow their stories throughout history, and every time humans think they’ve managed to defeat them, they only set them back for a time. Humans can’t kill the wendigo—they can only free it, creating a problem for their descendants. Humans are useless against it.”

“We killed all the wendigos,” he says too quickly, his heart racing. “They’re all dead.”

“You missed one,” Shae replies. Her eyes are dark and fearful. “This monster is younger than the other trapped wendigos, and it’s the most dangerous one. It attacks everything on the mountain. I need you to help me kill it, I know where it lives. It has a lair down in the mines.”

Relief washes over Mike as he realizes what wendigo Shae is referring to. “That’s Hannah, she’s the one that had a lair down in the mines. But we—we killed her, she’s gone.”

“No,” Shae growls in annoyance. “I know the one with the butterfly. I’m talking about the one that still looks human.”

And just like that, the relief is gone. Mike thinks about the few humans he’s seen since coming back up here, and the only ones that come to mind are the police officers looking for Josh’s corpse. Josh’s undiscovered corpse. Josh, who had no idea what was happening when they found him, who was writhing with delusions. Josh, who was dragged away by Hannah to die, not killed right in front of Mike. Josh, who Chris is convinced might still be alive.

Slowly, Mike puts two and two together, and realizes who the last wendigo must be. Chris might be right. Maybe Josh had found a way to survive just like his sister had. Josh must still be alive—but as a wendigo.

Mike feels a tug at a rope around his heart. He didn’t even know it had been tied up.

Shae’s hand touches his bare shoulder, and Mike looks over at her sharply. She pulls away her hand, looking at him nervously. He doesn’t have any other options here. The idea of abandoning Josh in the mines a second time is unthinkable, so after a moment, he tells her, “I’ll go stop your monster. Because I know him.”

Shae looks confused, but when she starts to ask something Mike cuts her off suddenly. He doesn’t bother to hide the emotion in his voice. “Is this why you turned me into a werewolf? So that I could protect you from the monster you couldn’t defeat on your own?”

He isn’t expecting Shae to answer, and she doesn’t. She stares at him, expression too neutral to mean no. Mike thinks he understands her better now than before, but he doesn’t like the newfound understanding.

When Shae stays quiet, Mike nods, jaw stiff. So that’s how it’s going to be. “Let’s get back to the lodge,” he says, and his voice is harsh even to his own ears. “If we’re going to do this, I need supplies.”
"You’re going to shoot me, Mike? Me?"

Emily’s voice echoes in his thoughts as they walk back to the lodge, reverberating around his mind like a tune he can’t shake. He still remembers hearing the disbelief and shock in her voice, and even though he’s talked to her since they got back from the mountain, he doesn’t think she’ll ever forgive him for what he nearly did. He isn’t sure that she should forgive him.

He knows Chris will never forgive him if he kills Josh.

They stay human, and Mike staunchly refuses to look up at the sky, unwilling to transform back at the moon’s suggestion. Shae is shivering beside him the whole walk, but when Mike offers her the jacket she declines it. She still won’t make eye contact with him, clearly feeling guilty about manipulating him. Mike is too busy reeling from the revelation of Josh to distract himself with his new friend’s betrayal.

Josh. The thought of Josh being alive settles and scares Mike in equal measure. This is inescapably his fault. He’s the one that set off the chain of events that forced Hannah to cannibalism, and now he’s condemned Josh to the same hungry fate. He can easily picture Josh leaping around the mountain, movements supernatural and terrifying. Mike closes his eyes tightly for a moment, trying to escape the guilt that has settled in his stomach like a rock.

“Are you upset with me?” Shae asks, cutting through Mike’s guilt. Startled, he looks at her, and sees that she’s standing only a foot away. Now that she’s finally meeting his eyes he can identify the emotion in hers: fear. “I would have told you sooner if I knew that you knew this wendigo. I didn’t mean to— I mean… I wouldn’t have tricked you.”

Mike’s anger with her crumbles away, destructed as easily as it was constructed. “You didn’t trick me into anything,” he tells her with a shrug. “I still think being a werewolf is awesome. I just didn’t think you were recruiting me into your pack so I could do a job for you.”

“That’s not why I turned you,” Shae says, and when Mike raises an eyebrow she rolls her eyes. “I mean. It isn’t the whole reason.”

“I’m not upset with you. Just be honest next time.” He sounds like his mom when she’d caught him sneaking out late at night in high school, and he laughs. Shae’s smile is anxious and uncertain, but she doesn’t look quite as miserable after that.
The doors to the lodge are easier to open with hands than paws, and Mike holds the door for Shae like a proper gentleman. She quickly heads inside, rubbing her palms over her arms for warmth, and Mike closes the door behind himself. He doesn’t blame her for shivering—his legs feel like they’re about to fall off, let alone his other lower extremities. He has a newfound respect for Jess and Sam. “C’mon,” he beckons to Shae, and she nods and follows him.

She’s still trembling as Mike leads her up the rickety stairs to the third floor. One breaks beneath her bare feet, and her cry of “Aw, fuck” shocks a laugh out of Mike.

He reaches to steady her arm, laughing. “Hey now. I know you’re new to Hogwarts, but be careful.”

Shae throws him a look over her shoulder that very clearly spells out she has no idea what he’s trying to reference. Mike is a little relieved, because that was a pretty nerdy reference. Really, who is he? Chris?

She makes it successfully up the rest of the stairs, and then holds out a hand to Mike. He scales them fairly easily, taking her hand to jump up the last three. He’s not sure if his newfound superpowers or Shae’s super strength helps him leap, but either way he just barely lands on his feet. “Whoa. That’s new.”

“You might retain some of your abilities even when you aren’t transformed,” Shae says. “I mean, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been a human.” She looks beyond proud of the fact.

“Humans aren’t so bad,” Mike says as he leads the way down the hall. He opens the doors to the master bedroom, where everything is exactly as he left it. Heading straight for the closet, he grabs his duffel bag and pulls out his clothes. “I know a few good ones. Here, take whatever you want.”

Shae goes straight for whatever she wants, which is apparently Bob Washington’s bomber jacket. It’s a distressed navy blue, and she grabs one of Melinda’s sleep shirts to wear under it. Mike opts for his own clothing instead, already having stolen one of Bob’s coats. He feels more comfortable the second he covers himself up, so he dresses as quickly as he can, layering up Hartley-style. When he’s dressed, he turns to Shae.

Once again Mike is unsure whether to diagnose Shae’s fashion style as the hottest new look or a complete disaster. He knows that Emily would have Words with a capital W about what Shae’s wearing, but he has no idea what those words would be. Shae’s currently clad in a baby blue pajama shirt, the navy bomber jacket, thick cargo pants with more pockets than necessary, and fuzzy socks with reindeers on them. He snorts. “I’m not sure the socks match.”

Shae looks down at said socks, and wiggles her toes. “They’re warm. Besides, I look better than you do in your stupid baggy clothes.”

Affronted by the insult, Mike can’t fight the sneaking suspicion that she might be right. “These clothes aren’t baggy!” He presses his good hand to his abdomen, flexing unnecessarily. “I look good! Do you not think I look good?”

Rolling her eyes, Shae turns to the closet. She sorts through the Washingtons’ clothing, examining each piece with a shrewd focus. When she comes across a long white fur coat, Mike half-expects her to be offended. Instead, she turns to him with a wide grin. “This is beautiful. You should wear this pelt.”
Mike isn’t sure how to begin to tell Shae that that pelt was probably manufactured in some horrible sweatshop filled with human rights violations, so instead he focuses on the other problem with it. “That’s a woman’s fur coat. I’m not going to wear that.”

Shae stares at him without comprehension for a moment, and then shrugs. “Whatever. Suit yourself.” She slides the fur on over the bomber jacket, admiring herself, and then takes it off. She tosses it back into the closet, which Mike has to struggle not to laugh at. He can practically picture the look of horror on Melinda’s face.

Mike puts on his socks one by one, and then smiles at Shae. “You know, my friend Sam might have a problem with you wearing furs. She’s a real die-hard activist.”

“Technically, you wear furs now,” Shae points out. Mike can’t argue with that.

There’s only so much dawdling they can manage to do before going to meet whatever creature is in the mines, but Mike is feeling a little peckish. They head back down to the main level, and he grabs a beer, opening it on the edge of the counter. The cap accidentally leaves a minute chip in the marble. He takes a sip, and then holds it out to Shae. “You ever drank before?”

Shae eyes the bottle with uncertainty, and then says, “Yes,” which is a pretty obvious lie. She takes the beer, and sips it. Two seconds later she spits it out, glaring at Mike and wiping off her mouth. “It’s bubbly!”

Mike laughs so hard he nearly falls over, and Shae glares at him the entire time. She eventually tries another sip of the beer, and her expression the second time is just as disgruntled. “This tastes disgusting. I can’t see why humans drink this shit.”

“My ma loves it,” Mike says, reaching for the bottle. Shae instantly looks curious, and hands the beer to him. He takes a swig before continuing. “Well, not beer. Wine. She has this whole group of friends out in Penticton who all own vineyards and make their own custom stuff. She knows a few breweries too, but she prefers wine. Have you ever been to BC?”

“No,” Shae says, watching him with wide eyes. “I’ve never left Alberta. I have tried, but… I just never got anywhere.” She goes so still that Mike almost looks around for a wendigo, and then she finishes quietly, “I always feel like I’m going to live the rest of my life stuck here in these mountains.”

Mike puts down the beer, uncomfortable with the thought of Shae being trapped here alone. He doesn’t have anything to say, so they stand in silence for a moment. Finally he chickens out and changes the subject. “I don’t think there’s any food up here. Do you want to come downstairs with me?”

Shae nods, and gestures for him to start. “Lead the way.” Mike tries not to think about what will happen after they find Josh. He tries not to think about how he feels like he already misses Shae, and how wandering around the mountain with her had been the best time of his entire year. He swallows down his emotions, and leads the way.

Behind him, he hears Shae pick up the beer, and take another chug. The noise is a little comforting.

The basement feels even colder than he remembers, and he can’t help but wonder if they left the fridge door open.
“Do you think we left the fridge door open?” he finally asks when he hears a rattling sound and
realizes it’s his teeth chattering together. “Because I do not remember it being this freakin’ freezing
down here.”

“I told you to wear that fur,” Shae points out without bothering to hide the smugness in her voice.
“I don’t know how humans function with their fragile skin and everything exposed like that. They
could catch frostbite so easily, and yet they still choose to live in the mountains.”

“You could catch frostbite too,” Mike protests, feeling the need to defend humanity.

But Shae shakes her head, smiling. “No. Not very easily. Even like this, my immune system is
stronger than most humans— and yours is too.”

“Neato,” Mike grumbles, still shivering. “Let me know when it helps me warm up.”

“I will,” Shae promises, and Mike has no idea if she’s being sarcastic or sincere. He narrows his
eyes at her, but she just grins at him. Her grin only falters when they keep walking down the
hallway and pass the creepy dollhouse again. “Are there more ghosts here that will attack us?”

“What? More—Oh!” Before Mike can stop himself he laughs, and then he feels bad and forces a
sober expression onto his face. “No, uh, that wasn’t— that thing that jumped out at us wasn’t a
ghost. It wasn’t a real one, anyway.”

Shae squints in disbelief. “How do you know?”

“Because my friend— my, uh… your monster… You know what, never mind. You beat the shit
out of that thing anyway, so I don’t think we’re in much danger.” Sure enough, when they reach
the end of the hallway, the metal arm moves out to scare them. Josh’s motion sensor system is
apparently infallible. But this time the ghost woman is in ugly tatters on the floor, thanks to Shae.

Mike laughs, and Shae growls at the arm and then pushes past it. Mike grins at her and follows.
“My hero.”

As they enter the basement’s kitchen, Mike is disappointed to see that Wolf-Mike didn’t have the
common sense to shut the door. “Fuck,” he mutters, and crosses the room to the fridge, which has
thankfully retained its temperature. He kicks the crate out of the way and fully opens the door, but
when he steps inside he’s shocked to see the contents.

He remembers what happened, even if some of the memories seem false— like walking on four
feet or howling at the moon. But he doesn’t remember this; he doesn’t remember decimating their
food supplies. Where the fridge had been well-stocked it now holds significantly less food, and the
floor is littered with packaging and garbage. Mike looks at the remnants of what was once plastic
covering roast beef, and at the empty crates and containers lining the walls.

He feels more than sees Shae behind him, and turns to face her, confused beyond belief. “What
happened?”

“We were hungry,” Shae shrugs with one shoulder. She doesn’t look surprised by the devastation
at all. “It happens.”

“Yeah, but I’m hungry again,” Mike says, and turns back to look into the fridge. He sees the skin
of a mango, green and orange, torn asunder by Shae’s teeth. The sinking feeling he’s beginning to
associate with Blackwood returns to his stomach. “Shae, how long did we… wolf out?”

He expects Shae to be as disoriented as him, so it’s a shock when she answers right away, “It’s
been three moons since the new moon.”

Since he lacks an almanac, Mike has to take a few seconds to realize what she means. When he does, he realizes with a jolt that it’s Saturday. He’d assumed that they had explored the mountain together for a night and a day, if that. But if he turned on Wednesday, and it’s now Saturday, then he hasn’t slept in four days. “Shit.”

And if it’s Saturday, then that means he blew everyone off without warning yesterday. “Fuck.”

And if four days have passed, then that means he hasn’t replied to Jessica’s text from Monday morning. “Fuuuuuuck.”

“What?” Shae demands, voice fraught with worry, but Mike hardly acknowledges her. He steps past her, letting the fridge door shut behind him. He pats down his jeans, looking for his phone in all his pockets, but it’s not there, of course. His phone is back upstairs, because he changed his pants after shapeshifting into a werewolf and then back into a human. Of course.

Mike walks through the basement, and reality slowly starts to set in. He feels more aware of his human side now, even more than when he’d first transformed back. He thinks about his phone and how many notifications he must have missed in the last few days.

“Mike,” Shae says as they head up to the main floor, her tone even more concerned now. Mike doesn’t stop, shaking his head. He was supposed to be back in Vancouver yesterday. None of this was supposed to happen. It’s like he’s been in a haze since coming here, and it’s sickening to have to wake up and realize that the real world still exists.

“Mike,” she repeats, and grabs his arm, and Mike realizes she’s said his name at least a dozen times now. This time her tone leaves no room for debate, and Mike turns around to face her. She looks scared, which he should have expected. It’s not like she can read his mind. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong is that I’m not supposed to be here,” he blurs out before he can stop himself. Shae drops his arm like his skin burned her, and Mike instantly feels a wave of guilt. “I’m not— this isn’t where I belong, Shae. I’m supposed to be with…"

He can’t bring himself to say Jessica’s name when he knows that isn’t quite true either, so he starts again. “I was supposed to see my friends yesterday. My human friends. And I promised them I would meet them yesterday, and then I went off the grid, and one of them called me right when I came up here and asked if I was up on the mountain, and I lied to him and said no, so he’s probably losing his shit. Shae, I don’t—I have people I have to—I can’t live here.”

Shae’s lips twitch downwards. “I know,” she says, too quickly for Mike to believe her. “I’m sorry. Do you want to go back to your other pack?”

Mike hesitates, staring at her. He already feels bad for bringing up his friends when he knows that he’s the only friend that Shae has in the world; the only friend she’s ever had. “No. I… yes. You don’t have to be sorry, Shae, I… didn’t mean to lash out at you. But I should go back to them.”

Something about Shae’s expression softens. “I understand.” Mike wants so badly to ask Shae to come back with him again, but he isn’t sure how she would take that. Last time he made the offer she hadn’t looked exactly thrilled by the idea. She ducks her head, thinking hard about something, and then lifts her chin to look up at Mike. “Before you leave, can you help me defeat my monster?”

There it is again; that tug at Mike’s heart. He wants so badly to defend Josh to Shae, but he knows
there’s no point. Even if he spent an hour sitting with Shae to tell her Josh’s entire story, he isn’t sure Shae would see the value in his redemption. He also doesn’t want to admit that he’s the reason Josh is down in the mines in the first place. “Yeah,” he says. “Yes. I’ll help you.”

Although she tries to disguise it as something else, Shae’s sigh of relief is obvious. “Thank you,” she breathes. Mike feels the intrusive urge to hug her, but he isn’t sure she’d appreciate the gesture, so he just nods and walks past her.

He knows Shae probably thought “supplies to defeat the monster” meant “gun” or “knife”, but Mike doesn’t want to shoot Josh and he has no desire to pick up a knife again ever. Instead, he heads upstairs to grab his flashlight, figuring it might be his best defense option in the dark mines. He sees his phone in the corner of his duffel bag but forces himself not to touch it, knowing that nothing good lies down that road.

When he goes downstairs Shae fixes the flashlight with a strange, dubious look, and then turns that same look on Mike. “That’s what you’re bringing?”

“Yes,” Mike says, clicking the flashlight on and off and then swinging it like a bat. “It’s gonna be dark down there.”

Shae looks thoroughly unimpressed. “Wolves can see in the dark. Why wouldn’t you bring some form of fire?”

Mike bristles at the idea, and says without thinking, “I won’t hurt him again.”

Cocking her head to the side like a dog, Shae asks curiously, “Again?”

Mike thinks about the fury on Josh’s face when they woke him up to tell him about Hannah and Beth. About how depressed he’d been for most of 2014, locking himself in his room and refusing to talk to any of them. He thinks about what Josh said after the prank, about how he honestly thought they deserved this— and then about him and Chris dragging Josh away. He’d pointed a gun at Josh, for fuck’s sake. They’d tied him up. And then when Emily had screamed, he’d left Josh alone at a moment’s notice. And then when he had the chance to save him again down in the mines, he left him to die down there.

He can hear Josh stuttering for Mike not to hit him, and see the whites of Josh’s eyes as Mike had aimed the pistol at him. Mike closes his eyes for a moment, setting his jaw. He won’t hurt Josh again.

He’d rather hurt himself first.

“Mike,” Shae murmurs, barely audible. He opens his eyes, and Shae is right in front of him, looking up at him with that same curiosity. “Was he your mate?”

Mike stammers for a second, and then laughs, and reaches up to scratch the back of his neck. “Was he my— my mate? No! No.”

Shae squints at him in disbelief again, this time looking like she’s not buying any of Mike’s bullshit. Mike feels his face heat a little, and he stammers again. It’s not like it’ll hurt anyone if he says anything. It’s not like Shae will judge him, and Shae won’t tell anyone. She can’t. Mike bites the inside of his cheek, and then confesses, “I… I think I wanted him to be.”

Before he can take it back or make a joke or anything, Shae moves forward and hugs him. Mike stares down at her grey scalp, and then hugs back, closing his eyes tightly. This is the first time he’s ever said anything out loud about this to anyone. Even his mom doesn’t know, and she knows
almost everything else about him.

Shae’s tiny arms are infinitely comforting, and Mike pats her back softly. She whispers against his chest, “I’m sorry you have to kill your mate,” and his blood runs cold.

Shae steps away from him, and Mike tries to force a sober expression onto his face. She nods silently, seeming to sense that he doesn’t want to talk about this anymore, and heads towards the front door. She gives him a look before stepping outside, and Mike starts to follow her.

The door shuts, and Mike hesitates.

He goes to the cabinet under the sink and grabs an aerosol spray can, and then checks that his lighter is in his pocket. “Just in case,” he mutters, and then follows Shae.

The sun is high in the sky by the time they reach the mine entrance, and Mike is glad for it. He doesn’t want to face whatever awaits them in the mines after sunset, and he also thinks he might fall asleep if they went in the dark. With every passing second spent as a human, Mike feels more fallible and drowsy— which makes sense, since he hasn’t rested in several days. If they had any other task, maybe he’d suggest they wait until tomorrow. But Shae is anxious to make her mountain safe, and Mike is anxious to see the monster he created.

They take turns leading the way; at times, Shae looks confused about the scent she’s following, and Mike has to use his human knowledge to lead them towards the mines. When they enter the mines, the dim surroundings confuse him, and Shae pulls him down the pathway. His boots nearly catch on mine cart tracks, but he follows along. Shae stole a pair of Bob Washington’s hunting boots to match his jacket and pants, and they are clunky and echo down the hallway. At one point, the two of them hear a sickening screech in the distance somewhere. Like a bird calling out into a glass chamber.

Mike wouldn’t exactly call himself a wendigo expert, but he’s pretty sure that noise means they’re supposed to either stand stock-still or run far away. Instead, he and Shae inch closer, moving down the path. It’s the first time he’s ever moved towards a wendigo. As they get deeper into the mines, it becomes nearly impossible to see, and he realizes he’s clinging to Shae’s hand like a lifesaver.

He lets go, and Shae gasps in surprise and maybe fear. It’s the first noise either of them have made in their descent, having mutually agreed to stay silent. The gasp glances off the rock walls like a ray of light, and Mike quickly reaches to take her hand again. “Sorry, sorry sorry sorry! It’s okay,” he whispers. “We’re good.”

Shae doesn’t seem convinced, but she clutches his hand like a lost child anyway. They continue to walk down the path, and when they hear another bone-rattling screech, they hardly hesitate for a second. Mike closes his eyes, blocking out the dim light of the hall to walk for a moment in blindness. All he can hear is the occasional plink of water dripping down from stalactites, the occasional rustling of some bat or other cave-dweller being disturbed, and Shae’s heavy nasal breathing. He’s tempted to remind her to chillax once more, but this hardly seems the time.

After nearly half an hour of trekking it through the dark mines, the road ahead of them is cleft in two, providing them two options. Shae tilts her head towards the left, but Mike shakes his head. “No,” he whispers, “this way.” The words trigger a memory, and as they head down the path that takes them deeper into the caves, Mike’s brain replays the events with nearly eidetic precision.
“No, this way,” Sam beckons him, and he wonders how she’s not freezing half to death in the yoga pants she’s got on. They don’t even cover her calves. Snow pants and balaclavas would be appropriate attire here, not tight capris that are practically molded to her legs. And yet it doesn’t seem to hinder her, which reaffirms his belief that Sam is a superhuman. Maybe he should try eating kale sometime.

He holds back a complaint about how cold it is as she walks ahead of him, blazing the trail bravely. Mike feels like he could collapse at any second, except that he doesn’t want to touch the slimy, cold cave floor. He hears something skittering far away from them and shudders.

“I think we’re close,” Sam mumbles, and then adds for clarification, “to the lair.”

Mike follows her, shining his flashlight around them to try to catch sight of any wendigos. “How can you tell?”

“I don’t know, I just feel really terrible all of a sudden,” she mutters, and Mike smiles wryly. It goes unnoticed in the darkness.

“Ditto.”

The narrow path they’ve been walking along opens up into a cavern, and Mike can see a water wheel ahead of them. The wooden structure is partially submerged in a lake, although there’s no way to tell how deep the water is. “I really don’t want to go in there,” Sam says, and he’s inclined to agree.

Mike grits his teeth and looks around for other options, but it looks like there’s only one way to the other side: through the lake. He points the flashlight at a few planks at the ground that might be connected to a ladder, and resists the urge to just call Josh’s name. Maybe if he does, Josh will come swimming.

Instead, he sighs. “There’s no other way through.” He prepares to jump down into the undoubtedly freezing lake, but Sam turns and heads another way. She looks more prepared for spelunking than he feels, with her headlamp illuminating the area around her. Mike follows her, eager to prolong the time before they have to go into the scary dark mine water.

Their combined light throws something on the ground into sharp relief, and Mike watches Sam approach it. He watches her, too nervous to step forward, but his heart stutters when he realizes what the uneven pile of rocks must be hiding.

“Mike,” Sam breathes. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Looks like a grave.”

Mike forces his thoughts back to the present, and shakes himself off. Shae squeezes his hand, and they don’t walk down the path that leads to what’s left of Beth. Instead, Shae walks over to the ledge to stands on the precipice. She eyes the water uncertainly. Her voice is little more than a whisper when she asks, “We don’t have to go in there, do we?”

“Unfortunately, the last time I saw J— your monster, he was keeping house over there.” Mike points across the lake, and Shae cowers. “What? Not a big fan of water?”

“Not deep water,” she replies, letting go of his hand to cross her arms around her body protectively. “Anything could be hiding in there.”
Mike doesn’t want to confirm Shae’s fears, but she is undeniably right. His lips twist into a frown as he stares at the dark water. He’s had nightmares of this place a hundred times since leaving the mountain, and it seems surreal that he’s back, and willingly entering this water again.

He figures a little manipulation isn’t the worst move he could pull here. What Shae doesn’t know might still hurt her, but at least she won’t be freaking out the whole way across. So instead of telling her about how Hannah had hid underwater and then grabbed Josh, he comforts her. “It’s only waist-deep. The deepest part is close to the other side, and the water should only go up to your chest. And besides, I thought you were a wereewolf, not a werecat.”

Shae punches his shoulder lightly, and then reluctantly sits down on the ledge. Mike sits down with her, and jumps down into the dark lake once more. This time, he braces himself for how cold it’s going to be, so the water only shocks him for a few seconds and then he starts to adjust.

“C-Come on down, the water’s fine,” he says, grinning up at Shae, and she unenthusiastically does. Mike waits until she’s moved past him to start shining the flashlight around them, cautiously looking for anything that moves. When he doesn’t see anything except the murky water, he starts to lead Shae to the other side of the lake.

They walk in silence, water rippling around them, and Mike’s heart is pounding. He doesn’t stop for one second, but constantly searches the water, anxiety and fear ramping up into paranoia. When he thinks he sees a shadow at one point they both stop, and Mike shines his flashlight on the area, silently willing it to not be Josh.

He wonders if he fell asleep at one point and this is all some fucked up nightmare.

The shadow doesn’t move, and Mike realizes it must be a reflection from the water wheel. He doesn’t breathe out, still petrified, but he starts to walk through the water again. It’s warmer than he remembers, or maybe he just adapted faster this time. Or maybe his werewolf powers are finally coming to good use.

The water dips down and as Mike takes an uneven step on the lake bottom a screech echoes through the cave, louder than anything. It seems to bounce off the walls like a projectile, echoing from every surface. Shae freezes still, not moving an inch, and her gaze is desperately flying around the mine. Mike doesn’t need to look around; he knows where the screech came from.

They reach the other side of the water and he pulls Shae up as soon as he gets out. They’re both soaked and Shae looks miserable and terrified. Mike wants to tell her it’s okay, but when he opens his mouth he hears a human scream, and he quickly turns to look behind him.

“Josh!” Mike blurts the name out before he can help himself, before he can even think. He knows that scream. The last time he heard it was the last time he saw Josh, and he never thought he’d hear it again.

Shae looks at him like he’s trying to get them killed, and Mike winces, but nothing happens. The moment settles, and the walls around them stop ringing with the combined screams. Mike summons all the courage he has to walk towards the source of the noise. Sam left the rusted door ajar after she’d pried it open, but it’s closed now. Mike pries it open easily enough, and then holds it open for Shae.

The first chamber they enter is empty, but Mike remembers seeing a body hanging here, so he’s instantly caught off-guard. There’s a mass of something on the floor, and just the sight of it gives Mike goosebumps. He points his flashlight at the thing, half-expecting it to get to its feet and jump at him, but it stays still.
He starts to walk over, and Shae follows, clearly reluctant to approach it but not keen to be left alone either. With every step that brings them nearer to the thing, it becomes increasingly clear what it is; Mike can smell what it is. It’s carnage, plain and simple—just like the mass of bodies that they had seen earlier, but this is all human. Mike sees a button on the ground, and his heart stops altogether.

Josh.

He moves closer to the body, even though he hears Shae growl in warning, and kneels. It’s unlike anything Mike has seen up close, and he feels sick just at the sight. But he has to know. The skin seems too pale, too grey and mottled, but maybe everyone looks like that when they die. Mike reaches for the body, and Shae hisses “Mike” but he doesn’t acknowledge her, turning the decapitated head so he can see the face.

A sinking feeling of familiarity sets in, and Mike breathes out slowly. The head he’s holding has been half-gnawed open, and one of the eyeballs is missing. It is decaying and grotesque, but he can still recognize the features. This is the head of the stranger.

Overcome with relief, Mike quickly drops the head, and wipes his hand off on his wet pants. The head rolls away from the mass of other body parts. In his head he sends a silent ‘sorry, bro’ to the stranger’s decapitated remains, but the main emotion he’s feeling is unerring relief that the head did not belong to Josh. He gets to his feet, wiping off his palm once more.

Shae is giving him a slightly revolted look, and Mike just shrugs. He’s pretty sure Shae has no right to be disgusted with him after he’s seen her eat a rotten pig. He shines the flashlight around the cavern, trying to decide what their next move should be, and that’s when they hear it.

“No,” a voice cries. It almost sounds like singing, or just distraught wailing. “No, no, no! No!” This last word is half-human, half-unearthly, and the scream makes Mike’s ears ring.

Mike recognizes that voice. He swallows hard and then nods to Shae, hoping she catches his drift. She nods back, her eyebrows drawing close together in confusion. Maybe she’s confused by how human her monster still sounds. Mike doesn’t stop to wonder, moving past her to head towards the source of the noise.

He peers through the wooden planks that they’d been able to see Josh through last time, but nobody is standing there. Some of the rocks have fallen from the wall in what looks like the aftermath of a small avalanche; or maybe they were tugged down in an attempt to climb out. The light filtering in from where Sam had climbed out illuminates bloodstains covering the floor, and if Mike thought he had goosebumps before now, that’s nothing compared to this. Some of the bloodstains are almost spelling something out, and Mike squints to read them. He’s almost too distracted to notice when something enters the cavern from a deeper part of the mines.

Shae bristles, and moves closer to Mike, clearly terrified. He doesn’t turn to look at her, trying to make out the features of the figure walking into the dim blue light. Or—not quite walking, but pacing around and occasionally moving just slightly too fast to be human. They’re severely malnourished, bones showing in their shoulders and arms and neck. Mike spots a fixture on top of their head, like an uneven headpiece that looks like a coat rack. Or, no, wait—an antler.

He can just barely see the features of a mask connected to the antler, strapped to the top of the figure’s head. His blood runs cold as he identifies it as the same Psycho mask that Josh had worn. The creature is dragging somebody else’s arm behind them, ragged tendons stretching onto the floor like tulle, and Mike squints to try to make out their features.
He sees Josh’s eyes, and then corrects himself. He sees one of Josh’s eyes, but the other eye is torn too far open, stretching too wide. Josh always had big eyes, but this is something else entirely. His nose is recognizable, and his jawline just as sharp, but his mouth is only half-Josh. The left side of his face is ripped open, like someone took a knife to his lips and kept pulling. Mike can see teeth poking through the hole, but they look more shark than human.

Mike is horrified and heartbroken in equal measure.

Shae whimpers at his side, peering through the wooden planks with undisguised terror, and Mike tries to quell the fear in his own heart. He doesn’t move to open the door, instead watching the creature pace around its lair. Mike bites his lip nervously, and then calls out, “Josh!”

The figure stops mid-step, freezing. Mike and Shae are frozen too, hardly daring to breathe. The creature turns to look at them, eyes narrowing, and then reaches up to his head. He lowers the mask over his face, and then screeches at them. This one sounds exactly like nails on a chalkboard, but neither Mike nor Shae winces.

When the scream ends, the creature lifts the mask up, and then brings a hand up to his face, wiping at his good cheek. “You’re not real,” he moans, hysterical. “Go away. Go away. Leave me alone.”

And that was Josh’s voice, coming from Josh’s mouth, so Mike has no choice. He looks at Shae, and mouths silently, I’m going in.

Shae shakes her head furiously, indicating that she is very much not down to face this terrifying wendigo-Psycho hybrid, and Mike stares at her for a second before nodding. He moves around her, carefully adjusting his grip on his flashlight, and Shae reaches out to presumably hold him back, but Mike is determined.

He pulls the door open, and summons all the courage he can find. Before he can doubt himself, he steps forward into the cave.
Mike remembers having nightmares as a kid—nothing as visceral as what he’s dreamt of recently, of course, but his subconscious still managed some pretty terrifying things. In the worst nightmares, he would be alone. Of course, he had the stereotypical puberty nightmares that everyone else did: being caught in his underwear in front of the whole school to a chorus of unstoppable laughter, his crush finding out he had feelings for them and laughing rudely in his face, his dad showing up to his house and Mike asking if he would stay and the man laughing cruelly and then leaving yet again.

He remembers a lot of unkind laughter.

He remembers his mother coming to wake him up, cradling his head in her lap and smoothing back his hair. She used to offer meaningless reassurances about how whatever he’d seen was entirely imaginary, and explain the REM cycle in a comforting, low voice. Mike would drift off to sleep again, and the second time around it would usually be unfettered by mean teenagers or Emily Davis or his dad.

Since last year, his nightmares have centred almost wholly on Hannah and Beth. His shitty dad appearing in a dream became almost a blessing, seeing as he fell asleep every night expecting to see the innocent faces of the Washington twins. They would tell him how cold they were, how the soles of their feet hurt from wandering the mountain. In the summer, Beth would show him her cracked lips, and Hannah would tell him how starving she was. Their ribs demonstrated how close to death they were, but in Mike’s dreams they never died. They were stuck in limbo forever and ever, until Mike finally came to join them—or so they told him.

He remembers waking up alone in his apartment, eyes blurry with tears and chest heaving like he’d just run a four minute mile. He remembers reaching for the stuffed animal on his bed, and feeling guilty for even owning it as he whimpered and held it to his chest. Men weren’t supposed to cry like this, no matter what Sam told him about toxic masculinity. He remembers staying awake for the rest of the night, wishing his mother would call and tell him about rapid eye movement.

This year, his nightmares have been something else altogether. There is rarely a time when Mike hears laughter in his dreams, or when he gets scared by something as fickle as unpopularity. These days, his dreams are full of bones, and blood, and butterflies. He dreams about his own teeth starting to look like wendigo fangs, and about his skin falling off, and about Hannah gnawing on the head of the stranger and then looking over at him with razor-sharp movement. In his dreams these days, Beth doesn’t show up anymore, finally laid to rest. Hannah is undead, and impossible to kill. And Josh is dead.

And in real life, Beth is dead. Emily had seen her makeshift grave, and Sam had found the evidence of her decomposition and post-mortem digestion. Maybe if she’d survived the fall, she and Hannah
could have made it out. Or maybe they would have eventually succumbed to hunger and torn each other apart like the wendigos had done in the lodge. It’s impossible to guess now—Beth has been gone for a year and a month.

And in real life, Hannah is dead. He and Sam killed what was left of her, and nearly razed an entire building to the ground in the process. Mike can’t help but see the irony in who exactly was responsible; Hannah had been in love with him, and Sam had been in love with her. It was a love triangle like something out of a Shakespeare play, and had ended just as tragically.

And in real life, Josh is—

Josh is taller than Mike remembers him, and not just because of the antler he’s fixed onto his head. He’s lankier, and in the areas where he’d been a little pudgier, he’s now slender enough that it’s clear he’s malnourished. The cave feels bigger too, which Mike initially attributes to fear but quickly realizes that it’s because Josh has knocked out one of the walls. That dark passage definitely hadn’t been here a month ago, and neither had the rubble on the floor.

He must be stronger now, if he could do something like take out a cave wall. His jaw is soaked dark red with dried blood, the corners peeling away like acrylic paint. Mike can’t stop staring at his teeth, and his bug eyes that have always been big but are now gaping out of his head. He has never seen Josh’s face look so wild.

The last time he’d been in this cave with Josh, Josh had looked dazed, and had barely managed to speak after Mike had smacked him into consciousness. Now, Josh looks so present that it’s unsettling. Mike thinks he’s never witnessed Josh this present his entire life.

Josh is staring right at Mike. Not through him, but at him. Mike isn’t sure if he should be grateful that Josh can perceive his presence. Escaping notice might have been a blessing if Josh decides to attack. Wary but determined, Mike takes another step forward into the cave.

Josh repeats himself, voice shockingly human. “Go away.”

Mike is disinclined to obey that order. Instead, he takes a step forward. “I’m real,” he tries to assure Josh. “It’s me.”

Josh laughs in disbelief, shaking his head. His laughter doesn’t exactly dispel Mike’s creeping fear that this whole thing is a terrible nightmare, but he still tries to protest further. “Josh, it’s Mike—”

Hearing his name seems to trigger Josh, because he opens his mangled mouth but no human noise escapes. Instead, he lets out an ear-piercing scream, eyes still trained on Mike. He drops the bloodied arm he’s holding, and before Mike can say anything else, he starts to jump towards Mike.

Oh motherfucking Mary and Jesus on a tandem Christsticle, Mike curses silently, trying to stay still. Josh comes closer, but he doesn’t walk. His movements are erratic, like he’s lagging and glitching in one instant and then moving too fast to be possible in the next. It’s like nothing Mike has ever seen before, except that he has seen it—he’s seen the same movement from Josh’s sister.

Josh leaps forward, looking at Mike inquisitively. Like a very, very evil cat. Mike’s heart is racing, and he stays perfectly still. He can feel the weight of his lighter in his pocket. It would take nothing at all to grab it—he could whip out a makeshift flamethrower before Josh had any idea what was coming.

Maybe that’s Mike’s destiny here. Maybe he is supposed to kill Shae’s monster, to keep the mountain safe, and to pick up the mantle that the stranger had left behind. He thinks about the look
in Sam’s eyes after they’d burned down the lodge, and about being chewed to bits alone here in
this cave. He hadn’t told anyone he was coming down here. He hadn’t told Jess. Or Chris. He
thinks about Chris, and how much faith Chris still had that Josh was alive. He thinks of Chris
trying to be brave and confessing to Mike that he wants to go back to the mountain just to check on
Josh.

Mike slowly reaches for the lighter, heart torn. The movement surprises Josh, who halts mid-step
and narrows his eyes. He reaches up to rub at them, and it strikes Mike how tired Josh must be. It
doesn’t look like he’s slept a solid hour in three weeks.

When he speaks again, he’s himself. “Mike?” His voice is quavering with doubt and fear, and he
twists his hands and fingers nervously. “That’s not… that’s not Michael. It’s not you, you’re just
a… it’s a hallucination. It’s not real. It can’t be.”

Mike’s hand closes around the lighter in his pocket, and for a moment, he considers going through
with it.

Fuck it.

He releases his grip, and steps forward. Josh’s eyes instantly train on him once more, wide and
scared. Mike raises his hands like someone trying to diffuse a hostage situation, or someone
surrendering at last. “It is me. I’m not a hallucination.” Josh looks up at Mike’s hands, and Mike
wonders if he’s got dirty palms or paws before he remembers he’s missing two fingers. He closes
his fists, embarrassed, and then lowers his hands slowly. “I came back for you.” Honest, if not the
whole truth.

Josh squints at him again, and then jolts forward. Mike’s heart is in his throat, but Josh doesn’t try
to eat him. Instead, he shoves him, pushing his shoulders away with an expression that would be
almost curious if it wasn’t so suspicious. Caught off-guard, Mike stumbles backwards. He just
barely manages to catch himself from falling on his ass in time, and when he does he looks up at
Josh right away, breathing hard.

There is no relief on Josh’s face to see that Mike is real. Instead, he looks horrified— about as
horrified as Mike has felt since he learned that Josh is alive. The cave is silent around them as Josh
drinks in the sight of Mike. Mike feels warm for the first time in days; for the first time since he’d
eaten that raw meat in the fridge. He can’t begin to diagnose why his shoulders suddenly don’t
ache anymore, or why he didn’t notice the ache until that second. Finally, Josh breaks the silence.
His voice is low and full of disbelief, but he’s lucid. He isn’t hallucinating any longer. “Mike?”

“Yup,” Mike replies, suddenly aware of how inadequate he is for this. He’s tempted to say that he
bets Josh expected someone like Sam or Chris. He holds his tongue.

“Mike,” Josh breathes, eyes wide.

“Josh,” Mike replies, quiet and unsure why he’s mimicking Josh. He clears his throat. “Josh, I—”

“You can’t be here,” Josh interrupts him, taking them both by surprise. Mike is glad— he isn’t sure
if he had been about to apologize or admit something. Now that they’re standing only a few feet
away from one another he can see how violently Josh is shaking. He’s trembling like a leaf, and
Mike doesn’t know how to help him. “Mike… you… you have to leave.”

Before Mike can say anything more to that, Josh adds, “You have to leave, or else I will eat you.”
He is clearly serious about his threat, hands restless and gaze travelling over Mike’s arms and chest
and neck. Mike has never been more conscious of exactly how much meat there is on his bones
than he is right now.

He gulps, and Josh traces the motion with his eyes before licking his lips. Mike feels like the smart thing to do here would be turn and run, or draw out his flamethrower and roast Josh to a crisp. But now that he knows that Josh is still himself, he doesn’t think he could hurt him or abandon him. So instead, he jokes weakly, “How do you know I won’t eat you? I’m hungry too, man.”

A beat passes where Mike is terrified that Josh is about to tear out his throat, and then Josh laughs. He laughs like it’s been startled out of him, which it probably has— Mike would guess that this is the first time Josh has genuinely laughed since Hannah dragged him down here in the first place. When the laugh fades away, Josh looks miserable, like Mike’s only reminded him of how long it’s been since he smiled. “Mike, I…” He bites the human side of his lip and then shakes his head. “I am so fucking hungry.”

“I have food,” Mike says, and then when Josh glances down at his chest he quickly amends, “real food. If you come back to the lodge with me, we can—”

“No,” Josh growls, and backs away. Even now, his movements are still more concrete than they used to be. It’s simultaneously graceful and disconcerting. “I don’t— I can’t leave the mines. Every time I try, I…” He takes a shaky breath in. “I—I’ve hurt people. There were some cops… I don’t want to hurt you.”

The bodies that him and Shae had seen belonged to the police officers that Mike had seen on his way up the mountain. Of course. He isn’t sure how he hadn’t put that one together until now, but he’s surprised to find he’s relieved by the revelation. In the next instant, he regrets his relief. The cops were most likely innocent men who had no idea what they were up against. Despite what his gut is telling him probably happened, Mike hopes Josh didn’t eat them alive— hopefully it was something quick and painless.

Mike takes a step towards Josh as he takes another step back, maintaining the distance between them. Josh growls again, but he doesn’t screech, so Mike figures (hopes) he’s still in the clear. “You won’t. I trust you.”

Josh’s expression makes it clear he thinks Mike is delusional. “If I don’t, then something else will. There’s… Hannah is still out there, Mike.” His voice catches on her name, but Josh doesn’t look sad— he looks scared. “She hasn’t come back here, so I think I’m safe in the mines, but I can’t go wander around the mountain. She’s stronger than me, and even if she decided not to kill me, I’m sure she’d have no reservations about killing you.”

The look on Mike’s face must give away what he’s thinking, because Josh’s eyebrows draw close together in confusion before Mike even speaks. “Josh, Hannah’s… she’s dead. I— we killed her.”

This is far worse than when they’d all woken Josh and Chris up from their drunken slumber so long ago. It even feels worse than explaining why Beth and Hannah ran out onto the mountain in the first place. He reaches out to try to comfort Josh, but Josh shrinks back and nearly trips over the arm he’d left on the ground. “You killed her?”

He sounds more relieved than disturbed. Mike takes this as a good sign, and after some hesitation, he nods. “Yeah, um… Sam and I did. We set her on fire. That’s the only way to kill a wendigo. Or how you get rid of them, anyway.”

Josh mouths the word wendigo, misshapen mouth forming the ‘o’ slowly. Mike expects Josh to mow him down for killing his sister— well, killing what was left of her. Instead, Josh asks, “Is that what you were planning to do to me?” His voice wavers on the words.
“No!” Mike blurts out, even though he’d been considering it. “No way, I didn’t— I didn’t even know you were down here. I came back for something else.”

Josh’s stare is unflinching. He hasn’t blinked in several minutes. “For what?”

“It’s… not important. It doesn’t matter right now.” Guilt churns in Mike’s stomach, and finally he takes a step back. “Josh… I shouldn’t have left you down here. Or, I mean, I should have come back right away. I was a, a coward and I abandoned you, and I’m sorry.” He trips over the last word, and Josh continues to watch him. “I’m so sorry.”

Josh is eerily still, eyes trained on Mike. He doesn’t say anything about the apology and instead asks, slow and scared, “Right away? How long have I been down here?”

“It’s been three weeks,” Mike admits.

At first, it’s clear Josh doesn’t believe Mike, but as he starts to consider the time passed he shifts. The cavern around them doesn’t change at all, but Josh shrinks in on himself, and it almost makes him look human again. What little colour remains in his skin drains from his face. “You’re kidding,” he whispers, voice hoarse. He’s shaking even worse than before now. “It’s been that long?”

“Yeah,” Mike whispers. “I should have come earlier.”

“It feels like I just saw you in the lake a few days ago,” Josh says. His voice is little more than a low whimper now, like how he’d sounded in the shed but far worse. “I… guess that makes sense. Because I feel like I haven’t eaten in weeks.”

Mike resists the urge to ask about the stranger’s body, the deer, and the cops. Instead, he moves closer to Josh. This time, Josh doesn’t move away. “There’s food back at the lodge,” he repeats. “It’s safe there now. And if anything happens, I’ll protect you.”

Josh scoffs, the noise weak and half-hearted. “And if I lose my cool? Who’s going to protect you?”

Mike turns to look behind himself, but Shae’s eyes aren’t visible between the wooden planks. She must have been too scared to stay when Josh started advancing on him; Mike doesn’t blame her for turning tail. Josh is terrifying.

When he turns back to face Josh, Josh is giving him a strange look, but at least he doesn’t look as terrified anymore. “Okay, if we’re doing this… you have to lead the way. And I don’t want to see any mirrors for at least a week.” He reaches up to touch the side of his face gingerly, and winces when he accidentally sticks his finger into the gaping hole in his cheek. “In return, I’ll try not to kill you.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Mike says, trying not to grin at Josh’s bemused expression at not knowing where his mouth is. “I’ll lead the way.”

He clicks his flashlight on, and Josh instantly screeches, clawing at his arms with painfully long nails. “Turn it off!” he howls, and Mike laughs before pointing it away from Josh. The dim light settles over him again, casting a shadow over his features and making it even harder to discern how bad the damage is. Mike fights the urge to tell Josh his starved cannibal face doesn’t look as bad as Hannah’s starved cannibal face had. He’s not sure that would be comforting.

Instead, he walks towards the door, and waits there for Josh, pointing the flashlight outside. His suspicions about Shae getting scared and booking it are confirmed when he sees no sign of her outside. He shines the light towards where he’d found the stranger’s head, and looks at it from a
distance, shuddering slightly. Maybe before he leaves he’ll come back down to get the guy’s body and give him a proper burial.

“I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti,” Josh whispers in Mike’s ear, and Mike screams, dropping his flashlight. As he scrambles to pick it up, Josh laughs, low and almost nervous. “I’m sorry,” he says, still chuckling. “I couldn’t resist. I’ve been alone in this cave for three weeks.”

“I nearly jumped right outta my skin,” Mike grumbles, and stands up straight again. “Christ, dude.”

Josh doesn’t say anything, and when Mike turns to look at him his expression is indecipherable in the low light. Even if Mike had nearly peed himself, it’s almost worth it to have Josh act like himself again. Mike sighs, and then reluctantly asks, “… Well?”

Josh blinks, and it seems forced. It’s the first time that Mike has seen him blink since meeting him down here. “What?”

“Well, aren’t you going to do the noise?”

Josh smiles, wide and delighted and manic. His sharp teeth make him look even happier (and more terrifying) as he leans towards Mike’s ear. He sucks his teeth and hisses in a horribly spot-on Hannibal impression, and Mike feels goosebumps rise on his arms.

“Ewwwwww. Please don’t do that again.”

“I’m sorry… Clarice.”

“I’m going to regret encouraging you with this.”

Josh’s smile freezes, and then slides off his disfigured face. Mike is on the verge of taking his words back and saying that Josh could recite the entire Hannibal franchise from Silence of the Lambs to the new TV show if it would make him smile, but then Josh says softly, “You sound like Beth.”

Mike isn’t sure how to offer comfort. Beth’s remains are still in these very mines—or what Hannah had left of them is, anyway. But Josh doesn’t know that… yet. There’s so much that Mike needs to tell him, good and bad and dreadful. His hand flexes with the impulse to reach out and touch him, but he restrains himself. “Come on, follow me. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Josh doesn’t say anything or even nod, but when Mike starts walking away, he follows instantly. He doesn’t give the cave another look, and Mike figures he must just be grateful to get to leave. Mike knows he’d have gone stir crazy down there himself, and Josh was never exactly mentally healthy. Things must have been unimaginably worse.

The lack of conversation is overwhelming as Mike leads Josh through the rusted red door to the lake, and this situation is all too familiar. He’s walked this path in his sleep over and over—dreams where he saves Josh, nightmares where he doesn’t. The nightmares are far more prevalent.

To try to stop his thoughts from spiralling, Mike blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. “Hey, so, uh, how did you cope down here? It must have been pretty bad.”

“It was,” Josh deadpans, dry. He doesn’t add anything else.

Mike weakly adds, “Figured,” and sits down on the edge of the lake, swinging his calves down into the water. The brisk cold of the water feels familiar now, and Mike hardly winces at all. He
slides down, dark water rising to his chest, and then turns around to look up at Josh.

Josh is already looking at him, disposition impossible to guess in the low light. Mike’s flashlight is sending a distorted beam through the water, and he wants to raise it to examine Josh, but he doesn’t want Josh to smack their only source of light away. He blinks, and Josh doesn’t blink back. A chill runs down Mike’s already freezing back.

“I thought we agreed you weren’t going to try to kill me,” he laughs nervously, and Josh says and does nothing. He stays perfectly still, just watching Mike. After what feels like a whole minute, Mike blinks again, and Josh’s lips part slightly. He wonders if he went too far by asking Josh about how he’d coped with being trapped alone in a cave and starving to death for three weeks. “Come on in, bro, the water’s fine,” he tries to joke, reaching up out of the water to pat Josh’s foot gently. “Nice and toasty.”

“It was pretty bad,” Josh says, and Mike has no idea what he means for a second. He doesn’t take his eyes off Mike as he continues, “It was more than pretty bad, Michael. I was so weak, and I was so scared she was going to come back in that I didn’t move for hours. Or… they felt like hours, but now I’m worried they might have been days.” He crosses his arms around himself. “I just sat there, too scared to leave the cave because I thought any second Hannah was going to come back inside and kill me. Like she killed you. I—I thought she killed you. I thought she saved me for later.”

Mike tries to interject, but Josh just keeps ranting, eyes fixed on Mike. “Do you understand how horrible that was for me? Hannah. My sister. You and Sam basically said, ‘Hey, you know that monster that we blamed Jess’ death on? Well, joke’s on us, because that wasn’t you, it’s your sister— she’s alive, and she’s a scary undead demon, and she dug your other sister up, and now she’s coming for you!’ Do you have any idea how fucking—” He inhales, shaking from the effort. “What was it you called it? You called me a fucked-up son of a bitch, right? Full… Full mental jacket.”

“Josh,” Mike breathes, horrified. He remembers saying that after slapping Josh out of his episode when they’d found him hallucinating in the cave, but he can’t believe Josh remembers.

“I, I definitely went full mental jacket, bro.” Josh laughs, humourless and bitter. “I wish I’d had a straitjacket. Then I could have kept myself from— from doing what I did to those cops, when they came in to find me. That would have been better protection than that stupid mask I made. Then I wouldn’t have… I wouldn’t have eaten—”

“It’s not your fault,” Mike says instinctively, interrupting Josh. “That isn’t your fault.”

Josh closes his eyes, and then opens them abruptly. There are tears lingering in his eyes. “I was so fucking hungry. I am so… god damn hungry.” He seems to have run out of steam, and now he’s returned to just staring at Mike expectantly.

“I’m sorry,” Mike breathes.

“How do I know you’re not a hallucination?” Josh steps away from the edge of the water, face wrought with sudden doubt. “How do I know that the real Mike isn’t lying at the bottom of this lake dead, and you’re an imaginary Mike trying to get me drown myself?”

The mine is silent as Mike tries to think of something to say. Somehow, he doesn’t think slapping Josh will work here. He pulls himself up out of the water, mostly because his toes are starting to go numb, and Josh doesn’t step away from him. Mike shakes off his wet pants, and then holds out his hand for Josh. “Here. Feel this.”
Josh considers his hand, and then reaches out, fingertips lightly brushing over the lines on Mike’s palm. His nails scratch Mike’s skin, but don’t do any damage. Mike smiles and takes Josh’s hand in his. Almost instantly Josh tries to pull away, but Mike holds on. He’s determined to prove his own existence. “See? Feel how warm I am.”

“You’re freezing,” Josh complains. He squeezes Mike’s hand anyway, like he’s testing its solidity.

“You’re freezing,” Mike retorts, and grips Josh’s hand back. “That means we’re real, and that we’re really stuck in a mine underneath a mountain.” Josh doesn’t react except to squeeze his hand a little tighter. Mike’s lips twist uncomfortably. “I’m sorry,” he repeats.

“I don’t want to go in the water,” Josh says, and pulls his hand away. He eyes the water with undisguised suspicion. “We can find another way out.”

“This is the way out I know best,” Mike says, and goes back into the lake. Once he’s safely submerged, he flexes his hand where Josh can’t see it. “Come on. It’s safe.”

Josh looks unconvincing, but he sits down on the rocky shore and lets his feet dangle underwater. “You thought it was safe last time too, and look what happened then.”

“I promise it’s safe this time.” Mike is struck by a sudden thought, and he can’t restrain a smirk. “You’re the only wendigo here.”

Josh doesn’t smile, but he also stops squinting suspiciously at Mike. He slides into the water, exhaling thin puffs of air that shine visible in the cold darkness. Once his feet have touched the shallow bottom of the lake, he looks at Mike with a different sort of expectation. “Okay, fine. Lead the way.”

Mike starts sluicing his way through the water, trying to keep his own fear in check like he had with Shae. Every few steps, he shines his flashlight around them, looking cautiously for any dark shapes. He sees the reflection of the water wheel but doesn’t stop this time, instead peeking over his shoulder at Josh. Josh is looking nervously around the cave, eyes wide with fear, and Mike figures it’s best not to stretch this out.

“Do you hallucinate about me a lot?” he asks, and before Josh can call him insensitive he quickly adds, “Like, does it ever just veer into you fantasizing about me? You can tell me. I won’t mind.”

Josh shoots him a dry look, and Mike laughs, turning forward again. They cross the lake without any other interruptions, and Mike doesn’t stop to look at the wall he’d hid behind as Hannah grabbed Josh the first time. When he reaches the other side of the lake he emerges from the water and shakes himself off before offering Josh a hand.

They’re both dripping all over the wood and stone path beneath them, and Mike glances down the path to their right. Down that way lies Beth’s remains; or what remains of them. Josh is shivering from the lake, and Mike decides now isn’t the time for Josh to properly honour Beth’s memories. He takes off his soaked jacket, and hands it to Josh. “Here.”

“No much of a towel,” Josh says, drying himself off with it anyway.

Mike stares at him. “Wear it, you weirdo.” Josh reluctantly slides it onto his arms, and within a few seconds the shaking ceases. Mike purposefully doesn’t think about how his jacket looks on Josh, instead leading him up through the mines.

There is nothing enjoyable about their journey upwards. Mike’s feet are starting to ache from the trek, and Josh stumbles a few times over minecart tracks and stalagmites. At times Josh says they
must stop, and when Mike turns to look Josh has been scared sedentary because of a sliver of light that crept in between rocks above them.

Once, Mike stops moving, and Josh looks around nervously. Mike realizes with a start that Josh is having problems seeing him simply because he’s standing still, and so he waves his hand. The gesture is invisible in the darkness, but Josh’s gaze instantly fixes on his hand, and Josh looks relieved.

“That’s new,” Mike says, watching Josh carefully. Josh doesn’t reply, and Mike doesn’t stop moving again.

They move up through the mines, and the air starts to taste different. The closer to the surface they get the warmer they are, and soon Mike isn’t shivering anymore either. Josh is blinking more and more the closer they get to the exit, and Mike can’t piece together exactly why until they step outside into the day.

The warm sun beats down around them, and Mike has never been so grateful for a chilly February afternoon. He barely has time to take in the sunlight and warmth before Josh opens his mouth to scream—a screech so loud it seems to rattle the stone entrance to the mine. Birds fly out of the trees surrounding them, and Josh is caving in on himself like he’s being burnt alive. The noise is so high-pitched it hurts Mike’s ears.

“Holy mother of nucking futs,” he swears loudly, but his voice is barely audible over the screaming. “Josh!”

Josh fails to answer, instead clawing at his eyes like he intends to pry them out of his skull. Mike’s jaw drops, and then he realizes what’s wrong. He should have expected this when Josh reacted badly to the flashlight. “You can’t go outside during the day! Shit! I forgot!”

No reply comes from Josh, who is somehow still screaming. It’s remarkable he hasn’t run out of breath yet. Mike struggles to think of a solution before Josh damages his eyes more, and ends up taking off his shirt. He pulls it up over his head and then forces Josh’s hands away from his eyes, replacing them with the shirt. “Here, this should help.”

It does, although not right away; Josh’s scream only peters out after another minute. As his screaming dies down Mike ties the shirt awkwardly around the back of his head. The intricate knots he learned on sailing trips are finally being put to good use, but it still looks strange to see Josh blindfolded with a whole shirt. Josh reaches up gingerly to adjust the shirt where it’s almost covering the hole in his cheek, and then sighs. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Mike replies. “Sorry I’m depriving you of the sight of me shirtless.”

“I’ll live,” Josh says, dry as ever, and then reaches out blindly towards Mike. His hand lands on Mike’s upper abdomen, and Mike quickly grabs it before either of them can say anything. “This is a pretty fucked up trust exercise.”

“The sun should set soon,” Mike says. He glances up at the sky, and sees the faint moon right away. That’s another thing he should come clean about, but he thinks it can wait until they’re inside the lodge. He isn’t sure if there are any other negative side effects to wendigos being outside in the light, but he certainly knows he doesn’t want to find out the hard way.

He leads Josh through the snow without another word, and as the sun heads towards the horizon their clothes dry and Josh’s hand grows warmer. Mike is still cold, seeing as it’s the tail end of winter and he’s wandering around a mountain without his shirt, but he’s warmer than he would feel
if he was just human.

The moon becomes more and more visible as the sun dips below the skyline of trees, and Mike feels the pull to transform when he looks at it. He resists the urge, instead squeezing Josh’s hand every time. Josh squeezes back, but they don’t talk. They’ve fallen into a comfortable silence with one another for the first time in their entire lives. Mike privately finds it funny that all they had to do to reach this new level of friendship was turn into a wendigo and werewolf.

The silence envelops them almost all the way back to the lodge, long after the sun has set for the night. It’s evening now, and Mike is avoiding looking up at the moon at all for fear of fur spreading over his fingers. They’re still holding hands, and Mike is mentally rationalizing that with the idea that if he lets go of Josh’s hand, Josh might trip. After all, he’s still weak from eating so little for so long, and he doesn’t know this mountain as well as Mike does.

Josh only lets go to untie Mike’s shirt, free hand working over the knot. Mike watches as Josh gingerly exposes his eyes to the fresh air, and then they both breathe in relief when the darkness seems to do nothing. Josh hands Mike his shirt back, and Mike gratefully pulls it on, glad to cover up.

When he pulls his head through the collar, Josh is watching him. Mike doesn’t know what to make of that at all, so he just reaches to take Josh’s hand once more, hoping Josh won’t point out the strangeness of doing so.

“We don’t need to still hold hands,” Josh points out.

Mike shrugs, and sighs, stretching his sleeves down as far as they can go. “I’m not going to lose you again.”

“That’s gay,” Josh says, but he looks helplessly pleased; like he’s amused despite himself. They complete the remainder of the trip to the lodge hand-in-hand, and only when they arrive does Josh finally release Mike’s grip on him. Mike glances over at Josh, and sees him staring up at the charred building in dismay. “I thought you said you set Hannah on fire.”

“We did,” Mike says, uneasy about how casually Josh is bringing her up. He’s sure the grief will come later, and that Mike will have to deal with a lot of deserved anger. “She just… happened to be in the lodge. It wasn’t just her we had to deal with, there were a lot of other wendigos.”

Josh’s head snaps to look at Mike. “There were other wendigos? I thought you said I was the only one.”

“Oh,” he replies quickly, “uh, you are now. There were a lot of them locked up in the sanatorium; the stranger was keeping them there.” He neglects to mention that the only way to reliably keep a wendigo in check is trapping it and that killing it is just procrastinating on the real problem. Somehow, he doesn’t think that will help Josh’s paranoia.

“The stranger?”

“This, uh, wendigo hunter guy. Jack, I guess. He showed up right after we…” Mike gulps. “Well. Right after Chris and I locked you in the shed.”

Josh raises an eyebrow. “Right after you left me alone because you heard Emily screaming?”

“Yeah. Right after that.” He winces. “I’m sorry, Josh—”

Waving him off, Josh says impatiently, “So Jack was keeping wendigos up at the top of the
mountain, and they— what, they got out?"

“Well, Sam and I kind of… burnt the sanatorium down.” Josh stares at him in complete disbelief. “I was exploring up there, and Wolfie showed me where the wendigos were trapped, and—”

Josh raises a hand to interrupt, “Wolfie?”

Taking a moment to breathe, Mike steps towards the doors to the lodge. “There’s no point in explaining, you’ll find out soon enough.” He pushes one of them open, and Josh follows him, expression curious. Mike narrows his eyes when Shae isn’t in the living room. Part of him had expected her to be waiting at the door like a protective parent on prom night, but her complete absence is making him uneasy. He calls, “Hello?”

No response comes from any part of the house, and Mike’s hands twitch with impending panic. He puts the flashlight down, and tries to think about what might have befallen Shae. Maybe she’d come back here and then gone to the mines to look for him. Maybe she’d watched from a distance as he’d talked Josh down, and then found another way out.

Another way out… Mike’s thoughts clear as he remembers the small cavern Shae had tried to get him to enter when they were both wolves. That must have been another entrance to the mines. He turns on his heel, and heads back out the door.

“Is someone else supposed to be here?” Josh asks, and when Mike doesn’t clarify right away he grabs at his arm. “Mike?”

“Just a second,” Mike says, and then realizes that he can’t very well call for Shae in front of Josh. “Just… wait in here, for a second. I’ll be right back.”

Josh looks less than thrilled with this idea, but Mike doesn’t give him time to protest. He walks outside, and waits until the door has closed behind him to move. He doesn’t transform, although his skin is practically itching with the idea. He could find her much faster if he was a wolf; it would take almost no time to get down to the mines. He could defend her so easily.

Mike takes a few steps away from the lodge before he realizes he isn’t heading in any direction at all except down the slope, and then he stops. He’s frustrated, and feeling even more guilt than usual at the idea that Shae might be in danger because of Mike’s negligence. He had hardly given her a second thought; he’d been too invested in getting Josh out safely.

Mike realizes his claws— no, his nails are scratching at his arms, skittering to find purchase and sending tiny white bursts of pain up to his brain. He forces them to his sides, and then raises his face towards the evening sky and howls.

There is no response, and Mike’s heart sinks. Something must be up. Mike steadies his stance a little, and then prepares himself to go back to the lodge, or down to the mines, or— or somewhere. In the span of a few hours, he’s lost one friend and found another.

Just as he’s about to step forward, he hears a distant howl, echoing from the other side of the mountain. It doesn’t communicate anything except that Shae is still alive and out there, and Mike isn’t sure how to translate, so he just howls again. After another long moment, Shae howls back, and his heart settles back down into its usual cavity.

Mike tries to get a handle on his breathing, and reassures himself that Shae is coming back. He rests one hand on his hip, and passes the other one over his face slowly. “She’s fine,” he mumbles. He doesn’t remember when he last shaved, but his five o’clock shadow has grown into a short
beard. He runs his fingers across his chin thoughtfully, and repeats, “She’s fine. Josh is fine. You’re fine.”

When he finally collects himself enough to go back into the lodge, he finds out that Josh is most decidedly not fine.

Josh is still in the living room where Mike had left him, which is the first sign that something is up. The second sign is Mike’s jacket, which he’s pulled around himself tightly like a security blanket. The final sign is that he’s hunched over in a tiny ball on the ground, arms curled around his knees, and that he’s clearly crying.

His head snaps up the instant the door swings open, and Mike sees that his eyes are red with tears. “Hey,” he greets Josh gently, closing the door behind himself. His voice is as soft as he can make it. “I was only gone for ten minutes. Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“You said one second,” Josh spits out, teeth gritted tightly. “You said you’d go check on Emily, and you left. And then you said we’d meet Sam outside, and you left. I thought— I thought you left again.” A tear falls down his cheek, and Mike wonders if he’s been like this the entire time Mike has been outside. “I’m not okay, Mike. Look at me.”

“I know,” Mike whispers, and he keeps his distance. But Josh doesn’t seem to be getting better, angry tears still flowing. “I— I know that. But you’re alive, and that’s got to count for something, right?”

“You sound like my psychologist,” Josh mumbles, looking down at the floor.

“Who, that old fuck?” Mike has met Dr. Hill a total of zero times, but he’s heard several disgusted recollections from Chris, who has accompanied Josh to a few appointments in the past— usually when Josh didn’t feel up to going alone. He tries to do his best Swedish accent, completely butchering it. “Joshua. I’m hurt.”

Josh shakes his head. “He’s my psychiatrist. My psychologist was a woman, and she was insufferably cheerful. I always wanted to tell her where she could shove her candy and life advice.”

Mike isn’t sure what to say to that, so he moves to sit down in front of Josh. “She sounds horrible,” he assures Josh, obviously lying.

Reaching up to wipe away a tear, Josh chuckles a little. “She… she wasn’t. She was nice. I’m the horrible one.” He looks up at Mike again, cheeks flushed.

Mike has no idea if he’s asking for validation or a fight, so he doesn’t address it at all. Instead, he gestures to his jacket. “You look warm.”

“I don’t feel warm,” Josh mutters, and unfolds himself. He settles down to sit cross-legged on the floor, which Mike supposes is an upgrade from the fetal position. Mike mirrors his movements. “I feel really cold.”

“Hey, man, keep it.” Mike shrugs. “And if there’s any way I can warm you up further, let me know. I’m trying to be the perfect host and all that.” He gives Josh a big exaggerated wink, and then bats his eyelashes lots and purses his lips for good measure.

Josh rolls his eyes, smiling like he thinks Mike is an idiot. For some reason, it’s a smile Mike has received a lot lately. “Technically, this is my house,” he points out.

“Technically I own this joint now,” Mike says, grinning. “Finders keepers, motherfucker.”
“Oh, so we’re back to real grown-up swears now? That’s a pity, Michael. I thought nucking futs was really endearing.” Josh wipes away a tear, and smiles back at him.

“I’ll nuck you up,” Mike threatens, and Josh just laughs. “Don’t nucking try me.”

Still laughing, Josh reaches up to scrub at his eyes, and no more tears appear for now. “You’re so —”

But he doesn’t get to find out what Josh thinks he is, because before he can finish the sentence, the door swings open. Josh’s eyes go wide, and Mike turns around to see who’s come to call. Fortunately, it isn’t a stranger this time; Shae is standing in the doorway, looking down at them. Her hair is done up unevenly in a long, messy braid, and her eyes are bright with curiosity.

“Oh, good,” she says. “You rescued your mate.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone reading and commenting on this! You're all so sweet. I'm sorry that this chapter took a while to put up, but it's a long one with some important new developments! I'm including specific content warnings just because in this chapter there is a brief reference to hospitalization, and we delve a little more into Emily cheating. Please stay safe! And enjoy :)

Mike scrambles up to his feet like he’s been caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but Josh and Shae both remain still, eyeing each other with undisguised wariness. Shae doesn’t move from her spot in the doorway, and Josh curls around himself a little more, tugging Mike’s jacket around his shoulders like a shock blanket.

Shae shoots Mike an expression that he has no idea how to decipher, and he realizes he hasn’t said anything yet. Reluctantly, he clears his throat. “Josh, this is Shae. Shae, Joshua. I believe you two already know each other.” He isn’t sure that Shae being deathly terrified of a monster inhabiting her mountain counts as an old acquaintance, but he’ll take what he can get here.

The werewolf levels a look at Josh, and the wendigo stares back. Finally, after Mike pointedly clears his throat again, Josh slowly stands. “I don’t think we’ve met,” he mutters, glancing at Mike without comprehension.

Shae growls, “Yes, we have,” and takes a step backwards. The moment she’s out of the doorway her eyes start flicking from side-to-side, and it’s obvious that she’s fighting the impulse to run. “You did not speak so much as scream last time we met.”

Josh shakes his head. “I don’t… if I attacked you, I’m sorry, but I don’t remember.” He looks nervously at Mike once more. “I don’t think this is a good idea, I’m not ready to-to meet people.”

Before either of them can flee the scene, Mike quickly intervenes. “Hey, come on. Shae, you don’t have to be afraid of Josh. He’s not a monster, see? He’s just a nerd.”

Both look unconvinced. Mike wonders exactly what experience Shae had with Josh; she didn’t clarify for Mike what had happened, but she must have seen Josh having an episode wandering around the mountain—or maybe he tried to attack her. It must have been bad if she couldn’t even stay down in the mines to protect Mike.

“She’s smart to be afraid,” Josh says, glowering. “I could eat her in two bites.”

“Hey, no, what the fuck,” Mike says, and reaches out to punch Josh in the arm. Josh dodges at superhuman speed, and Mike stares dumbly for a moment before trying to brush it off. “Don’t start with that shit, Josh, she’s already scared. I told you, there’s food for you here. Do not eat my friends. You promised you would try.”

Josh grumbles something under his breath, but doesn’t jump up onto the ceiling or anything, so Mike takes it as a success. He refocuses his attention onto Shae. She still seems stuck in escape mode, arms crossed and teeth bared. Her skin is paler than usual, drained of colour from fear. Mike
approaches her cautiously, moving one slow step at a time. “Shae.”

She doesn’t respond until Mike is only a foot away from her, and he can reach up to gently touch her shoulder. Her muscles are tense under her palm, and she is now refusing to make eye contact with him. “Shae. You’re safe with him, I promise.”

“He tried to eat me,” she growls, loud enough so Josh can hear. Josh, to his credit, looks a little ashamed of this. He also looks a little curious about how close they’re standing, but doesn’t interrupt. “I don’t know how you define safe, but I don’t… he’s a wendigo.”

“I know,” Mike says, and wrenches his eyes shut for a minute. He thinks about Hannah for the trillionth time this month. “I know, but… He’s pack.”

Silently, Shae considers this. She is obviously dubious, scanning Josh for signs of friendliness. Josh does not exactly strike Mike as particularly intimidating right now; he’s still wearing Mike’s jacket, and he left behind the loose, rotting arm in the cave. As it turns out, the “I just finished crying” look does a lot to humanize a wendigo. Josh sniffles and glares, and something about this pathetic display and Shae’s unaltering trust in Mike seems to win her over. She pushes Mike’s palm away from her, and then starts to walk over to Josh.

Josh seizes up, paralyzed by anxiety or hunger or some other fear entirely. Shae pays his stillness no mind, walking up to him until she is far too close. Mike suspects that the concept of personal space is not appreciated in werewolf packs. Josh’s gaze darts between Shae and Mike nervously, at a loss for words. “What… what are you doing?”

Instead of answering, Shae opts to lean in and sniff the side of Josh’s mouth. Mike barely restrains himself from laughing as Shae sniffs Josh’s exposed teeth, entire body taut with curiosity. She sniffs the human side of Josh’s mouth next, and then curiously takes his hand, smelling his claws with careful devotion. Josh makes panicked eye contact with Mike over Shae’s head. He laughs, fake and tentative, and his voice is shaking with panic and confusion. “Um. What is she doing?”

“Just let her finish,” Mike says, unable to not laugh any longer. “It’s… she’s almost done.”

Apparently the next step in Shae’s process of determining if Josh is truly a part of Mike’s pack is petting his hair, and Mike bends over laughing as Shae does just that. She brushes her hand over Josh’s scalp with a strange reverence, and Josh is beyond flummoxed. “Uh,” he begins, but Shae has already given up on that particular line of inquiry. Instead, she walks around Josh, reaching down to his waist. In a move that takes both men by surprise, she lifts Josh up three feet in the air almost effortlessly.

“Is she going to fucking suplex me?” Josh demands, voice high and squeaky, and Mike can’t stop laughing for long enough to answer.

Thankfully, Shae decides not to suplex Josh, and instead lowers him to the ground safely. She pets his back, tracing his spine with her fingertips, and Josh has apparently been made speechless. The final piece of evidence Shae needs is to walk around to Josh’s face and lick a stripe along the edge of his jawline— on the human side. Josh finally recoils at this, and he doesn’t shove Shae away but he quickly jumps back. “Ew! What’s wrong with you? Don’t lick me!”

Shae straightens up, staring at Josh. She still seems hesitant, but after a moment of indecision, she finally announces her verdict. “You were right. He’s pack.”

Mike stops wheezing for long enough to wipe his eyes, and give her a shaky thumbs-up. He’s pretty sure 90% of that was bullshit anyway, because he has no idea why Shae would need to know
if she could lift another member of the pack. But if it helped reassure her, then he’s not going to question it. “Great. So you two are fine with each other now?”

“Fine,” Shae nods, and there isn’t a trace of terror on her face.

On the other hand, Josh looks completely out of his depth here, and he fidgets uncertainly. “Mike? What is all this? What do you two mean by pack?”

This is a discussion Mike should have prepared for more, probably. In his defence, he hasn’t known about Josh’s survival for very long. In an ideal world, he’d have the entire trip back to Vancouver to prepare a presentation explaining his new lycanthrope circumstances, and in an ideal world the first person he would tell would be… Jess, maybe. But here he is with no exit strategy and no excuse for his friend’s weird behaviour other than the supernatural, unbelievable truth.

Mike braces himself, but when he looks up to meet Josh’s eyes, all his words fall away. “I, uh, we should… We should probably be sitting down for this.”

They settle on the couches around the living room, and Shae kicks her shoes off and puts her feet up. She appears more comfortable now than before, more at ease than she had even been in her own home. Mike supposes now that they’ve defeated her monster, no matter how unorthodox the method, she must feel safer. She undoes her braid, letting her long hair fall over her shoulders, and as Josh watches her curiously, Mike watches Josh.

Josh has hardly settled at all; his body language is a perfect antithesis to Shae’s comfort. He sits on the couch strangely, like he’s forgotten what soft, luxurious furniture felt like. His back is too straight, and his feet are shaking. His shoes have been worn down to ugly, mud-stained pieces, and Mike wants to tell him to take them off but he thinks it’s probably best if Josh washes up at his own pace. Down in the cave, he had built himself into a literal monster, mask and all. Being up here in his childhood resort must feel like he’s died and come to heaven—a spooky afterlife with no heat and broken stairs, but a clear step up from a freezing stone tomb.

Mike manages to cobble together tea out of the assorted ingredients in the pantry, and brings Josh and Shae a pitcher of ice water while it’s brewing. Josh drains the whole thing, and it doesn’t fix his severe dehydration instantly but it’s a good start. Shae watches him with equal parts amusement and pity clear on her face, and neither of them comment.

Making food is difficult, mostly because Mike has no idea what Josh will actually be able to palate, let alone what he might keep down. Mike settles on mashed potatoes with gravy and a simple vegetable broth; he’d prefer something with meat but he’s not sure it would be wise to whet Josh’s appetite for meat right off the bat. He brings Shae and Josh’s bowls out to the living room, handing them the food wordlessly. They haven’t struck up a conversation on their own, which is not great but also unsurprising. Josh nods his thank you to Mike, and Mike goes to grab his own dinner. In the thirty seconds he’s gone, Josh performs a magic trick—his plate is empty and his bowl is dry. His eyes are ravenous, and he eyes the food in Mike’s hands, clearly not satisfied.

“Here you go, bro,” Mike says, and hands his own portion to Josh without a word. If his choices are going without dinner and Josh sneaking into his room in the middle of the night to eat him, he’ll take the first. He’d rather sneak out for a midnight snack than be a midnight snack.

Josh downs this food just as quickly, and Mike sits by the fireplace. He’s tempted to get a small fire going for warmth, but Josh would probably not be thrilled with that. Once they’ve eaten, Shae puts her dish on the side table, where Mike suspects it will stay for the next century if he doesn’t
eventually move it. Neither of them seem like very pro-active cleaners.

Finally satiated, Josh leans back into the couch, looking a little more human already. “Alright, dude, spill the beans.” He watches Mike carefully, waiting for an explanation. “What’s going on?”

Awkwardly, Mike reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck. Apparently during all his time cooking and evading and procrastinating, he couldn’t come up with a better line than this: “So, funny story. I’m a werewolf now.”

Josh doesn’t laugh, like Mike would expect from Chris, or scream, like he might expect from Ashley. Instead he blinks, slow and nonplussed. “You’re a what?”

“I warned you, bro. It’s a long story.” Mike sighs, and adjusts to a more comfortable position. Shae is watching him keenly too, even though she’s already heard most of this story. “I guess I should start with Wolfie.”

So he starts with Wolfie, and tells Josh all about this dog he met up on the mountain, this abandoned wolf that he had assumed belonged to the stranger— to Jack. He watches Josh grind his new sharp teeth together, but he isn’t interrupted. He tells Josh and Shae about how he’d tamed Wolfie, and Shae laughs at him, and Josh laughs too because it’s a pretty ridiculous story.

He tells them about losing his fingers, and they stay silent, and he has to push through that part of the story quickly before anyone tries to make a joke because he doesn’t want to get emotional about things he’s lost. He tells Josh what happened when he left the sanatorium, when he left Wolfie behind, and then about how he’d felt back in Vancouver—

“Wait, wait, what happened to the others?” Josh is rapt but nervous, stiff but fidgeting. “Jess?”

“She made it,” Mike nods. “The… Hannah took her from the cabin, and then she and Matt got lost in the mines together, but they made it out okay. She’s fine.”

“Are you two still”— Josh motions with his hands, although it looks more like he’s misusing a Wiimote than alluding to anything else.

Mike frowns, confused. He replies, “Uh. Together? Yeah.” Probably not when he gets back to Vancouver, but he hasn’t been dumped yet.

Ignoring Mike’s answer completely, Josh shifts forward in his seat. “What about Chris?” His gaze is hungry again, like it had been when he’d seen Mike for the first time.

“He’s fine,” Mike says, swallowing awkwardly. He doesn’t mention that Chris is probably furious with him. “Everyone made it, Josh.”

“Ashley? Emily?” Josh suddenly looks disturbed. “Sam?”

“Sam’s fine too,” Mike assures him. “Like I said. You were the only one.”

Josh settles down in his seat again, and Mike continues to tell Josh about their trip down the mountain. He leaves out details about exactly how excruciating the police interviews had been, and about waiting outside Jessica’s hospital room because the doctors hadn’t let him in since he wasn’t family. He skims over his own experience at the hospital, making a joke about the weird doctor who had offered to reattach his fingers if Mike could find them. Neither Shae nor Josh laugh, both looking at him with sympathy, and Mike wrinkles up his nose and soldiers on.

He tells them about how awful this month has been, but doesn’t mention the nightmares, the
crying, or any of the other trauma. He tries to downplay how much his journey to come get Wolfie has taken over his thoughts, and what a bad state he was in until he found that purpose. At every mention of Jessica, Josh’s torn lips twitch. Mike doesn’t ask why. He tells Josh that everyone is still pretty shaken up about what happened, and that Chris had told him that he didn’t believe Josh was dead.

“So Chris sent you up here then?” Josh looks pleased by the idea until Mike shakes his head, and explains that he hadn’t come up here for Josh at all. He didn’t believe Chris—he just wanted to come get his dog.

Shae grins, and it’s all teeth. “And that’s where I come in.”

Uncomprehendingly, Josh shakes his head. “You owned the wolf?”

She barks out a laugh. “I am the wolf.”

Josh looks at Shae closely, and then turns to look at Mike, and then turns back to look at Shae. “This is a prank, right? I’m being pranked. Is this a revenge scheme? Because if so, I’m underwhelmed.”

Mike feels a pang of annoyance at the mention of revenge plots, but he dismisses it. He scoffs, “This isn’t a prank,” and gets to his feet. “She’s telling the truth.”

Josh’s eyes rove over his body, and his expression is still one of pure disbelief. “Mike, you’re not a… God! You’re not a werewolf! This isn’t even funny. Just because I’m all fucked up now doesn’t mean everyone is.”

“No one everyone,” Mike presses. “Just us. I came back up to the mountain, and I met Shae, and she said she could transform me into a werewolf. And I said yes.”

No conviction dawns over Josh’s face. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Shae cuts in. “And then I told him that this evil bony weirdo had been stealing all my food and trying to kill me, so we went down into the mines to find you. And now you’re all caught up.”

Josh turns his attention back to Shae, bemused but still in denial. “I stole your… food?”


Tabling that concerning revelation for later, Mike pushes himself off the wall. “Josh. What is it going to take it to get you to believe me? I know you don’t trust me, man, but come on. Why would I lie about this?”

But before Josh can give an answer, Shae scoffs. “This is taking too long.” She throws her jacket onto the couch, and starts to pull her shirt up over her head.

“Whoa, uh, nope, no thank you,” Josh begins, shielding his eyes, but he quickly peeks out from behind his hands when he catches a glimpse of fur growing up her stomach. He’s rendered speechless as the fur takes over her flesh, growing faster than any natural fur could, and as Shae rips the rest of her clothes off Josh is transfixed. Mike wonders if he looked like this the first time he watched Shae transform.

Shae lets out a little half-huff, half-whimper that is distinctly canine and something tugs at Mike’s
heart; before he knows what he’s doing he’s pulling off his own shirt. Almost instantly Josh’s eyes are fixed on him, pinning him in place, and transforming has never felt like this before. Mike closes his eyes as he feels the world shift around him and his senses change, and the fur is like a familiar warmth spreading over his skin— like dipping into a warm bath. He growls, and when he opens his eyes, Josh is not the same colour. Josh is taller now, towering above Mike like he never has before. Josh’s eyes are the size of dinner plates, and he licks his lips and says Mike’s name, but it sounds different than every other time he’s heard it.

The transformation is complete, and two huge wolves are now pacing around in front of Josh, eagerly awaiting a response. Josh stammers for a moment, shellshocked and dumbstruck, and then begins to laugh. His laughter is the most beautiful thing Mike’s newly sharpened sense of hearing has ever experienced, and Mike thinks he could listen to this sound forever. He paws his way over to the couch and rests his head on the cushions, and Josh sinks down onto the floor, still laughing.

Mike and Shae circle him, and Shae licks his face, curious. Josh’s laughter grows more manic and less contained, and he starts to cry once more. Shae whimpers in distress, licking him again, and he shakes his head and pulls his knees up to his chest. His laughs have turned to sobs.

After half a minute of Josh crying that feels like an hour, Mike feels himself starting to shift back into a human. Thankfully, he has his wits about him for once, and the first thing he does is haul tail back to where his clothes are discarded on the floor. He carries them, half in his paws and half in his mouth, around the back of the couch. He then changes there as fast as he can. Mike has no desire for Josh to see him naked; at least… not while Josh is crying and in distress.

When Mike is presentable again he walks back to Josh’s side, and sits down next to him. Shae is licking at Josh’s tears. As much as she might try to pretend to still be scared of him, she’s clearly concerned for his wellbeing. It doesn’t seem to have much of an effect, however, and Josh pauses to take another shallow breath.

“Hey,” Mike says, and works his arm around Josh’s shoulder. This whole situation reminds him uncomfortably of one time in grade nine when Hannah had broken down crying during a test and Mike had ended up comforting her. “Did we scare you? Was it too awesome?”

Josh hiccups out a laugh, and shakes his head. “No, I just—” He breaks down again, shaking like a leaf. Shae starts to transform back, still pressing in at Josh’s other side in clear concern. Mike takes advantage of Josh’s face being hidden to mouth at her to ‘Put Some Clothes On’, and she sticks out her tongue but then goes to get dressed anyway.

Finally, Josh spits out, “I’m not scared. I’m— I’m happy.” Mike is doubtful, given that his body is still wracking itself every few seconds with a new sob. His voice is muffled as he explains, “I’m happy to know that I’m not the only monster now.”

Shae vaults over the back of the couch, fully dressed. She slides off the cushions to sit on Josh’s other side, furthering Mike’s hypothesis that personal space is just not going to be a thing that they adhere to now. “If you’re happy, why are you crying?”

Josh looks over at her, and Mike sees how red his face is. It almost looks good on him— it’s a nice reminder that he’s still at least part human. “I’m fucked up like that,” he answers.

The puzzled look doesn’t slide off Shae’s face. Mike rubs Josh’s shoulder gently out of impulse more than anything else, even if it does remind him a little bit of comforting Hannah, leaned up against the door to her locker. He doesn’t take his arm away from Josh until Shae observes, “Your mate is very unique, Mike.”
Mike jerks his hand away like he’s been stung, and Josh looks over at him with a wide shark grin. His pointy teeth only enhance the mental image. “Why does Shae think I’m your mate, Mike?”

Shae looks even more puzzled now. “Because Mike said—”

“Nothing! I said nothing, shut up!” Mike is sure his own face is beet red now, which isn’t a good look on him. Josh’s grin only grows more mischievous, and Shae narrows her eyes suspiciously at them, like there’s a joke she isn’t in on. The ‘joke’ she’s being excluded from is Mike having a girlfriend and being unavailable to flirt with Josh, and Mike has no desire to explain that joke to her right now.

Thankfully, Shae changes the subject. “You’re unique too, Mike,” she says, and smiles softly, like now there’s something she knows that they don’t. She reaches over Josh to hold out her hand, and Mike takes it, holding it awkwardly. “I’ve never met another fighter quite like you.”

“A fighter like me?” He frowns.

“One so kind.” Shae squeezes his hand briefly before letting it go.

Josh is watching their interaction keenly, and he says to Shae, “You’re very unique too.” Awkwardly, he holds up a hand, and Mike feels an unwarranted and unnatural burst of pride flare up in his chest.

Shae stares at him, and then high-fives his hand. “Perks of being a monster.” Josh winces a little at the force of it, but Shae pays his pain no mind, sidling closer to him hesitantly. She looks nervous; like a flighty animal who wants to approach a human but doesn’t want to be hurt. When Josh does nothing but lower his hand, Shae anxiously inches closer. Slowly, she nuzzles against his neck, and then stills.

For what might be two or twenty minutes, they sit there like that— three backs pressed up against the couch, two slumped against each other. Mike wants to make a joke about a werewolf and wendigo sandwich but he doesn’t want to bring up food again, so he stays silent. Josh doesn’t say anything either, and Mike thinks he’s fallen asleep when he hears soft, shallow breathing. Mike moves his head a little to try to see if Josh is awake, and Josh pivots his head to face Mike.

Suddenly, their faces are only two inches apart, and the entire world seems to be grayscale except the shape of Josh’s jagged, ruined lips. Mike is scared of how much he wants to ruin them a little more, so he quickly leans to the side and looks over at Shae. “She asleep?”

“I think so,” Josh breathes, and then shakes himself a little. He sounds half-asleep himself. “How did she pass out so quickly?”

Mike shakes his head, unsure, and then thinks about it for more than three seconds and realizes the obvious answer. “I mean. We’ve been awake since Wednesday.” He opens his mouth to say something else, but then he remembers—he’s been awake since Wednesday.

He pulls away from Josh, and Josh’s lips close abruptly. Mike isn’t sure why he noticed that they had parted. “I’m gonna go check my phone. Feel free to make yourself food or whatever, I’ll— um, I’ll be right back.” He gets to his feet, and dusts himself off, brushing down imaginary wrinkles.

“You know this is my house, right?” Josh teases quietly, adjusting his grip on Shae. She snuggles into him, growling in her sleep, and he smiles before holding a thumb up to Mike. “Sounds good, cowboy. Go deal with your girlfriend.”

Mike wants to protest the last word, but Josh’s eyes have already drifted shut, and Mike doesn’t see
the point in waking him again. “Sure,” he says, and watches Shae and Josh curled up together on the floor, stealing a last look. “Yeah. Right.”

His cell phone is still in the corner of his duffel bag that he packed so haphazardly. He hasn’t ended up using it half as much as he’d expected to—but then again, he thought he’d be home by now.

Mike plugs his charger into the wall, and then watches his phone screen come to life. At first, the service symbol shows him as being out of range, and he holds his breath. He wouldn’t be surprised to have no data at all up here. Isn’t that what Chris wouldn’t shut up about? But it would be pretty bad if he couldn’t get in touch with anybody. He’s got a feeling that the local police coming up to try to find him on the mountain and running into a hungry wendigo and a defensive orphaned werewolf might be… pretty bad.

Finally one bar of service appears, and then two, and then three. Mike is too distracted at that point to continue watching the top of his screen, because that’s when the notifications start pouring in. His phone starts vibrating with missed texts, calls, and messages so fast that Mike can hardly read them. There’s three from Emily all at 12:51 AM, and there’s an image from Sam that disappears before he can make out anything. Mike watches his phone vibrate rapidly in his hands, and as it quickly becomes flooded with messages it is apparently overwhelmed, and shuts off.

“Fuck me,” Mike swears softly, and turns it on again. This time the phone lights up faster, and the messages eventually start to slow down. He opens his phone to begin reading them, settling into a more comfortable position on the bed.

Every single person in his friend group has messaged him.

He checks his texts from Jessica first.

Jess: I know you’re probably mad, but can we talk about this? I’m sorry for texting you so early, but that was this morning… We don’t have to see each other before Friday if you’re mad?
Jess: Michael. Please. Can we talk about this
Jess: Sorry for calling you last night I’m anxious L
Jess: Mike I asked Sam if she’d talked to you and she said you’re not replying to her messages and she dropped by your place and she said you aren’t home and she talked to your neighbour and they haven’t seen you, are you okay???
Jess: I’m the worst girlfriend ever I’m sorry
Jess: Mike please reply I’m getting really scared
Jess: I asked Em if she had talked to you and we got into a fight and Im panicking I don’t know what to do ??? I talked to Matt he said he’s coming over later
Jess: my parents think they should check me into somewhere and idk I’m getting worse but idk how
Jess: Matt is here but I don’t know what to do I miss you I keep having dreams you’re back on that mountain

Mike’s fingers hesitate over the keyboard, and then he switches through his other conversations. The colourful texts start to blur together, and Mike turns down the brightness, frowning in dismay.

Sam: Michaaeeeel! We need to hang out before Friday :) Just talked to Chris and he said he called you and you got in a fight. :( Did you want to talk about it? I’m always down to have a feelings sesh with my old gym buddy! :D
Sam: MIKE! Spin class tomorrow! Me and you! No feelings required! 8 AM! You game?
Sam: Hey, if you don’t have the mental energy to reply to these, that’s okay too. <3 We’re all here for you!
Sam: Hey, Mike! Jess said she thinks she might have upset you? I’m going to come drop by your house today just to check on you <3
Sam: Sorry for overwhelming you with texts, but your neighbour said you haven’t been home in a few days. Is everything okay? I’m getting concerned :(  
Sam: I miss you I hope you’re alright
Sam: I talked to Chris again, and he said he called your mom? We’re all worried about you, I hope things are okay.

“Shit,” Mike curses, and sits up straight. He skips straight to his text conversation with Chris, heart racing. They contacted his mom?

Chris: I hope we’re cool after that call. I deleted the whole program I was using to track people down, so… still best bros?
Chris: I don’t wanna intrude on your time with your mom but I’ve kind of been panicking now that I don’t know where you are. If you could reply that would be great? Honestly even just leave me on read that would be enough
Chris: I’m sorry if this is annoying
Chris: I’m sorry for texting you yesterday. I trust you.
Chris: holy fuck Sam said you haven’t been replying to her texts. I know I’m probably overreacting but are you okay? Did you lose your phone?
Chris: It’s 3 in the morning Im super high with Ash and Im so worried about you I cant listen to anything shes saying
Chris: If he’s dead I don’t want you to be too. come back
Chris: sorry
Chris: I just called your mom and she said you’re not with her. I knew there wasn’t a problem with the fucking tracker. Are you kidding me? You are such a hypocrite
Chris: I can’t fucking believe you
Chris: Emily and Ashley warned me about the kind of guy you were but I didn’t think you would lie to me. I thought we were friends
Chris: If you don’t reply to this in the next week I’m coming up to Blackwood myself.

Mike closes his eyes tight, shutting out that threat and the room and the world for a moment. He inhales and then forces himself to hold the breath before exhaling. Matt’s up next.

Matt: hey bro :p Jessica said she couldnt get in touch w u im just checking in to make sure everythings ok? did u have a fight or smth? lol :(
Matt: hey bro were all seriously worried about u over here idk if u just went awol bc of stress or if somethings up but shit feels like taken (the liam neeson movie) fr
Matt: (1 Image Attachment) i hope this meme cheers u up wherever tf u are
Matt: we miss u, idk what to do, jess is crying
Matt: im at jessicas place. mike if youre not dead im gonna kill u
Matt: that last text was a joke. But like. pls do not be dead

Ma: Michael, Christopher just called me. He seemed to be under the impression you were staying with me? Should I have lied, sweetheart? I told him I hadn’t talked to you in a while. Please reply when you get this. <3 Mom
Ma: I know you are healing but we are all worried about you. I’m going to drive into the city on Monday and come check on you
Ma: <3

Ash: chris is super worried abt u u big burly jock pos u ebtter reply to his txts lol don’t leave my bf on read
Ash: (1 Image Attachment) matt sent me this quality content and im forwarding it to u as a desperate ploy to try to get u to come home \_(ツ)_/¯
Ash: apparently he called u and ur not at your mom’s house? he thinks youre at the mountain
Ash: michael fucking munroe if u make chris go back to that god awful fucking nightmare mountain out of concern for u, i am going to make u regret it
Ash: im a SCORPIO, mike, ill fuk u up
Ash: hes seriously panicking idk what to even do. pls come back
Ash: im sorry i called u a pos
Ash: the three other parts stand

Emily: Mike, Matt told me Jessica said she wasn’t able to get in touch with you. Is everything okay? Do you need me to come over?
Emily: I’m gonna take that silence as a no, and try not to be desperately offended. It’s probably best if we don’t fuck around again—I care about Matt.
Emily: Unless, of course, I’m supposed to take that silence as a yes? In which case, just say the word.
Emily: I talked to Sam, and she said nobody has been able to get in touch with you. You better not have got yourself into any kind of danger, you big dumb idiot. Nothing turns a girl off like the guy being dead.
Emily: Michael, maybe Jess is fine with being left on “Delivered” for this long, but I’m not that type of girl. Reply. I’m getting worried
Emily: Matt said that Jess is freaking out, and I don’t know how to help her :( I miss being her friend sometimes. I hate that you came between us sometimes.
Emily: I miss you I don’t trust Matt I can’t do this I miss you
Emily: Please reply. I’m sorry about what I said. I just miss you
Emily: Matt is staying over at Jessica’s fucking house for the night to “calm her down” like I’m not an idiot!!! I know what that means!!
Emily: Come home

Mike’s stomach is rolling with the usual mixture of guilt and self-hatred that comes from reading Emily’s messages, minus any of the lust that used to linger around. He clenches his fist around the blankets, and then opens the group chat. There are too many messages to read properly, but Mike scrolls through distractedly. He sees texts on the days leading up to Friday asking about him, and then more and more as the time they were supposed to meet at his house comes and goes. His lip hurts and he realizes he’s almost bitten through it.

The first message he sends is to his mom.

Mike: I’m okay, ma!!! Just went out of town for a few days, and my phone died. Made a new friend, and reconnected with an old one. I won’t be back by Monday, so don’t come visit – I’ll come visit you in Penticton soon. Love you <3

After that, he writes the same message to Jessica and Chris and Sam and Emily. Matt and Ashley mostly seemed concerned about Chris and Jess, so he’ll let the others fill in the blanks for them.

Mike: Sorry I went AWOL. I’m okay, I just needed to spend some time out of town. I’m safe, but I don’t know when I’ll be back. I’m sorry I made you worried.
Almost immediately, Jessica responds. She must have been waiting up—it’s only about eleven at night in her time zone, but Mike still feels bad.

**Jess:** Oh my god I was so worried :( I miss you. I hope you’re okay

He doesn’t know how to reply to that, so he gets off the bed. His phone is at thirty percent now, and he unplugs it, heading back downstairs—and being careful to avoid the broken steps in the staircase. He’s got to fix that soon. Mike walks back into the living room, treading lightly on the hardwood, and stops still when he sees the sight in front of him.

While he went upstairs, Josh clearly dozed off—but neither him nor Shae decided to move up to the couch. They’re exactly where Mike left them. Josh, all teeth and claws and bones, looks feral, and Shae does too. Her teeth are bared against Josh’s shoulder, but she doesn’t look like she’s about to sleep-attack him. Mike feels an indescribable emotion in his chest that he quickly tamps down on before it can take form.

The pair are curled around each other, limbs tangled and heads leaning towards one another. It’s the cutest thing Mike has ever seen.

**Mike:** I’m okay. **Mike:** <3

Before pocketing his phone, he snaps a quick picture of Josh and Shae. The flash startles Josh, whose eyes open wide for a moment—but he doesn’t wake up. Slowly, his big eyes drift shut again, and his breathing evens out.

Mike laughs under his breath, and then lies down next to Shae. He has a comfortable bed upstairs, but he wouldn’t want Josh to wake up and wonder where he was. “When in Rome,” he mutters, and neither of the others move. Mike stares at Shae’s mop of hair, and then grabs a couch cushion to use as a pillow.

He’s asleep within seconds.

In his dream, Chris is yelling at him. Mike tries to cover his ears, but he can hear everything thanks to his new acute werewolf senses. Chris tells him off for leaving Josh in the shed. Chris tells him off for leaving Josh in the cave. Chris tells him he’s a liar, he’s a liar, he’s a liar— he’s an asshole, a narcissist, a toxic piece of crap.

*Hey now,* he tries to protest, but Chris flips him off with both hands. Mike steps forward, and Chris punches him in the gut, hard. The wound flares up—quite literally; one second Mike is made of flesh and bone and in the next his abdomen is lit up like a Christmas tree. He winces and stumbles away, holding his glowing skin and wondering why it’s glowing. He falls to his knees, and Chris is still yelling, but now Mike’s ears are ringing too loudly to hear it.

“Hey,” he hears, and when he opens his eyes, everything around him is illuminated with that same pale yellow glow. Jessica is standing over him, concern on her face. “Mike. Hey, baby. Hi.”

Mike glances down at his stomach in concern and sees that the area where Chris punched him has begun to disintegrate into light. He chokes out, “What?” and Jess slowly kneels. She looks like a benevolent god, but her irises are glowing with the light that Mike is starting to feel uneasy about. Her wounds have all opened up, but instead of red she’s bleeding white.
“Kiss me,” she whispers, a smile playing on her lips, and Mike narrows his eyes at her. He doesn’t think this is the real Jess, so he doesn’t move to kiss her. Jess stares, and then leans closer. As she moves, her hair starts to fall out, turning black. Mike panics for a moment, thinking she’s hurt, but as she blinks at him he realizes this isn’t Jess at all, it’s Emily.

“Kiss me, Michael,” Emily insists, and Mike doesn’t know what to do except obey. He leans in and kisses her, but her lips are freezing cold. Instantly he recoils. The light around them is blue now, and wherever they are is all ice and water. He looks down at himself, and sees that his body is gone. There’s just nothing. Even when he moves and can feel his hands, they’re nowhere to be found; he reaches towards Emily and then she starts to disappear too. He becomes paralyzed in fear as the room starts to get brighter and brighter, and eventually his eyes start burning so he closes them tight.

After a minute of blindness, Mike slowly opens his eyes, and to his relief the room is dark once more. His body is visible again, and there’s no ominous light to be seen. His relief fades after only a moment when he realizes he’s alone in this dark space. Mike gets to his feet, looking around for a door, and he nearly jumps a foot when he sees Josh standing right behind him.

Josh’s eyes are missing, and his mouth is longer than it should be, than it has ever been. Mike can’t take his eyes off the cavities where Josh’s are supposed to be, but when Josh says nothing he nervously asks, “Josh, where is everyone?”

“I ate Chris,” Josh says, and his mouth looks like the trap that Mike got his hand stuck in. “And Emily, and Jess. I ate Shae, and when I find them, I’m going to eat Matt and Ashley and dear little Sam. But first I think I’ll eat you.”

“No—” Mike tries to move away, but the room is smaller than he’d realized and he’s up against a wall in no time. “Josh, no—”

“Thanks for coming to save me, Mike,” Josh grins, and leans in with his silver bear trap mouth, and Mike opens his mouth to scream but it’s too late.

Mike wakes up, and his heart is racing.

Warm light is filtering in through the windows and doors, making the burnt ruin of a house look almost welcoming. It’s Sunday afternoon. Somewhere, his phone is vibrating. The floor is hard and uncomfortable beneath Mike’s body, but at least his head is on a soft pillow and he’s holding something warm. The first thing he sees when he opens his eyes is soft white fur. That’s definitely not Bruiser.

The sight of Shae reassures Mike, and he lies there for the next few moments just sinking back down to his resting heart rate. He doesn’t remember what he was dreaming about, but he knows it was a nightmare—probably one of his usual reruns about Hannah eating him as vengeance or the cabin blowing up, or Jess or Sam or Josh dying.

The thought of Josh makes Mike lift his head to see if Josh is still where Mike had left him. Sure enough, he hasn’t moved from his spot on Shae’s other side. Shae must have transformed in her sleep, and once again, Mike must have blindly reached out while asleep towards her warm fur. He’s less embarrassed about waking up cuddling Shae this time, because Josh is snuggled up to her other side, hand splayed out over her fur.

Shae shakes herself awake, and then without warning, stands up to her full wolf height. Josh is
startled awake by the movement too, and quickly drops his hands, curling in on himself. Shae barks once and then leaves, bounding away without offering any explanation. Josh looks at Mike for a moment, and then his eyes drift closed again.

“Morning,” Mike prompts, reaching out with his foot. He pokes Josh’s shin with his toe. “Moooorning.”

“Mmrh,” Josh replies, which is not a real word at all. A smile twitches at the edge of his mouth, drawing Mike’s attention to his sharp teeth. “Let me sleep here until I die.”

Mike frowns. “Uh, no. Wake up, meathead.” He prods Josh’s foot, and Josh kicks him back harmlessly.

“You’re the meathead,” Josh mumbles.

His head isn’t even supported by a pillow; he’s just lying on the hardwood. At least this must be a step up from the cold ground of the cave. Mike remembers reading about soldiers who had returned from war to find their beds too soft for their tastes, and the food too palatable. He wonders if Josh feels like that now, and he fidgets. “Dude, come on. Let’s at least move to a bed.”

Without fully opening his eyes, Josh shoots Mike a playful smirk. “Oh yeah? You wanna get me in bed?”

You know it is on just the tip of his tongue, but Mike bites the words back. Despite his bravery so far, Mike suddenly can’t find even the smallest amount of courage to tease Josh back. He stares at Josh, and then pulls his feet away. His eyes sink shut, and he doesn’t move. Mike does the cowardly thing and pretends to fall asleep.

He swears he can feel Josh’s eyes on him, gauging whether or not he’s actually fallen asleep. Mike exhales, peaceful but measured and he lets his breath even out naturally. After a few minutes of silent stillness, he hears Josh breathing just as slow. He’s fallen asleep for real.

Mike watches Josh as the tension of the previous moment seeps away, and then he gets to his feet and goes outside. He needs air.

The outside air feels crisp against his skin, and Mike reminds himself that it’s still mid-February and he’s still on top of a mountain. Werewolf physiology or not, he knows his mother would yell at him if she saw him walking around in just a shirt. She would probably yell at him for one or two other things he’s done over the past week, but for some reason he thinks she’d start with that. Thinking about his ma for too long feels raw, so Mike uncrosses his arms and steps through the front door.

Shae is outside, human once more. She’s wearing only her moccasins and a long shirt he hasn’t seen before, grey and ill-fitting. It’s almost a dress; it’s probably pajamas. She’s making it work. In Shae’s hand is a fruit that Mike can’t identify at first due to the large black spot on it. He eventually determines that it is a half-eaten, very rotten mango; one of the expired fruits he’d seen in the basement fridge.

“Morning,” he says as he shuffles over to her. Shae doesn’t lose her composure for a moment, clearly having expected him. She takes a bite out of her mango, and Mike cringes. “You’re going to get sick if you eat that.” Christ, now he sounds like his mom.

Shae shoots him an amused look, and takes another bite. Her teeth rip at the black, rotten part, and
Mike frowns. There’s no possible way that she can find that appetizing. “My body isn’t weak like yours,” she informs him, clearly teasing. “I’ve been a werewolf for my whole life. I won’t get sick.”

Shae is sitting on a charred log, probably because what was once the patio is now a burnt ruin. If they’re going to stay here much longer, Mike will have to try to fix up this wreck of a house. He sits down beside Shae, and she offers him her mango. He shakes his head, revolted, and Shae returns to eating it herself.

It’s chilly out, but Mike likes the cold breeze. It’s a jarring contrast to how soft and warm he’d felt with Josh only a few minutes ago, and while part of him is tempted to go back inside and snuggle right back up to the wendigo’s side, most of him is terrified to do that for several reasons. At least he feels content out here with Shae. She peels off the last bit of the mango’s skin and gnaws at the pit and Mike chuckles. He can’t believe he’s feeling hungry watching Shae eat rotten food. If Emily was here, she’d have a heart attack. It’s hard to comprehend that he’s only known Shae for a few days when he already feels like she’s his sister, and when he already knows firsthand that he would endanger himself to keep her safe.

“Do you usually wake up this early, or is this a special occasion?” Mike digs his toes into the ground, kicking at frozen soil. It’s ineffective. “Because I could have probably slept for another week.” Now that he’s up and outside, he isn’t actually sure if that’s true; maybe being a werewolf means he needs less sleep now. If that’s the case, he has a pitch that any college student would love.

“Your cell phone woke me up.” Shae pauses licking the mango stone dutifully to look over at him. “I don’t know how you stand having that thing on you all the time. It wouldn’t stop ringing and I...” She almost looks embarrassed to tell him this, like she’s guilty for having such sensitive werewolf hearing. She rolls the pit around her palm, glancing away from him. “I don’t know why it made me so panicked. I felt like my throat was about to close up.”

“Oh,” Mike says, and rests his hands on the log uncertainly. He should have guessed that at some point he’d have to explain something to an orphan girl who lived alone for all her teenage years. “That, uh. Sounds like anxiety. It’s like, an illness that some people get in their brains, and it makes them feel more worried about everything. Sometimes they can’t stop panicking and they have these attacks—”

He’s interrupted by Shae throwing the mango stone right at his face. It hits him squarely in the cheek. “God, Mike, I know what anxiety is,” Shae scolds him. “Just because I’ve been living on the run doesn’t mean I’m an alien. I read things.”

“Sorry.” He bites the inside of his cheek.

Shae grins, bending to pick the mango pit up from where it rolled off the log. “You sound familiar with anxiety.” She sounds like a therapist, although Mike has yet to hear of a therapist that’s allowed to fling rotten fruit seeds at their patients.

He decides to ignore the obvious prompt to get him to open up, and instead deflects with, “Oh, no, uh, my girlfriend has anxiety. She’s really anxious all the time. She never used to be—I mean, I... don’t think it was ever this bad, anyway. She used to have confidence issues, but now it’s like she’s a fragment of her old self.”

Shae suddenly looks curious. “Girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Um. Yeah.” Mike sinks down a little. “I’m dating this girl named Jessica back home in
Vancouver. She’s the one you probably smelled in the cabin; we were in there before she got taken by the wendigo. She’s fine though! She made it out okay. Our friend saved her.”

“So you have two mates.” There is no misunderstanding in Shae’s expression regarding this idea. “Joshua and Jessica.”

Mike laughs before he can help himself. “Okay, like I said, Josh isn’t my mate.”

“Sure.”

“And I don’t… love Jess.” He sighs. “Not like I should.”

This is what confuses Shae, and she looks uneasy at the thought. “You’re with your mate, but you don’t love her?”

“It’s complicated,” Mike says, because it is. He remembers the early days of his thing for Jess, which had happened while he was still with Emily. He’d like to say that it wasn’t exactly his fault, and that Jess had given him the idea by being Emily’s hot and low-maintenance best friend. But none of that is true; he had been happy with Emily, and then he had second-guessed himself when he’d thought Emily was cheating on him and he’d started to talk to her best friend. And then the prank with Hannah happened, and Mike remembers thinking that it was cool that Jess and Em set this up together— like Jess was looking out for his best friend, but also like she had anticipated the whole thing. Like some part of her wanted Mike and Emily to break up over this, which they did. Mike had been selfish and vain, and he had clung to the idea that Jess liked him even before he had any solid proof. He had fucked up his thing with Emily long before he agreed to prank Han.

Now he’s still selfish, and he’s still vain, but he knows better. He knows that Jess had no idea what the prank would set in motion, and even if she had participated with an ulterior motive, none of that matters now. Emily is with Matt, and Jess can’t stand to touch Mike, and the most promising romantic prospect he has in sight right now is an undead cannibal monster who used to be the class clown. Mike remembers his snowball fight with Jess, and how she’d come to him before the trip telling him how excited she was. How Josh had told him about that private cabin a ways up the mountain that they could retreat to, alone together. He remembers making a joke to Josh about Josh sneaking up there to join them, and watching the eagerness in Josh’s eyes with some confusion. At the time, he’d thought Josh was maybe down for a threeway— now he knows Josh had been enthusiastic about his prank.

Complicated doesn’t even begin to describe the situation. It’s all twisted up in his mind now; Emily and Jessica and Matt and Emily and Jess and Matt and Josh and Jess and Hannah. He thinks about his phone vibrating incessantly, and wondered who bothered to text him back today. He thinks about Chris, and about how complicated explaining that to Shae might be. He thinks about Josh waking up alone on the living room floor.

“Can I see a picture?” Shae says, knocking Mike out of his reverie.

He turns to look at her, startled, and then realizes what she’s asking for. “Yeah, sure!” He digs his phone out of his pocket, and then unlocks it, scrolling through his notifications. A few messages catch his eye. Em has wished him death in all caps but he also sees a “Thank god you’re alright”, which he quickly closes before Shae’s prying eyes can read. Despite her undiscerning diet, Shae’s altruistic nature means she probably wouldn’t be okay with Mike getting loving texts from his ex-girlfriend. Sam has sent him a few texts, and Mike doesn’t read through them in full, but he sees a lot of heart emojis. Jess and his mom both sent him nearly the same message, which is jarring; they’re both glad he’s okay and would love further information but they’re not going to pressure him.
Chris hasn’t contacted him yet.

Brushing that off, Mike goes to his camera roll, and scrolls through images quickly. Shae leans her head against his shoulder, watching the pictures slide by. “You know so many people,” Shae comments as Mike scrolls up through a particularly embarrassing section that is entirely composed of bad drunk selfies. He went to this huge holiday party in December, and it ended up being a shit show; he had to give Chris a ride home because he threw up on himself. It makes for hilarious if disgusting blackmail photos, but Mike wishes the party hadn’t happened altogether—Matt and Emily had gotten together only a week afterwards.

He moves past the party entirely, cycling back through winter, fall, and then summer. He already knows he’s not going to get a good picture until before last February, but when he finds it, it still blows him away. Everyone looks younger, and so much happier. And standing beside of Josh are Beth and Hannah, and looking at their smiles makes Mike’s stomach turn, worse than any rotten fruit could.

“Here,” he says, voice empty even to his own ears, and hands Shae the phone.

She looks at the screen curiously, and then takes the phone, holding the photo close to her face. “Which one’s Jess?”

“There,” he points to her, smiling brightly and standing second from the left. “And the guy beside her is Matt. They’re the ones that got lost in the mines together.”

“She’s pretty,” Shae says, and nudges Mike’s side. “Too pretty for you.”

“Thanks.” Mike elbows her, and rolls his eyes. “And on Jessica’s right, that’s Emily. She got lost in the mines too, but she made it back to the lodge. She’s really smart. And she’s dating Matt.”

Shae smiles. “Now there’s a good-looking couple. I love seeing 10s with 10s.”

“Hey! I’m so a 10!” Mike isn’t sure if he’s pretending to be offended or if it’s genuine. “Besides, this is before she and Matt got together. Back then, her and I were the good-looking couple.”

“She really dodged a bullet,” Shae says, shit-eating grin stretched ear-to-ear. “Who’s that beside Emily?”

“I’m gonna push you off this log,” Mike threatens. “That’s Ashley. She’s, uh… I guess she’s dating Chris right now. Things are not gonna last.”

He expects Shae to ask who Chris is, but instead, she frowns and points to the twins. Her finger slides across the photo, zooming in on Hannah and Beth’s smiles. “Who are those two?”

Mike chews his lip. “That’s Hannah, and that’s Beth. They were Josh’s sisters.” He can’t bring himself to look at them any longer, so he looks up at the trees around them. “Hannah… um… We set up this stupid thing. Jess and Emily and I, but—Matt and Ashley were in on it too. And the twins both ended up dying because of it.”

Shae’s breath catches in her throat, and Mike feels her shift against his shoulder. “And… Hannah?” She slowly moves the photo so that it’s zoomed in on Hannah’s tattoo. She hadn’t gotten it long before this picture.

“Yeah,” he says, unsure if he can trust himself to say much more about what happened. “…Yeah.”

They’re both silent for a long time. Mike thinks about Shae noticing the butterfly tattoo. Maybe if
she’d transformed and said something to him, he would have realized that Hannah was who she was, and they could have tried to appeal to what humanity she had left. Maybe then Josh wouldn’t have been dragged down to the cave at all.

Shae moves the photo to the right, and then laughs softly. “Wait. That’s Josh?”

“Yep,” Mike says, and he smiles. “Why? You don’t think he looks the same?”

“He really aged fast,” Shae jokes. It’s an obvious attempt to end the awkwardness, but Mike appreciates it. “So, who’s beside him?”

“Chris.” Chris who apparently is furious enough to not text him. Mike forces himself to dismiss the thought, focusing on Chris’ goofy grin. He looks younger in the photo. “He’s Josh’s best friend, and his partner in crime. If anyone’s Josh’s mate, it’s probably him.”

Shae gives Mike a look that he can easily interpret; she thinks he’s full of shit. “But Chris is with Ashley?”

“Not for long,” Mike mumbles. Shae rolls her eyes, and zooms out to look at the whole photo. Only he and Sam are left. “That’s Sam— uh, Samantha. She’s the best person in our friend group… Honestly, I think she might be the best person on earth.”

Shae zooms in on Sam. “Is Sam dating anyone?”

“Nope,” Mike says, and holds his tongue before he can add Lucky.

“I don’t see why not,” Shae mutters, and then scrolls right. She sees him, and Mike sees himself. He’s envious of how naïve he used to be— back when he honestly thought things like being prom king and teacher’s pet were important. Back before he learned about the existence of werewolves or wendigos, and back when Hannah and Beth were alive and well. He thinks he looked better in the photo than he does right now with his depression and beard, which is why he’s surprised when Shae giggles.

“What?” he demands, and she hands him his phone back. “What is it?”

“You’re so ugly!” Shae barks with laughter.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry that this chapter took so long to post, but it's a super long one—and it's probably my favourite so far! Thank you so much for reading this; it means the world to me that other people out there are enjoying this ridiculously self-indulgent and long-winded slow-burn. I hope you all love awkward tension as much as I do! Also I specifically wanted to credit one of the blog posts that I quote in this chapter, so here's the link! It's a great read if you want to learn more about wendigo lore, or if you're interested in what other traits and powers might pop up in this fic. Check it out!

The next few days are spent healing.

The water ebbs back before flowing forward once more, and Mike is transfixed. He watches the white floor for any movement, but he only sees the artificial tide rippling out; and the thin film of soap covering the surface. He reaches out to pop one ambitiously large bubble, and it pops, leaving a dent in the chaos. Mike can see straight through to the bottom, where there are no rocks or sand or kelp. Instead, Mike sees a face staring up at him.

He tries not to shy away from the water; he knows that it isn’t a real face, or even a real hallucination. No one was buried in the bathtub, and Hannah’s charred remains had been removed from the lodge. But he still feels startled by the vision, and so he closes his eyes, hoping for a reprieve.

Unfortunately, that makes it worse. Mike had been standing beside the tub as the water rose, but now he sinks to his knees, grip tight on the porcelain for balance. With his eyes closed, he can clearly see Hannah’s face, and the sight turns his stomach. It’s harder to differentiate between memory and truth when Hannah is right there, bones and glasses morphing together into an impossible monster. She opens her mouth, and Mike grits his teeth. His fingers skid over the bathtub. It was all his fault. This, her, everything. Mike’s eyes are shut so tightly that they’re starting to hurt, memory blending with hallucination blending with phosphenes.

Two sudden things happen simultaneously, and Mike’s eyes jerk open. Firstly, his six fingertips dip into the hot bathwater, which doesn’t make any sense at all. The tub was barely half-full a moment ago— or had he been distracted for longer than he’d thought?

The second thing that interrupts his flashback-daydream-nightmare is the familiar drawl of Josh demanding to know how long he’ll be. It’s still bizarre to hear Josh’s voice when he never thought he would get the chance again, even if said voice is reprimanding him. “Holy shit, dude, did you pass out in there?”

“Bet he’s using up all the hot water,” Shae’s voice filters through the door too, and his face heats with embarrassment. But it’s only been a few minutes—he forces himself to dismiss the thought. He’ll handle the newfound revelation that baths apparently trigger his trauma later; he has a feeling he shares that one with Sam. Mike pulls his hands away, wiping them off on his jeans, and then turns the faucet off.
“I’m not using any of the water,” he says, pulling the door open. Josh and Shae both look unimpressed, similar expressions on their faces. Josh is chewing his lip, which probably isn’t a good sign, but he’s doing it with the unmarred side of his mouth, so Mike doesn’t call him out. Shae rocks up to the tips of her toes to glance over his shoulder curiously. “This bath isn’t for me. I’m not the one who spent the last three weeks in a cave.” He pauses, and then looks from Shae to Josh with a wide grin. “Did you two miss me?”

“No,” Josh scoffs.

“Yes,” Shae says, and pushes past Mike into the bathroom. “Why is there so much water?”

Mike stands to the side, letting Josh through. He tries to keep the embarrassment out of his voice as he explains, “It took a while to heat up, and I got distracted. It’s hot now though, so, uh, be careful.”

Not known for her carefulness, Shae immediately plunges her hand into the water, and then winces when she discovers its temperature, snatching the hand back. She shakes it off (like a dog) before wiping it on her shirt, and Mike watches her in fascination. He has yet to see her shower, unless you count bathing in a mountain creek or licking yourself clean. Mike counts neither.

Josh unbuckles one of the straps on his overalls, long nails struggling with the metal. He manages it though, and one corner sags as the strap comes undone. He must be used to these overalls by now, seeing as he hasn’t worn anything else in weeks. When they’d tied Josh up in the shed, he’d had a belt and gloves on. His outfit was intact aside from the fake blood he’d splattered over it in an attempt to up the fear factor, however possible.

Looking at Josh now, it’s hard to remember what the Psycho’s outfit had looked like. The real horror show is so much more terrifying. Josh shrugs off the overalls until they’re hanging around his waist, and Mike stares at the dried blood caked onto his shirt. There’s a large bloodstain by his shoulder, and his sleeves are soaked with gore and dirt and other grime that’s impossible to identify.

As Josh unbuttons the blue shirt, Mike is overcome with the urge to take his clothes away and get rid of them. Maybe burning the clothes like they’d burned the rest of the wendigos will help Josh in some way, if only psychologically. He remembers reading about catharsis working like that for some people.

But on the other hand, Mike has owned a few pet goldfish in his time on the planet. He remembers that when you clean a fish’s tank you’re supposed to leave some of the water in, so that the fish isn’t frightened by the brand new habitat. When they left the cave, they left Josh’s habitat behind completely, as well as the mask he used to protect himself. Mike has no intention of letting him go back there, so he’ll let Josh decide what he wants to do with his clothes.

Underneath Josh’s blue shirt is a dark grey Henley, and Mike can’t help but notice how it clings to his frame. He should have prepared himself for that, given that Josh is the literal definition of malnourished, but something about the sight still unsettles him. Josh’s old body had been average, but he had suited his softness.

This Josh isn’t soft at all; he’s lost dozens of pounds in his starvation. His body is a tight frame now, and the shirt outlines it perfectly. When he’s ditched the overalls and baggy plaid, his head seems to suit his body so much more; Josh reaches up to run a hand through his hair and Mike’s eyes trace his jaw, his cheek, his neck, his collarbones. Josh is all bones now, and Mike feels a rush of pity—but he also feels the roof of his mouth go dry.
“So are you two just gonna watch?” Josh raises an eyebrow, and Mike catches himself. That’s the second time he’s caught himself zoning out in the last five minutes, although getting distracted by Josh’s body is much more pleasant than getting distracted by thoughts of his sister.

He quickly averts his gaze, and Shae gets up from where she’s perched on the edge of the bathtub. Josh snorts, and reaches down to his hips. His voice is rife with its usual self-deprecation, but it seems to cut even deeper now. “I know I’m a freak of nature. No need to stare.”

“That’s not why I was staring,” Mike stammers, which is obviously not the part of the statement he should have addressed. Josh squints at him suspiciously. “I mean… you’re not a freak of nature. Come on, Shae, let’s give him some privacy.”

“I think he’s probably sick of privacy,” Shae says, but she gets to her feet anyway, walking between them. Mike moves towards the door as well, unconvinced that Josh will be alright. The last time he was in here, he was watching Sam bathe. This can’t possibly be a good place to leave Josh on his own.

Mike opens his mouth to say something, and then his concern is circumvented by Josh tugging his shirt up over his head, so what he ends up saying is “Holy dickbiscuit,” which is a new one. The bloodstain on Josh’s shoulder was apparently not from a meal, and the blood is apparently not someone else’s; there’s a stab wound in his chest. The mark itself is only a few inches wide, but the area around it is all inflamed and badly, badly infected.

Mike feels queasy just looking at it, and Shae hisses in sympathy. “That looks terrible,” she comments, and Josh frowns at her before glancing down at his chest and realizing what she’s talking about. “Did the other wendigo do that to you?”

Josh sighs, and tosses his shirt to the ground. He folds his arms across his chest. “No.”

That catches Mike off-guard, and he considers the wound with new apprehension. “Wait, really? Then who did?” He hopes it wasn’t Josh; he wouldn’t put it past him given what Josh has been through since being left alone, but the idea is still chilling. Would he have stabbed himself because no one came to find him?

The room is quiet as Josh grinds his teeth together, which they can all see thanks to his exposed cheek. His fingernails are digging into his bare arms, and it’s obvious he’s uncomfortable. Finally, he confesses: “Ashley.”

The helicopter ride away from the mountain is noisy enough to wake every animal in the forest, but the inside of the helicopter is silent. Emily refuses to look in his direction, but truth be told, Mike isn’t exactly eager to look her way either. He doesn’t know where to look; his hands are torn apart irreparably, so even glancing down is a no-go.

He looks over at Sam’s hands, and sees her perfectly manicured butterfly nails— now ripped and broken. Mike wonders when she had time to anxiously chew her nails apart. Sam’s hands are shaking, and she’s pressed up against his side; she’s not big enough to cut off the circulation to his arm, but it’s not quite comfortable. Somehow, he can’t bring himself to deny her the warmth— or pull away.

In fact, most everyone is shaking in one way or another. The sheriff riding with them keeps looking out the window and shivering, like he thinks he has some idea of how cold the mountain might be. Mike wants to scoff, but he doesn’t have the energy. He can’t stop thinking about the missing seats
in the helicopter: Matt should be sitting next to Emily, holding her hand or at least alive. Jess should be next to him, not dead somewhere on the mountain. Josh should be bundled into Christopher’s side.

Instead, Ashley is bundled into Christopher’s side, and Mike makes eye contact entirely by accident. Her skin is deathly pale, making the blood spattered across her cheek look even more gruesome than it had before. She’s trembling, but her jaw is set with resolute strength. Mike wishes that were how he felt right now— ready to take on whatever horror came at them next.

Right now, Mike just wants to go home and call his mom and cry. He wants to fly back to Vancouver, take the world’s longest shower, and then begin the grieving process. Even the word grieving feels wrong to think when just last night he was flirting with Jess, fucking with Matt, and fighting with Josh. But as the sun slowly rises and dawn bleeds out into every corner of the sky, Mike knows he can’t deny what happened. He watched Josh get taken— he saw Jessica’s body. They’re dead, and there’s nothing he can do.

He realizes he’s been glaring at Ashley, who looks hurt by the stare. Mike quickly glances down at the floor of the helicopter, folding his good hand over his bad hand. He can feel Ashley’s gaze cutting into his scalp, and he sees Chris move his arm a little closer around Ash’s shoulder. Sam hasn’t moved from Mike’s side, and Emily hasn’t looked over at anyone, gaze fixed on the burning lodge.

They’re all going to have to live with this forever.

And then the sheriff’s radio receives a sudden signal, startling everyone in the helicopter. “Sheriff, we have located two more survivors on the mountainside. We’re setting up a safe point for them to climb down to, and then we’re extracting them as well.”

The sheriff, apparently not noticing anything amiss, replies, “Ten-four.”

The silence was dead before, but now it is live like a wire. Mike jerks his head up to look out the window, not daring to hope… But sure enough, a second helicopter is descending to an indiscernible place on the mountain. Emily’s eyes are bugging out of her skull, and Sam’s jaw goes slack with surprise. Chris is the one to break the silence, and he looks so hopeful Mike can’t help but feel a rush of optimism.

“Can you ask who they are?” he begs the sheriff, who looks over at him in surprise. Maybe Chris forgot that at the moment they’re all suspects of at least arson, although the fire is only the tip of the iceberg here.

Despite their uncertain legal status, the sheriff nods, and pulls his radio back up to his mouth, asking who the survivors are.

The reply comes almost instantly: “They look young. Teenagers.” The sheriff rolls his eyes at how wildly unhelpful that is, but everyone else is waiting with baited breath. “One is covered in a whole lotta blood, she doesn’t look too good—”

“She,” Mike blurts out before he can stop himself, and all eyes are suddenly on him. “J-Jess? Is she blonde?”

After a moment of silence where nobody breathes, the response comes. “Affirmative. A blonde girl and a boy in some type of school jacket. They’re both real roughed up, sheriff.”

“Matt,” Emily breathes, and she sounds like she’s on the verge of tears. Mike glances over, and
sees that she is. She looks at him for the first time since he had his gun pointed at her, and for the first time in months, their thoughts are in tandem. Thank god. They’re alive.

But then Mike looks over at Chris, who has wilted completely, and he realizes what that means. Two survivors. Only two. Meaning Josh isn’t one of them. As the reality of their situation sets in, Mike has to struggle to keep his face under wraps; his emotions are warring with each other. Somehow, Matt and Jess made it, but Josh didn’t. Mike’s grieving process just became simpler and more complex all at once.

He closes his eyes for a moment, letting himself regain his breath. His fingers twitch against his palm, and he lets out a sigh. The noise is barely audible over the whir of the helicopter blades, carrying them to safer grounds.

When Mike opens his eyes, Ashley is staring at him—only for a moment, and then she glances away.

Back in present times, Shae is hard at work cleaning Josh’s wound. She tells him calmly how the skin healed over the wound before it was cleaned, so she’s going to have to remove some of the skin to rinse it out fully. Mike isn’t sure that’s sound medical advice, but he knows less about it than Shae apparently does, so he doesn’t say anything. She starts to rub the skin gently, and Josh winces, eyes closing tightly. “Oh, good, you’re already bleeding,” Shae comments cheerily. “I was worried I’d have to reopen the wound completely. This hasn’t completely healed.”

“Great,” Josh hisses through gritted teeth. Red is quickly spreading over the towel Shae is holding up to his shoulder.

“It is great. Unfortunately, we’re still going to have to get in there, so... it might be better if you sit in the bathtub.”

“Seems like you’ve got it covered,” Mike says, feeling awkward. Shae and Josh both turn to give him a confused look, the latter’s face wracked with pain— which does not exactly help Mike feel less awkward. He nods uncomfortably, and goes to wait outside.

The strange part about Ashley stabbing Josh with a pair of scissors is that, in light of everything else that’s happened to Josh recently, it’s not strange at all. The Ashley that Mike knows is timid and flighty, easily embarrassed and quick to flare up. He doesn’t know much about the dynamic between Ashley and Josh—and he’s still not sure how Chris works into the whole thing—so it’s difficult to guess what was going through Ashley’s mind after she found out who the Psycho really was. But then again, when she had stabbed him, she hadn’t known who he was at all. She had just picked up the first weapon she could find and done her best to defend herself.

When Mike thinks of it as self-defence, it almost seems badass.

Instead of going downstairs, he waits just outside the bathroom, listening to Shae’s muffled voice through the door. Josh occasionally speaks up, but it’s hard to tell what either of them are saying. At one point, Mike swears he hears his name, and he’s tempted to just press his ear to the door and eavesdrop that way.

But then the door opens, and Mike tries to look as casual as possible. Shae comes out of the bathroom with both hands covered in blood, and a red line smeared across the base of her neck. She closes the door behind her, uncaring of the stain she leaves on the knob.
“He’s taking a bath now,” she informs Mike. “He made a weird joke about not interrupting him for a few hours… I’m still deciding whether or not I like him.”

Mike is pretty sure now would be a bad time to bring up Josh watching Sam in the bathtub and then chasing her through the house. “That’s Josh for you.”

When Josh comes out of the bath an hour later, Mike and Shae are lounging on the couches downstairs, simply killing time. Josh walks down the stairs carefully, and Mike looks up to see that he changed into one of his old outfits. The tape of a fresh bandage is poking out from under the collar of his Jurassic Park t-shirt, which Mike hasn’t seen him wear in years. It looks good on him; it makes him look younger.

Josh’s towel-dried hair is a mess of curls, some sticking to his forehead, and his hands are all pruney like they used to get in swimming lessons. His teeth are still sharp, and his cheek is still torn open, and the bags under his eyes are darker than they’ve ever been, but he looks definitively more Joshua now than he did before his bath.

Mike holds up a thumb to Shae, and then when she narrows her eyes, he wiggles his thumb down, questioning the verdict.

Shae flips him off, but she’s grinning.

Slowly, they learn how to co-exist. Josh learns how to be human again, with an asterisk after human. As much as the thought scares Mike, the three of them are not human. This is handy because they don’t have to cook any of their meat, but the cons are that they’re not human. Maybe Josh will get better with time, and all the wendigo spirits that flew straight down into him from the lodge will decide they’re moving out. But for now, they have to learn to live together as… whatever they are.

“So you agree,” Josh says, interrupting the middle of Mike’s long spiel. “I’m not a human.”

“Well, you’re at least part wendigo,” Mike says. Josh is sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging his feet back and forth and making his way through a container of frozen salmon. The smell is turning Mike’s stomach a little, but this has to be done. “We can’t let that slide. There is a part of you, and I don’t know how potent that part may be, that thirsts for my blood.”

Josh looks revolted, but not by the uncooked fish; by the gross reference. “Seriously?”

“Hey, Emily loved those movies,” Mike laughs. “She even had all the books— but don’t tell her I told you that.” He considers the ramifications. “Seriously. Don’t.”

Josh rolls his eyes. “The difference between me and Edward fucking Cullen, Mike, is that I don’t want to suck blood. I want to eat. And also, I’m not a glittery Cedric Diggory.”

“You are eating,” Mike points out.

“This tastes like junk food to me,” he complains, waving the salmon around in the air. A piece of fish falls to the ground, and Mike tries his hardest not to look queasy. “I want to eat living meat, bro. The wendigo spirits aren’t exactly asking.”

That idea is fascinating, and Mike wants to ask if Josh can see the wendigo spirits. However, he
doesn’t want to make fun of Josh’s mental illness, so he holds his tongue. “Then I guess you’re gonna have to live off junk food for now.” He watches Josh take another bite of salmon, and watches him swallow the meat. Josh’s sharp nails pierce the skin easily, scales catching and falling off of the fish back into the container.

The sight reminds Mike of another thing he’d meant to accomplish today, and he pulls out a nail clipper from his back pocket. “Speaking of you being human,” he continues, walking over to hop up beside Josh on the counter, “let’s take care of this, okay? I was thinking I could help you cut those claws down.”

Josh eyes the small metal clipper, and then eyes Mike, and then eyes his salmon. “Right now?”

“Yes, right now,” Mike says, reaching for Josh’s fish. He’s disgusted to find it cold. “Put that shit away, you can finish your garbage food later. Right now, we’re gonna make you look a little less like a wild animal.”

“Coming from the werewolf,” Josh says, and Mike tries not to tense. That’s the first time Josh has brought it up since Mike transformed. Josh reaches for his hands, and Mike thinks Josh is actually agreeing to get his nails trimmed for a second, and then he knocks the clippers out of Mike’s grip. His fingertips are surprisingly soft, and it’s distracting enough that Mike doesn’t expect it when Josh’s knuckles brush over his.

Mike’s brain short-circuits before he realizes why Josh is staring at his hand, and then his heart sinks. “Oh,” he mumbles, pulling his hand away and awkwardly placing it on the edge of the counter. (There’s a chip on the counter from where he opened his beer the other day; thankfully, it doesn’t seem like Josh has noticed. Or maybe he just doesn’t care.) His remaining fingers and thumb curl around the countertop, and Mike experiences— for just a brief moment— that dizzying sensation of trying to move fingers he doesn’t have. His brain is getting better and better at curbing those impulses, but he’s still got nearly two decades of muscle memory to undo.

“You talked about what happened in the sanatorium,” Josh says. It’s not an accusation, or an inquisition; just a statement. “The bear trap.”

Mike does not want to talk about it. He stays silent, although his brain is still shrieking to try to locate his missing pinky and ring finger. In his mind, he hears his mom say vena amoris.

“Or in this case, the wolf trap,” Josh jokes. It’s weak, as Washington one-liners go, but when Mike looks over at Josh he’s surprised to see desperation in those big eyes. Like Josh is trying his hardest to restore order between the two of them, which would make sense. Mike is reassured by that. He was right. Josh does want to get back to being human— even just emotionally.

“Har-har,” he says, and picks up the nail clipper. He pretends not to notice the relief on Josh’s face as he spreads out a sheet of paper towel on the counter, and then reaches for Josh’s hand. “Come here, Mr. Stand Up Comedian.”

Mike holds up Josh’s palm with one hand and clips his fingers with the other, slowly working to trim the nails down into something presentable. It would be easier if he used a knife, or some type of beauty scissors— Mike remembers that Jess keeps all that shit in her bathroom. But Mike doesn’t want to see a knife, and he has a sneaking suspicion that Josh won’t want to see scissors either. Josh doesn’t bring it up, and Mike is unspeakably grateful.

His work is gradual and time-consuming, but when he’s done both hands Josh holds up his nails. He flexes his palms, cracks his knuckles, and then runs the edges of his nails over his wrists. His cheek and eye are still very clearly supernatural, but his hands almost pass for human now.
If the cut is a little jagged on some of his nails, Josh doesn’t say anything. Mike cleans up, throwing out the garbage and putting the salmon back into the freezer. When he looks back at the counter, he’s surprised to find Josh already staring at him. Josh smiles, and it’s disarming. That’s a smile that Mike hasn’t seen since before last year. “Thanks,” he says, and then slides off the counter and walks out of the kitchen.

Mike stands by the freezer until his teeth chatter from the cold, and then he closes it gently. He’s digging his own grave by staying here, but he doesn’t know what else to do.

And I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

God damn it, Emily.

- 

It takes a very thorough search of the house for Mike to locate a toolbox. He walks past the creepy dollhouse, and then changes his mind and goes back to flip it around so it isn’t facing him. He walks around the basement, frowning at the hooks hanging from the ceiling and the remnants of Josh’s prank. He knows it was all a practical ‘joke’ now, but the artifacts still scare him.

When he searches the library, he puts the Ouija board back on the shelf, righting some of the candles that apparently fell over. Mike isn’t a particularly spiritual man, but he’d rather not have that junk lying around. Besides, he doesn’t love the goosebumps the board is giving him anyway—if werewolves and wendigos exist, why not ghosts?

Mike flips the board over to hide its letters, and then changes his mind five minutes later and goes back to move it right side up. This house is creepy enough without being literally haunted.

An hour later, he finds his treasure; the toolbox is on the floor of the linens closet, tucked under some beach towels. There’s an ice pick next to it, which Mike makes a mental note of.

“You could have told me it would be in the linens closet,” he gripes aloud, but neither Shae nor Josh answers. He thinks Shae went back to her home, or just out to explore the mountain. The door to Josh’s room has been closed for some time, so Mike can only assume he’s in there. He grumbles “Whatever” to himself, and then sets to work.

Maybe he’s doing this because he feels like he still owes the Washington family a debt, after causing their daughters to be killed and their son to be cursed. Maybe he just wants to make the best of his living space, for however long they end up staying here. It’s hard to guess when Josh will be ready to get back to the real world, let alone Shae.

Or maybe Mike is feeling idle, like he needs something to do with his hands. He thinks about hunting, about going out to find Shae and tracking down a rabbit with her, and his ears twitch—which is peculiar, since he’s never been able to wiggle his ears before. A lot has happened to him in the last few days; his worldview has changed, he’s become a new species, and he found and rescued one of his undead friends, previously assumed dead. To top it all off, Chris has left him on read for over twelve hours now. That takes a lot out of a guy.

So whatever the reason is, Mike starts working. Some of the wooden planks have burned to ash while some are still usable, and some are cracked so it’s hard to guess whether he’ll be able to safely mend them. He’s never been good at construction or home repair or any other DIY shit. That was always his mom’s forte. But it’s important that he does his best to fix this—the stairs are a centerpiece of the lobby. They would be the main event if not for the chandelier.
Mike glances over at the chandelier, half-expecting to see Hannah there. But she (fortunately) isn’t. The living room is empty, and the beautiful circular fixture that has starred in so many of Mike’s nightmares is ruined beyond repair. Maybe he’ll try to repair it sometime, but that isn’t a priority.

The priority is getting these stairs into working condition, which Mike slowly achieves. He runs out of nails halfway through and has to switch to screws, which looks uneven but it’s the best he can do under the circumstances. The work is not monotonous, or easy, but Mike falls into it regardless. Soon, he’s not thinking about Chris or Jess or being a werewolf or chasing anything down to eat it at all. His only thoughts are the sounds of the drill pushing through wood, the sight of the treads realigning one by one, and the feeling of—

“Oh, cheese and crepes!” he swears, and nearly falls off the stairs. He’s succeeded in giving himself a nasty splinter, and he takes a break from his work to go upstairs and extricate it from his palm. “Motherfucker,” he adds, in case Josh is listening from somewhere. It’s not exactly that he’s ashamed of his faux swears, he just doesn’t want to be mocked for it.

When he reaches the bathroom and opens his fist, Mike is dumbstruck by the sight of the tiny splinter lying in the middle of his palm— on top of his skin. “Huh,” he mumbles, before he remembers what he is now.

“Oh, right. Werewolf.”

Upon his return to the stairs, Mike is impressed by his own work— they already look so much better. He runs his hand over the banister, and then decides he’d better sand them down, too. He didn’t cut away all the burnt parts, and he tried to flip around some of the treads that were too badly damaged to look at all presentable, but some splinters are still sticking out.

It takes another forty minutes of sanding and then polishing before he’s satisfied, and by then it’s nearly dusk. Mike flicks the lights on, despite knowing Josh will probably hate it; he can’t help his fear of the dark. He looks at the stairs, and something twinges in his chest. He’s still not sure why he saw fit to spend a whole afternoon fixing someone else’s broken house instead of driving back to his house, but it feels organic.

Shae and Josh haven’t come back yet, so Mike is smiling to himself alone in the lobby, but he doesn’t mind. He pulls out his phone and snaps a picture of the staircase. He wants to send it to Sam or Jess or Emily, but he doesn’t want to give them a clue as to where he is, so he locks his phone and slides it back into his pocket. He stands there smiling at nothing with his hands in his pockets for longer than he means to.

“Ah!”

“Ah!”

“Ah… oh, that one didn’t even move—”

“Ah!?”

“Ah!”

“Ah!?”

“Ah… oh, that one didn’t even move—”

“Ah!?”

“Ah!”

“Ah…”
“Whoa!”

“Shae,” Mike says, voice calm. “I’m not going to be able to shake the pot if you don’t stand back, and then it’ll burn.”

“Oh.” Shae steps away from the pot, which is still popping incessantly, but her neck is craned to watch the popcorn. Mike shakes the large pot from side to side, and then up and down a few times for good measure. Josh is waiting for them in the living room; he’s the sole member of the film committee, while Mike and Shae have been assigned to snack detail. Or, more accurately, Mike has been assigned to snack detail and Shae has assigned herself to watching the popcorn through the glass lid.

“You can’t tell me you’ve never had popcorn before,” Mike accuses her, shaking the pot. He’d found a large container of kettle corn in the pantry, and Shae had found baby blue oven mitts, which Mike is currently wearing as he cooks. The power is still on, which feels like a miracle and a blessing from God. If Mike had to go out to that creepy generator this late at night on Blackwood Pines... well, he wouldn’t. He’d ask Shae to do it.

“I’ve had popcorn,” Shae scoffs. “I just prefer the microwaved stuff. It’s cheaper.”

“Nah, this is cheaper. All you need is oil to cook it in.” Shae wrinkles up her nose, and for some reason, Mike finds himself about to open up to her. There’s a long story on the very tip of his tongue about his mom’s financial situation thanks to his shithole dad, and how she’d always found joy in being able to cook for him. Even if that cooking had been whittled down to the bare necessities, and even if she hadn’t always been able to find money to feed herself, she would always look proud whenever she could make him something he liked.

Mike remembers his ma helping him move into his apartment, and all the cooking essentials she’d stocked his kitchen with. He remembers the first time he made popcorn on his shitty stove that takes ten years to heat up; his phone had been wedged between his ear and shoulder and he’d been shaking it the complete wrong way. Half the popcorn had burned, and there was a permanent scorch mark on the bottom of the pot. He remembers telling his mom over the phone that he was surprised how easy it was, since it had always seemed so special to her. The line was silent for a minute, and when she finally spoke, Mike could hear her voice catching.

Sometimes he worries he grew up too fast, but when he looks at Shae, he feels bad for even having the thought. No one else has had to grow up as fast as she had. He clears his throat, and gestures towards the fridge. “Can you grab the butter?”

Shae spares one last look at the popcorn, and then goes to the fridge. “This is margarine,” she complains, like she wasn’t eating rotten fruit this very morning.

“So? I didn’t know you were a picky eater.” In fact, there was butter, but it was disgustingly rancid. He had tossed it in the trash, foreseeing the potential pitfall of Shae not giving a shit about the expiration dates of food. This is their first movie night ever, which is a critical bonding point for any friendship. If Shae’s still deciding if she likes Josh or not, then Mike doesn’t want to mess that up by making gross movie snacks. “Put some in a bowl and put it in the microwave.”

Shae follows his instructions as Josh’s voice calls from the other room. “You two nearly done in there? I picked the perfect movie!” It’s a little difficult to discern whether Josh is yelling super loud or if Mike is just way better at hearing now, but Mike can hear him perfectly. He thinks about being able to make out words from outside the bathroom earlier, and makes a mental note to Google werewolf powers later.
Shae walks away to the living room without even setting a time on the microwave, so Mike rolls his eyes and then finishes her task. The popcorn is pretty much done now, so he moves it off the burner and then waits for the last kernels to stop popping. When he can safely take the lid off, he tosses a handful of popcorn up in the air and catches maybe two of them on his tongue.

As Mike stoops to pick up the fallen pieces, he catches a whiff of the salmon he’d thrown out earlier—even though the garbage is hidden under the sink and the lid is closed. Speaking of werewolf powers, super smell is rapidly becoming his least favourite one. Mike isn’t even sure where you’re supposed to dispose of your garbage on top of a mountain; it’s not exactly like there’s a friendly custodian who will stop by and clean up for them. He supposes he could take their trash down to his truck and drive to the closest dump, but that sounds like so much effort. He’ll probably just end up throwing their shit into the mines.

“I’ve never seen this one before,” Shae says from the other room. “Is it good?”

“Oh, it’s the best,” Josh assures her with a laugh. “It’s perfect.”

“Really? What’s it about?”

“Well, I don’t want to spoil the plot, but. There’s a bunny rabbit in it. Do you like bunnies?”

“Rabbits are good. They’re one of my favourite foods.

“Oh… well… it’s not— it’s not about eating rabbits.”

“Is it like Bambi?”

“No-ooo, it is almost the polar opposite of Bambi.”

“Is it like Watership Down?”

“No, it’s n— Wow, you’ve watched Watership Down?”

“My mother liked it.”

“Well, she has great taste then—”

“Had great taste.”

“Uh. Had. Your mom had great taste. Watership Down is a great movie, maybe we should watch that instead!”

“I don’t like Watership Down.”

“Oh. Well, this movie really isn’t like Watership Down at all, so you don’t need to worry. It’s not animated.”

“What’s it about?”

“OK, well… it’s about this teenager, and he’s got a lot of issues, and then one day a jet engine crashes into his room. And he nearly dies, but he doesn’t, because he follows this giant bunny outside—”

“Josh?” Mike finally stops eavesdropping to interrupt, calling out from the kitchen. “There is no way in hell you’re making me sit through Donnie Darko again.”
There is a long few seconds of absolute silence, and then the microwave finishes with a loud beep.

Josh mutters, “I’ll find something else.”

Here are the positive results of having a movie night:

Number one: Mike gets to have a normal night watching a movie with his friends. The last movie night he had was watching Legally Blonde with Jess, which hadn’t been very fun because she knew the entire script by heart. His hopes are already higher for this one; there’s no dog here to whine at him whenever he stops petting it. Only monsters, and he’s pretty sure he’d get his hand bitten off if he tried to pet Josh or Shae.

Number two: Shae and Josh actually seem to be getting along okay. They rarely initiate conversation with each other, unless Shae sees anything she’s curious about. Every time Shae’s curiosity comes dangerously close to striking a nerve, Mike crosses his fingers underneath his knees. His silent prayers seem to work, and Josh is patient with Shae.

Number three, arguably the most important pro of having a movie night: Shae gets to show off her talent for catching popcorn in her mouth. She flings a piece up into the air, and then her eyes slip half-shut in intense concentration before she lunges forwards and closes her teeth around it. She tosses another piece upwards, and it flies high above her before landing right on the very tip of her tongue.

It’s like watching an Olympic athlete; she is graceful and terrifying. Mike suspects she’s using her werewolf reflexes to cheat, but he doesn’t call her out. What good is supernatural prowess if you don’t use it to show off your popcorn-catching skills? Shae throws another handful up, catching them out of the air with her teeth— and her hand darts out to catch an errant one.

Here is the only con of movie night:

Picking the fucking movie.

For all Josh’s unstable, manipulative, paranoid, cannibalistic charm, he sure does have really shitty taste in movies. The tension between them is close to coming to a head as they shoot down each other’s eleventh recommendation. They’re standing beside the shelf of DVDs, both poring over suggestions they’ve brought up multiple times.

At Josh’s feet is a pile of assorted films, ranging in quality and age. The Saw movies are at the bottom of the pile after a vehement fuck no from Mike, covered by everything from The Breakfast Club to Jaws. The only movie Mike has selected— his personal favourite, Die Hard— is tucked under his arm.

Josh holds out Pan’s Labyrinth for Mike’s consideration, and Mike shrugs, pulling a face. “Ehhh. No. It’s too depressing.”

“Too depressing?” Josh is clearly trying not to seethe too openly. He flexes his jaw, and his teeth move— it’s unsettling. “It’s a masterpiece.”

“I don’t wanna have to read subtitles the whole time,” Mike gripes. “If we’re gonna watch a Del Toro film, why not Pacific Rim, dude? Pacific Rim is badass.”

Josh reaches up to massage his temples, groaning. “You sound like Chris. I don’t want to watch an action movie, Michael. I want to watch something provocative.”
“Well, you sound like Emily.” Mike pulls Tomb Raider off the shelf, holding Angelina Jolie up to Josh’s face. “Okay, you can’t say no to this one. It’s a classic.”

“No. You know what’s a classic?” Josh bends to fish a movie out of his pile, and narrows his eyes. “Heathers.”

“I don’t want to watch a musical!”

“It’s not a— what?! What are you talking about? This is the original Mean Girls!”

“It’s a musical, dude. Jess loves it. Okay, well, if not Tomb Raider, then what’s wrong with Indiana Jones?”

“What isn’t wrong with Indiana Jones?”

“Indiana Jones is perfect. We can watch all of them.”

“If we’re going to watch a series, then let’s just go with Saw! Or Scream!”

“I told you, dude! I don’t want to watch anything scary!”

“Here,” Shae says from her spot on the couch, holding up a VHS. They both turn to look at her, and at the cartoon she’s holding. It is, admittedly, the perfect choice. “Scooby Doo!”

“No,” Josh and Mike say in unison, and then return to their war.

In the end, the series they decide on is Home Alone— the first two, anyway. Most of the movies Shae chose are animated or kids’ movies, but somehow she has yet to see Home Alone. Popcorn is scattered around the floor, and the bowl has been knocked somewhere out of sight. Mike zones out halfway through the second movie, slouching down into the couch cushions and letting his eyes slide shut. He feels someone pull a blanket over him at some point, and by the time the credits are rolling, he’s mostly asleep. The last thing he remembers hearing is Shae laughing softly as Josh tells her a quiet but lively story about something.

All in all, not the worst movie night he’s ever had.

In the end, the series they decide on is Home Alone—the first two, anyway. Most of the movies Shae chose are animated or kids’ movies, but somehow she has yet to see Home Alone. Popcorn is scattered around the floor, and the bowl has been knocked somewhere out of sight. Mike zones out halfway through the second movie, slouching down into the couch cushions and letting his eyes slide shut. He feels someone pull a blanket over him at some point, and by the time the credits are rolling, he’s mostly asleep. The last thing he remembers hearing is Shae laughing softly as Josh tells her a quiet but lively story about something.

All in all, not the worst movie night he’s ever had.

When he dreams, his dreams are confusing and unmemorable. He remembers the moon, the colour green. He feels safe.

Mike sleeps soundly.

The next day, Mike quickly discovers that his new job is apparently Josh and Shae’s personal chef, as both seem incapable of feeding themselves. Shae’s idea of a healthy meal is either a single fruit or an entire elk carcass, and Josh either shies away from eating or voraciously consumes everything within sight.

Mike’s own appetite has become less reliable; being a werewolf means he gets hungry at random and his body craves whatever it wants whenever it wants, which is usually meat. Shae drags a dead rabbit into the lodge one night, holding it between her wolf jaws and smiling up at Mike. Her tail is wagging, and Mike can’t bring himself to be as disgusted as he knows he should feel.
“That’s disgusting,” he tells Shae, ignoring his stomach rumbling. “Take that shit outside.”

“Yeah. Gross,” Josh says, and he licks his lips. Mike gives him a look that clearly spells out how dare you betray me like this, but Josh looks unrepentant in his hunger. He walks around the kitchen island to pet Shae’s head, and her tail wags harder. Mike rolls his eyes. “Sharing is caring, Shae—”

But as Josh reaches for the rabbit, Shae growls and pulls away from him. Josh hisses right back, sounding more like a snake than a human. Mike makes a mental note to do some research on wendigo physiology, because he’s curious to know exactly what animal Josh is even closest to now. Josh makes another grab for the rabbit, and Shae’s growls get angrier.

Mike laughs. “I don’t think she cares about you enough to share.”

With a sigh, Josh steps back from Shae— and in the next instant the werewolf is whining plaintively, pushing her nose up towards Josh. She keeps the rabbit in her mouth, and shakes her head quickly.

Flecks of blood spatter across the floor, and Josh slowly smiles, reaching forwards again. Shae growls and moves away, and Josh grabs the rabbit’s foot, tugging on it insistently.

“She wants to play,” Mike realizes aloud, and then grimaces as more viscera spills onto the white tiles. “Can you please take her outside?”

“She’s not a dog, Mike,” Josh admonishes him, grinning like a maniac now. The teeth definitely help that mental image. “We’re having fun.”

“Hey, I’m the one who’s gonna be scrubbing blood off the kitchen floor later!”

Rolling his eyes, Josh pulls on the rabbit’s leg. It’s a disturbing depiction of Tug-of-War, and Mike shudders; but he seems to be the only one who’s disturbed. Shae growls happily, and barks around the meat in her mouth. “You don’t have to clean it up. This place is a pigsty anyway.”

“And what if more cops come?”

Josh bares his teeth in a happy and terrifying smile. “Then I’ll eat them too.”

Shae tugs the rabbit away from him and then bounds outside the open door. Josh follows her, jumping onto the doorframe before going through it, and Mike tries very hard not to be alarmed by his wendigo movement. He can already feel his future career prospects going down the drain.

“And what’s this I see on your application about a criminal record, Mr. Munroe?” he mutters to himself as he gets the mop and bleach. “Oh yeah, I returned to an active crime scene weeks after the disappearance of one of my friends. But don’t worry. When more cops showed up to replace the ones that my friend ate, he just ate those ones too. Easy peasy. Situation normal: all fucked up.”

If Mike shrieks when he sees that one of the rabbit’s ears fell off, well. Hopefully his supernatural friends are out of hearing range.

When he has the chance, he remembers the note he made to himself and he does some research on wendigo exorcism. He doesn’t tell Josh for obvious reasons; the most unexpected one being that Mike himself is a werewolf. But he doesn’t have a craving for human flesh, and the last thing Mike wants is for Josh to eat him or Shae alive. However unmeasured Mike’s werewolf powers are, they’re at least contained— and for the most part, they’re harmless.
Josh is unrepentantly a wendigo, a fact that scares Mike a little more every time Josh brings it up. He discusses his hunger constantly, even though Mike has set up a pretty solid dining schedule for him. He’s so much leaner than he used to be, and faster. And if Mike is ever able to forget all that evidence, he can always just look at Josh’s teeth and eye.

(Except half the time he can’t bring himself to look Josh straight in the eye either, not when it’s such an obvious reminder of Emily. Mike remembers his fear that Emily might have turned into a wendigo very clearly, coupled with his regret after pointing a gun at her. He’s not particularly excited for Josh to hear that story.)

(He is also not particularly excited for Emily to find out he’s babysitting a wendigo.)

He doesn’t tell Shae he’s doing research either, although the idea crosses his mind. Shae had told him that the whole reason she’d come to Blackwood in the first place was that she’d stumbled across a library CD that had told her about the existence of wendigos. She might know more about how to cure them, but Mike confiding in her about his fear might also make her question her budding friendship with Josh.

So he steals a moment away for himself, making some excuse to go up to the master bedroom and check his phone. Once he’s alone, he starts his research, but it doesn’t take long before his hopes are dashed. Some suggestions include forcing Josh to drink boiling fat, which Mike doesn’t have the stomach for. Another “reliable” solution is to burn the body to ash so not even one bone is left, or to hold the wendigo down and beat it to death with silver weapons and then burn it. He rejects both of these out of hand. Unfortunately, it looks like the only reliable way to exorcise a wendigo spirit from someone is to kill them, and that isn’t an option. Mike has lost Josh so many times that he feels a little sick looking at the depictions of death, and he moves onto the next tab.

Some versions of the wendigo that Mike reads about are gigantic creatures, ranging anywhere from twenty feet tall to the size of a mountain. He’s sure the descriptions are dramatized, seeing as he’s still got a couple inches on Josh. Other common features include the scent of rotting leaves or meat, a body composed entirely of heart or an icy heart, and a hissing voice that can perfectly mimic any sound or voice it chooses. Josh is still warm to the touch, and while he may have smelled like dried blood and rotten leaves a few days ago, he smells like shampoo now.

The voice that can mimic anything it hears is the only trait that gives Mike pause, and he recalls what Ashley had said during her police interview about Jess. Maybe that’s one of the few wendigo characteristics that horror enthusiasts, cryptozoologists, and spiritual believers are actually right about.

One website lists several translations of *wendigo*. They include “He Who Lives Alone” and “Spirit of the Lonely Places”, which make Mike chuckle. Apparently Minnesotans refer to the monster as “Windwalker”, and the Inuit use “The Evil Spirit That Devours Mankind”. He learns that some believe wendigo is a more apt term for the mountain-high beasts made of ice, whereas ‘windigo’ is supposed to explicitly refer to human cannibals. Most use the terms interchangeably.

Some believe that once someone is possessed by the wendigo spirit, if their transformation goes unchecked and they continue eating humans, they will become unrecognizable and the original human will be gone. Mike is reassured that that clearly isn’t the case since Josh recognizes him, until he continues reading.

*In these cases, because there is still a brain inside the shell, the Wendigo can be just intelligent and cunning as was the body’s previous owner. As creative as a human, with the strength and savagery of a monster, these Wendigowag are said to be much more predatory – bolder and more aggressive – than Wendigo of other tales. Anecdotes about Wendigo attacking travellers and even
their lodgings, and wearing skulls and other human bones as jewelry, taking pride in their hunting ability. As well, these Wendigowag are said to stockpile human flesh in trees and caves to get them through the long winter, allowing them to hunt during the summer months as well, also unlike any other.

Josh had been carrying around a rotten arm, sure, and he did build himself a mask with an antler, but that was for protection, right? He’d thought Hannah was still alive, and hiding somewhere on the mountain. He’d been scared, and he hadn’t known how to defend himself. Mike feels a rush of fear and sympathy, all jumbled up together. He locks his phone, sliding it into his pocket. Josh isn’t like the monsters these people are describing. Josh is still Josh.


After a minute of silence, Josh pads around the corner, giving Mike a puzzled look. “What was that last one?”

Mike doesn’t hide his relieved grin. “Just checking you’re alive.”

Josh looks at him like he’s the weird one, and then walks back into the kitchen, unbothered by the conversation. Mike doesn’t look up wendigo exorcism again.

One new development unrelated to healing or to Josh’s humanity or to Josh and Shae’s friendship is Mike’s new stubble, which he has grown surprisingly fond of. He’s never let himself grow a beard, and if anyone ever asked, the reason gave would be pure vanity. A girl had once told him his jaw was so perfect he didn’t need to hide it, so of course that had gone straight to his head. But out here on the mountain, he has time to experiment—or rather, he’s had no time to shave, and he has discovered he doesn’t actually hate the look he’s been avoiding for years. The stubble matches how he feels now; a man of the mountain. That isn’t his permanent state of being, of course; he still has an apartment in Vancouver and a girlfriend away from the mountains. He’s just also got enhanced strength and agility and reflexes, limited invulnerability and resistance to pain, and supernatural smell. And a cool beard.

Mike looks in the mirror, and sees his dad, and then blinks, and doesn’t. He sees himself, in all his questionable glory. He could shave his face right now, and the resemblance would be gone in a second. But he doesn’t, hands still as he takes in his reflection. He figures that after how long he’s spent hating the way he looks, he can take a moment of narcissism here.

“Hey, do you think I could shave my beard to look like Hans Gruber?” He calls to Josh and Shae from the bathroom before opening the door. Neither of them are in sight, even though he could swear he just heard them talking outside. “Do you think that would be a good look—”

His rambling is interrupted by a sudden appearance in front of him; where a moment ago there had been no one, now there is Josh. Mike lets out a colourful stream of swears, and brandishes his hands out uselessly. It’s good to know how he would react in the face of danger. Josh laughs, and leans over the banister, grinning down triumphantly. “Ha-ha! Beat that!”

“I will,” Mike hears Shae say, and then she jumps up from the first floor of the lodge too. Her jump is a little less nimble and much less jarring; whereas Josh had seemed to appear out of nowhere,
Shae jumps halfway up the railing on the stairs and then pulls herself to a stable place. From there, she vaults off again, jumping up to stand beside Josh. Shae looks like she’s pouncing, as opposed to Josh’s unnatural jumping. “See?”

Josh scoffs at her, and then turns to Mike. “I scared you, though, right?”

“I was more agile,” Shae protests, crossing her arms.

Mike squints at them, looking suspiciously from wendigo to werewolf. “…What are you two doing?”

“We’re seeing who’s better at jumping,” Josh says, and he’s smiling again. Mike catches himself before he can smile back like a huge dork. “There are a lot of factors at play here; my wendigo abilities give me the option to vault from wall to wall with ease and grace. Shae, on the other hand, is convinced that she’s a were-cat.”

“I’m fantastic at jumping,” Shae cuts in, stepping forward. “I’ve been jumping around walls since I was a child. I’ve had years to hone my reflexes.”

“Yeah, but you can’t do this,” and with that, Josh is on the ceiling, and then perched on the balustrade of the stairs, and then clinging to the banister on all fours, and then standing on the first floor. The entire process takes maybe five seconds, and he looks like a spider—or like Stitch.

“I’m stronger than you,” Shae growls at him, pushing her sleeves up around her elbows. It’s not the first time that she’s said those words, but she sounds just as competitive this time. “Which allows me to do this.” She bypasses the stairs entirely, vaulting over the side of the railing. Mike and Josh watch in awe as Shae drops through the air and then rolls into a somersault as she lands.

Mike leans over the railing, eyes wide with concern. “Holy shit, Shae, are you okay?” But before he even finishes his sentence, Shae is standing up and looking triumphant. Not only does she look unaffected by falling at least a dozen feet, she looks smug.

“I’m fine,” she says, which seems to be the truth. “Werewolves are good jumpers; when we’re wolves, sure, but also when we are in human form. You’d probably be just as good at jumping, Mike.”

Mike blanches at the thought, stepping back. “What? I’m not jumping from this high; are you crazy? I’m going to break every bone in my body.”

“If you do, we have enhanced regeneration. You can do it! Do it, do it, do it,” Shae begins chanting, clapping her hands.

“No!”

Josh joins in, and they goad him on in unison, “Do it! Do it! Do it!” He grinds his teeth, and takes a step back. Josh and Shae keep cheering him on, but Mike is temporarily paralyzed by nerves. He summons all the courage he can muster—an old trick, but one he’s become adept at—and he slides one knee over the railing, followed by the other. Suddenly, before he can change his mind, he’s jumping down. Or more accurately, he’s falling.

His descent is too fast, but Mike braces himself, bending his knees and waving his arms. When he lands, he feels the wood beneath his feet shift; and sure enough, when he checks a moment later, some of the floorboards have come loose. His landing hurts, but it’s more the force of the landing than the actual solid ground that hurts. His feet feel fine; in fact, upon further inspection of his limbs and extremities and head and heart, he feels fine. He feels like he just took an adrenaline
shot, but he feels fine.

When he finally gains control of his breathing, he glances over at the other competitors in the jumping contest, who are both staring at him with huge matching grins. Josh looks impressed like Mike has never seen him before, and Shae looks proud.

Mike shakes his head at them. “I can’t believe I fixed the stairs for nothing.”

They spend the rest of the afternoon jumping and running around like a bunch of children, and eventually, they decide that there’s no fair way to determine a clear answer as to who the best jumper is.

(They all know Josh won.)

The purpose of Mike’s next trip down to the basement is to obtain more food, since their supplies are quickly dwindling. Josh brought in a huge slab of deer meat, which Mike had dutifully pretended he was going to cook for them. They all know they’re going to eventually eat it raw, but for now, it’s staying in the freezer.

He’s been carefully portioning out food for himself and Shae, and simultaneously letting Josh eat anything he wants. As far as Mike can tell from his covert wendigo research, it’s a good sign that Josh is interested in food other than meat, even if he prefers meat. Mike watched Josh finish off half a box of Lucky Charms by himself yesterday, which contains no human parts whatsoever. If he can keep the spirit of Makkapitew satiated with marshmallows, it’ll be a blessing for all of them.

But on his way down to the hotel, Mike sees a door that has not been opened since his arrival at the lodge. For the first time, the door to the home theatre is ajar; and there’s a cold light seeping through the crack.

His curiosity gets the better of him, and he enters the dark room. The wall is lit up with grainy monochrome video feeds, but no audio is playing from any of them. Each video is a different room in the lodge—or in one case, the shed. And slowly, one by one, they’re disappearing. He sees the feed of the kitchen blink off, and a moment later, the feed of Hannah’s bedroom cuts out.

“Hey,” someone says from behind him, and Mike jumps and then whips around to face the source of the voice. Josh is reclined in one of the seats, hand poised over a laptop. In the strange white and grey light, he looks like part of an art installation. With his dark sweater and computer, he looks like a hacker.

Mike makes his way over to Josh, sitting down beside him. “Hey.” He looks at the laptop, and although it’s difficult to tell what program Josh is running, he can at least read the words CCTV System Termination at the top, which is… unsettling. He jokes, uneasy, “You spying on us?”

Josh doesn’t reply, and Mike remembers that, of course, Josh had been spying on them. He looks up at the screens, where feeds are continuing to drop left and right. With every click of Josh’s mouse, another video flickers out of existence. Mike watches the master bathroom disappear, and then Shae’s cabin, and then the library.

He frowns as he sees the room with the saw trap disappear, and when Mike’s eyes start to hurt he turns to look at Josh instead. Josh’s jaw is sharp as ever but looks even more dangerous in the flickering light; his profile is alarmingly gaunt. Mike’s sitting on his human side, so he can’t see any teeth. From this angle, it’s almost easy to forget that Josh is anything but human.
Mike wonders why Josh got the idea to turn off the surveillance cameras now, or how he feels about it. They haven’t discussed the prank yet, and by this point it feels like the elephant in the room. He imagines a parallel universe where he saved Josh; where Josh got rescued and not abandoned. Where the need for desperate measures never arose. Would that version of Josh return to the lodge to undo his mischief, or would he leave these cameras up and this program running forever?

The last video (the master bedroom) disappears, and takes with it all the light in the room and the friendly white noise that had been their ambiance. Josh’s laptop illuminates his face from an entirely new angle, and Mike watches him. He doesn’t feel the same fear he’d experienced when he’d found Josh in the cave. If Josh was truly all wendigo, he wouldn’t have felt the regret or emotion necessary to undo this paranoid, controlling part of his prank. Even though Josh looks his scariest right now, Mike thinks that he could learn to trust this version of Josh more than the old one.

Josh breaks the silence: “There. All done.” His voice lilts and drawls in the same way it always has, and he closes his laptop, plunging the room into total darkness. The absence of light is clearly comforting for Josh, and Mike is surprised to find he can still see the outline of chairs. He keeps forgetting he has night vision, and other handy werewolf powers. He can even see the silhouette of Josh’s profile, watching Josh turn towards him.

It’s impossible to make out the expression on Josh’s face, so he doesn’t try to interpret it as anything. They sit in the dark together for a while, both contemplating saws and knives and baths and blood. When Mike gets up to leave a while later, Josh doesn’t say anything, and neither of them bring it up again.

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“This isn’t even my final form,” Shae’s voice says.

“I do not sound like that,” Shae says, miffed.

“I do not sound like that,” Josh echoes, and it’s almost a perfect copy. Something about it is slightly wrong; it’s just barely too soft and rounded to be Shae, but it comes damn close. “My bark is worse than my bite.”

“No,” Shae growls. “My bite is worse. Stop this, I don’t like it.”

“Why don’t you like it?” Josh teases, still using Shae’s voice. “It’s your voice.”

“Josh! Stop teasing her,” Mike says, and lobs a pillow in Josh’s direction.

Josh intercepts the pillow with a hand, swatting it out of the air before it gets anywhere near him. It falls off the couch, and Josh pays it no heed. Instead, he squints in concentration, and then adjusts his belt buckle. When he speaks again, his voice is not Shae’s, or his own—it’s Mike’s. “Stop teasing her, Josh. It’s not right to tease girls. Only I can get away with stuff like that.”

Shae cackles, throwing her head back in glee. “That’s awesome! That sounds just like Mike.”

“It does not!” He doesn’t sound like that, does he? Or—he wouldn’t say anything like that anyway. “I sound way cooler than that, come on.”

“I sound way cooler than that, come on!”

“That’s exactly how you sound! Try me again, Josh.”
“This is so stupid. I’m not doing this with you two right now.” Mike gets to his feet, and Josh picks up the pillow and tosses it at him.

He catches it, and then flips Josh off. Josh seems undeterred, and smirks, purring at Mike, “What, you don’t want to play with us anymore?”

And okay, that’s— something new. Mike tries to have a completely neutral reaction, and ends up going with an eye roll. Shae pouts, upset at being excluded from the joke, and she demands, “Whose voice is that?”

“Jessica’s,” Mike grumbles. “Although she sounds nothing like that.”

“I think I’m doing a pretty good job,” Josh giggles, and the weird part is that he fucking is. He’s got the fun intonation down perfectly, and the way Jess sings her sentences— or, more accurately, how joyful she used to sound before Hannah took her.

Mike crosses his arms, uncomfortable at the thought. “No, that isn’t her. She’s not that… happy.”

In the last few days, he’s discovering in his conversations with Josh that what goes unsaid usually has more meaning than any of the shit they say aloud. In this case, the words that hang in the air between them are She’s not that happy— anymore. She’s not that happy thanks to this mountain. Because she used to be that happy, before everything got fucked up.

The happiness vanishes from Josh’s expression, and all of a sudden, the game is over. Mike hates himself for ruining it, but he hates Josh a little too for jumping right to Jess. Shae is looking between them, obviously confused by the sudden nerve that someone struck, but Mike doesn’t have the strength to explain it to her right now. He gets to his feet, and walks out of the living room, and then out of the lodge.

By the time he’s realized where he is, he’s fully dressed in his boots and jacket, and he’s halfway to the cabin where Shae lives. His hands have been clenched into fists for so long that his nails have left six white marks on his palms. His vision is drawn to the evening sky, where the waxing crescent moon looks just like one of the marks. Thanks to his new powers, they fade nearly instantly.

He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed Jess until he’d heard her voice; but that was her old voice. The fact that it had come from Josh’s mouth is equally confusing and almost as upsetting. He doesn’t know if he’d miss Jess this much if she were here, or if Josh weren’t.

He badly needs a breather to sort his head out. When he gets to the cabin, he leaves his clothes inside, and transforms. Dark brown fur begins to spread all over his body, and the feeling of relaxation he gets is like smoking a cigarette but with none of the burn. His anxieties melt away, replaced by animal instinct.

He ignores the feeling of isolation to explore the mountain by himself, and creates his own path. He pays no mind to thoughts of Josh or Shae or Jess or anyone else. By the time he’s made it back to the cabin and back into his own skin, the dusk is calming instead of stifling.

A few hours before dawn the next morning, he brings up the idea of leaving.

Shae is curled up on his lap, taking a nap in wolf form. She’s much too big to fit on Mike’s lap properly, but he doesn’t push her off, staying in his uncomfortable place on the floor. Shae makes a noise in her sleep that sounds distinctly feline, and Mike makes a mental note to tease her for
purring. He scratches behind her ear, and Shae makes the noise again; soft and unguarded. Mike hears an unobtrusive chuckle, and when he looks up, Josh is looking at them. His eyes are just as soft and unguarded as Shae’s sigh.

“She isn’t really that tough at all, is she,” Josh comments, and he doesn’t sound like he’s insulting Shae— although Mike is certain she would take it as an insult if she were awake. His gaze is surprisingly affectionate; Mike had worried that Josh would be too wry with Shae, too cold. The opposite has proved to be true. If anything, Shae’s the one clinging to her reservations, hesitant to let Josh in. It makes sense, when Mike stops to think about it. Josh has always been loving.

Before Mike can control himself, he blurts out, “Have you thought about when you want to go back?” The thought is like a current; conducted through him before he could even try to cancel the question. Josh’s eyes go sharp, and his jaw sets. He stares daggers at Mike, who remembers that Josh is a supernatural being. He thinks about *the strength and savagery of a monster*, and he bites his lip. His knuckles itch.

Then the moment passes without incident, and Josh brushes the sentence off like it’s nothing. “Not really.” He looks away, which is a clear signal that he doesn’t want to talk about this. Josh’s gaze travels up to the ugly ceiling, over to the unkempt fireplace— his eyes look everywhere but at Mike. Just as Mike’s about to pester him again, Josh continues, “The only people I would wanna see are Chris and Sam anyway.”

(He wonders if he would have made the list, had someone else found Josh. He knows he wouldn’t have, and tries to not let that thought upset him. He fails.)

The corner of Mike’s mouth twitches. “What about your parents?” A good friend would maybe let it go; give Josh more space, more time. Mike and Josh have never been good friends. “You don’t want to see them?”

“Drop it,” Josh tells him firmly, looking over at him.

Mike drops it, and goes back to petting Shae. Josh stays seated for a while after that, but he’s restless now— something has become frayed between them. After a few minutes, Josh gets up and leaves Mike and Shae alone, walking off to who-knows-where. Mike doesn’t follow him. He leans back against the couch and takes a nap, Shae’s warmth soothing him to sleep.

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When he wakes up and goes to fix the shit he started, Josh is hiding in plain sight. The door to his bedroom is wide open, which is unusual for him. Actually, Mike is pretty sure that one’s a genetic trait; Hannah and Beth had never liked having their doors open either. Maybe it’s a Washington thing.

Mike knocks on the door to be polite anyway, and Josh glances up at him. “Welcome to the party, pal,” he says. There isn’t a trace of irritation to be found, and he even *smiles*. So apparently they’re done talking about feelings, and they can return to their usual dynamic of making jokes and pretending everything’s fine.

Cool. Mike can roll with that. “Hey, I thought you weren’t a Die Hard fan! There may be hope for you yet.” His room is cleaner than Mike has ever seen it before, with the exception of what’s covering the bed; Josh must have ransacked an old photo album. Dozens of photographs are strewn
over the sheets and pillows, covering almost every inch of the bed in memories. “… What are you doing?”

“I’m time travelling,” Josh tells him with a completely earnest grin. “Come look.”

So Mike does, willingly stepping inside Josh’s room for the first time in two years and three weeks. The cleanliness is even more unsettling once he’s inside; no laundry is anywhere to be seen. It seems ridiculous that he found time to clean up the residual piles of clothing during the past few days of recovery, but perhaps it’s a good sign. Mike hopes he burned the overalls, and then remembers that he probably wouldn’t be able to— because fire. Josh ushers him closer, and Mike sits down in the chair beside the bed.

“Here,” Josh says. His eyes seem wider than usual. “Look at this one, it’s gold.”

It’s Beth, bright smile plastered to her face forever, short calloused fingers pulling strings to play a forgotten chord. She looks so damn young in the picture; her bangs are messy and her hair is curly like Josh’s. Her guitar is covered in a billion stickers, exactly how Mike remembers it. He sees an alien, a McDonald’s logo, a punk hand. The picture is a little out of focus. Josh is right— it’s gold.

“Look at this one,” Josh repeats, this time a murmur, and he hands Mike another photo. The subject of this one is Matt, who is wearing a yellow crescent moon sticker on his forehead with pride. This was taken at school; the cafeteria is faintly visible in the background, and it takes a second before Mike realizes that Matt’s wearing a Sailor Moon sticker. On his face.

Mike mumbles, “For a jock, he really is a nerd.”

“You’re one to talk.” Mike opens his mouth to protest— he never claimed to be a jock— but Josh hands him another photograph. This one is of Sam and Hannah, arms linked and smiles wide. If he thought Beth looked young, then Sam and Hannah are nearly unrecognizable. Hannah’s hair is much shorter, whereas Sam hasn’t chopped off her long blonde hair yet. They’re surrounded by shitty Halloween decorations, and Hannah is holding a pillowcase— presumably filled with candy.

He doesn’t recognize their costumes until he flips over the photograph and reads in Josh’s messy writing: Halloween 2011: Leslie and Ann! Sam and Hannah. There’s a pink lipstick kiss, preserved after all these years; it’s impossible to guess who left it.

There’s at least a hundred more photos, and while most are pictures of Beth and Hannah, Mike can see several pictures of moments he remembers. Matt and Chris play Mario Kart, Ash cuddles a long-gone cat, and Beth braids Jessica’s hair. Jess and Emily look hideous in matching all-denim outfits (this one would be great blackmail).

Mike sees himself, arm slung around Emily’s shoulders. He can’t remember where this one was taken, but they look happy. Innocent. Em is gazing at him with this pride on her face that Mike has’t seen in years, and he looks so much younger. This must have been taken before they started dating. When he flips the photo over to see when it’s from, there’s no date on the back.

“Hey,” Mike starts without looking up, “do you know…” As he looks up, he trails off.

Josh is tightly holding a photo in both hands, intensely focused on it. He’s nearly tearing the photo between his fingers, but he doesn’t seem to notice. There is no sign that he heard Mike at all. The picture is of Chris, sitting on the floor of what looks like a blanket fort. His glasses are skewed on his nose, and he’s giving the goofiest smile ever straight to the camera.

“I’ll give you some space,” Mike says, and it comes out awkward and stilted. Josh isn’t mourning
Chris, so there’s no reason to act weird about this. But Mike doesn’t know how to diffuse this kind of tension without prying for details, so he places the photo of him and Emily on the desk, and then leaves. Josh doesn’t acknowledge him at all, and when Mike glances back at him from the door, he hasn’t looked up from the photo.

Mike closes the bedroom door. He wonders how many times Josh has isolated himself with old memories of people he loves instead of just reaching out to his friends.

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When he gives in and checks his phone ten minutes later, Chris still hasn’t texted him.

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In Mike’s apartment in Vancouver, the flow of time was never steady. He had spent hours looking up online universities and then checked the clock to find out that only fifteen minutes had passed. He had taken quick showers that turned into hours of standing under the water and letting imaginary blood and dirt wash away. Just last week, he’d lost track of time and forgotten it was Valentine’s Day.

Mike feels the same way here; and he’s starting to wonder if it isn’t his surroundings. Maybe it’s his mind.

Days turn into minutes turn into hours turn into nights, and Mike starts to gauge time by the moon. It’s a bad habit that he picks up from Shae; he notices her watching the sky one evening and follows her gaze. The moon is reassuring to Mike for reasons he can’t place; it makes him feel safer to know it’s there. He feels uneasy when clouds block it from view.

When he asks Shae to explain how exactly werewolf brains work, she shrugs. “It’s just the moon. That’s what it does. Do humans not feel that way about the moon?”

“No,” he breathes. “They don’t. At all. I’ve never— I don’t know how to explain it. I can feel it. Like how you feel the sun, but it’s not like I’m feeling moonlight. It’s like I’m… I don’t know.”

“I know,” Shae says, and gives him a sidelong glance that tells him she’s both here for him and glad that he’s here to share this with her. He forgets sometimes that not only is he the first real friend she’s ever had, but he’s the first werewolf she’s ever known— other than her dad, but it has always been Mike’s belief that dads don’t count.

“But it’s, like, messing with me,” he complains, voice small and nervous. “I keep losing track of time. Not when I transform, because that’s totally different; I just keep feeling like I’m drifting.”

“That doesn’t sound like the moon at all.” Shae turns to face him. “That sounds like depression.”

Mike doesn’t reply, and Shae continues, doing her best attempt at his voice, “You see, Mike, depression is an illness that some people get in their brains, and it makes them feel complex moods —”

“Hardy har har,” Mike says weakly, and swats half-heartedly in her direction. He wishes he had a rotten mango to throw.

Shae smiles, and there’s thinly-veiled empathy behind it. She leans towards Mike, bumping her shoulder against his, and doesn’t say much else. He feels comforted anyway, and the three of them sit there in silence— just him, her, and the moon.
At one point, Shae gets up to go grab something, but Mike is too preoccupied by his own thoughts to follow her inside. His fear of the dark has almost entirely disappeared, thanks to his night vision. He’s still keeping an eye on his surroundings, but he’s more worried about the police showing up than he is about a wendigo appearing.

The door to the lodge opens, and Mike doesn’t turn around—until he smells Josh. “I brought company,” Shae announces, beaming. Josh isn’t smiling, but he isn’t frowning anymore either, so Mike is taking his presence as a potential good omen. One of Shae’s hands is curled around Josh’s arm, tugging him along, and the other is holding the case of Tsingtao. “And beer!”

Instantly, Mike figures out why Josh isn’t smiling. If he weren’t distracted by the urgent realization, he’d feel proud of himself for making the connection. “Uh, I don’t think Josh drinks, Shae.” Not anymore, anyway. Not since the last time Josh had gotten blackout drunk, and Hannah and Beth had both vanished. “But I’ll have one!”

Shae retrieves a bottle from the case, and then pops off the cap with her bare fingers. That just feels like showing off. Mike tries not to gape, and nods his thanks as she hands him the bottle. The glass is cold in his hand, and despite the low temperature outside, it’s not unpleasant.

He takes a long draught of beer, and his eyes flutter closed. Beer always makes him feel light-headed with nostalgia. He only opens his eyes when he feels a warmth press against his right side; Shae is leaning against him again, drinking her own beer and smiling (at the effervescence, no doubt).

Josh sits down on Mike’s other side, and does not lean against him. He’s shivering, and Mike fights the urge to pull off his shirt and offer it to Josh. Shae would definitely laugh, and Josh is wearing more layers than he is anyway. The corner of a fresh bandage is poking out from under his collar, and Mike smiles at the sight.

Josh gives Mike an uncertain look, and when Mike doesn’t explain himself, Josh cuts through the silence. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“I’m happy,” Mike tells him, smile fading to something more private. It’s the truth— he is happy.

“Why?”

Josh is here. Josh is safe. Josh is sitting next to him in an oversized sweater, safe and sound and alive. “Just am,” he says, and takes another sip of beer.

Josh scrutinizes him for one more long moment, and then his gaze falls on the beer. Mike doesn’t make an offer of it, but he does hold the drink between them; grip loose on the neck of the bottle. There is an awkward instant where Mike pretends he can’t make out the minute details of Josh’s face, and then Josh reaches for the beer and his cold fingers brush over Mike’s amputated hand.

If not composed entirely of ice, then the wendigo either has a heart made of ice or ice flowing through its veins.

Josh takes a nervous sip, and Mike stares at his neck. It’s a brazen move, but a passable alternative to thinking about wendigo traits, and how cold Josh’s hand is. Is he always that cold? He hadn’t been that cold when Mike had held his hand and trimmed his nails, or when he’d touched him after the mines.

He watches Josh’s throat bob as he leans back and drinks, and when Josh looks at him again, there’s something new on his face. If Mike didn’t know any better, he’d mistake it for something
like trust. “Thanks,” Josh mumbles, and hands him the bottle back. “Thanks, Mike.”

“No prob, dude,” Mike says, and takes a drink. Josh doesn’t lean into him the same way Shae is, but their hands are only a few inches apart on the cold patio wood. He counts that as a victory, and doesn’t press it.

They sit there on the cold patio as the sky goes from purple to indigo to a blue so dark it’s nearly black. The wood is disagreeable beneath them; it’s too hard, too cold, and feels strangely damp. Mike misses his friends, and he knows Josh misses Chris, and Shae is still trying to figure out where she fits in. They’re all anxious, and they’re all starving, and they’re monsters. Not one of them is anything close to perfect, and everything about this scene is unromantic and flawed and terrifying.

And yet. Mike closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath in. His bottle clinks against Shae’s when he places it down behind them. Josh sighs softly, and he finally leans against Mike. Mike does what he’s learned to do around wendigos—he goes completely still. He doesn’t move a muscle. Josh feels as cold as ice, but then he starts to warm up. Mike exhales.

Mike feels more comfortable here, in this funny stencil of a home, than he thinks he ever felt in Vancouver, or in his mom’s old house, or anywhere he’s ever existed in his entire life.

When he opens his eyes, the first thing he sees is the moon, tiny and silver and waxing. Mike could reach up and cover it with a fingertip, but he feels something immeasurable when he looks at it. Maybe, despite the situation they’re in and the people they are, this is where they’re meant to be.
Finally, the wait is over! This chapter is notably shorter than some of the others, but it’s heavy and contains some important plot. I thought I wouldn’t make those of you who are still reading this wait any longer for an update. That being said, I’m really sorry about the three month delay; I can assure you that I’m still very devoted to this fic and that the updates will slowly but surely continue. Thank you so much for commenting and telling me what you like and what you’re curious about; it really does mean the world to me and it’s what keeps me motivated! Let me know what you think of this chapter :) 

“If you can dodge a wrench, you can dodge a ball!”

“Holy mother—”

Mike ducks faster than he thinks he’s ever ducked down before, heart racing. The ball that thankfully isn’t a wrench soars over his head, and Josh cackles, throwing his fist up in victory. Shae was the one to find the soccer ball; they had been going through a storage room in the basement on the search for laundry detergent, but their hunt was derailed the second she dug their new toy out of a pile of junk. The ball is peeling apart at almost every corner, and the logo is so distressed that it’s impossible to imagine how long it’s been in this basement waiting for them.

Shae hasn’t played in years, and Josh is just as out of practice, but they’re both trying their best. They’re doing a little too well, actually, seeing as Mike’s breaking a sweat just trying to steal the ball. Josh is quick on his feet, darting around both werewolves with anxious, frenetic precision. Shae plays dirty, slamming into Mike’s side and even trying to reach around his waist and pick him up at one point.

“That’s a card,” Josh wheezes, out of breath from the exercise and laughter.

Shae’s nose wrinkles up as she frowns. “What card?”

“Oh, red?” Josh guesses, and Mike shakes his head. “Green? Christmas?”

“Christmas?”

“You know, like a Christmas card,” Josh starts, and is interrupted as Shae lobs the soccer ball at his head halfway through the sentence.

The ball bounces off his skull, and Mike feels a moment of panic, but Josh is grinning and even manages to bump it back in Shae’s direction. Shae barks at him, “Mike’s sense of humour is bad enough! I don’t need two of you!”

“And yet you’re stuck with two of us,” Mike points out, and Shae passes the ball to him. He tries his best to kick it up into the air and bounce it off his head, but ends up just bouncing it off his chest, which still looks pretty cool. The ball flies towards Josh, light and slow, and Josh misses it completely. “Come on, Washington! Don’t make me sub you out.”
Josh lunges after the ball, which is unnerving to watch. Mike doesn’t know if or when he’s ever
going to get used to how fast Josh can transition from nerd-on-two-legs to windwalker-running-on-four-limbs. He goes for the ball with all his might, and practically tackles it, scooping it up and tossing it to Shae. “Fuck you, Coach. Who’s gonna sub in; one of the deer?”

“Handball!” Shae screeches, triumphant. She catches the ball with her knee and lets it fall to the ground, grinning at Josh. “You’re not allowed to touch it. You broke the rules!”

Puffing up his chest to try to look more intimidating only makes Josh look more like a penguin, but Mike doesn’t comment on that. Josh barrels towards Shae, and she quickly picks up the ball, forgetting her own rules. “The first rule of mountain soccer,” yells Josh as he runs, “is that there are no rules!”

And without hesitation, Josh tackles Shae, arms circling around her stomach. He just barely manages to catch her off-balance. Shae doesn’t fall over, but she does get Josh in a pretty good headlock, and Mike’s chest hurts as he laughs and laughs at what a pair they make. “The second rule of mountain soccer is that you don’t talk about mountain soccer,” Mike says, half to himself and half to them.

Josh twists around under Shae’s arm to give Mike a wide, unashamed grin, and Mike swears the sun is shining out between his jagged, uneven teeth. Mike smiles back, and they keep playing until Shae kicks the ball so hard it lands in the forest canopy.

For once, everything is okay.

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The first complication comes when Josh tries to eat Shae.

It’s impossible to try to place blame on any single person when really, all of them are to blame. He doesn’t blame Josh for being a wendigo, seeing as that’s almost singlehandedly Mike’s fault. But he does think that if Josh had eaten a second breakfast like a normal cannibal zombie person, then maybe they could have avoided this. And as for himself, Mike should have set down some ground rules for their friendship other than “no horror movies”. Maybe “don’t eat each other” would have been a good one.

Shae is perhaps the least to blame, but she is responsible for the catalyst. She comes back to the lodge in the late afternoon, and when she pushes open the door, her mouth smells like blood. It’s such a simple mistake to make; what happens next isn’t really her fault at all.

Both Josh and Mike notice the blood, obviously, but Mike does nothing about it. He sniffs discreetly, trying to guess what sort of animal was on the menu today. It’s hard to guess—maybe that will come with time and experience.

Mike is about to make a corny joke about Shae brushing her teeth when Josh goes berserk.

It happens faster than either of the werewolves could possibly anticipate. One second, Josh is sitting on the stairs, shoulders taut with tension. Mike is aware of him only in a peripheral sense; keeping an eye on Josh in case anything happens. And then that second passes, and something happens: Josh leaps towards Shae, and his teeth sink into her shoulder.

“Holy fuck—”

“What the hell—”
Shae’s next words are non-verbal, as she howls in pain—not a wolf howl, a distinctly human one. She shoves Josh away and he takes the hit, but the damage is done. When his body is knocked away from her, his head follows a moment after; and if Shae’s mouth had smelled like blood, Josh’s mouth is on another level. He’s taken an ambitious bite out of Shae, tearing into the tendons in her shoulder.

As she whimpers and gropes her new wound helplessly, Josh jumps at her again, hands outstretched. This time, he reaches for her head, and Mike isn’t sure if he’s going to snap her neck or bite her face off, but neither outcome seems great.

Thankfully, Mike is there in superhuman time. He’d been paralyzed in disbelief when Josh first launched himself at Shae, but his next move is to make a beeline for the two of them. He pushes Josh backwards, and the strength of his action surprises everyone; with only one hand, he manages to shove him a few feet away.

Shae is pressing her hands to her shoulder as blood spreads across her shirt, and Mike doesn’t even know where to begin. He keeps his hand on Josh’s chest, trying to rapidly come to terms with the very real and rational panic taking over his brain. “Josh, what the fuck—”

But he doesn’t get the chance to finish his question before Josh leaps forward again, jaws snapping open and closed in an obscenely predatory display. He doesn’t catch Mike off-guard this time, and as Shae jumps back through the open door, Mike moves to position himself between the two of them.

He holds Josh back, both hands pressed to his ribs now. Josh’s eyes are unfocused and wild, twitching as his gaze flicks between different potential targets. His arms are raised, like he’s about to summon something, and his fingers are curling and uncurling. His head twists on his neck as he looks over Mike’s shoulder, down at Shae.

And then, suddenly, his eyes cross in confusion. When they uncross, he is staring straight at Mike.

“Oh shit,” Mike quickly blurts out, but before he can dodge or immobilize anything, Josh moves towards him. His newly trimmed nails reach up to claw at Mike’s forearms, and Mike feels several small, dull pains. He realizes with bemused dismay that Josh is scratching his arms open, but that he barely feels a thing thanks to his werewolf powers. “Jesus fuck, dude, stop it!”

Josh, unsurprisingly, does not stop it. His jaw unhinges and he opens his mouth wide to let out a bone-shaking cry; this scream is so loud and shrill that Mike hears Shae groan in agony behind him, and something about that triggers something unfamiliar in Mike. Josh hurt Shae. Shae is bleeding—a lot. Her mouth had smelled like something else’s blood before but now, the smell of her blood is washing over Mike’s senses in tidal waves. Josh did that—Josh made her bleed. Josh is trying to fucking eat them.

Before Mike knows what he’s doing, his body moves. He steps forward, foot landing between Josh’s, and his hand moves up to Josh’s throat. He pushes him back, and Josh is unprepared for the sudden force. In one swift, fluid motion, Mike knocks Josh down to the ground, and pins him there.

His hands hold Josh’s jaws closed, in case he tries to snap again. Mike straddles Josh’s chest, weighing him down so he can’t move. Predictably, Josh tries to move anyway. His knees slam into Mike’s back, and his nails reach up to leave angry marks across his throat, but Mike is unfazed. The minor bursts of pain are easy to dismiss, especially since he’s so angry—well. Anger isn’t exactly the right word for what he’s feeling. Protectiveness, probably. The need to stop Josh from following his horrible impulses.
Mike shifts so he’s further down Josh’s chest, thighs bracketing his hips. He lets go of Josh’s throat, and moves to pin his arms down instead. “Stop,” he insists. His voice sounds different even to his own ears. “Stop trying to attack us. You are not going to eat us.”

Josh hisses at him, and Mike just glares and keeps pressing him down until he finally stops struggling. Only when Josh goes limp beneath him does he ease up, and even then he lets go slowly. He remembers what this is called now; he’s executed a perfect alpha roll. All Shae’s talk of pack dynamics must be more than talk; when push came to shove, Mike’s werewolf instincts had kicked in right on time. He would usually never think of using such a cruel technique on a dog, let alone a human; but Josh isn’t himself right now. He isn’t human.

As the wrath seeps out of Josh’s limbs, he sinks down a little, and Mike stays on top of him. “Cut it out, Josh,” Mike says, watching the wendigo close its eyes. “This isn’t you.”

When Josh opens his eyes again, they seem brighter than normal; the blue is more defined, the red sharper. His pupils are wide again; Mike has never seen them that narrow. He opens his mouth, and then his lips flutter closed, like someone’s stolen all his words.

“Welcome back,” Mike mutters, and climbs off him. Josh reaches for his hands for a second, and then aborts the motion, dropping his fingers. He lies there, still and speechless, even after Mike moves away. He’s clearly having trouble processing what his hunger just made him do.

And things had been going so fucking well.

“Leave me alone,” Josh begs, all choked up. “Get away from me.” His breathing is stilted, and his nails are digging into his knees. He has a bloody mouth and dark eyes, and even though he’s starting to look more scared than scary, Mike is still on edge.

Shae doesn’t need to be told twice; she turns on her heel and leaves, stomping away. Mike only sees her face for a moment but the flash of betrayal he catches is clear enough. He hopes that betrayal isn’t because of him.

He stumbles over to close the door, and then lowers himself to the ground, sitting against it. Josh watches him with wide, scared eyes, but Mike doesn’t leave. In fact, he doesn’t say or do anything. He just blocks the door, and watches Josh carefully.

They stare at each other for far too long, minds racing on different tracks. Mike tries not to think about how he’d felt like this was starting to become a home. Or how safe he’d felt the other night, tucked in-between Josh and Shae, fingers greasy with popcorn and chest tight from laughter. He closes his eyes for a sharp second, grinding his teeth together. His fingers twitch; the ones that aren’t there try their hardest to twitch, and it feels bad.

He tries not to think about Sam coming over with homemade baked vegan goods and telling him about trauma being a lifelong battle. About the only way to stop a wendigo being murder. About Josh going limp and helpless underneath him, and how that had felt. How he’d moved instinctively to hold Josh down. He could have hurt Josh. Josh could have killed any of them.

As hard as he tries, he can’t pull himself away from his tangled mess of horrible thoughts; he only snaps out of it when he notices Josh is crying. Mike opens his mouth to ask if he’s okay, and then bites back the words. That would have been a colossally stupid question.

Thankfully, Josh notices Mike’s fidgeting, and reaches up to rub gracelessly at his eyes. “Can you come here?”

He’s sure that if Emily or Ashley (or Shae) were here, they’d make a comment about how Josh isn’t in a position to make requests like go away or come closer after an outburst like that. But Mike had seen Josh the wendigo attacking Shae, and Josh the human shaking underneath him afterwards, and they were two entirely different entities. It’s hard to suss out how this whole possession thing works, but he knows one thing for certain; this isn’t Josh’s fault. Josh might have a flimsy grasp on empathy and no ability to predict consequences, but he wouldn’t do something like this. He became consumed with revenge after his sisters disappeared, and now he’s become consumed with hunger.

(And if they’re pointing fingers, both of those afflictions are Mike’s fault in the first place.)

So Mike doesn’t say a word, he just calmly obliges. He crawls over to sit beside Josh, ignoring the twinge in his arms. The scratches on his throat have already healed up, but his wolf powers are taking a little longer to knit his arms back together. They’re still bleeding, and Mike sees Josh’s gaze dip down to look at them. His expression is equal parts conflicted and concerned, like he’s only now realizing he hurt Mike.

Eyes still pinned to his injured arms, Josh reaches forward and tugs on Mike’s hands. Mike has to restrain himself from flinching, but Josh doesn’t try to eat his hands or anything; instead, he pulls Mike closer until he can wrap his arms around him in an awkward but endearing hug.

Josh’s skin is warm, which is a good omen. Mike embraces him, adjusting so that he’s got a better grip on Josh’s shoulders, and Josh leans his head forwards against his chest. The height difference between them isn’t that much, but Mike suspects Josh just wants to hide his face. He doesn’t question it, holding Josh tightly.

The tension in Josh’s frame seems to melt away much faster like this, and Mike feels more at ease too. Their knees bump against each other, and Mike feels his face heating up— he’s suddenly very glad Josh isn’t looking at him. His feelings for Josh are getting harder to disguise as just brotherly affection, especially when they’ve never been brothers or affectionate or anything.

Josh mumbles something inaudible against his shirt, and his breath is warm on Mike’s chest. Mike licks his lips, and asks quietly, “What?”

“I never want to go back,” Josh repeats without lifting his head.

The shock that passes through Mike feels electric. Josh pulls away to look up at him, to gauge his reaction. Mike can’t keep the look of surprise off his face. “To… to Vancouver?”

“To anywhere. To civilization. I never want to go back to anywhere there’s people.” Josh’s jaw is set, and it’s clear that this isn’t the first time he’s had this thought. It’s just the first time he’s voiced it aloud. “I want to stay here.”

“You want to…?” Mike shakes his head, and releases Josh. He doesn’t pull away at all, so Mike has to move out of reach himself. He narrows his eyes, trying to figure out what to say. The other day when he’d broached the subject, Josh had said he’d missed Chris and Sam. Maybe that’s a good starting point. “Don’t you miss everyone?”

Josh stares at him in disbelief, and then laughs. “Do I miss everyone? You don’t think I miss everyone, Michael? I’ve been trapped alone on this mountain for almost a fucking month, losing my mind. Sometimes I would see Chris in that cave, and I would try to talk to him, to get him to come rescue me, and then he would disappear. Two nights ago I thought I saw Beth in the kitchen, and—” He swallows, voice thick. “When I saw you, like, for real saw you, I thought there was no way it could be you. I thought it was my brain torturing me again.”
He is almost speechless, and the words that do come to mind aren’t useful—like his brain is just regurgitating unhelpful thoughts. “Josh—”

“You— you have no idea how much I miss everyone. I haven’t seen my friends in a month, because I’ve been too busy trying not to gnaw my own leg off. But I can’t— I can’t see them.” Despite his distress, Josh is determined. “I can’t go see them, because if I do, I’m gonna hurt them. I can’t control it. This is me controlling it the best I can right now, by not eating your arm. Y-You don’t understand; I want to eat everything that moves. I’m a fucking monster.”

Mike tries to keep his voice level. “Don’t say that shit. You’re not evil, Josh. It’s not you, it’s the wendigo spirits. We released too many all at once, and they all went into you because you were alone and scared. It’s not your fault.”

“I’m not alone now, and look what just happened!” Josh looks like he wants to shove Mike, or maybe curl into himself. “I just took a fucking bite out of a person! I just tried to eat Shae!” His voice, and hands, are shaking. “I can’t go back to the real world, and I don’t want to. This is my life now. It has to be. I don’t want to hurt anyone,” he pleads.

“You’re not going to,” Mike promises, and then quickly adds before Josh can protest, “I won’t let you. I’ll stay with you here as long as you need, until you learn how to control it.”

This doesn’t garner the reassured expression or enamored sigh that Mike had hoped for. Instead, Josh looks furious, and starts in on him again. “You can’t promise that!”

“Yes. I can. I’m promising you that right now, and you aren’t listening to me.” Mike doesn’t know how he can possibly outline how much he’s here for Josh any louder, and it’s getting frustrating. He’s in this for the long run, and if that means they have to sit on a hundred floors and have a hundred breakdowns together, he can live with that. He’d rather be here for the bad times than not know about them, and they’re bonded now. Wendigo and werewolf. Why doesn’t Josh get that? “I’m here, aren’t I? I trust you.”

“You have an apartment in Vancouver,” Josh tells him, and Mike’s cheeks starts burning. Josh catches the look on his face, and he homes in on that. “You have a mom that actually gives a shit about you. You have a life outside of here. I don’t. My life outside of here ended when I was legally declared dead. You have a girlfriend.”

Mike snaps at the last word. “In case you haven’t guessed, Jess and I aren’t doing so hot these days.” For some reason Josh looks startled by that, and Mike continues, “I’ll just break up with her, and then I can—”

“All the blood in Mike’s body runs cold. “What,” he demands, and he means for it to sound furious and loud but it actually comes out quiet and hurt.

“I’m just saying, bro, it’s funny that you keep talking about how fucked up I am when you can’t manage to stay with anyone. Did you forget about that time you dated Emily? Why’d you break up with her again, anyway… the idea of staying with one chick seemed too scary? Or that time you led Hannah on, but couldn’t commit?” Josh’s eyes are cutting into Mike, and his words are just as painful. “Now you wanna break up with Jess just because it would be the easy way out! Jesus. You’ve got issues worse than mine, Mike. You can’t break up with your girlfriend on an impulse.”

“It’s not an imp— stop trying to rile me up!” Mike crosses his arms over his chest, trying not to let
on how much Josh’s words are affecting him. “You’re trying to push me away, and it’s not going to work.”

Josh laughs again, dry and angry. “You’re trying to pull yourself away from Jess.”

Somehow, Josh’s refusal to listen to him or understand any of the clues he’s leaving is the last straw. He explodes and shouts, “I don’t want to be with Jess!”

Instead of replying, Josh just watches him. He looks like he’s scrutinizing Mike; trying to figure out what he really means. Mike has never felt so frustrated— he’s laid out exactly what he means. He’s spent long enough talking about this; running in emotional circles all around this mountain. It’s time for action.

He gets to his feet, trying to push away the anger he knows is plain on his face. Josh keeps watching him as he storms away, following Shae out the door. Mike can feel Josh’s eyes piercing through him all the way down the mountain.

6:13

Chris: I’m mad that I miss you

It doesn’t take long for him to catch up with Shae. His instincts tell him she’s headed to the forested valley on the back of the mountain: the area he’d climbed up when he’d made his way up here two weeks ago. Her smell helps too; he can’t name exactly what she smells like, but whatever it is, it’s definitively her.

Sure enough, he tracks her down to the middle of a clearing in the sylvan chaos. There’s a young tree— maybe twice his height— that has been recently uprooted, and it’s lying still in the grass, neatly slicing the clearing in half. Shae is sitting on the tree, bent over herself. Her hair is wild, and her posture is tightly wound, but from where he’s standing, she looks unhurt.

“What’d the tree do to you?” he asks, interrupting the silence. Shae doesn’t laugh, and doesn’t glance up to look at him, still curled around herself like a bat. Mike approaches cautiously, kneeling before he’s even reached the log. “Hey. Are you still bleeding?”

“Not physically,” Shae growls at him, which makes very little sense. She glances up at him, and it’s obvious she’s been crying. Her cheeks are blotchy, and her eyes are wet. Her shoulder is already healing, but the skin around the open wound is still bloody and she hasn’t taken any measure to bandage it up. Mike involuntarily moves towards her, overcome with pity, but she glares at him so he ends up just taking a seat beside her on the newly fallen tree.

They both stay silent for a while after that, listening to the mountain soundscape. A bird cries out somewhere, and Mike thinks about Jess; about snowball fights, about birds flying away from him. About Josh.

He leans forward, resting his forehead on his palm and his elbow on his knee, and thinks about his promise to stay here. Michael, can you make it last with anyone is stuck in his head like a song, drowning out the sounds of the forest. He supposes it’s better than constantly remembering screams from different members of the Washington family, but it still hurts every time he thinks about the words. He doesn’t know. He’s trying to find out.

“It was like a nightmare,” Shae says, and he’s jerked back to the present. “I’ve never been attacked
by a wendigo before— not like that. I was so scared. That was worse than when we had to escape that one in the sanatorium.”

“Well, yeah. I was there to protect you in the sanatorium,” he tries to quip back, smiling gently. She looks over at him, and something seems to come loose in her expression. “You were here to protect me today too.”

“I did a really shitty job,” he mumbles, and pulls his hand away from his face. “Can I help patch you up?”

Shae shakes her head. “No, it’ll heal on its own—or I’ll make Josh bandage it up. That would be fitting, since I had to clean off his shoulder.” She smirks, but then falters. “You stopped Josh, right? He isn’t going to come join us to try to find his dinner?”

“I don’t know,” Mike says, and then when she looks panicked he quickly amends, “No. He’s not gonna try again—not now, anyway. But we, uh, got in a fight.”

Shae blinks, seeming to perceive something more than his words. “Not about me.”

“No,” Mike says, quiet and embarrassed.

“About him being your mate.”

“No,” he groans, and looks up at the sky. Shae groans too, clearly exasperated, and he ignores her. The moon is there, faintly visible in the blue expanse, and it sets his heart at ease. “About him coming back home with me. To our real home.” Shae deflates beside him, and Mike pretends not to see it. “He doesn’t want to.”

It sounds like Shae’s trying hard to be non-committal. “Why not?”

“He’s scared… and he can’t control himself. He likes it here.” The moon doesn’t move, and Mike sighs, closing his eyes. He feels like he can still see everything with his eyelids closed; the log they’re sitting on, the discomfort on Shae’s face. The tiny coin that fell up into the sky and became the moon. Mike goes tight-lipped and is struck by a random bout of honesty. “And I get it, I don’t blame him, but he has to go back. I don’t want him to be around people either, but he has to. There are too many loose ends to tie up there. He’s got a family and friends and a home there.”

“You’re talking about yourself,” Shae points out, which feels like a barb even though she’s right. “Not just Josh.”

He looks over at her, and is surprised to discover she looks like she’s pitying him. “I… yeah.”

“It’s okay,” Shae says, and pulls him into an awkward hug. She doesn’t wince when his chest presses against her shoulder, although some of her blood does get on his shirt. “You’ll figure it out; whatever you need to do, it’ll happen. And I’ll help.”

“Thanks,” Mike mumbles, and then leans into her a little, resting his chin on her undamaged shoulder. Her arms hold him up, and it’s easy to just sink into her warmth like he’s a kid who needs help again. It feels like hugging Sam. “Thanks, Shae.”

His mind clears as suddenly and vividly as the sky after a storm, and Mike realizes he knows exactly what he needs to do.
He doesn’t notice that he’s received a reply from Chris until he checks his phone the next morning. Mike had almost given up on hearing from him at this point; he’s trained himself out of looking at his phone, because he knows the lack of contact will just sting. So when he finally sees it, it’s been a full fourteen hours since it was sent, and Mike can’t quite believe his eyes.

“Whoa,” he blurs out, hardly aware he says it aloud. He takes a step back, unplugging his phone from the charger—he’d only meant to check the time and weather. It’s eight in the morning, his phone is at ninety six percent, there’s a thirty percent chance of rain, and he has an unread message from Christopher Hartley on his phone.

Mike flops onto the master bed and reads the words over until they blur together. The syntax smudges together before his eyes until he can’t even try to parse what Chris means, let alone guess why a Wednesday night in February might be important enough to warrant a reply after radio silence for so long.

“I’m mad that I miss you,” he reads aloud, toneless and deadpan. He tries again, pushing an imaginary pair of glasses up his nose and pretending he’s wearing seven shirts for no reason. “I miss you…but I’m mad about it.”

A familiarly smug voice drawls from the doorframe, “Who are you mad about missing?” and Mike abruptly locks his phone and tosses it away from him. It ends up falling onto the pillows and then dropping off the bed completely, but Mike doesn’t check to see if he broke it.

Instead, he jolts straight up and faces Josh. “I didn’t think you were up,” he laughs awkwardly, trying his hardest to not look suspicious.

He fails miserably, and Josh’s eyes narrow. “I heard you moving around,” he explains, which is a little freaky but Mike makes no comment. “Are you… packing?”

Oh. Yeah. Mike forgot the most incriminating part of this scene, which isn’t his abandoned phone, but the columns of his stuff piled around the room. He scratches bluntly at the back of his neck, pursing his lips as he tries to come up with a rapid-fire explanation—but there really, really isn’t a good one. Nothing he says is going to pacify Josh; all he can do is be honest and hope that Josh sees reason.

He stands up, and takes a shaky breath in. “Yeah,” he begins, and is unsurprised to find that all his courage has disappeared. Mike grabs a pile of freshly laundered socks from the bed and shoves them into his duffel bag, and then grabs his flashlight and tosses it on top. It’s easier to own up to this if he looks like he has a purpose instead of just staring helplessly at Josh’s pre-panic. “I’m going to leave.”

“Where—” Josh starts, taking a step into the room, and then jumps back like he’s been burnt. He stammers, “Can you shut the blinds?”

“Huh?” Mike looks at the window behind him and sees the bright sunlight shining directly into the room. Suboptimal conditions for a drowsy, vulnerable wendigo. “Oh, yeah! Sorry.”

He shuts the blinds, and then draws the curtains over them for good measure. Josh exhales in relief behind him, and sees the bright sunlight shining directly into the room. “You’re… going to leave.”

“I’m going to leave.” Josh looks absolutely stricken and he quickly amends, “But I’ll be back. It’ll only take a few days, but…I have to go home.”
All of a sudden Josh’s despair and anxiety cauterizes to anger at instant wendigo speed. “I don’t believe you,” he accuses, and he looks furious but his voice is scared. “You’re leaving me here just like I knew you would.”

Mike wants to deny the paranoia, but he knows there’s no point. He and Josh are experts at deflection; they could argue back and forth for weeks if they both wanted to. But he doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to win anymore, he just wants to be stable now. He wants things to make sense, and for Josh to start fucking cooperating with him.

So instead of *I’m not*, he says, “Come with me if you want,” and Josh instantly blanches. If he was scared and upset before, it’s twice as bad now, and it pains Mike to watch. “But I have some things I need to do on my own, if we’re staying here for a while. I need to get things sorted.” He emphasizes them staying on the mountain, because that’s the important part anyway. This is just the next step in Josh’s rehabilitation into humanity: Mike figuring his shit out.

Josh stares at him with that same disbelief he’d showed yesterday when Mike had snapped at him. It’s as if Mike is completely unfathomable to him. Finally, he lowers his gaze. “You’re not coming back.”

Mike opens his mouth, and then shuts it. He glances over at the curtains; he needs to see so that he can pack. He looks at his phone, and considers Chris, his friend he’s been putting on the backburner for days to take care of Josh. He and Josh have been standing on the same hand of two different clocks, occasionally synchronous but mostly flying past each other as they both try to figure out what they’re doing wrong, and why the other person doesn’t get it. He doesn’t know what else to say other than “look at my sleeve, my heart’s right here,” so he does the first thing he can think of: he howls for Shae.

Howling can’t be translated into any language that really makes sense, but if Mike had to give it a go, this one would go something like “Regis, I’d like to use my last Lifeline and Phone-A-Friend.”

Shae’s there within five minutes, which is more of a credit to Mike’s voice than Shae’s speed; she wasn’t in her cabin at the top of the mountain, but was in fact camped out on the couch downstairs. No matter how many times Josh has insisted it’s a loveseat and not a futon (and Mike has subsequently pointed out that he sounds like his scary mom), Shae has ignored his warnings and pleading in favour of passing out there whenever she wants.

Shae’s unhurried arrival means that by the time she slouches into view behind Josh, Josh and Mike are having a full-on fight. Mike is trying his hardest not to lose his cool, but it’s difficult when Josh is going down a list of reasons that Mike won’t come back. Finally, Mike snaps. “I know you think I’m a good-for-nothing asshole, but I’ve made up my mind and I’m going to fucking stay here whether you believe me or not!”

“Then why is your stuff in a bag?” Shae interrupts, neatly cutting into Josh’s reply. Both boys turn to her, and she yawns, displaying all her teeth. Mike can’t tell if it’s supposed to be a power move or if she really just doesn’t care about closing her mouth. She’s wearing a pair of camo hunting pants and a white tank top that Mike’s pretty sure is his. Even though her hair is a mess of grey knots, she’s still the most accidentally fashionable person Mike has ever seen. “What are you two fighting about?”

“Mike is leaving us. The mountain.” He sounds more upset than
angry, and when Mike looks over at him, Josh only holds his gaze for a second before looking away. His distress and worry are written all over his face, and Mike’s anger seeps away like steam. He feels bad for yelling, but he can’t exactly take it back now; not when Josh is still pissed and he’s about to leave.

Shae looks from Josh to Mike, and when he doesn’t disagree, she pauses in confusion. “Really? Today?”

“There’s just some things I need to take care of,” he mutters. “I told you there’s some loose ends so… I’m leaving, but I’m coming back in a few days.”

“I don’t believe you,” Shae accuses in the exact same tone that Josh had used.

Josh laughs at the repetition, sharp and sudden, and Mike almost wants to chuckle, but he’s put out by the look on Shae’s face. He knows she’s had her fair share of abandonment; she’s shared her whole life story with him, and now she’s worried he’s just going to be another memory.

“Shae,” he tells her, trying as hard as he can to make her believe him, “I promise I won’t be long.” He really needs her to cooperate with him on this one; if their little pack is two against one, this is never going to work. He’s spent too long on this mountain without dealing with his real-world responsibilities—he needs to press play on the life he’s put on pause for the last few weeks.

Fortunately, Shae only looks suspicious for a moment more before she nods, and Mike sighs in relief. “I trust you,” she says, and it’s obvious she’s telling the truth; her face is clear and her sincerity is almost disarming. He hopes she’s going to be okay while he’s gone, because he knows she doesn’t trust Josh yet, not fully—not the way she trusts him. Especially not after Josh’s craving yesterday.

“Thank you,” he tells her, soft as he tries to match her tone. And now, the difficult part. “And, uh. While I’m gone, I need you two to stay together.”

The ease slides off Shae’s face. “Why? So he can eat me?”

Josh rolls his eyes, and crosses his arms over his chest. Hopefully it’s a display of ‘as if I’d try to eat you again’ and not ‘just you wait until Mike is gone’.

“No. So you both have someone to reassure you that I’m coming back,” Mike insists. The two of them exchange a look, and then turn to face him; they’re wearing matching doubtful frowns and it makes them nearly look related. It’s a look of disapproval that he’s seen the Washington siblings trade back and forth a hundred times. “I need you to take care of each other.”

Shae bristles, looking affronted. “I can take care of myself.”

“You’re wearing one sock,” Josh says, surprising both Mike and Shae, and they all look down to see that it’s true.

As Mike tries not to chuckle at that, Shae purses her lips from side to side, chewing on that revelation. “Only one foot was cold,” she mutters.

Josh snorts, and then looks over at Mike. His hands are digging into his arms, and Mike wants to pry his fingers away from his skin. He’s possessed by the urge to cut Josh’s nails again before he goes, or try to file them down, but he knows that both of those things would be too weird to ask for. Now that Josh can maintain his own personal hygiene and well-being, Mike has no excuse to touch or hold his hands.
And on that incredibly gay thought, he reaches for his jacket. Josh is still standing between him and his duffel bag, so Mike rethinks his whole packing process— he doesn’t need most of this shit anyway, and it’ll give him less to cart up the mountain when he returns. Josh and Shae can take his shirts and toothbrush as collateral, and he’ll bring new things back.

He only grabs his car keys, phone, wallet, and a bag of snacks he’d hastily thrown together this morning. Once he’s picked out the bare necessities, Mike shoves them into the depths of his pocket and pulls his jacket on. It’s nearly too hot for this coat now, and the thought of the green coat dances across his consciousness. He thinks that would still be too stressful to wear, but his trauma has been significantly easier to deal with up here on the mountain.

There’s a joke on the tip of his tongue about how he did end up finding his therapy dog, but when he looks over at Josh and Shae, the words sour in his throat. Both of them look worried as hell; Shae, at least, is trying to hide it, staring down at the carpet and awkwardly fidgeting. On the other hand, Josh is staring at Mike, eyes unfocused as he fails to hide the signs of his oncoming panic. His fingers are pressing into his sleeves, and Mike would bet it’s starting to hurt.

He crosses the room and pulls Josh’s hands away from him, and then takes Shae’s hands and holds them in his. “This is the shit I’m talking about. Take care of each other.”

Josh scoffs, but the noise is quiet and catches in his throat. Shae squeezes Mike’s hands, and then moves forward and up onto her tiptoes so she can hug him goodbye. She mumbles into his shoulder, “Drive safe.”

Mike wishes he could take her with him, because he bets she’d love Vancouver. He can already see her getting along with everyone— Sam would be beyond fascinated to meet a werewolf. Well. Technically, he supposes she’s still going to meet a werewolf.

He wishes he could take Josh with him too, and as he lowers Shae to the ground he makes eye contact with Josh. Mike parts his lips to say something and Josh says, stilted and uncertain, “You’d better hurry back.”

“I will,” he promises, and suddenly all of this feels too real. He isn’t just saying goodbye to them for a few hours, or for the day; this is him leaving the mountain. Leaving their shared space. Mike winces at the thought, and then wonders how closely his new physiology is linked to pack dynamics. He’s done his research on wolves and on werewolves, but he’s pretty sure it shouldn’t hurt to leave Shae and Josh behind.

He blinks hard, and when he opens his eyes, Shae and Josh still look distraught. “I will,” he repeats, stumbling over the words a bit, and then he moves between them and leaves the room. He doesn’t look back as he heads down the stairs (the human way, not the dangerous way), and he only spares the house a parting glance when he’s gone through the front door.

Mike is struck by that same feeling he had weeks ago, when he’d made the snap decision to come here. Even if this is a colossal mistake he has to commit to it and leave now, otherwise he never will; and that wouldn’t be fair to any of his friends, or his mom, or himself. He sees Shae step out onto the landing from the master bedroom as the door is swinging shut, and then she’s gone, and he follows suit. He begins the trek down Blackwood.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your kind comments! Here's ANOTHER road trip chapter because I have no self-control; it's a little shorter than the first one. The next chapter's going to include some familiar faces, so this one's all about Mike! Please let me know what you think :)

“Guess how big my heart is!”

Grace glances in the rear-view mirror, doing perfunctory checks to ensure everything is okay. Waves and hills and trees race by their tiny car, speeding by until the landscape around them blurs together. Their destination is one Grace has visited hundreds of times, but her son has only been here once. It was one of his father’s favourite places, but he doesn’t know that yet. He doesn’t learn that for years; not until he grows old enough to ask questions about his father other than “where is he”.

She drums her nails against the steering wheel; they’re coated in chipped blue polish. Acoustic guitar filters through the speakers and some long-forgotten singer croons about American girls.

“How big?”

He doesn’t reply, and when his mother looks to see what’s wrong, she sees him holding up two little fists together, shaking them rhythmically to mimic a young beating heart. His grin lights up the whole backseat. “This big!”

“I don’t know if that’s right,” Grace smiles back at him, enthralled and adoring. “Your teacher must be lying to you, Michael, because your heart is bigger than your whole body.”

Mike squints at her, struck by disbelief. “She wouldn’t lie to me!”

Grace’s laugh fills up the car, and when Mike clues in, he starts to laugh too. From what Mike remembers, they laugh all the way to the coast, golden and blue smiles painted in his memory for life.

The beach is secluded and relatively unknown. Mike’s father had been the one to take Grace here first, and she looks around at the sparkling water and dark sand with a sigh. Some pain is nice to remember. While she unpacks the car and loses herself in reverie, Mike loses himself in exploration. A seashell leads to a tidal pool leads to a tiny crab leads to a tiny creek which runs away from the beach, and as Mike walks upstream he forgets to pay attention to where he’s going and focuses on adventure.

By the time Grace notices he’s gone, Mike has scraped his knee and found a cricket. She finds him sitting down on a shoal and bawling as the cold water runs over his stinging leg, hands clutched around the unnaturally docile insect.

“Jesus hot sauce Christmas cake,” Grace swears, making a beeline for her son. “I was yelling for you, kid, why didn’t you reply? Are you okay?”
“I found a cricket,” he blubbers, which is not a real answer but tells Grace everything she needs to know. She scoops her son up in her arms, and carries him out of the forest and back to the beach. To her relief, Mike leaves the bug behind.

They sit on a log in the sand and she bandages up his knee before setting up their picnic. Mike doesn’t meander away again, having learned his lesson, and instead opts to wander their narrow strip of beach in search of interesting seashells. He builds a sizable heap of rocks, and Grace tells herself she’s not going to let him bring this junk into her car—even though she’s well aware she’s going to relent and let him keep anything he wants. At least the cricket won’t be coming home with them.

When the sun sets, Mike leans into his ma’s side and unsuccessfully tries to hide his yawns, and Grace tells him stories to lull him to sleep. She tells him stories he barely remembers now; tales of her teenage escapades where she’d gotten lost and her parents had had to track her down to mend her knees and free her crickets. She censors most of the details, but time blurs everything together anyway.

The tide is quiet and accommodating, providing a soft score for her stories but not intruding far enough up the beach to reach them. Mike’s grip on his favourite beluga toy is going slack, but his fingers keep moving across it like he’s petting a real animal. Grace smiles at the sight, and watches the waves silently with her son. She’s under the impression he’s fast asleep, and is surprised to hear him suddenly say, “How did they find you?”

Grace glances down at his messy black hair, and frowns. “What?”

“How’d they,” Mike starts, and then yawns so wide he nearly inhales the entire Pacific ocean. “How’d they find you? Your ma and dad? Why didn’t they get lost too?”

She runs her chipped nails through his hair, bringing it closer to something approaching presentable. “We’d never travelled before as a family, but we talked about what to do if I got lost. If I got lost, I had to find landmarks around me. You know what those are, kiddo?”

Mike shakes his head, and Grace looks out at the waves, struggling to locate the right word. “Alright, it’s like… see that weird log over there? What does it look like to you?”

“A gator,” Mike answers without missing a beat.

Caught off-guard, Grace laughs. “A gator? Yeah, okay, I can see that. So if you were to get lost on this beach again, and you know you need to find me, just remember the gator log. Because you know I’m sitting close to it. It’s a landmark. Do you get it?”

When Grace looks down, Mike has fallen asleep against her side. She scoops him up and packs the car, driving home in the silent dark.

It’s her fondest memory of that beach.

The cable car stutters down the mountain, shaking and creaking but sturdy. Mike leans against the cold window, watching the tops of trees fly by as he’s lifted over the forest. The station shrinks away behind him until it’s an indistinguishable structure and then gone, and the lodge is already out of sight.

Mike would be lying to himself if he said he wasn’t looking for gator logs in the forest around him; searching for any outliers to differentiate parts of the mountain. Occasionally he sees things he
thinks he remembers from his exploration of the mountain, but of course, he’d climbed up the other side. At one point, he thinks he sees a bear, and he nearly rocks the tram off of its line in panic—but it doesn’t really look like a bear, so it’s probably just a large pile of dirt.

At this point, there’s nothing he can do about a bear or any threats on the mountain anyway. With every passing second, he’s further and further from the two people he promised to stay with and protect, and it feels worse and worse the more he thinks about it. The cable car arrives at the station, and Mike stares at the open doors for a full ten seconds before he gets to his feet to climb out. It would be easier to head back up and go back to Josh and Shae. “I couldn’t do it,” he’d mumble, and they’d accept him instantly. They’d both be relieved: Josh with his newfound desire to be a hermit and Shae with her general distrust of society would both be thrilled to see Mike walking back with his tail between his legs.

“I have to,” he reminds himself, eight fingers digging into his knees as he stands. “I have to.”

It’s difficult to locate his car again, since everything looks different now. Spring is bursting into life slowly but surely, shoving winter out of the way, and as he reaches lower and lower altitudes the environment around him starts to turn more and more unrecognizable. All the snow he’d walked around in to cover his tracks is nowhere to be seen, and instead the ground is obscured with tiny green buds and the beginning of flowers.

He ends up stumbling across it completely by accident, after an hour of walking around with dwindling hope. The log that catches his eye doesn’t exactly look like an alligator, but it is covered with uprooted grass and flowers. It looks conspicuous in its coverture, and Mike is relieved to remember exactly how and where he’d hidden his car. He brushes the dead greenery out of the way, and braces himself to lift the log.

To his immense surprise, it’s a hundred times easier than he remembers to lift the fallen tree; it barely puts any strain on his arms. “Oh, right,” Mike says, cutting into the silence around him. “Werewolf?” He throws the log out of the way, and then lifts the other log with the same ease, grinning cheekily as he does it. He kind of wishes someone were here to watch him do this, but whatever—there will be lots of time to impress his friends with his super strength back in Vancouver.

Mike slides into the front seat of his car, and everything about it feels strange. Tasks that he’s done a thousand times (turning the keys in the ignition, adjusting his mirrors to glance behind him) feel different—he’s only been away from civilization for two weeks, but he’s a different species now. It’s a little impossible to grasp, so he doesn’t try. Instead, he turns on his music and pulls away from the mountain, driving past his amateur camouflage. The song that blasts to life is a soft acoustic one he hasn’t heard in years, and Mike lets it play. For some reason, it reminds him of his mother, and he glances down at his phone, wondering if he should give her a call.

He thinks he might get overemotional if he talks to her right now, seeing as she thinks he’s been missing for almost two weeks. He’s not sure how to begin to tell her that it’s been the best time of his entire life. For so long, his ma has been his only family, and it’s almost dizzying to think that now he’s been drafted into a new family—none of them human.

As he turns onto the road leading away from Blackwood, he passes the sign marking the road as closed, and Mike wonders if anyone’s been down here to investigate the missing cops. He can’t remember any distinguishing characteristics, and he doesn’t think either of them mentioned a name. One was older, and one was younger, and now both are dead—at his friend’s hands.
His own hands tighten on the steering wheel. Does Josh feel remorse for murdering them, or is he just trying to block out the memory as best he can? Mike, ever prone to fits of unshakable guilt, would probably have a hard time trying to forget eating two humans alive. But Josh didn’t have a choice, and he hadn’t been himself. He probably doesn’t relish the memory of gnawing the stranger’s scalp open either.

Mike turns up the music, forcing himself to stop thinking about cannibalism for the first time in a while. He’d like to say that he feels more normal the further he gets from Blackwood, but with every mile away from the mountain he feels worse and worse. The air around him is warmer than it had been up near the peak, and the foliage around him is different.

Every few minutes he feels the urge to do a 180, cutting across empty highway lanes to zoom right back to the place he just left. As the mountain fades in his rearview mirror, Mike keeps wondering if Josh and Shae are okay without him. His fear of abandonment has never been scarier than right now, as he purposely isolates himself. He’s not just pushing himself away from people who want to be involved in his life, he’s leaving his pack behind—two people that desperately need to be around other people, even if they both don’t want to be.

He can feel himself spiralling in self-doubt and hatred the more he listens to sad acoustic music, so Mike reaches for his phone to change the playlist. The next song that comes on makes him laugh so hard the car swerves. “Of course,” he scoffs, smiling involuntarily. “Of course this happens to me.”

Not even two minutes later, the car is careening down the highway far above the speed limit, and Mike is belting at the top of his lungs: “I’m on the hunt, I’m after you! I smell like I sound! I’m lost and I’m found! And I’m hungry like the wooooooooolff!”

Slowly, the drive becomes more manageable. The mountains surrounding him are a small comfort, and it makes him feel more human to do mundane things like dick around with his windshield wipers and headlights. After about an hour of driving, a freight truck speeds by him, and the significance doesn’t dawn on Mike right away. When it finally does hit him, his foot stutters on the gas, and his car speeds up just a little. That’s the first person he’s been around other than Josh and Shae since two Mondays ago.

He used to be the kind of kid who would go to parties all the time just to gather company around himself; the kind of teenager who would run for class president if only to ensure everyone knew his name. He used to be scared that no one would like him, so he would arrange his life so that everyone would like him. Now he thinks he might be even happier surrounding himself with only a handful of people he cares about, which is a terrifying and alien concept.

Another car passes him about twenty minutes later, and then when he merges onto a bigger highway, vehicles become more and more frequent until they become unexceptional. Mike sighs and leans his seat back a little, and lets his mind go comfortingly blank.

He is nudged back towards lucidity by the sight of a couple tourists pulled over on the side of the road to look at some mountain goats. Mike pulls over too, thinking only of Shae’s face if he were to tell her he saw something interesting and didn’t take a photo to show her. He gets out of his car, and snaps a picture of an elderly ram munching on some grass.

“They’re really something, eh?” Mike whips around to look at the sound of the voice, and sees a
man leaning against the hood of an old pick-up truck. Two small children are craning their necks out of the backseat window to try to get a better look at the goats, and Mike smiles at the sight. One of the kids (humans, not goats) looks at him for a moment, observing him closely, and then finds him unremarkable and looks back at the wildlife.

“Yeah,” he says. This is the first stranger he’s ever talked to as a werewolf, and yeah seems like a pretty lame way to mark this momentous occasion, so he adds, “I’m surprised they’re not scared of us.”

“I don’t think many people come to the Rockies to hunt goats,” the man replies, tone of his voice clearly teasing. “Besides, they could probably hurt us more than we could hurt them with those big old horns.”

Mike bites back a comment about his super strength and speed and eight foot vertical leap, and just smiles politely. “I’ll make sure to steer clear.”

He gets back in his car, waving to the man and his kids, and feels strangely quieted for the next few hours. Usually when he’s alone he habitually talks to himself, but it feels okay right now to sit alone and focus on the road as strangers speed by and Blue Oyster Cult sings to him about the reaper.

Eventually, Mike does do a U-turn across several lanes, but it isn’t to head back to the mountain. He’s been driving for hours when he sees a familiar sight— almost before he knows what he’s doing, his car is spinning across the empty road and pulling off the highway. He drives into the tiny outcropping, coming to a stop in the same parking spot as last time.

There are a hundred tiny not-quite-rest-stops on the drive to Vancouver, but there’s no doubt in Mike’s mind that this is the same one he stopped at last time. So much of his life has changed since he was last here; he looks different now. There are new scars on his body, and a new beard covering his jaw. But nothing around him looks different; the outhouse is unchanged, as is the sign detailing the history of this valley.

The poster on the outside of the bathroom still warns him about bear and mountain lion activity in all capital letters. Last time, Mike had scoffed. This time, he chuckles. The most dangerous thing in this mountains is not a bear or a mountain lion, and if Mike can handle harbouring a giant crush on a cannibal monster, he’s pretty sure he can handle a cougar or two.

The valley itself looks idyllic during the day— the last time he saw it had been late at night. Everything is unmoving; the wind whipping through the trees far below him doesn’t create any movement big enough to see from up here. It still looks like an ocean to him, majestic and unsettling. He doesn’t feel exactly uncomfortable viewing the expanse, but after staring down at the trees for movement for a few minutes, Mike gets bored— or worried— and pulls out his phone. He wants to call Chris, if only to demand an answer as to what exactly he meant by his last text. Does Chris really hate him so much that he wants to be rid of Mike forever? Does he actually not hate him at all, and just hate that he misses him? If he misses him so bad, why didn’t he text him back for so long? Mike isn’t sure how to address or alleviate all that anger, but maybe Chris will help him figure it out. His finger hovers over the button to call Chris.

He calls Sam.

For a second they are both strung in the suspenseful silence together, waiting on the other person to
say anything. Sam is the first to talk, voice trembling with happy disbelief. “Mike?”

“Yeah, hey,” he mumbles, scratching the back of his neck. “Hi, Sam.”

“Hi,” Sam breathes hard, and then there’s a jumbled array of noises, like she tosses the phone through a washing machine before speaking again. “Hi! Hey, uh— wow! How are you?”

“I’m good,” Mike says, leaning against the rail separating him and the valley. “I’m sorry I ghosted on our plans.”

“I don’t care,” Sam informs him, and he can hear her smile through the phone. It’s intensely comforting, and he closes his eyes and just tunes into her voice. “I get it, alone time is important. Believe me, I know that, but… you really scared us.”

“I know.” His fists clench around the cool metal railing. “I’m sorry.”

Her voice catches in her throat. “Where… are you? I mean, I don’t want to press. Are you… still in the country? This isn’t long-distance, is it?”

Mike laughs, and then feels bad for laughing. “Yeah, I’m still in the country. I’m actually on my way back to Vancouver right now.”

“Really?” More washing machine sounds. “That’s awesome! Everyone’s going to be so excited to see you. We were, uh. We were worried.” Sam swallows.

“Don’t be,” he answers reflexively, and then adds, “I mean, you don’t need to be. Like I said, I’m safe.”

There is silence for a moment, and then more shuffling, and then silence. Mike is about to say something more when Sam speaks again. “It hasn’t even been a month since Blackwood, Mike… I know you’re dealing with it in your own way, but the rest of us are all trying to stay sane too. Chris got— well.” She sucks a breath in. “We can talk about that later—”

“No, no, how is Chris?” He hardly cares that he’s interrupting Sam, suddenly desperate for more information. “Is he good? Is everyone good? How’s Jess?” Shoot. Probably should have asked about her before Chris.

Again, Sam holds the silence for another beat before talking. “Jess is okay! She’s— we’re all okay. Like I said, we’ve all just been worried about our big burly jock piece of shit.”

“I see you’ve been talking to Ashley,” he laughs, and runs a hand through his beard. It’s an idle habit he picked up at some point in the last few days; it started as simple wonderment (wow my beard is growing faster than ever before) and now it’s almost grounding. “She and Chris still hanging in there?” Mike winces at his lack of subtlety.

Thankfully, Sam doesn’t seem to notice. She makes a non-committal squeaking noise that sounds a little like “eehhhhhh”, and then laughs. “I think we’re all hanging in there. Everyone has their own conspiracy theory about where you are. Em thought we should just give you some time alone, and Matt agreed at first, but. Things got scary when your mom said she didn’t know where you were either, and when we figured out you hadn’t been to your apartment in days.”

“Ugh,” Mike groans at the mention of his mom. He privately thinks that Emily’s texts to him tell a different story, but Sam doesn’t need to hear anything about that. “I didn’t mean to scare anyone.”

“Well, it’s just— Chris said he called you, and you said you were visiting your mom, so then when
we got in touch with her and she was just as confused as we were, it really threw everyone off?”

Mike lowers his gaze to the ground, trying to ignore the waves of guilt threatening to bowl him over. “Chris and I mostly. I mean, and Jess, but she’s… you know how she’s been.”

Mike, ever the impulsive fool unable to control his own mouth, blurts out, “With Matt. Right?”

He’s an intelligent guy; he can put two-and-two together. He remembers how Matt and Jess had to be torn away from each other when they’d first been airlifted from the mountain, and how Jess had only let go of Matt when she’d seen him. It’s not like he holds the title of World’s Best Boyfriend; at this point, he doesn’t even think he’s in the running. But he thinks Matt might be.

He can practically picture the expression on Sam’s face right now. Lips pulled to one corner, face clearly reading I-don’t-want-to-contribute-to-gossip. “Not… like that. That’s not what I meant. I just meant… you know how she hasn’t… talked. Much. Since the mountain, but also, since you left.”

“She hasn’t talked?” And boom, there it is. Guilt abounding. “At all?”

“Not since you left. Not to any of us, anyway. She sends messages, but any time anyone wants to hang out with her, she cancels last-minute. I think the only person she’s really wanted to talk to is you, but.” Sam inhales. “Since you haven’t been here…”

“I guess I owe Matt,” Mike supplies, unable to keep all the bitterness out of his voice.

“Not like that,” Sam repeats, sounding utterly unconvinced. “Anyway, that’s not… I don’t want to talk about that. I’m okay, Emily’s okay, Matt and Jess are okay. Everyone’s good. Are you good?”

“I’m good,” he answers without hesitation, and then realizes with shock that it’s true. He hasn’t had a nightmare in days, and he doesn’t feel dizzy with nausea every time he looks at his own hand. “Sam, I’m… really good. I have a lot to tell you, but it’s all good. I promise. You’re gonna be really happy.”

“Oh,” Sam says, surprised. “Okay! I’ll… look forward to whatever you’ve got to tell me, then. When do you think you’re gonna be back here?”

“By tomorrow for sure, if not today.”

“Yay! That’s amazing! Okay, great. See you tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow,” he affirms, turning around to head back to his car. Before opening the door he pauses, something caught in his throat. “Sam… do you think Chris is going to stay mad at me?”

Sam scoffs loudly into the phone. “Come on. It’s Chris, Mike. He’s the most forgiving person on the planet. He forgave Josh for that awful prank in a heartbeat.”

Mike hums, smiling a little. “You think?”

“I don’t think Chris could stay mad at anyone for long,” she says, and then pauses before muttering, “least of all you.”

His hand slips off the key in the ignition. “What do you mean least of all me?”

“You know what I mean,” Sam giggles, and Mike has no idea what she means, but the suggestion is enough to brighten his mood for the rest of the trip.
He passes a vacant fruit stand with a sign announcing “OPEN SOON” in bold block letters, red lettering standing out even from a passing car. Mike smiles for a reason he doesn’t remember.

The scenery around his car grows less alpine and more familiar. The mountains shrink into foothills, and he starts to see less snow and more waterfalls. A farm flies by every minute, until he’s in the thick of farmland and every new lot he passes is acres and acres of some different crop. At one point he passes an alpaca farm and takes a picture for Shae—by the end of this trip, he’s going to need a scrapbook to show her and Josh everything.

He’s not sure if Josh is even going to be happy to see him return, so he forces himself to stop thinking about Josh, and stop thinking about Chris. As the scenery changes, he opts for a change of scenery; he takes a different route than he had last time, and lets himself zone out. His attention is only pulled back to planet Earth by a quick glance into the rear-view mirror and the sight of his own reflection.

“Oh, shit,” he mumbles, lifting up his shirt and looking down at it for the first time in hours—or maybe days. There’s a dark red stain on his shoulder, and Mike’s brain scrambles in panic to try to find an explanation until the memories come back to him. Shae’s shirt had been slick with blood after Josh attacked her, so this isn’t his blood. It’s hers.

He didn’t even bother to change his shirt this morning; Emily would be so revolted. “Really, Michael?” he says aloud, doing his best Em impression. It’s pretty bad. “Do you think you look like some sort of badass with blood on your clothes? Gross.”

He misses Emily, but not the way he misses everyone else when he’s not around them. It isn’t the same way that he misses Josh or Shae either, or Jess, or Chris. Being alone is his least favourite state to be in, but being alone with Emily also has its downsides. The two of them have a unique and ugly synergy; they sharpen each other. When he was dating Emily, he felt compelled to involve himself in activities he wasn’t interested in and talk to people he didn’t care about. Everything was about status back then; the person he is now would have been unfathomable to him two years ago.

He knows Emily has grown and changed so much since high school too, and some conceited part of him regrets missing out on that. They could have grown beside each other, and continued to thrive for excellence every day, but that isn’t what either of them want anymore. Their foolish high school dreams are grounded now, but that doesn’t dull their prospects. It just means that they know where it’s safe to start.

Emily has become painfully realistic about her goals and ambitions; where she might have been aimless before, now she is limitless. Maybe in another universe they stayed together and Mike got to be there for all the critical decisions in Emily’s life, but their lives took a different shape. Mike wanting everything in high school meant that he wanted everyone, and while that’s still so true that some days he feels his heart is going to explode out of his chest for eleven different reasons, he’s learned to temper it.

Unfortunately, he learned the value of loyalty too late, and even though he and Emily have both grown into strong young adults, they’ve grown apart. They’ve cheated on each other too many times to ever entrust their bodies to each other again, and now thinking about the idea of Em being his girlfriend makes him cringe. But regardless, she’s one of the people he knows he’s never going to let go of. Their trials on the mountain ensured that their bond, whatever it might be quantified as, is for life. He feels the same about the other six too; he just can’t do impressions of their voices as accurately.
Mike is forced out of his thoughts when he glimpses a passing sign declaring the existence of washrooms, and that’s an offer too good to pass up. He pulls out of his lane and exits the highway altogether, and farms start to disappear in favour of buildings. He even spies a Tim Hortons, which is when he starts to grasp that “WASHROOMS – NEXT EXIT” actually signifies a whole town just off the main road.

The town is quaint, and for the most part, unpopulated. There’s a diner with some movement inside, but Mike can smell the stale and bitter coffee a kilometre away. He passes it, and a schoolyard, and a structurally questionable building marked “City Hall”. He’s sure this doesn’t qualify as a city, but the hall looks abandoned anyway. He sees a deer investigating someone’s mailbox, and he snaps a picture to show Shae, already preparing a joke about trip snacks.

An old woman eyes him from her porch as he pulls up to the promised washrooms, which are accompanied by a garishly decorated souvenir shop. Mike isn’t sure why a town like this would require any type of tourist trap, let alone one with neon signs in the window advertising suspicious lottery prizes and perilous cheeseburgers. The washrooms look normal enough, so Mike parks his car and gets out to stretch his legs. He nods to the old woman, and she doesn’t acknowledge him at all, staring him down with a quiet nature that freaks him out a little bit.

He does his bathroom business, which includes attempting to clean his shirt. Even freezing cold water doesn’t do much to remove the dried blood, but it does give him the opportunity to check himself out in the tiny mirror with rusty corners hanging above the sink. He splashes water onto his face, and runs his hands through his beard, closing his eyes. The stub of where his ring finger on his hand should be bumps against his chin, and Mike sighs.

“Vena amoris,” he mutters, and opens his eyes. He looks so fucking old for his age, and worn out. He thinks it’d be a wonder if anyone in this world other than his own narcissistic self were to find him attractive.

Without warning the door swings open, and the loud noise startles Mike so much that he whips around to face the entrance. A confused attendant in a tacky uniform stands there nervously, one hand on the doorknob and the other holding a bucket of cleaning supplies. Mike realizes what a sight he must make, half-naked and dripping and missing fingers and washing a bloody shirt in the sink.

“Uh,” he begins, and then realizes that there’s no good way to convince them he hasn’t been standing in here crying. He wipes at his damp face, and then says, “I’m a paying customer.”

The attendant nods, slow and uncertain, and then goes into one of the stalls with a bottle of cleaning solution. Mike bolts.

The inside of the souvenir shop is more illuminated than their dingy bathrooms, and presents a more welcoming atmosphere from the get-go. It’s almost too welcoming, every item beckoning Mike to come look at it, every sign inviting him to spend money on something he doesn’t need. Thankfully, the attendant who’s cleaning the bathrooms is nowhere to be seen, so Mike shakes off the embarrassment and heads on in.

He passes on the racks of postcards with different Canadian scenery, figuring he’s seen enough on his trip already. There are coffee mugs for each province and miniature models of Parliament, but he doesn’t know anyone who’d have any use for them. Strangely enough, there’s a lot of Union Jack-branded paraphernalia, which doesn’t make any sense seeing as he isn’t in England.
His lie about being a paying customer turns out to be a prophecy; when he sees a box filled with stuffed animals, Mike can’t restrain himself. He goes over to look at the assortment of toys, and spots a fluffy beaver with cartoonish buckteeth. He pulls it out of the box, brushing it off and checking the price tag. Jess will either love it or hate it, but either way he can’t resist.

Mike hadn’t planned on buying gifts for anyone else, but when he takes the beaver up to the counter his eyes roam over the lighters and gum to a collection of jackknives. One in particular catches his eye; instead of faux leather or wood, the knife is covered with an ugly plastic decal. There’s a white wolf on it, and he can’t help himself—he grabs that too. Shae’s most likely going to hate it, but she’ll keep it with her forever.

There’s a bell, and a sign that says ‘ring for service’, and because Mike is honourable he doesn’t just take his items and drive. He rings the bell, and when nobody appears, he rings it again, craning his neck to look into the back of the shop. “Hell—”

He only gets through the first syllable of hello before the door opens, and out walks the same beleaguered attendant who he’d startled in the bathroom. Mike winces, but doesn’t falter, pushing his items forward on the counter. “Hey. Sorry… about that. Just these, please.”

“Well,” the attendant says, and makes eye contact for three seconds before nodding and reaching for the beaver and knife. The back of Mike’s neck is uncomfortably itchy. “How would you like to pay?”

“Oh, right. I forgot. Money,” he jokes, and when there is no reaction he fumbles for his wallet and exhales, “Sorry-cash-please.”

The attendant is wearing a nametag that is helpfully blank, missing the label where the name is supposed to go. Their eyebrows are raised at him—perhaps permanently—but they take his cash and hand him back his change.

Right as they pass him the money, Mike reads a sign behind them that says “Ask about our takeout menu!” and he’s hit by the realization that he hasn’t eaten anything in a while, followed by the sickening moment that he hasn’t eaten anything in almost two full days. He frowns, instantly aware of the empty feeling in his stomach. The lack of normal hunger is an unexpected symptom of his new enhanced endurance, and Mike sure as hell forgot to prepare for that one. He kind of wishes Shae had given him a more detailed guide on “How To Be A Werewolf”, but it seems like her solution to enhanced endurance is to never not be eating.

Mike closes his eyes for a moment, and steadies himself against the counter. Now that he’s thought about food, the desire is impossible to ignore. He wonders how he went this long without eating, and opens his eyes to look at the attendant. He’s not going to eat this bored cashier, but he does need to eat, and soon. “Can I… see your takeout menu?”

The cashier pauses in the middle of putting the gifts into a bag, and their left eye twitches. “Sure,” they say again, barely opening their mouth. They hand him a menu, and Mike gives them a wide and charming smile. It is not reciprocated.

Twenty minutes later he’s back in his car and cruising down the highway, blasting classic rock music and eating questionable takeout for dinner. The beaver is in the passenger seat, strapped in for safety, and Mike is drumming on the steering wheel in unison with the song.

He glances over at the stuffed animal next to him, and he can’t help but think about how much fun
it would be to do this trip with a pet dog beside him. Then, Mike leans his head out of the open window and lets the wind whip through his beard, and drives like that for a few minutes. It’s not as fun as he expected, but maybe that’s because he’s a human.

He pulls his head back inside the car, and for the rest of the night his brain is filled with intrusive and unshakable thoughts about dogs driving cars.

The traffic around him has stopped feeling unfamiliar, and Mike has stopped paying attention to every person that passes him. The air is more humid here than he thinks he remembers, and despite how late it is, he feels warm enough to drive with the window open a crack. The sea air whips in through the opening, ruffling his hair, and something about it is uniquely calming.

According to the dashboard clock, it’s 4:37 in the morning, on Friday the 27th. According to the signs flying by his car, he’s in Vancouver— for the first time in almost two weeks. And according to the moon peeking in through his open window, he’s different— but the city is the same.

He’s been up for an unhealthy amount of time, but Mike isn’t tired. If anything, he’s restless, so when he pulls into the city limits he doesn’t head straight for his apartment. Instead, he turns down his music and drives to the beach in the silent dark. He knows the route like the back of his hand; or maybe something more familiar, since his hands have recently undergone some notable changes. Something about the trip reminds him of his mother, and Mike glances over at the empty seat next to him.

The beaver looks up at him, beady eyes shining.

There are only three other cars parked in the lot, and no signs of life from anyone except the ocean. The waves crash loud enough onto the beach that Mike can hear them from inside his car, and he watches through his windshield for a minute before gathering his things and getting out.

Standing in the sand makes the reality of his surroundings set in, and Mike wraps his arms around himself and shivers. This feels like the opposite of Blackwood. His shirt is still damp, but it’s hard to focus on anything other than the sight in front of him. The moon’s reflection is dancing in the water, and he pulls out his phone.

He takes a handful of pictures, but none of them capture anything about it; they make the morning look so much darker than it is. The sun will be up in a few hours, and soon this beach will be vibrant with life. Runners pacing its lengths. Families walking their dogs. But right now, it’s just him and the horizon: two fluid, quiet things.

The storage on his phone is going to be full soon thanks to all the pictures he’s taken for Shae, but it doesn’t stop him from taking a video of the coastline. He wonders if she’s ever seen the ocean, and then flips the video around so that he’s in it.

“Breaking news,” he whispers, grinning at his phone screen. “Today, we managed to capture exclusive new footage of a mysterious cryptid. Watch this clip, and prepare to be amazed.” He closes his eyes for a second, trying hard to focus on growing fur, but all that seems to come to mind is how cold he is. He feels instant embarrassment, and opens one eye to look nervously at the camera. “Prepare… to be amazed… whenever I remember how to transform.”

The waves laugh quietly, and Mike sighs. “Any second now.”

He’s about to stop recording altogether when suddenly something compels him to look up, and he
obeys the impulse. The moon is there, like always, hidden from him in the sky— until it peeks out from behind its veil of clouds.

And all of a sudden, Mike doesn’t have to be worried about his newfound inability to transform, because he’s there— fur is racing along his skin, and it’s all he can do to remember to shove his phone in his pocket before stripping himself down. He peels his clothes off faster than he ever has before, and the transformation is nearly instant.

In one second he’s standing in the sand, toes wiggling in his shoes, and in the next he’s bounding towards the water on all fours. His embarrassment is nowhere to be found, and the same can be said for his thoughts of his friends, or of anything but this moment. He dives into the freezing cold ocean, and when he submerges, he whines happily.

It’s his fondest memory of that beach.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is only about a third as long as I thought it would be, but it has some major developments and hopefully you'll enjoy it!

On a quick personal note: The shock I felt when I checked the word count for this document and saw that it had reached 100,000 words was incomparable to anything else I’ve ever felt about something I’ve created. This fic has become really special to me, and even though I’m currently using it to procrastinate on my real life job (which is also, at the moment, me writing about werewolves... how did I fall into this niche), it means so much to me that I can't make myself dismiss it as something unimportant. Thank you all for indulging in this and (hopefully) enjoying it.

Also, thanks so much for your continued kind comments, and I hope that this story continues to interest everyone. Let me know what you think of this chapter!!

The west coast is warm, signs of spring poking through wherever they can. Michael’s vacation did not blur his knowledge of Vancouver; he doesn’t have to struggle for even a second to remember his way home. He knows this city.

While the sun rises, he drives down well-worn roads and up hills towards his apartment. People walk their dogs and bike to school. Nobody pays him any mind. As he switches from his exhausted playlist to the radio, an overeager morning show host fills his car with traffic news and the latest in pop culture, and Mike loses track of time.

Things are familiar, but not too familiar. The stairs leading up to his apartment are peppered with newsletters that someone couldn’t be bothered to put through the mail slot, and Mike picks them up, feeling like an alien. An intruder. He has to jiggle the key in his front door for a minute before it clicks and turns, and he can’t help but look around nervously— even though he’s certain that only makes him look more suspicious. His neighbours know who he is, right? The old guy next door isn’t going to call the police on him. Probably. Hopefully? Does crime even happen before nine in the morning?

The apartment itself is stagnant, which comes as a relief. Some part of Mike had expected roaches or rodents to have built their own home here in his absence, but thankfully that isn’t the case; everything is exactly as he left it. A half-packed bag is lying on the floor, and Mike scoops it up with a slight frown. He should have cleaned up before he left.

But if he’d waited any longer, maybe Shae would have gone to confront Josh on her own, and then everything would have been terrible.

Mike blocks out that thought as soon as he has it, shaking his head and wincing. He elects for a much less painful idea, picking up his mail from the past two weeks and starting to sift through it. The pile of flyers from outside considerably outnumbers the number of bills, and he smiles at all the deals he’s missed out on.

“Thirty percent off my first vape,” he speaks, and the apartment doesn’t respond, doesn’t laugh or
joke back or scoff. He’s lived here for over a year, but right now it doesn’t feel like a home— it feels like a big, empty building with nobody he cares about inside. It feels lonely, and abandoned, and sad.

Mike dumps all the flyers into the recycling, and then takes out his phone to pay some of the bills.

**Sam:** Are you back in the city yet? :)

**Ma:** Hi sweetheart, are you back in the city yet? Sam gave me a call yesterday to let me know you weren’t dead.. It’s nice to know I have at least one child that worries about me. I always wanted a daughter ;)

**Ma:** Just kidding… MOSTLY!

**Ma:** <3

He grins at the texts, replying ‘yes’ to both. Sam’s relationship with her parents is sometimes strained, so it’s nice to know she’s been keeping in touch with a mother who cares about her, even if it isn’t her own. Mike clears his notifications, not that there are many, and he pays his phone bill for March. Money is a little tight, but money has always been a little tight; he’s learned the hard way to stretch out what he has into what he needs. Thankfully, he doesn’t think he’ll be returning to finish his first year of university any time soon, so at least he doesn’t need to worry about that debt.

Fighting the lingering sadness about his empty apartment, Mike gets to cleaning. He eats the snacks that had been meant for the road trip, stomach rumbling in delight, but he doesn’t feel particularly full or hungry. Being a werewolf is weird. Before he opens his fridge he can smell the contents, and they don’t smell great.

His mother’s voice echoes in his head from a lifetime ago. “I knew you should have lived on campus. This place is a pigsty.”

Mike can’t help but wonder if she’ll be proud of him now, of what he’s done. Who he is. The last time she saw him, he was struggling with trauma so heavy he thought he would never be able to shake it. Now he’s different; when he thinks about the mountain, his hands don’t shake and his jaw doesn’t set. When he dreams, his brain doesn’t plague him with relentless memories and nightmares about Hannah and death. He thinks about rebuilding the stairs in the lodge, not sawing his own fingers off. His thoughts of cannibal miners have been replaced with thoughts of the accidental cannibal he knows and lo—

Well. A lot of things have changed for the better.

He texts Jessica, because every time he starts to think about Josh his brain derails itself. He’s done this a hundred times before, with a dozen different girls, and he doesn’t want it to be this way with the two of them. Trying to keep both isn’t fair— Jess deserves better, as does Josh. And if Mike’s honest with himself, this is a long overdue conversation.

**Mike:** Hey! I’m back in Vancouver and I owe you an explanation. Are you free to meet up today? Coffee maybe?

Jess doesn’t reply right away, and Mike realizes his phone is shaking in his hands. He puts it down, steeling himself to not be anxious about this. Instead of sitting around and waiting for her to contact him, he decides to be productive with his time and clean himself up.

Unfortunately, showering comes with unexpected difficulty. The hot water stings his skin instead of calming him down, and halfway through his shower the light above him starts flickering. He has to change the bulb, but he isn’t going to wander around his apartment nude to do it. He grimaces
and tries to refocus on the water.

The facts he knows to be true keep conflicting with what his brain is telling him is real. He knows he’s alone, but it’s hard to persuade himself that he’s alone when he keeps feeling sensation all over his body. Mike opens his eyes just to triple-check that no one else is around: sure enough, no one is touching him except the water.

He closes his eyes and lets out a heavy sigh loud enough to disrupt the silence. His fingers are starting to prune up under the stream, but he can’t convince himself to turn the water off.

“What’d you think was in here, Mike?” he asks himself, echoing his words from when he’d gotten himself tangled up in the cabin’s spooky shower curtain. “Come on.”

His eyes stutter open once more and Mike’s hands skitter across his body like it is an unfamiliar plane. He recognizes the early warning signs of freaking out, but he doesn’t exactly know how to stop the onslaught. His brain is glitching; constantly sending him signals that something is wrong. Something’s incorrect. He’s taking a shower, a task that should be incredibly mundane, but he’s somehow managing to fuck it up.

When he turns around to grab the bottle of conditioner, he sees Hannah.

Instinct takes over and he freezes, hand jarred in the air. He can hardly hear the running water over the sound of his frantic pulse. He breathes out and lowers his hand and forces himself to open his eyes and see—

Nothing. Nothing is there, and no one is in his shower. Least of all Hannah Washington.

“Fuck,” he exhales, his voice almost unrecognizable. “Fuck.”

He remembers— with bemusement— how he’d zoned out trying to spy Hannah in the bathwater back at the lodge. He’d considered water as a potential new aspect of his trauma, but he’d forgotten all about that discovery upon the sight of a shirtless Josh. He’s seen Han a thousand times in nightmares, but zoning out during the day to hallucinate about her is a new low.

(There had been one vivid night not long after the mountain, when Jessica was staying over at his house. He had fallen asleep curled up with her, holding her tight to protect her as best he could. Jess had twisted out of his grip in the middle of the night, and when his fists closed around empty air, he woke up in a panic— and the first sight his brain supplied him with was a wendigo perched on the end of his mattress.

His scream had been loud enough to make Jess run into the room, wide awake and wide-eyed. Her words almost went unheard; soft voice tempered by trauma and sleepiness. “What? What happened?”

“She was here,” Mike sobbed, and only became aware he was crying after speaking. “She was right there. I saw her.”

Jess climbed into his bed, into his arms, and Mike clung to her like a child would hold a doll. He kept his eyes wide open to focus on her blonde hair, her dark eyelashes. Anything that would convince his brain she wasn’t an undead monster.

“Just a dream,” Jessica murmured against his chest, already losing consciousness. “Back to sleep.”

But I hadn’t been asleep danced on the edge of Mike’s lips, but he didn’t say anything as Jess’ breathing evened out. He hadn’t slept again that whole night.)
Mike turns off the shower, breathing hard, and runs to pick up his phone. His fingers dial the number through pure muscle memory, and he ignores the fact that he looks ridiculous and that he’s dripping all over his carpet. He waits one, two, three rings, and then exhales as a familiar voice comes through the receiver.

“He—Hello?”

His relief is tangible. “Hi, Jess.”

The line is so quiet he almost thinks Jessica has hung up, and then he hears her voice again, a little louder than before. “Michael?”

The art on the walls is indistinguishable from any other hipster coffee shop, as are the plants that get to drink spring water. There’s a placard instructing patrons to keep up with various social media accounts, and a half-full tip jar with a funny drawing. In one corner there is a congregation of moms and strollers, deep in a conversation about something inaudible. In the other, an exhausted university student is bent over their laptop, accompanied by two and a half empty mugs of coffee and one of tea. Their headphones are in so far they might be brushing against their skull, and Mike would bet money that they’ve been here at least since the shop opened.

A latte is sitting at the table in front of him, foam starting to coagulate unpleasantly. Mike has never met a cup of coffee he didn’t like, so he’ll probably still drink it. Beside his latte is an untouched London Fog in a matching white mug; it has steeped for so long that the tea is probably strong enough to lift the cup itself.

The bell above the door chimes, announcing someone’s entrance, and Mike whips around in his seat—only to see an elderly couple looking at him curiously. Mike settles back down, stretching out his sleeves and trying not to be embarrassed. It would be pretty much the worst thing ever if he got stood up by his girlfriend while trying to break up with her.

He’s on the verge of getting up to go check his hair in the one-stall bathroom for the third time when he sees someone standing in his peripheral vision. Mike pauses, hands hovering an inch from his scalp, and then turns to look at the girl he hasn’t seen in three weeks.

Jessica’s hair is still blonde. Her eyes are still blue. She’s wearing a long grey sweater he doesn’t recognize; it’s a size too big for her, and that strikes a chord in his memory, but he doesn’t know whose it is. Her hands are shaking, and before he can help himself, he reaches out to take them in his.

“Hi,” he says, jumping to his feet. “Hey.” Jess embraces him readily, leaning into him like they never forgot how to do this. The hug is comfortable, if a touch too long; Mike tries to pull away and Jess clings to him silently. He remembers what Sam said about her selective muteness as of recent, and guilt shoots through him yet again. At this point, if he’s going to write an autobiography, he thinks the title should probably just be something like ‘I’m Sorry and also Yikes’.

He holds her for another beat before patting her shoulder softly and moving away. Jess releases him. “I got you tea,” he says, feeling dumb even as the words leave his mouth. He points to the tea, and to the seat across from him, and he finds himself momentarily terrified when she doesn’t sit down immediately. If Jessica walks out of this café now, he has no idea how he’s going to do what he’s about to.
But fortunately Jess smiles at the tea, and he breathes easy again. She takes a seat, pulling at her sleeves anxiously as she does so. Mike notices that she’s still wearing the silver necklace he got her, and it sends another bolt of remorse through him. He wonders if she’ll dramatically rip it off as she storms out. “It might be a little cold, um… I got here early.”

He hadn’t, actually— Jess is just late. But she reaches for the tea and takes a sip which is hopefully a good sign. Another thirty seconds of silence pass, and Mike feels like he’s drowning in all the words she isn’t saying. “Jess… I’m sorry.”

Jess’ eyebrows crinkle together uncomfortably, and she looks down into her mug of tea. A full minute of silence passes between them, during which Mike adjusts himself in his seat several times. He can’t help but fidget, but he stays silent at least, letting Jessica take her time. After they’d first come back down from the mountain, she’d needed to collect her thoughts like this before most sentences. It’s nothing new, but it’s upsetting to see the symptom return.

When she finally speaks it catches Mike off-guard; her voice is too quiet for him to hear anything, and he’d been looking down. “What?”

Jess gnaws her lower lip, and blinks slowly, doe eyes filled with concern. She repeats, “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, are you okay?” Mike instantly replies, and then cringes at how stupid his own gut reaction is. “I mean, yeah, yeah, I’m good, I’m okay.”

“Are you… sure?” Jess sounds nearly sick, like her throat is hoarse. Her voice is nearly pained. “Michael, I was so worried. Wh… Where have you been?”

Now or never. “On a trip,” Mike chickens out, lowering his gaze to the table. His latte looks sad, so he raises it up to his mouth and sips it. It’s pretty subpar. “I didn’t think it would take as long as it did.”

“Chris said,” Jess starts slowly, every word calculated, “that you w-were visiting your mom. But he told me he was worried that you w-went back up to the… to the mountain.” She stares at him, and this time, he meets her gaze instead of looking away. Jess confesses, “I thought you’d been kidnapped or something,” and her hands fly away from the table as she starts to fidget with her sleeves again.

“I wasn’t kidnapped,” he reassures her, and Jess’ shoulders sag with relief. “I’m fine, I promise. I’m better than before.”

“Well… well…” That seems to hit a nerve of some kind, and Jess reaches up to run a hand through her hair, frustrated. “Can you explain, like… where you went, then? Please?”

He thinks about how she might react if he were to tell her he went back to the mines where she’d been lost all night, tracking down the same kind of monster that haunts both their nightmares. He imagines what the look on Jessica’s face would be if he were to tell her that Josh is alive, and kicking, and hungry—he doesn’t think it’ll be too happy.

But on the other hand, it doesn’t feel right to lie to her. The whole truth might be too much right now, but he can’t exactly tell some fake story about not going up the mountain when he’s going to be heading back there in a few days. Mike steadies his hands on the table, and then looks up at her, praying she won’t freak out. “Okay, the truth is… I went back to Blackwood.”

Predictably, Jess freaks out; her hands fly to her mouth one second too late to try to block out a
half-gasp, half-shriek. The other customers glance over; the moms give Mike a collective judgmental glare and the barista behind the counter raises their eyebrows but doesn’t comment. “You went back?” Jess hisses, looking and sounding petrified. “W-Why in the fuck would you want to go back to that waking hell?”

“I didn’t feel right here,” Mike blurts out, and this twists the expression on Jess’ face from terrified to completely lost. He realizes he’s somehow getting defensive over a mountain, let alone a mountain he and his friends all nearly died on (and that two of them did die on) so he abruptly changes his tone. “No, like, what I mean is I— nothing felt right here. I was just so upset all the time, and I could never say anything about it because I knew nobody would understand, but… I just constantly felt like I left something behind.”

Jess’ mouth is twisted up like she’s conflicted about something, but she nods slowly. “You could have… said something, if you were upset, I— I knew you weren’t doing well, you could have talked to me. I’m not doing so hot either.”

“Not that,” Mike says, trying to summon his courage. “I felt like I abandoned… uh… shit. Okay. So, in the sanatorium, I found a wolf, okay?”

For a long, uncomfortable moment, the only sounds in the café are the background chatter of other patrons, the noise of grinding coffee beans, and quiet acoustic music. Jess stares at him for a full minute before asking slowly, “Was it… a real wolf?”

“What? Yes, it was real,” Mike sputters, even though hey, actually, it technically wasn’t. “It wasn’t a fever dream, it was this wolf that the flamethrower guy kept as his pet. And it helped me get through the sanatorium, kind of like… my guide. So after we got rescued, I kept feeling like shit because I left this wolf behind.”

Jess blinks, long and uncomprehending. “So you… went back… for a dog.” She stares at him like more of the story is going to reveal itself on his face, and then a small smile breaks over her face. “That is the most Michael Munroe-ass thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Yeah, well,” Mike starts, and then ducks his head to laugh. He can’t help how good it feels to get this off his chest. “Yeah.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Jess breathes in, shaking herself off. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m okay, I promise,” he assures her, reaching across the table to offer her his hand, palm up. “Are you okay?”

“Well,” Jess starts, and then cuts herself off, lips going tight. She looks like Emily for an instant, and then something very close to sadness flashes across her face. “Yeah, I’m… I’m okay. I… that isn’t what I wanted to talk about today.”

Mike has broken up with enough girls to make a calendar of sad memories, but this part never gets any easier. He can feel the impending awkwardness already, and he shifts around in his seat to try to rid himself of extra discomfort. “I have a feeling I know what we’re gonna talk about,” he says, and laughs to try to relieve some tension.

It doesn’t work. Jess leans onto her fist, elbow resting on the table; she purses her lips before speaking softly. “Yeah.”

Suddenly, Mike realizes that he has no idea what he’s going to do if Jess starts crying. He might not be in love with her, but she’s one of his absolute best friends, and they’ve been through hell
together. He doesn’t want this to end badly, but he’s already changed the track so it’s too late to stop the train wreck. He pulls his hand back to his own side of the table, and frowns gently before repeating, “Are you okay?”

“This is just really hard,” Jess says, raising her eyes to look at the ceiling of the café. Mike winces, hoping not to see tears, but then Jess continues, “I’ve never dumped somebody before.”

Things stop making sense. Mike rewinds through Jess’ last sentence, hoping to extract meaning from the words that might help him glean exactly what is happening right now. “You… what??”

“I’m sorry,” Jess says, lowering her eyes to look at him. Colour is rising to her face rapidly, and Mike begins to realize that even though he was the one that asked Jess to come meet him, they have had a wildly different understanding of the situation. “I’m so sorry, Mike. You’re really charming, and sweet, and this isn’t really because you left. I just… I don’t think I like you like that.”

“What?” Mike repeats, feeling absolutely dumbfounded.

“I… I really like Matt,” Jess says, and a blush instantly flares up in her cheeks. It’s the most colour Mike has seen on her face in a month. “Nothing has happened, but I… uh… I like him, and I have for a while. And I think he likes me back.”

“Oh.” And suddenly, Emily’s texts rush back to Mike, and Mike understands what every one of his exes must have felt— except his realization is accompanied by a wave of relief. This is a picture-perfect solution; he should have expected this exact scenario, seeing as he’s been a pretty fucking garbage boyfriend. “That’s, uh… yeah. Okay. To tell you the truth, Jess, I’d rather be your friend anyway.”

“R-Really?” Jess’ tone is delighted, but definitely streaked with disbelief. “Oh! Okay. Good. Because, you and me, we’re best friends for life. Even if you go on long-ass trips without letting anyone know so you can go find imaginary wolves.”

“She isn’t—” he starts, and then shakes his head. “Okay. Best friends for life. That works for me.”

Jess smiles, brighter than usual. “Thanks, Mike.” She gets up from her chair, and beckons him up; and then pulls him into a crushing hug. They used to tell jokes that Jess had a bird skeleton instead of a human one, but Mike suspects there might be stronger metal than either of them expected.

He hugs her tightly, and this time, she’s the first one to pull away. “Here,” she mutters, voice stained with shame. She starts to fidget behind her neck, and then unclasps the silver necklace. “I, uh, looked up how much this was— it’s really, really sweet, but I understand if you want it back —”

“No way,” Mike interrupts instinctively, and shrugs with one shoulder. “You should keep it.”

Jess stares up at him, twinkling eyes hiding some emotion Mike doesn’t understand, and then she nods. “Alright. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Mike grins, and then ducks down to reach into his bag. “Here, while we’re talking about gifts! Just a little something to apologize for my absence.”

“Oh.” Jess starts, and then gasps when she sees the beaver, “Oh! He’s so cute! Jesus, you’re making me feel so guilty right now.”

“Don’t feel guilty,” he says, and holds back a joke about how that’s his job. “You’re still my best
friend, right? Take it as a best friend gift.” Jessica’s smile wobbles and Mike starts to feel bad, so he quickly adds, “Isn’t it cute how its teeth match yours?”

Jess socks him in the arm, which is well-deserved, and then rocks up onto her toes to kiss his cheek. “You’re the coolest guy I know,” she says, and it sounds honest.

He laughs it off, but it makes him feel better. He grins at the beaver and at Jess, and then mutters, “I try.”

She reaches up to pluck at his chin gently with his fingers, and then laughs louder than Mike’s heard her laugh in a while. “And I like the beard by the way. You look l-like a regular mountain man.”

Mike resists the urge to tell her that he kind of is now, and just smiles.

On the day Mike first moves into his apartment, Vancouver is humid. It’s been raining all afternoon, and his hair is a mess. He remembers his ma pointing it out, and also remembers getting huffy about it.

“You don’t have to tease me,” he grumbles, and wishes that his hands were free so he could flatten down his scalp. His arms are occupied otherwise; he’s got three boxes piled on top of each other. They tried to bring as much of his things as they could carry, but he still catches himself wondering every few seconds what he’s forgotten. After this, he’ll drive Grace back to their old apartment, and she’ll keep packing for her move to Penticton while he starts to get his new life together.

“I’m not teasing,” Grace says, her smile betraying that she absolutely is. “It looks cute like that; it’s nearly curly. You look like Josh.”

Mike rolls his eyes as his mother searches her pockets for the keys. His gaze drifts to the house beside the apartment, where an old man is sitting on the steps and smoking an honest-to-goodness cigar. Mike nods uncertainly, and the man nods back. A sign in the window of his house declares that he sells USED BOOKS and buys JEWELRY, which seems like an odd way and place to run a business.

There are only a few cars parked on the street, and everything is relatively still. This isn’t the first time they’ve been to check out the apartment, but this is the first time that it’s been his apartment. He’s infinitesimally glad that his ma hasn’t made him live in a dormitory; that wouldn’t be fun at all right now. News travels fast, and just about everyone who doesn’t know about the prank at least knows about the twins disappearing.

He’s already caught enough flak from his high-school friends about what happened; Emily and him are going through one hell of a rough patch and he’s been getting the silent treatment from Sam, Chris, and Josh. Hannah and Beth are beautiful, kind, and beloved by all; every day that they aren’t found sends Mike deeper into a well of paranoia. He doesn’t know what he’s gonna do when they are found, let alone what will happen if they aren’t.

“Oh, what am I doing?” His ma laughs, self-conscious. “This is your place. You should be the one to open it.” Mike flinches, knocked out of his thoughts by a sudden hand holding a ring of keys.

Mike takes the key, and turns it in the door. It’s easy, simple. It’s nothing and it’s everything.

The door swings open slowly, and Mike looks at the empty apartment. For the first time since he saw Beth and Hannah run away through the woods, he starts to feel like things will maybe be okay.
Moving out of an apartment is a hell of a lot harder than moving in, as Mike quickly learns after a few hours of packing. It seems like everything he’s lost over the past year is suddenly reappearing, demanding his attention. He does a lot less packing and cleaning and a lot more finding and remembering.

His beluga toy peeks out from between piles of detritus on his bed, clothes he thought he lost and textbooks he never opened. He finds a letter from Hannah, and that takes up a good forty minutes. Part of him wants to fold it up and give it to Josh, but that hardly seems decent when most of the letter is about horses and about him and how very badly she’d like to go horseback riding with him.

(He had, actually, managed to fulfill that particular Hannah Washington fantasy, and not at the expense of her life either. All the gym classes from different grades had been lumped together into two outdoor education classes, and Hannah had ended up in Mike’s class, as had Josh. Mike remembers Hannah not-so-subtly riding next to him with hearts in her eyes the whole time, and Josh riding close behind them and talking to Chris about John Wayne the whole time. Whether Josh had intended to ruin the moment as a protective older brother or he was just super passionate about an Old Hollywood racist was lost to time forever.)

Mike packs up his socks, folding what he can into suitcases and boxes. He might run out of room in his truck, but if he’s got to, he’ll just drop things off at his ma’s house. He isn’t planning to come back to this apartment for a while, if ever. Right now the idea of staying here is suffocating.

He thinks about Josh and Shae a lot; he wonders how they’re doing, if they’re getting along. He wonders if they’re safe together or if they’ve gotten in any more danger—from the mountain or from each other.

He wonders if they miss him as much as he misses them.

Sometimes it feels like Mike has drawn so many people into his closest inner circle that if he stops paying attention to any single one of them for even a second, they’ll disappear forever. It felt like that when he was still dating Emily but he became aware of his feelings for Jess. It felt like that when Chris and Josh used to joke about his ego, and then go home together and leave him to his own devices. It felt like that when Shae was looking through his phone, bewildered by the amount of friends he had amassed when he was her very first—unaware that she was the most important one.

It feels like that when he thinks about Josh, because thoughts of Josh are intermittently tangled with Chris, Josh’s best friend and probable soulmate. Chris, who hates Mike’s guts right now, and Josh, who has unknown feelings about Mike’s guts other than probably wanting to eat them.

Only halfway through packing up his DVDs (and making notes of which ones he’s bringing to the mountain) does Mike yawn, and then all his fatigue comes rushing down at once. He hasn’t slept in days. It isn’t even evening yet, and being a teen wolf means he could probably last a while longer, but now that he’s had the idea to sleep it’s inescapable.

His bed is cold, but the blanket is warm. Mike passes out before he remembers to be scared of nightmares.

- 

Josh is there beside him, in his bed. The walls are a pleasant orange, and the ceiling is patterned
with something Mike doesn’t recognize. Or doesn’t remember. Maybe it isn’t his bed, but Josh is there beside him, so he takes care not to question anything.

“Hi,” he tries to say, but the words get swallowed up because Josh is kissing him. Before Mike can adjust from Josh beside him, Josh is on top of him, kissing him soundly, and it’s slow and soft and he loses himself to it. Josh’s teeth are sharp. His lips are not. This is what Mike has dreamed of a hundred times before—and he knows it’s a dream because Josh hasn’t said anything snarky yet. But it’s never been this good, this warm.

In high school, his sex dreams of Josh were all outrageously impossible, due to a lack of understanding and a wild imagination. He remembers vivid red heat, limbs pulled ways they usually aren’t, and gasping for air until his blood runs out of oxygen.

This time, nothing is in danger of running. Mike lets time fly by them, light flashing impossibly fast around the bed. But he doesn’t open his eyes, he just kisses and kisses and kisses Josh. It’s good. It’s perfect.

Josh’s teeth are sharp, and his lips are not, but his teeth are sharp. His hips press down into Mike’s own, but as Mike strains to move he finds sharpness there too. Josh’s grip on his face is tight, like he’s trying to pull Mike’s skin off, and Mike hesitates for a second before opening his eyes.

There’s a skeleton on top of him, with skin stretched taut over its bones. The cavities where its eyes once lived are painted red, and its hands are trying to crack Michael’s own skull in two with brute force.

The second he realizes this, the thin layer of flesh holding everything together disintegrates. The skeleton’s bones land all over him, rattle together like xylophone bars. The teeth, so sharp they could be blades, click against each other as they fall towards his lips. Mike shoves all the bones away from himself, kicking and thrashing and flailing, and he’s distracted for long enough that it takes him a while to realize what the heat is.

He freezes in place, limbs akimbo. The orange walls are ablaze, and the ceiling looks just like it did in the sanatorium. The room is on fire.

When he wakes up, shaking and sweating, he looks around for Shae’s white fur and is only greeted by the sight of the tiny white beluga. Mike reaches for it anyway, clinging to the baby beluga as reality sets in. He’s not in the sanatorium, but he’s not on the mountain either; the knowledge comes as both a comfort and a disappointment. He clutches the toy to his chest for a few minutes, and then forces himself to get moving.

“I can’t stay here,” he tells his constant companion from childhood. The toy whale watches him, unblinking and unmoving. Mike closes his eyes, and then mutters once more, “I have to go back.”

Now that he knows what it’s like to feel free, the idea of confining himself in this tiny apartment for one day longer is suffocating. So Mike does what any college dropout looking for guidance would do—he calls his mom.

Grace picks up on the first ring, like she’d been holding the phone and sitting on the porch just waiting for him to call. It’s quite the mental image. “Hey, ma,” he says, and winces, preparing himself for the lecture of his life.

Instead, what she replies with is “Hi, kiddo,” and a soft laugh. Relief shines through her voice, and
he wonders how worried she really was. “It’s good to hear that voice.”

“It’s nice to hear your voice too,” Mike says, and to his intense embarrassment he realizes his own voice is cloudy with emotion. He coughs, trying to sound a little gruffer. “I… uh… how’s it going?”

“Well, my son isn’t dead, so that’s a nice change to my afternoon,” his mom replies, and Mike cringes, checking the time. It’s somehow only an hour past noon; he must have peacefully slept through most of the day and all of the night.

“Sorry,” he apologizes quietly. “I didn’t mean to be gone for so long.”

“Well, next time you’re going to leave the city, you let me know beforehand,” she scolds. That’s closer to what he expected. “And don’t you dare use me as an excuse to your friends— unless they start picking on you again.”

Mike blushes, and is instantly glad this is a phone conversation and not a real life one. Nobody’s picked on him since the second grade. “I will. I, um,” he starts, and then glances around his empty apartment. “I actually wanted to talk to you about something important. It’s kind of… related to why I went away. And where I went. Can I come over tonight?”

To Mike’s surprise, his mom doesn’t instantly say yes. The line is quiet for a moment as she hesitates, and then she says, “Sorry, Michael. You know I love you more than anything in the world, but I… uh… already made plans for tonight. I didn’t think you’d come back home this soon, honey.”

“Oh yeah?” Mike frowns, trying not to let his ego be bruised by his mother having plans more important than him, her only child. “What’s up?”

There’s a giggle in the background of the call, and when Grace speaks again, he can hear the smile in her voice. “I’ve got a lady friend staying the night.”

“Oh,” he replies, and then as the meaning of her words sinks in, “oh. Augh. No, god, no! Cheese and crackers, ma, why would you tell me that?!?”

“You asked, kid,” his mom supplies. The background giggle has turned into a near cackle, and Mike can feel his face going ashen. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt this scandalized in his entire life. “You don’t want me to tell you about my love life? That’s unfair when I have to listen to your whining for anyone who’ll give you the time of day. I had to sit through you and Emily trying to get along, and you and Jess sneaking around. It’s not like you walked in on me and saw my hand in the nookie jar—”

“Please, please, please, please, please shut up,” Mike begs. “Stop talking. Please. Ma. Mom. Shut up. God, I’m going to have nightmares again tonight. You’re the devil.”

“Don’t blaspheme,” Grace chides him, despite not having gone to church in a decade and a half. “You really don’t want me to tell you anything?”

“I forbid you from telling me any of the details. I forbid it. As long as you’re happy, that’s all I need to know. Seriously. That’s it.”

“Well, alright,” she says, after a moment of thought. “I am happy. You can come over tomorrow morning if that works for you, honey.” There’s a whisper in the background of the call, and then his ma amends, “After eleven.”
“Deal,” Mike says, and mutters out a hasty “Love you,” before he can hear anything more from his mom’s new lady friend, or his outrageous mother.

Grace replies, “You too,” and the line goes dead. His baby beluga is staring up at him from his lap with the same sympathetic beady eyes that Jessica’s toy has, and Mike shakes his head down at the toy.

“She’s out of control,” he tells the toy, and the beluga is unblinking and unmoving but it seems to agree.

Mike: Hey everyone! Sorry I’ve been out of town for so long. I promise I’m ok. Better than ever. It’s been hard to adjust and I know I owe all of you an explanation. Most of all my main man Chris who has been straight up ignoring my texts for days now like he’s Rachel McAdams in th

“No. That’s not nice,” Mike sighs, and forces himself to start again.

Mike: Hey everyone! Sorry I’ve been MIA for so long :( To those of you that I haven’t talked to yet: things have been a little rocky for me— in a good way! I owe all of you an explanation and I thought I would try to get everyone together at once. For old times sake ;) Reunion party at my place tonight at 7. Ill take care of party supplies its the least I can do
Sam: YAY!
Matt: :O
Ash: oh SHIT
Sam: I’ll be there!
Jess: i`ll be there <3
Matt: (1 Image Attachment) http://gifsite.net/1285/yzma_he-s_still_alive_?!.gif
Matt: o oops didn’t mean to send the link too
Jess: party supplies better mean good snacks this time
Ash: matt have you had that waiting the whole time in case he came back? Imaooo
Emily: “In case”
Ash: Well
Matt: ill be there, 100%... just glad ur ok man
Jess: ^
Sam: ^
Emily: ^
Ash: ^^^
Chris: I’m coming too.

Mike tries not to let his eyes pop out of his head as he stares at Chris’ comment and tries to decipher it a hundred different ways. He chews his lip, kicking his feet back and forth. It feels so fucking amazing to talk to his friends again.

Mike: I’m ok <3 You guys are great
Emily: Obviously.
Mike: @Jessica Riley What does “good snacks this time” mean though?
Mike: My snack game is strong
Jess: Crunchy cheetos are an abomination
Ash: RETWEET!
Matt: TRUE
Chris: True
Mike: What the eff
Sam: Not this again
Emily: Matt last time you were on our side. What gives
Matt: I learned to love myself
Sam: Both types of cheetos are good! I like puffy and crunchy!
Ash: FALSE!
Chris: Debatable
Mike: Et tu Matt
Jess: Oh look at me I’m so smart I quote Shakespeare and eat shriveled orange twigs
Mike: What’s the difference
Ash: are you FUCKING kidding me
Chris: Is that a joke?
Matt: lol what
Sam: Guys please!
Ash: im breathing in some fresh oxygen and pretending i didn't read that just now
Emily: I can’t believe I dated you
Jess: Same
Sam: Please we can’t keep doing this!!

Mike stands up from his computer, grabbing his house keys and a handful of change. Seven minutes later he returns triumphant from the corner store to sixty-five new messages. He ignores them all in favour of snapping a quick selfie of himself with a bag of crunchy Cheetos, and sends it to the chat without a second thought.

Emily: Did he disappear again
Mike: (1 Image Attachment)
Emily: Holy SHIT Michael
Chris: Holy fuck
Ash: HOLY FUCK
Matt: brooding white male video game protagonist
Chris: Holy shit
Ash: fuck dude
Mike: ???????????? What?
Sam: Your beard looks really nice!
Mike: Oh yeah… oops haha. Spoiled the reveal!
Ash: Good shit
Matt: Looks sexy bro
Chris: ^
Emily: Is this why you disappeared for two weeks
Jess: You are all WEAKLINGS
Jess: I’ve already seen his beard in real life. I’m not distracted from the disgusting bag of crunchiness. Stop trying to be seditious Michael and face up to your snack sins.
Mike: See you all at 7

His cheeks are almost aching, and Mike realizes he hasn’t stopped grinning since everyone said they’d come right away. He closes his computer, and tries to ignore the swooping feeling in his heart. He missed all his friends so badly, and despite all the awkwardness and drama lurking barely below the surface, it feels so nice to get to talk to them. He thinks that the bond between the eight
of them is entirely unbreakable; he’d thought the mountain had broken them apart but it’s only strengthened their group dynamic. He lies back on his bed, thinking about how dearly he loves his friends.

And then he eats a whole bag of crunchy Cheetos, because *fuck* his friends.
I've been writing this fic for over a year now, which is UNREAL. Thank you for sticking with me through thick and thin! I'm sorry for the delay on this chapter; it was one of the parts I was the most excited to write and I hope you enjoy. Also, happy belated Halloween!

The next person on Mike’s list of people to see in Vancouver is the one he’s been dreading the most, but he knows he can’t shirk this responsibility. He doesn’t play any music on the trip to West Van, letting his anxiety fester as he drives in silence.

He wishes more than anything that Shae was here to help him do this, but she’d hate this more than anything. Then he briefly wonders if he should try to contact Josh. The idea stems from cowardice; he knows if he contacted Josh, Josh would tell him to turn the car around right now and get out of there while he still could.

Mike hasn’t been to this neighbourhood in years, and his memories of it range from wonderful to downright unbelievable. As he drives through the rainforest, he passes trees taller than anything the Rockies have to offer, and he thinks about exploring the back paths with Beth and Sam on hikes. He remembers pricking his fingers on blackberry bushes with Hannah, and helping Josh sneak out to go to parties neither of them really wanted to go to anyway.

But he also remembers the people he’s going to visit today, and his heart sinks at the confusing and vivid memories. He pulls up in front of the Washington estate and parks outside, heart already pounding in his chest. The house is tall and alabaster, and everything about it exudes wealth. There is no gate or fencing around the house, but a thick swath of trees outlines the edge of the land.

It’s an unnecessarily large property; he knows these people own a mountain, but there still seems something unnecessarily wasteful about having land big enough for an outdoor pool *and* an orchard. There are towers growing out of the house that Mike swears he doesn’t remember from his childhood visits here. They might have renovated at some point.

“Come out to the coast,” he mutters to himself, hands curling around his steering wheel. “We’ll get together. Have a few laughs.”

Here’s what Mike remembers about Bob and Melinda Washington.

They’re an odd couple by all accounts; rich beyond measure despite always investing in the strangest ventures. It’s difficult to imagine the type of people who would try to purchase a mountain being the same type of people who raised three teenagers at once. Bob is in the film industry; he creates horror movies and risky thrillers that usually pay off. Mike can never remember what Melinda’s job is— she always has fingers in too many pies to count. He’s heard her talk of fashion, and business, and banks. She might have been a doctor at one point, but it’s impossible to recall.

Mrs. Washington always gave Mike the heebie-jeebies, which was weird because he’s pretty used to trusting moms and hating dads. The man of the house, on the other hand, seems like a harmless
idiot— albeit a stern father with a basement full of guns and discarded set pieces. When Mike’s ma had dropped him off for sleepovers she had always made pleasant conversation with Bob but never quite meshed with Melinda. Mike doesn’t blame her.

After their daughters went missing, it took one week for Melinda to go through their rooms in search of clues. Upon finding nothing, she packed up their clothes and books and possessions into neat boxes and hid them away in the attic. Mike knows all this from Chris, who had relayed the information to him last year. Mike hasn’t been to this house since the first trip up to Blackwood.

He wonders if Melinda has already packed up Josh’s room or if she’s holding out hope.

Mike approaches the front door and knocks (with the knocker, because of course there’s a knocker). For an instant, he’s on his own on the stone porch, feeling exposed in the bright afternoon sunlight. He wishes impulsively that Shae was with him to help him find courage, and then braces himself to do this alone.

There are footfalls from inside the house, and then a pause, and then the door opens. Sure enough, it isn’t Bob but Melinda— just his luck. There’s a set of wrinkles around her eyes that have deepened in the last year, and she’s holding her chin high. For some reason, she’s dressed less like a mother and more like a monarch. Her haughty posture is complemented by a white dress shirt and white dress pants, accompanied by a silver watch and no other jewelry.

“Michael!” She greets him, stepping forward to hug him. Despite her smile, she still looks sad, and there’s something different about her eyes. She’s still grieving, of course. “What an unexpected surprise. How have you been?”

Her words aren’t the guilt trip he’d anticipated, so Mike swallows his nervousness and hugs her back. “I’ve been alright— out of town, actually. I just got back yesterday.”

Melinda smiles wider, but the melancholy in her face doesn’t quite disappear. “With your mother?”

“No,” he says, and glances over her shoulder. The house appears to be empty, and he isn’t sure if he should feel relieved or not that Bob is absent. Melinda will be less likely to level a gun at his head when he tells her about her missing son— probably. “Uh, can I come in? I have something I have to talk to you about.”

Melinda’s eyes sharpen, but she only nods and answers, “Certainly,” opening the door wider. She gestures inside with a long, gracious sweep of her arm, and Mike moves past her, unease rising with every step.

The inside of the house is just as grand as the outside, with high ceilings and no clutter. As he toes out of his shoes in the foyer, Mike tries to reconcile his memories of the Washington Party House with this lonely, vacant place that feels like a crypt. There are photos of Josh, Hannah, and Beth perched on a mantel, and Mike gravitates to the familiar faces, moving over to look at the family pictures.

Melinda moves past him, paying him no mind as she heads into another room. “Would you like anything to drink?”

“Water is fine,” Mike replies, looking at a picture of Beth with her snowboard and Hannah with skis. Josh is behind Hannah, holding a ski pole like a sword and caught mid-maniacal laugh. No date is visible, but the frame has a thin layer of dust covering it. Mike runs his fingertip across the glass, wiping it clean but leaving a smudge in his wake.
“I’ll make tea,” comes the reply, leaving it unclear whether she heard his request and ignored it or didn’t hear it at all. “I’m afraid it’ll just be the two of us today; Bob’s on a set. He’s got two more weeks of shooting, and then things will finally settle down.”

“He’s already back at work?” Mike blurts out before he can help it. He winces, praying Melinda doesn’t hear him, and only breathes when no response comes for a minute. Josh stares at him, silently judging, from a family photo of some party for something. There are party hats on everyone’s head, and Mike badly wants to snap a pic to show Josh back at the lodge but he’s not sure how Josh would react.

As Mike follows her path down the hall, his senses are suddenly overpowered by a sharp, stinging scent. When he turns the corner he discovers the source of the smell; Melinda is standing at the kitchen counter, slicing up lemons. The smell is nearly unbearable. Mike reels back for a moment, and then steels himself on the doorframe. He isn’t sure why exactly he’s reacting this way—his werewolf powers haven’t kicked in for other fruit.

Melinda turns to look at him, and raises an eyebrow when she sees the way he’s clinging to both sides of the door. Mike quickly releases his hold on it, stands up straight, and stammers, “Sorry, you were saying?”

“He’s already back at work,” Melinda echoes, sliding the knife she was using back into the sink. She takes one mug of tea that smells like lemon and ginger, and holds the other out to Mike. “That’s what you asked, right? How he could film so soon after his last child went missing?”

Mike doesn’t want to move any closer to the sharp smell or the sharp knife or the sharp woman or the sharp question. He wants to turn on his heel and leave this house, but he knows that if he doesn’t tell Melinda the truth, it could be months before she finds out that Josh is alive. Instead of running, he reluctantly steps forward and takes the proffered cup. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Life goes on,” Melinda announces, like Mike doesn’t already know that. Like he hasn’t been suffering in the wake of Hannah and Beth and Josh’s disappearance just as she has. Like he hasn’t undergone trauma worse than she ever could have. She seems to lose interest in glaring at him, the accusing look draining from her face as she walks away to go stand by the window. As she stares out at the empty yard, Mike wonders how many times she’s stood in here, alone, waiting for her family to come back. “Life goes on even though they’re gone.”

The absence of her children is palpable, in small but noticeable ways. They’re in every photo. There are five chairs around the dining room table that easily has room for eight. Melinda and Bob could move to a much smaller house now, or repurpose their children’s empty rooms for guests or offices or other things. Mike knows they won’t.

He sits down in the dining room, waiting for Melinda to return from reverie. Despite his initial encounter with the lemons, the tea is pleasant. It’s warm and soothing in all the ways this place isn’t. His hands cradle around the mug, and he takes another sip before Melinda turns around and seems to remember she has company.

She walks to the table, placing her mug on a coaster and sighing deeply. In a surprisingly vulnerable move, she runs her fingers through her hair; it almost makes her look like Grace. “What do you need to tell me?” Melinda asks, and it’s clear from her tone that she thinks the answer is going to be sorry. Sorry for everything he’s done to her family. Sorry for not coming here to own up for his actions in the past year. Sorry for killing your kids.

Mike straightens up, takes a heady breath in, and doesn’t apologize. “Mrs. Washington, Josh isn’t gone.”
Once the sentence leaves his mouth, there’s not much he can do except silently watch her face as the words take their toll on her. Her face goes unfettered from sadness, making her look years younger and bewildered and confused, and then totally shell-shocked, and then consumed by such a powerful disbelief that processing his statement seems impossible. But there’s still a glimmer of youth and hope there, making her eyes look far less sad. “What do you mean?”

“When I was out of town, I… I went up to Blackwood,” Mike continues, nerves raging. “I went up there to get something else, and I ended up finding him. He’s alive.”

Melinda’s dark knuckles have gone white around the mug she’s holding onto. She looks like she could flip the table. “Where is he now?” she demands, and Mike blanches.

“He’s still there,” Mike confesses, and watches the colour drain from the woman’s face. “He just couldn’t come back in the condition that he’s in. He’s… I don’t know if you’re going to believe this part.”

Fear is bright in Melinda’s eyes. “Is he alright? What happened?”

“He’s alright, but he’s…” Mike is possessed by the urge to lie to protect Josh, but can’t come up with any better excuse on the spot. He stumbles over his words, slowly explaining, “He got lost in the mines under the mountain, and he didn’t have anything to eat for weeks. And there were all those spirits roaming around from when we burned down the lodge—”

“Spirits?” Melinda narrows her eyes. “Is this what you all went on about to the police?”

“Yes,” Mike growls, suddenly frustrated with her disbelief. “It’s real. They’re real, and once they were released, one of them— or maybe all of them— went into Josh.”

Uninterrupted silence falls between them, and Melinda stares at him, the hope fading from her face. Her hard gaze drills into him for so long that Mike is on pins and needles by the time she finally speaks. “You’re telling me that my son is alive, but he can’t come home because he’s been possessed by an evil cannibal spirit.”

Mike shifts in his seat. “Yeah.”

“But for some reason, he didn’t eat you.”

“Well… he recognized me.”

Running her hand through her hair again, Melinda stares at him, trying to figure out just exactly what the hell he means. He knows that expression well because he’s seen it on her son many times in the past week. “Then why wouldn’t he be able to come home? You don’t think he’d recognize his own mother?”

Mike quickly backtracks. “No, no, uh, he would. He just… he’s worried he wouldn’t be able to control himself. I can defend myself against him.”

Melinda’s eyes narrow to guarded slits. “How?”

“I— uh…” Mike bites his lip, and takes a sip of his tea. “When I was up on the mountain, I met this girl.” Melinda rolls her eyes, and he quickly says, “No, no, not like that. She’s… okay, you’re really not going to believe this.” He inhales, and exhales, and then blurts out, “Her name is Shae, and she’s a werewolf.”

“A werewolf,” Melinda repeats. Her hands are lying flat on the table, and Mike scooches his chair
“And so… am I,” he confesses, and then breathes in another shaky breath. This is the first time he’s told anyone other than Josh about it, and this isn’t exactly how he wanted it to go down—or who he wanted to tell. Melinda is still squinting at him in suspicion. “Shae turned me, so. Um. Believe it or not… you’re looking at a real live shapeshifter. The real deal. In the flesh. The shapeshifting flesh.”

Melinda crosses her ankles, and shakes her head once, and then twice. “You were right.”

“What?”

“I don’t believe you.” She smiles, bitter and patronizing, and Mike feels a rush of humiliation.

He insists, “I can prove it,” and then instantly regrets the words. “But… uh, it doesn’t seem right to do it in a classy house like this.”

Something seizes Melinda, and she leans forward. “Show me the proof.”

Mike is unsettled by the idea of transforming here, in front of someone he doesn’t really know despite having known her for years. “Uh—”

“Prove it,” she demands.

“I can’t just will it to happen,” he lies, grasping at straws. “I need… uh… a stimulus. It won’t just happen on its own.”

“Okay,” Melinda says, and stands up abruptly. She walks around the table, abandoning her mug of tea and walking back to the kitchen. Mike turns his head to watch her, irrationally scared of her strange reaction. He’d expected disbelief, not a demand for evidence. He has no idea what she’s going to do—and then she opens the freezer door, and suddenly he can smell exactly what she’s going to do.

Melinda removes a package from the fridge, and grabs a pair of scissors, slicing open the plastic wrap. It’s a slab of uncooked meat, probably only half-defrosted. The scent assuages Mike’s nostrils and he has to do everything within his power to stay calm, stay normal, and keep his stomach under wraps. He can control himself.

Detached and methodical, Melinda slides the steak out of its packaging onto a plate of fancy china. The smell is unbearable. She throws away the garbage, and then walks back to the dining room table, where Mike is practically salivating at the mouth. “Now or never, Michael. Show me some proof to your bullshit story. Or is this another prank?”

“It’s not,” Mike protests, getting to his feet. Melinda puts the plate down on the table, and Mike forces his eyes away. The bright red meat is the most alluring food he’s ever seen. “I swear to you, Josh is alive. I just don’t wanna transform here.”

“I don’t care,” Melinda says, still sounding detached. The dark sadness has returned to her eyes. “I want to know the truth. Show me the truth.”

And with that, she lifts the steak from the plate, holding it up to him. “It’s still raw,” she begins to say, but she’s interrupted by a low growl. Not from Mike’s stomach, but from his mouth. He doesn’t bother taking off his clothing; he just lets his shirt rip along his spine as his back changes. The look on Melinda’s face goes from determination to terror, and she drops the meat to the ground.
Mike follows the smell, ignoring the woman freaking out in front of him, and he tears into the meat. It’s the greatest relief he’s ever felt; he feels all his discomfort about being in this clean, rich home melt away as his fangs sink into the steak. His claws leave marks on the polished floor, and he stops worrying about lemons and etiquette and money.

As he eats, he stops to look up at Melinda; she’s backed several feet away and is looking down at him in fear. There’s a line of blood that must have splashed from the steak onto her perfect white shirt. Mike can’t fathom the mix of emotions on her face in wolf form so he doesn’t bother trying, returning to the meat.

When he finishes, he starts to transform back almost instantly, and Melinda, dismayed by the reversal, flees the room. Mike starts to trot after her, and then realizes he’s almost wholly naked, pants ripped at the seams and shirt a pile of ribbons.

“Son of a witch,” he mutters when he gets control of his faculties. “That was one of my favourite shirts.”

There’s a new outfit waiting for him on a table in the foyer, so Mike assumes he isn’t supposed to leave, and that Melinda isn’t calling the cops or animal control or Scully and Mulder. He puts on the outfit, admiring his reflection in a bathroom mirror that probably cost more than all the furnishings in his apartment. There’s a piece of bloody meat in his beard, and Mike picks it out, embarrassed, and throws it away.

“Gross,” he mutters, smoothing down the front of the shirt. It’s one of Josh’s old ones, and the pants are Josh’s too. They’re too small for him, but Mike can give them back when he returns to the mountain. Or maybe he’ll keep them just to annoy Josh.

When he returns to the kitchen, he finds Melinda washing off his plate in almost the exact position she’d been in earlier. She’s changed into a long patterned dress, and put her hair up in a messy bun. Mike stands in the doorway and silently observes, waiting for her to notice him.

Eventually she speaks without turning her head, and Mike jumps. “When Bob and I purchased such a large amount of land on that dangerous mountain, we were warned about magical entities. We didn’t believe it. I’d never heard of any such thing in my whole life.”

Mike stays quiet, unsure of what to say, and watches her turn on the dishwasher. “If it helps,” he finally adds, “I didn’t believe until I saw monsters myself.”

“And then you became one,” Melinda replies. It’s not judgemental, just observant, and he doesn’t know how to react. Her own son is a monster too; it must be a lot to take in. She wipes her hands dry, and then finally turns to face Mike. She asks, slow and hopeful, “Is he really alive?”

In a moment of inspiration, Mike remembers he took a photo of Josh, and reaches for his phone. He swipes through his pictures and lands on the one of Josh and Shae curled up on the floor together, limbs entwined and surrounded by pillows. Josh’s teeth are poking out of his cheek and Shae’s teeth are poking into his shoulder. They look as cozy as two monsters can be, and Mike hands the phone over to Melinda.

“Oh,” she says, and bursts into tears, and Mike panics. He reaches out to pat her shoulder awkwardly, but she hardly even seems to notice, eyes glued to his phone screen. “What happened to his eyes?”
“He’s fine, I promise,” Mike says, patting her awkwardly. His relationship with Melinda has gone from discomfited to guilty to terrified to comforting all in the same afternoon, and he’s not sure exactly what he did to deserve this weirdness. “He just kind of gets into fits, but other than that he’s okay.”

Melinda traces Josh’s broken cheek with her fingertip, and then launches herself towards Mike. Mike almost jumps back, but before he can she wraps her arms around him in a hug. It’s the most uncomfortable hug he’s ever been through, but he pats her back gently and tries to figure out how he’s gonna retell this story to Josh to not make his mom sound kind of scary. “He’s okay, I promise.”

Melinda pulls away, tears still in her eyes, and points a finger at Mike. “You have to take care of him,” she demands, and then grabs the collar of Mike’s shirt. “Please. He… he cares about you.”

“Josh?” Mike is puzzled by that, because Josh has given plenty of evidence to the contrary over not only the past year but over the course of their entire friendship. “Uh… I will. I’m not staying here, I’m gonna move in with him on the mountain.”

At that, she hugs him again, and then squeezes his shoulders before finally stepping back. “Good. There’s nobody else I’d trust more with him.” She pauses, and then amends, “Except Chris. Or Sam. Actually, I would trust several people more, but none of them have stepped up to the plate. You’re all he’s got, Michael.”

“I know,” Mike says, shifting awkwardly between his feet.

“Here,” Melinda says, reaching for his phone again and opening up his notes. Mike worries she’s going to stumble onto his intrusive thought diary or his Die Hard fanfiction ideas, but instead she starts typing numbers. “I’m giving you my cell number, and my email. Send me more pictures of him, please— and don’t hesitate if you need anything. Food, money, entertainment. Anything.”

Manners kick in. “I can’t—”

“Anything. If you need it, we’ll take care of it; it’s not like we’re wanting for money, Michael. I’m also going to tell the police officers to bring the investigation to a halt, and we’ll send crews up to rebuild the lodge.”

Mike imagines a series of construction crews coming up to Blackwood only to be eaten whole. “Well… hold off on that for now, maybe. I’m pretty sure Josh doesn’t need the company, but I’ll let you know.”

Melinda frowns, pursing her lips with distaste. “At least let me give you some money, then.”

“I’m good,” Mike says, raising his hands and stepping away. “I’ll let you know. I promise.”

They stare at each other, not family or even friends but certainly allies. Mike nods at Melinda, as if to seal the deal, and she leans against the kitchen counter and gives him an uncertain smile back. She doesn’t apologize for forcing him into a transformation, but then again, he’s taken three of her kids away from her.

All in all, it’s not his worst visit to the Washington house.

By the time Mike drives back to his apartment, there’s a girl waiting on his doorstep with a bag of groceries. He squints at her from down the block for half a second before realizing it’s Sam, and
when he realizes, his heart beats twice as fast.

She looks up at the sound of his approaching truck, hair falling back from her face, and Mike feels a pull in his chest. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed Sam—the nicest person he knows, who somehow grew from tolerating him and giving him the occasional lecture to being one of his best friends. She’s wearing a blue shirt that cuts off around her midriff, and the smile that spreads across her face is brighter than the sun.

“Mike!” she shouts before he’s even properly parked, and jumps to her feet, racing down the steps to meet him. Mike almost vaults over the hood, unable to contain his giddiness, and they meet halfway, colliding into each other so hard it almost hurts.

Sam hugs him tighter than anything, and Mike tucks her into her chest like she’s a baby bird and looks up at his apartment with a giant grin. “Hi, Sam,” he greets her and lets go, but she does not. He awkwardly hugs her again, and Sam just stays wrapped around his chest like a koala. He jokes, “You don’t need to hide your tears. Let ‘em out.”

“I’m not crying.” Sam looks up at him with dry eyes and a huge grin. “I’m just worried if I let go, you’ll disappear again.”

“That’s irrational,” Mike scoffs, and then wheezes when she elbows him in the side.

“Is it?” she demands, laughing despite her words. “You’re irrational, asshole. I’m so glad you’re back.”

“Are you? You just called me an asshole,” Mike laughs and hugs her again.

God, he missed Sam.

She informs him, “You have so much to tell me,” voice muffled against his chest. He thinks to himself that she has no idea, and she finally pulls away from the hug, as if she’d heard him. “What happened? Where were you?”

“Hold your horses.” Sam looks like she’s about to elbow him again. “I want to tell everyone at once. It’s… kind of a long story.”

(He suspects that on a mountain with our undead friend, getting bitten by strangers and turning into a werewolf might put a damper on Sam’s mood.)

“Fine.” Sam rolls her eyes and reaches into her grocery bag to reveal its contents: a fifth of rum and a batch of muffins. “I’m not sure what kind of party this is going to be so I brought both options. You can never go wrong with muffins, right?”

“That depends,” Mike says, eyes flashing as he pretends to look menacing. “Are they… vegan?”

Smacking his arm with all the force of an angry teddy bear, Sam laughs. “You know that they are, asshole.”

He unlocks the door to his apartment and ushers Sam in, taking the baked goods to the kitchen. Sam stands in the doorway for a moment, looking around, and Mike realizes he forgot to make things look normal after last night. Half his apartment is dusty and untouched, and the other half has been crammed into bags and boxes. “Sorry about the mess, I, uh. Haven’t been here.”

“It’s so empty,” Sam comments, taking off her shoes. “Are you moving out or something?”

It’s clear that she’s joking, but Mike doesn’t know what to say. He hesitates to answer, reaching for two cups, putting the muffins on the counter. They’re still warm. He can’t dodge the question
forever, and he’s paused much too long to deflect, so he finally answers, “Yeah. I’m moving out of the city.”

A different voice replies to him, and goosebumps rush up Mike’s arms. “Whoa, you’re what?”

The familiar sound of Ashley’s voice is beyond jarring, and he quickly peeks around the corner, looking back at the door. Standing at Sam’s side is Ashley, wearing a drug rug and backpack covered in buttons. For a moment it’s like she doesn’t recognize him at all and there’s a big bearded raccoon standing in his place. Mike glances down at his toes to make sure he’s still human, and then looks back up at Ashley. Behind her are Matt and Emily who both gape at him with similar expressions.

“I thought I told you to come at seven,” Mike jokes, trying to stamp out some of the awkward tension between the four of them. There’s a crease in Matt’s forehead like he’s got something to say, and Emily is wearing dark lipstick but surprisingly not scowling. They’re exactly as he remembers them, only way more awkward about coming over to his house to party.

Ashley says, “We expected you last Friday, dude,” and although it’s a joke there isn’t much humour in her tone. They’re still all looking at him like he isn’t supposed to be here—in his house. Mike wonders if he should have shaved his beard, but deep down he knows that isn’t it. He’d disappeared on his friends and provided only radio silence as an explanation. And he’d lied to Chris.

His shame and guilt must be evident on his face, because after a second Emily moves past Ashley, walking towards him. “We’re all just glad you’re alright,” she says, sounding surprisingly weary, and Mike’s guilt is not alleviated at all. Em pulls him into a hug, and Mike hugs back, making awkward eye contact with Matt over her shoulder. This is already the second worst party he’s ever had.

(Nothing is ever going to beat the yoghurt incident.)

Ashley pulls her sweater up over her head, revealing a shirt with some band logo on it, and takes off her shoes. Sam walks over to hug her and then Matt, who finally breaks eye contact with Mike to hug Sam and pat her shoulder. “How long have you been here?”

“I only just got here a minute ago,” Sam says. “I think we’re the first.”

“Oh,” Matt starts, and then looks over at Mike with interest. “Jess isn’t here?” The way he says it is brazen and challenging, and it’s obvious that his temper issues haven’t changed in Mike’s absence.

The old Mike would have easily gotten into a fight over the question (How dare you ask about my girlfriend, bro), but the new Mike doesn’t care, and doesn’t have a girlfriend. Somehow, knowing that Matt’s ulterior motive is an interest in Jess is better than just suspecting Matt wants to steal his girl. Or… did steal his girl. It’s hard to care about that when Matt makes Jess so happy, and Mike’s got enough shit of his own to deal with. He’s over petty relationship drama.

“Nope,” he says, shrugging with one shoulder. “We’re just waiting on her and Chris.” He’d assumed Ashley and Chris would show up together, but it’s unsurprising that Ashley showed up alone, given the recent state of their relationship. Okay. He’s clearly not over petty relationship drama.

“Have you seen her yet?” Em asks, always curious about Mike’s love life. It’s hard to parse whether she’s asking on the behalf of a protective best friend or an interested ex. Emily and Jess
haven’t been best friends since Jess started dating him, so he’s gotta assume she’s asking just to be nosy.

“Actually… we just broke up.” Mike drums his hands against his legs awkwardly, pulling a face. “Or, more accurately, she dumped me.”

There’s a beat of embarrassing silence and Mike’s shoulders sink down, but then Sam crosses the room, bottle in hand. “Here,” she says, and pours him a shot of rum. “Drink up, buddy.”

Everyone laughs, including Mike, and it doesn’t feel bad even though it’s at his expense. He downs the shot, and then wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand, grinning at his friends. “Thanks, Sam.”

“Welcome back,” she says, all sunshine and smiles. If there’s any awkward tension remaining in the room, Sam’s grin is wide enough to distract everyone from it.

By the time Chris and Jess show up, Mike is well on his way to having an excellent buzz.

His apartment is not that big, and most of his sources of entertainment were packed up into boxes last night while he was having a Cheeto-fueled packing spree. But they manage to make the party fun anyway, all getting drunk and sharing stories. He’s only been gone for two weeks but Ashley, Sam, and Emily have collectively taken seven midterm exams, and Matt has gotten three new sporting injuries. He pulls off his shirt to show them the bruising on his back, but refuses to show them the scar on his butt, much to everyone’s relief.

“Maybe after a few more drinks,” Matt says with a wink, and Mike is caught off guard for a moment before he remembers that Matt is dating Jess and definitely not hitting on him.

“It’s shaped like Harry Potter,” Emily says, referring to Matt’s scar a little too loudly. The vodka cooler in her hand is in danger of falling thanks to her emphatic gesturing, and Mike tries to remember if he packed up his dustpan. He’s pretty sure broken glass all over the floor might affect his security deposit.

Ashley leans forward, hand on her chin. “Wow. His full body? Is he riding a broomstick?”

Emily glowers at Ash, and gestures with the bottle violently. “No. Like Harry Potter. Like his lightning scar, Ashley.”

Solo cup in hand, Sam chimes in, “Does this mean Matt has to defeat Voldemort?”

Matt throws his hands up in the air and shouts with a sincere fervor, “You can’t say his name!” which sets everyone off laughing together. Mike laughs too, and laughs even harder when Matt continues to look aggrieved as Ashley howls Voldemort’s name.

He hadn’t locked his apartment door, and so when the next person arrives, no one notices until Mike feels a tap on his shoulder. He spins around, and then looks down at Jess, who smiles up at him. “Hi, Mike.”

“Hey!” He lifts her up in a giant hug, feeling euphoric from the combination of Jess talking without being prompted and all the alcohol. “You came!”

“Duh,” she says, muffled against his shoulder, but she’s hugging back so tightly it hurts.
Sam and Ashley cheer “Jess!” in unison and both run over to join the bear hug. Emily walks over too, which surprises everyone enough that they let go of her to watch the two friends-turned-enemies-turned-question-mark awkwardly hug.

“How are you,” Emily says, and it sounds forced and scripted, but she’s still asking. Mike exchanges a look with Matt that clearly shows they’re both thinking the same thing—what the fuck is happening.

“Good,” Jess replies, and pulls away from Emily, scratching the back of her neck. “Thanks for asking. How— how about you?”

“That’s the most you’ve said to me in weeks,” Emily laughs, but it’s not unpleasant. “I’m busy all the time. University is a nightmare. You aren’t missing out on anything.”

Jess twiddles her thumbs together in an awkward, nervous motion. “Not even all the boys?” It sounds like something she would have said a month ago, but her voice is too soft and vulnerable for the joke to really land.

Regardless, Emily smiles. “Especially not the boys.”

“Hey,” Matt says, and Emily steps aside so he can move towards Jess. “You good?”

The change is remarkable; Jess stops fidgeting, and a smile breaks over her face. “Yeah,” she says, and moves to hug Matt. They hug for an extended moment, and Mike can feel Sam and Emily’s gaze on him. He pretends something very interesting is at the bottom of his drink.

Finally, Jess pulls away from Matt, and her lips twitch. “Why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

“It’s just that kind of party,” Ashley cuts in before Matt can explain. “We’re letting loose.”

“Sounds nice,” Jess says, and looks away from the group. “D-Do you need help bringing anything in?”

Puzzled, Mike follows her gaze, and his eyes fall on the last remaining member of their party. Chris is standing in the doorway with three bags of chips and a ring of car keys around his pinky finger, smiling softly at Jess. “I think I got it all.” He’s wearing a shirt with cherries printed all over it, a long yellow cardigan, and the same pair of jeans he’s worn since he was seventeen.

There’s a chorus of cheers, and Sam rushes over to help him with his bags as Ashley greets him with a hug. Mike pays no one else any mind, gaze fixed on Chris. He looks a little slimmer, and there’s dark bags under his eyes, making him look more like Josh than himself. Has he been eating enough? Sleeping enough?

Chris turns to look his way, and they don’t exactly have the touching reunion Mike had hoped for. Neither of them move towards each other, frozen in place. Ashley is chattering on about some trailer for a movie, but Chris doesn’t acknowledge her. He doesn’t say a word to Mike either, just staring at him in that funny, indecipherable way and then nodding at Ashley. They silently stare at each other until Chris looks away, one of his hands balled up into a fist.

This is officially worse than the yoghurt incident.

Josh and Chris have always been a package deal; for as long as Mike has known them. Mike met Josh first, but all his memories of the two are connected. Even when he got alone time with one of
them separately, they always yammered on about each other in this mostly endearing, sort of infuriating way.

He remembers staying up late at the library with Chris, flicking through Powerpoint slides as Chris rants about some television show he’s been watching. Halfway through the rant he’d realized Mike wasn’t really listening, but when you get Chris started on a subject, it’s next to impossible to get him to shut up or change the topic. Mike finally gives up on the presentation altogether, closing the program and leaning his hand on his chin to stare at Chris.

The direct attention makes Chris look a little nervous, and he clears his throat before continuing, describing characters Mike can’t picture and plots he doesn’t care about at all. Mike keeps listening, but his focus is on the bridge of Chris’ nose. His light grey and blue eyes that only look bigger behind his glasses. His goofy smile, and his pale lips that always make it look like he’s pouting a little.

At the time Mike had been dating a sweet girl named Rachel who was bookish and had a weird interest in horses, but Rachel is far from his thoughts in this moment. He leans forward a little, blinking slowly at Chris in the dim light of the library. If Chris were any girl at their school, they would have been making out five minutes ago— but he’s too passionate about the television show.

“It sounds really cool,” Mike says, playing up his interest. “Maybe I could come over and we could watch it together sometime.”

“Oh!” Chris’ eyes light up. “Okay! I usually watch it with Josh, so maybe we could invite you to one of our marathons! That’d be really fun.”

*Aaand* moment ruined. Mike leans back in his seat, and if Chris adjusts his glasses and presses his thighs together under the table, Mike doesn’t notice. “Yeah, bro. Maybe.”

It takes eleven whole minutes for Chris to come talk to him— Mike knows, because he checks his phone almost every thirty seconds. He goes through every emotion that could possibly apply to this situation; he feels hurt that Chris is giving him the silent treatment in person, and then anxious that Chris is going to pull him aside later and talk to him one-on-one. He feels guilty that he’s been drinking when Chris doesn’t drink, and wonders if maybe that’s why. He feels offended that Chris is ignoring him in his own house, and then worried that this whole party is being ruined by his own inability to just say hi to the guy.

At eleven and a half minutes Mike is about to lose his cool, fake texting on his couch even though all his friends are there. He contemplates calling Shae yet again, but then a miracle happens; Chris comes over and sits down beside him.

Mike moves to give him space instinctually, and he sees Ashley side-eyeing them real hard from the other side of the room. It’s really not a big enough apartment for this much drama to be happening with seven different people, and yet somehow this is his life. Mike ignores Ash, looking over at Chris. Finally, he works up the courage to speak: “Thanks for coming.”

“Oh course,” comes the instant response, and Chris reaches up to adjust his glasses. He’s not looking at Mike, pretending to have chosen this spot on the couch by total chance. The bruise on his forehead has almost completely healed, but he looks more tired than Mike has ever seen him. Up close, the bags under his eyes look even worse.

Mike, notorious for following impulses without much thought for consequences, can’t fucking
stand this anymore. He didn’t travel back to this city only for one of his friends to ignore him, and pretend they don’t even know each other. He shuffles towards Chris and then reaches around him to hug him as best he can.

It’s awkward and stilted and he knows everyone’s watching out of the corner of their eye or otherwise, but Mike can’t help it. He rests his chin on Chris’ shoulder, scratching his shoulder softly; the pale yellow cardigan is pleasantly soft. “I’m sorry,” Mike mumbles, quiet enough that only Chris can hear it. It doesn’t feel like enough, but he can’t hold back an apology any longer.

Slowly hands start to move around Mike, and Chris turns his body so he can hug Mike back. He looks freaked out beyond measure, but he’s hugging Mike back, so Mike’s going to interpret this as a step in the right direction.

They stay there for a moment and then Mike pulls back. The tension between them is taut, and Chris bites his lip nervously—it makes him look years younger. “Mike… what happened?”

His mouth is dry, and Mike wants to reach for a beer or something but he knows that Chris hasn’t had a drop of alcohol since last February; not since he and Josh passed out while Mike ruined everyone’s lives. “I—” he starts, and can’t find the words. This is a hundred times worse than he thought it was going to be, and way harder than telling Melinda. It’s even harder than it was to tell Jess. Chris’ light blue eyes pierce into him, and Mike takes a shallow breath in. “I lied.”

“What?”

“I lied to you.” He exhales the start of the truth. “I was on the mountain.”

A hush falls over the room. Emily and Ashley had been making a feeble pretense at not eavesdropping, but that ceases the second he speaks. Jess, the only one who knew, still looks saddened by the confession. Sam and Matt are both openly staring at him, shell-shocked, and Chris’ mouth draws into a straight, narrow line. Something shuts behind his eyes.

Mike’s excellent buzz has definitely begun to sour.

Emily speaks up first, shaking her head and stepping forward. “I’m sorry, what are you saying? You went back to Blackwood?”

He takes a heavy inhale, imagines that Shae is beside him, and then tells them everything.

The group gathers around him as he talks, and for the most part, they stay silent. He expects a few affectionate eye rolls when he mentions going back for Wolfie, but even Sam, god-tier dog lover, stares at him in fear.

When he’d come down from the mountain the first time his ma had suggested group therapy, but Mike had always been too frightened of the idea to experiment with it. The idea of opening up to one person is scary enough, but opening up to people he cares about sounds like torture. This feels like the opposite of a group therapy session, because with every new confession Mike makes everyone looks more and more hurt. Matt cringes when he mentions the cops, and as he talks about scaling the mountain by himself Emily looks like she might cry. Sam looks nauseated by the time he mentions the sanatorium, as do Jess and Ashley. Mike never meant to make them relive this trauma like this, and he gets frustrated with himself as he talks about meeting Shae. It’s impossible to try to explain the positive association he has with Blackwood without explaining that Shae is a werewolf, or that Josh is alive.

So he omits the first fact entirely, figuring he can just tell them about that in due time. Instead
Mike folds his hands together, looking down at the hardwood floor, and braces himself for the most dramatic part of the story. “Shae said that if I was going to leave the mountain, she had one thing she needed my help with first. She needed my help to fight a monster.”

You could have heard a pin drop. All his friends look sick to their stomach; Jess is trembling and Matt looks ashen. Emily’s jaw is set resolutely; she hasn’t moved an inch in the last twenty minutes. Sam leans forward, adopting that expression exclusive to Samantha Giddings that is a unique mixture of dread and determination.

“A wendigo,” Sam states, gaze slicing through Mike.

“Yeah,” he breathes, and then hesitates before glancing over at Chris. “A familiar wendigo.”

It feels like everyone else in the room is made of wax, and the only real people are he and Chris. “Don’t fuck with us,” Chris says, quiet and soft. His tone contradicts the words, but he’s shaking too much for Mike to make any comment about it. “Please, Mike. I know you’re an asshole, but please don’t—”

“I’m not,” Mike swears, and then when the colour drains from Chris’ face he quickly shakes his head. “It’s okay though! He’s okay. He isn’t as bad as Hannah was.”

Chris sinks back into the couch, devastated, and Sam demands, “Josh is alive?!”

“Yeah,” Mike breathes. It feels pretty relieving to not be the sole proprietor of this secret.

“But he’s a wendigo,” Ashley insists, leaning forward. “Not a human.”

“Well, kind of.” Mike shifts uncomfortably. “When I found him, he was not doing well, but he hasn’t eaten anyone since then.” Sam looks ready to gag, so he quickly adds, “He’s still himself! There’s just a couple evil spirits kicking around his brain.”

Ashley folds her arms over her chest resolutely. “Did you trap him?”

Sam is the first to react, although the shadow that falls over Chris’ face is much angrier. “What the fuck, Ashley?”

“It’s a fair question,” Emily says. “When Mike thought I was infected, he pointed a gun at me.”

Mike winces. “I didn’t trap him. I’ve been helping him.” He thinks about what Melinda said about how he wasn’t the ideal candidate, and something jealous flares up inside his chest. “I’ve been cooking for him and Shae, and we’ve all been staying at the lodge together. It’s been difficult but he’s getting better; I’m helping him get back to normal. He still can’t really go out in the sunlight or be around people, but he isn’t a monster. He just... isn’t fit to come back to society right now. He will be, but it’s going to take time—and work. And I promised I’d stay with him until he gets back to normal.”

Jess realizes aloud, “You’re going back.” Her bright blue eyes are starting to tear up.

Mike reaches for the nearest beer, taking a long draught. The six others all watch him with wide eyes, and he breathes out before nodding. Usually it would be fun to be the centre of attention, but right now he feels like a monster. “I just came here to tie up some loose ends. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Emily starts to say something that sounds angry, but Sam interrupts her. “How do you know he won’t hurt you?”
“Well,” Mike begins, and then laughs nervously. “I, uh, didn’t tell you all the whole story. I did end up finding Wolfie, although not in the form I expected. I found Shae instead.”

Awkward silence floods the room, and finally Chris makes a weird gesture with his hands and asks, “Are you two… you know…”

“What? No! She’s a werewolf,” Mike blurts out, and before anyone can react to that he adds, “I wouldn’t have done that to Jess.”

He expects Jess to look relieved or maybe crack a joke but she just looks puzzled, as do the rest of his friends. Sam shakes her head, laughing in disbelief. “I’m sorry. The mysterious woman you met outside the sanatorium is actually the mysterious wolf you met inside the sanatorium?”

“Yes,” Mike says, grinning. “She’s really cool. She showed me her transformation, and then asked if I wanted to be a werewolf, and. Uh. I didn’t say no.”

Emily rolls her eyes, and Chris’ eyes are bugging out of his head. “You said yes? You’re a werewolf now?”

“She made me a pretty good offer,” Mike replies, laughing nervously. “If you had met her too, maybe you’d be the one with wolf powers now.”

Before anyone else can react to his werewolf confession, Sam moves closer to him, eyes bright. “When you leave tomorrow, do you want me to come with you?”

“No,” Mike says instinctively, and Sam’s face falls. “I mean— obviously yes, but Josh isn’t prepared for that. He isn’t going to be okay around anyone except me.”

Chris has been shaking his leg nervously the entire time but he finally stops, and when Mike glances over at him he can see how upset the words have made him. “Wait, that isn’t what I mea—”

Before Mike can apologize, Matt interrupts, leaning forward eagerly. “Can you transform in front of us?”

“Uh,” Mike says, and looks around the room. It feels different than the situation with Melinda for a number of reasons, but he still hesitates. Sam and Matt look excited but Ashley’s on the edge of her seat, and Emily folds her arms over her stomach, guarded. Chris is still frowning, undoubtedly from Mike’s comment about Josh not trusting anyone else, and Mike takes a heavy breath in. “Isn’t anyone gonna wine and dine me first?”

Emily rolls her eyes again and Jess speaks up. “Is it dangerous?”

“No,” Mike scoffs, and then realizes she definitely has reason to be scared after all he’s revealed to them today. “I mean, I wouldn’t hurt any of you. I promise.”

“Then show us,” Matt eggs him on.

Reluctantly Mike climbs to his feet, too aware of everyone’s attention. He starts to pull his shirt off, and Emily lets out the start of an ironic wolf whistle—but it dies in her throat as Mike feels a familiar warmth race up his spine and curl over his hips. Chris’ eyes fade to gray, as do Ashley’s hair and Sam’s lips. His senses easily hone in on specific smells; the spike of alcohol from the kitchen. The warmth of his friends’ skin. By the time he’s kicked off the end of his clothing, all the people he’s grown up beside look fascinating and alien.
Mike walks over to Sam as he falls onto his hands, and to her credit, she doesn’t recoil at all. He can smell sharp fear on her; it’s hard to describe how he senses it but once he’s identified it, he can tell she’s covered in it. But Sam stays resolute, and reaches forward to scratch the side of his head, fingers tickling the soft skin beneath his ears. It’s too weird to process, so Mike just keens towards her instead of trying to think about it.

Higher thought at all is hard to tackle, so Mike sticks with what he can manage. He approaches Matt next, who has never smiled this wide at him before. Matt rubs his back, which should feel like a gross invasion of privacy. Mike ignores how soothing it feels and bares his teeth, to remind Matt that he is not in fact a dog. Matt blanches, and then laughs; the noise sounds louder than usual.

“This is so fucking weird,” comments Ashley from behind him, and Mike turns around to lay eyes on her. She’s moved to Chris’ side, leaning into him; Mike is no wendigo but he can practically see their body heat, and he is unamused. He rears up, and Ashley shrieks in terror—but before he can really scare her, he starts to transform back.

The transformation back to human is like de-Hulking; he feels weaker and more embarrassed with every passing moment. Jessica, saint that she is, tosses him back his underwear; Mike pulls them on as fast as possible. “I’m glad I didn’t give you this back,” she mutters, fingering the necklace around her throat.

Mike frowns. “Why?”

“Silver,” she explains, quirking an eyebrow. “Duh.”

“You didn’t warn us about your clothes,” Emily sniffs, legs crossed tight. She looks even more put off than before.

“Sorry,” Mike breathes once he regains the capacity for human speech, grinning. He looks around for his shirt, but can’t locate it anywhere. Chris is staring openly at him, thighs pressed together and mouth hanging open. He certainly looks less upset—Mike would be lying if he said that wasn’t a huge boost for his ego.

“That,” Matt declares, shaking, “was so fucking cool.”

“You’re like a Vulcan,” Emily says, swaying back and forth. It’s impossible to determine if she is having difficulty dancing or having difficulty standing.

“I’m not a Vulcan,” Mike insists, distantly aware of how slurried his words are. The awkwardness of transforming into a supernatural monster in front of his friends is gone, and in its place his buzz has returned. He stopped counting drinks after his third, instead choosing to focus on having a good time. His fingernails are bright yellow thanks to Jessica, who had sat him down and insisted he let her paint them. “I’m all feelings. Big feelings.”

“No.” Emily rolls her eyes, perpetually aggrieved. Mike has often wondered if she is from some higher plane of existence, because many of the traits she seems to be irritated by are basic unavoidable human tendencies. “Vulcans aren’t affected by alcohol, but they have a sensitivity to chocolate. You ate chocolate and now you’re drunk,” she explains, jabbing an accusing finger into his chest.

“You’re drunk,” Mike mumbles back.
Sam laughs distractedly. She’s been trying to twist open a beer for several minutes. “He’s not drunk because he ate chocolate,” she says, and Emily turns her glare on Sam. “He’s drunk because he and Matt just did an irresponsible amount of shots.”

“You’re irresponsible,” Mike mumbles, and then thinks better of it. He reaches for Sam’s beer and pops the cap off with his good hand; it hardly takes any effort at all. Sam cheers, and downs half the beer in one draught. “I think you’re right though.”

Emily harrumphs, and Sam rolls her eyes away from her line of sight. “I still think it was the chocolate,” she mutters, just in time for Matt to hear her as he stumbles over to them with Jess.

“You can’t give Mike chocolate,” Matt pleads, arm thrown over Jessica’s shoulder. “It’s poison.”

“I’m not a dog,” Mike insists, but nobody pays him any heed, setting off into discussion again. Ignored and inebriated, he stumbles away from the group to fix himself another drink, and Emily follows. When Mike reaches the kitchen he opts for water instead, figuring he should stay at least lucid if he wants to be a good host, and Emily hops up onto the counter, staring at him shamelessly.

He tells himself he can’t hook up with her, a mantra he’s repeated in his head thousands of times. This time he thinks he might actually be able to follow it, seeing as his thoughts have been solely occupied by Josh for the past few weeks and he hasn’t had a dream about Em in forever.

She swings her feet back and forth, and Mike tries to figure out why she’s staring at him. She doesn’t seem particularly flirty, but it’s always hard to gauge Emily’s mood. He clears his throat and ruins the mood; one of his unsettling talents. “How are things?”

“They’re fine,” Emily says, sniffing again and raising an eyebrow. “I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Me too,” Mike replies; it’s simple and thoughtless but he can’t figure out what’s on her mind. “How are things with, uh, you and Matt? All good?”

Emily draws her lip between her teeth, glancing away. She stays silent for so long that Mike thinks she isn’t going to answer at all, which would be an answer itself, but finally she talks. “Actually, we broke up.”

“Oh,” Mike says. The Mike who went up to the cabin might have been excited or curious, but he only feels like his suspicions had been confirmed. Based on what Jess told him, this had been inevitable. “That blows.”

“I guess so,” Emily shrugs, emotionless, and then slumps down a little. “He ended things, which was weird. I always thought I would be the one to break it off— especially after he let me fall off a mountain.”

Mike has nothing to say to that, and when he doesn’t reply immediately, Emily turns to look at him again. Her eyes are dark. “I know he and Jess are close. Is that why she dumped you? Do you know if they’ve been hooking up?”

“No,” Mike answers too quickly, and Emily’s eyes narrow. “Uh, I mean, I don’t think so, no. But… I mean…” He glances over at the living room, and then back to Em. “Because of what Jess is like. Not because of the lack of attraction.”

There is no relief on Emily’s face— instead, he watches as she slouches down into herself. “I should feel reassured by that,” she mumbles, “but instead I just feel bad.”

“Yeah.” Mike shrugs with one shoulder, wondering if he should tell her what Jess confessed to him.
about liking Matt. He thinks Jessica and Matt will make a good couple; better than any other configuration that could have happened. Except maybe Jess and Em, but they’ve been down each other’s throats for so long that Mike can’t imagine that kind of reconciliation.

As Emily starts to lean towards him Mike freezes, sober enough to recognize someone entering his personal space but too drunk to shift away. Thankfully she leans past him, glancing towards the living room; Mike follows her gaze to see the board game the others are playing. Chris and Sam have equally competitive glares on their faces, while Ashley is flipping pieces over with a feverish energy. Matt and Jess are propped up against each other; not close enough to be anything more than platonic, but Mike and Em both recognize their nearness for what it is.

“I don’t think I was any good for him anyway,” Emily says, and Mike realizes she’s been talking to him for a while and he’s missed part of it. He tunes back into the conversation, moving to jump up onto the counter beside Emily. “He needs someone who isn’t going to goad him at every turn. Or cheat on him with their ex.”

Privately, Mike thinks that Emily wasn’t any good for him either. He shifts his weight until they’re shoulder-to-shoulder, scooting over to sit beside her on the counter. “He’ll find the right person, don’t worry. And so will you.”

“Thanks,” Emily says, soft and sad and a little bitter. The word is nearly caught in her throat, and Mike wonders what’s going through her head. This must be one hell of a conversation to have with your on-again, off-again ex-boyfriend about your recently-ex-boyfriend. She turns to kiss his cheek, and it catches him off-guard. “Thanks, Mike. You’re not a bad guy.”

“Thanks for the glowing endorsement.”

“Well, you try your hardest to be an asshole, but… I know there’s a heart of gold somewhere in there.” She pokes his chest right as someone gasps in the other room, and they both turn their heads to investigate the source. Sam is already on the scene with paper towel, mopping up some unidentifiable liquid as Jess apologizes over and over.

“Motherfker,” Mike swears, jumping down from the counter and striding over to the living room. Emily stops him with a hand on his arm, and he looks back to see her grinning expectantly, almost nervously. It’s a strange look on her.

“Could I try being a werewolf?”

He considers Em, and then considers the drink in her hand. “We’ll talk about it.”

After stumbling through an awkward conversation with Matt about a fantasy roleplaying game that Mike had mistaken for fantasy football, he locates Chris and Ashley. They’ve wound their way through his bedroom to the tiny fire escape he calls his balcony, and have made a temporary nest there for the purpose of getting high.

Chris is cradling a succulent that Mike had forgotten he owned while Ashley does some task on her phone, looking bored. The joint between her fingers could almost be mistaken for a cigarette if not for how blissed out Chris looks. Mike hasn’t seen him drink yet— after the first trip up to Blackwood, Chris and Josh both went sober. They had both felt too guilty about their one night of negligence to ever indulge again; Mike is fairly certain that Josh’s beer on the mountain had been his first drink in over a year. Weed, however, seems to present no problems.
Mike opens his back door carefully, trying to avoid pushing Ashley off the fire escape, and grins at the pair. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Chris looks up at him, startled, but Ashley just laughs and ignores the question. “Come join,” she implores him, patting the cold metal beside her. She and Chris are sitting across from one another, socks nearly touching.

“I don’t really smoke,” Mike starts to explain, and then thinks about how it might affect his werewolf powers. He sits down between the pair, back facing the alleyway. It’s chilly out but the sunshine is nice, and he folds up his legs underneath himself.

Chris blinks at him, torpid, and then blurts out in an unexpectedly loud and honest voice, “You aren’t interrupting anything. Ash and I broke up.”

The exclamation makes them the third couple to announce their breakup within the last few hours, and Mike has trouble processing the news at first. “Wait— you did?”

He turns to watch Ashley for a reaction but she merely shrugs, taking a hit. As she exhales a cloud of thick smoke, she replies, “Just like everybody else, apparently. You and Jess, Matt and Em… guess it wasn’t meant to be for any of us. Maybe we’re all better off alone.”

Chris shuffles in place, looking visibly uncomfortable, but doesn’t say anything. Ashley passes him the joint, and adds, “It wasn’t a waste though. We’re still best friends, right? Or… I’m your best friend that isn’t a wendigo monster?”

The discomfort fades from Chris’ expression and he laughs warmly, nodding. “Of course, Ash.”

Ashley gets to her feet, stretching and then patting Chris’ knee. “I’ll leave you to it,” she says, which doesn’t make a lot of sense, and then heads inside without explanation.

Bemusement fills Mike as he watches her leave, and his thoughts are drawn to the camera footage he’d seen in the lodge. Footage of Chris and Ash exploring the basement together, of Ashley tied to a chair with a saw above their heads, and of Chris untying Ashley as she tried not to look at Josh’s fake corpse. He remembers Ashley kissing Chris before Chris and the stranger had set off, but he doesn’t remember the discussion of when they’d started dating. It had just been a case of “we were in a dire situation together and now we’re bonded for life”, but unlike Matt and Jess, that feeling clearly didn’t survive off the mountain.

Her words set in after the fact, and Mike shakes his head and wonders, “What did she mean by that?”

“It’s nothing,” Chris says, the ghost of a laugh still etched into his features. He offers the joint wordlessly, and before Mike can refuse it again, he remembers that this is Chris, who has spent the last two weeks furious with him. Mike supposes he should take kindness and charity and forgiveness wherever he can find them, so he accepts the joint, nodding awkwardly, and takes a drag.

It turns out that his werewolf powers affect substances in a very minimal way, other than perhaps raising his tolerance. He hasn’t smoked in a long, long time; his ma smokes more than he does. As he exhales smoke, he opens his eyes to discover that Chris is watching him closely, gaze masked somewhat by his glasses. He’s picking dead leaves out of the soil in the succulent’s pot idly, but his focus is all on Mike.

It’s alarming, and not very pleasant; Mike feels like he’s under a microscope. (A mike-roscope, his
useless brain adds.) He lowers his gaze to the joint between his fingers, looking at his damaged hand instead of Chris. Nothing about today is going as expected, which is pretty on brand for his friend group but still isn’t great for his personal recovery.

“I’m sorry,” Mike blurts out, feeling very weird and bad. “Again. I’m sorry for lying to you.”

“It’s fine,” Chris says, reaching for the blunt. Mike hands it over without protest, frowning. “It’s in the past.”

“Okay, Rafiki, but…” He looks up at the clouds, and then back down at Chris, trying to find the right phrasing. “I shouldn’t have lied about being on the mountain. I really am sorry, bro.”

“If you hadn’t gone up, you wouldn’t have found him,” Chris replies, sounding more like himself than he has in a while. Mike missed all his talk of cause and butterfly-effect. “So… it’s fine. I’m just happy you saved him.”

Sam warned him that Chris was the worst at staying mad at people, but Mike forgot about that—or maybe worried it wouldn’t apply in this case. Thankfully, Chris’ forgiving nature seems to come with no terms or conditions, and Mike sighs with relief. Chris takes another hit, eyes closing in bliss, and then asks without looking at Mike, “Does he miss me?”

It’s a personal question for anyone to ask, but coming from Chris, Josh’s best friend and possible soulmate, Mike can’t help but wince. He’s glad Chris isn’t looking at him for a reaction, but when he hesitates to answer, Chris’ eyes slide open. He tries to swallow down the jealous secret that lives in his throat and instead stays honest, nodding at Chris. “Yeah. A lot.”

“You better not be lying again,” Chris laughs, weak and false.

“I think he’s sad he can’t see you,” Mike says, and it’s not something he’s considered at great lengths but once he’s spoken it aloud he knows it’s true. “He… I caught him looking at old pictures of the two of you together. You were in a blanket fort or something?” Chris flushes and ducks his head, which Mike ignores. “I don’t think he’d feel safe seeing you again though, not while he’s like this.”

Chris folds his legs underneath his body, adjusting his cardigan. “Like what?”

“Dangerous,” Mike whispers. “When he loses control… it’s bad. He attacked Shae before I left, and she could have been killed if I hadn’t been there. She still got hurt pretty badly; and she’s a werewolf. You’d be a way easier target. All that—” Mike cuts himself off before he can comment on how soft Chris’ skin is, or how good he smells, or how much meat there is on his body. “Uh, all those human limbs you have.” Nice save.

Chris hums thoughtfully, and then asks, “Shae’s the other werewolf, right? What’s she like?”

Mike screws up his face, trying to think of how best to sum up Shae. “She’s cool! Very blunt, uh—she likes to skip straight to the point for most things. She didn’t exactly have a normal childhood, so she’s not exactly a people person, but… she likes me.”

“Does she like Josh?”

“WEEEell…” Mike pulls a face, but when Chris looks concerned he quickly amends, “No, I mean, they’re okay. Like I said, Josh attacked her, and I think she’s still having trouble seeing him as anything other than a monster. But they have similar taste in activities, so… hopefully they’re getting along okay while I’m gone.”
Chris is staring, so Mike digs his phone out of his pocket to try to derail the conversation away from his upcoming move. “Here,” he says, flicking through photos with a smile. “This is Shae.”

Chris reaches for the phone, but the moment he sees the picture his expression softens. His whole posture relaxes, like just seeing a battered Josh sleeping on the floor is a balm for his soul. Mike pulls his knees up to his chest, hugging himself for warmth as he watches Chris. The joint is still in his hand, burning down to a roach, so Mike reaches for it.

Chris lets him take it without complaint, busy sending the photo to himself. Mike ashes the joint and then flicks it off the fire escape, and Chris doesn’t notice at all. He finally speaks, soft and vulnerable. “I miss him so much, dude.”

Mike nods, stilted but honest. “I know.”

Glancing up from the phone, Chris makes eye contact with him, and it’s almost paralyzing. “I’ll miss you too,” he says, staring Mike down.

The moment feels heavier than Mike is aware of, and he’s not sure what to say. He smiles, small and almost private. “I’ll be in touch, bro. I’ll miss you too,” he parrots back, and reaches out to touch Chris’ knee the same way Ashley had. Chris glances down at his hand and Mike instantly pulls away, trying to fight a flush.

Chris, evidently not as affected as Mike feels, hands back his phone without a word, and Mike pockets it gratefully. “You’re wearing his shirt,” Chris mumbles, and Mike gracefully pretends not to have heard him.

“We won’t stay on the mountain forever,” he promises, climbing to his feet. Chris watches him stand, but doesn’t move. “So you’ll definitely see him again someday. And me.” He offers Chris a hand.

Chris smiles, nodding slightly, and takes his hand. His fingers curl around where Mike’s should be. “Where’d the joint go?”

He must be higher than Mike had realized. Mike, on the other hand, feels more sober than he’d expected— so clearly weed doesn’t work on werewolves. Maybe he’ll have to try other substances, and see if anything else triggers it, Vulcan-style. He pulls Chris up to his feet, watching the blond rock towards him.

“We finished it,” he lies, and Chris smiles and accepts it. Mike opens the door to the party, and they head back in. The rest of the night is a blur, but he remembers the warm feeling of Chris’ hand in his for the rest of his life.
Hi, it's unbelievable to think that it's been almost a full year since I last updated this! The number one change I've made in the past year is that I've changed my preferred method of line break. Hope that isn't too jarring for readers, and if it is, please let me know! This chapter wasn't working for me so I changed a lot of it, and now it's heavily influenced by the emotions created by returning to this universe. Also the slow burn is still burning away two years later, with not much progress-- but SOON!

I hope you enjoy this update and continue to let me know all your favourite things about this fic! I can also be found on social media at montparnasse and maevesdunne!

Now to respond to the two dozen new comments. Jesus hot sauce christmas cake.

Sight develops in his mind before any of the other sensations, light creating itself without sound, images without weight. Everything is too bright to be pleasant but Mike thinks he knows where he is, even if he doesn’t remember how he got there.

Surrounding him are neatly sculpted hedge walls, but he’s not in a labyrinth; he’s sitting on a bench in a long, wide garden. It spans several fields, and when Mike tries to place an end to it on the horizon, he finds he can’t. The surreal feeling does not leave him even as the light settles down, and while the exposure becomes more bearable, nothing looks less fantastic.

Sensations finally begin to arrive, one by one; a warmth envelops him and Mike relaxes into it. He is only distantly aware of his body, but he is unalarmed; someone somewhere is playing music, and he knows the tune if not the words. Another someone is laughing, but they must be hidden behind the hedge. The sound is familiar and feminine, but no matter how hard Mike squints at the source, he can’t see anyone through the thick green leaves.

As sound creeps in, so does touch; Mike’s palm feels warmer than the rest of his body. He glances down, suddenly worried that it might have caught fire like it has in so many of his other dreams— but much to his relief, his hand is fine. More than fine actually; his missing fingers have magically returned to him, and are being held by someone.

He stretches out his fingers, experimenting, and the person holding his hand looks over at him. Mike knows who it is without looking up to see; the second his mind conceived a person to hold his hand, he knew exactly who he was dreaming about. His mind remembers memories as dreams, and for once, he doesn’t mind. He squeezes the wide palm in his, and Chris squeezes back, warm and unassuming.

Nothing is hurried. Mike listens to the faint laughter and thinks it must be Beth; it sounds exactly like how she used to. The Washington siblings are irreparably connected in his brain, so when he thinks of Beth, he thinks also of Hannah and Josh. He thinks of Josh, and wonders if he can make him appear too just by thinking of him. As soon as he’s thought it, Chris’ grip on his hand goes loose, and a tremor quakes the ground.

Chris squeezes his hand once more. The ground is still. Even though the moment has passed, Mike frowns, and begins to get up from where he’s seated.
A sudden hand at the crook of his arm stops him, and Mike looks over at Chris for the first time. “Stay,” Chris tells him, smiling thinly. His skin looks grey, and Mike narrows his eyes. “Stay with me.”

Looking over at the hedge once more, Mike feels uneasy. “I want to go see them,” he mumbles, unsure who they really are. “They’re right there.”

Chris says, “You’ll get lost,” and tugs on Mike’s hand again. The comforting warmth is still there but he is too unsettled to sit back down with Chris, too curious to leave this garden alone. “Don’t go. Stay with me.”

“But…” As he speaks, tears well up in Chris’ eyes behind his glasses, and Mike looks away from him, pained and confused by the sight. “I want to go see them.”

“They’re dead,” Chris says. A stone skips down Mike’s throat and sinks to the bottom of his stomach. “You left them alone and they’re dead.”

But the noises coming from just over the garden wall don’t sound like the cries of the dead, they sound like revelry and the laughter of the living. Mike squints at the leaves, and he hears another laugh—that one was deeper, older. Josh’s laugh. Another tremor shakes beneath his feet, and Mike drops Chris’ hand, petrified. He left Josh for dead again. Josh is dead again. He’s gone too.

The vines start to bloom before his very eyes, and white flowers burst into life across the hedge. Their petals block out what little light shone through, and the laughter drops down to a volume so low Mike can barely hear it. He feels a real sensation originating from outside the dream; his ankles scrape together as he slowly starts to stir. An alarm is going off somewhere, but Mike is paralyzed, staring soundlessly at the flowers spreading across the greenery.

Too late, he remembers Chris; he turns to look behind himself but it’s too late. Like Eurydice, Chris is pulled away into shadows the instant Mike sets his eyes on him. His washed-out skin blends in with the clouds around him, and Mike opens his mouth to say something but before he can utter anyone’s name the nightmare ends.

Mike wakes up to the blaring sound of his alarm. It is nicely complemented by the massive hangover pounding through his skull and the overpowering stench of weed coating every strand of his hair.

“Fuck,” he mumbles up at the ceiling, fumbling for his phone so he can shut the ringer off and lie in silence. His nails tap against the screen and Mike stares at them without recognition. They’re painted bright yellow.

Dim memories from last night begin to drip into his mind, erasing the last dregs of a bad dream he’s already forgotten. He remembers sitting at Jessica’s feet like her knight and letting her paint his nails, listening to her tell an outrageous story about prosecco and a pool. She had sounded like the old Jess, and he remembers feeling reassured as he gazed up at her, dopey and affectionate.

He remembers—and verifies with a quick check of his phone—emailing his landlord that he would not be renewing his lease at the end of this month, and as he rereads the letter he commends himself on his drunken grammar. Not too shabby.

He remembers what happened after he’d sent that email too: reclining on his couch and watching
his friends alone with each other. Despite their assurances that he was necessary to their friend group, they had all been happy without him, and they would continue to go on with their lives even if he left. He closes his eyes against the massive headache threatening to ruin his morning, and tells himself that they’ll all be okay if he’s gone.

Somehow, it doesn’t feel as sad to admit as he’d expected it would.

He remembers saying goodbye to everyone, although he doesn’t remember how each of them had got home. For some reason he thinks Chris might have kissed him on the cheek—he definitely remembers Matt blowing him a kiss goodnight while climbing into a taxi with Jess. Sam had told him something important to tell Josh, but for the life of him Mike can’t remember what it might have been. Hopefully it isn’t that important.

Mike sits up in bed, rubbing his eyes and fighting the nausea turning his stomach into knots. He looks over at his bedmate—his toy beluga is one of the only things he’s got left to pack. Mike smiles at the white whale, childish and simple, and then reaches over to pick it up.

Packing his truck takes almost no time, and before eleven Mike is ready to hit the road. He looks at his apartment and tries to muster up the energy to feel sad about leaving, but instead he just feels eager to go. His thoughts fly to Josh again, and all of a sudden it’s like he can’t get going fast enough.

As he locks the door for the last time and slips the key into the mail slot, Mike is hit with the strange sensation that someone’s watching him. He sniffs the air, and then turns his head towards the scent.

Seated on the step next door is a young man he doesn’t know, with a trim moustache that doesn’t suit his face much at all. He’s not smoking a cigar like his predecessor had been last year, just cradling a mug of coffee in his hands. The mug displays the proud phrase ENERGY POTION. Mike wonders how he’s somehow both never seen this man before and seen this man a thousand times before. With the exception of his unfortunate facial hair he’s pretty much a dime-a-dozen white guy, but he’s not unattractive. He watches Mike with that same curious but unobtrusive stare the old man had fixed him with a year ago.

Mike tries to think of some platitude about the passage of time or how to measure a year or the weather. He comes up short, and settles for nodding uncertainly. The man nods back.

There’s only one person left to visit, and Mike is pretty sure there won’t be a surprise test where he has to turn into a werewolf in front of her. He hasn’t made the drive out to visit his mom in months, and as he drives he feels a preternatural calm settle over him. Even though he’s nervous about explaining his disappearance to Grace, he can’t find the ability to be stressed. He’s been so dysfunctional and sad for so long that now this joyous mania feels like a gift he’d be an idiot to refuse or ignore.

He pulls over at one particularly captivating bend in the road and for once, the nagging voice in his head reminding him to stay anxious remains silent. Mike snaps a few photos of the valley beyond his car but his phone isn’t quite able to capture the sight. Even the rolling foothills on the horizon are hyper-present. He could reach out and touch them with his eight fingers. He wants to divert from his original route and go explore creeks too small to be waterfalls, trees too tall to be real. The wolf part of him is yearning to run.
Instead, Mike stays human, gnawing on his lip as he sends one of the photos to the group chat.

**Mike**: What a view. (1 Image Attachment)

**Sam**: Haha, looks like a different mountain!

**Ashley**: that’s not even the right mountain did u get lost

**Matt**: Did u go to the wrong mountain by mistake??

**Chris**: Did you go to the wrong mountain?

**Emily**: Are you sure you went to the right mountain?

**Jess**: I think you might’ve gone to the wrong mountain :P

**Ash**: @ everyone, jinx lol

“What a bunch of assholes,” Mike breathes to the valley in front of him. He sends back the most concise reply he can think of: a middle finger emoticon.

**Matt**: Hive mind

**Emily**: Wow I can’t believe Mike knows how to use emojis?

**Sam**: ^^ was literally about to say that! XD

**Ash**: our old mans getting wise

**Jess**: Please be safe on your trip!

**Chris**: Let me know when you get there safe?

The weight of everyone dogpiling him at once becomes easier to bear when he sees the two separate messages from Jess and Chris. He smiles, and sits there for a long minute before starting the car again.

Penticton is almost exactly how he remembers it, with the same neighbours living on either side of his ma’s house. He notices that Laura’s tulips have all been replaced with rocks and succulents, and grins wide. Time may have transformed him, but pesky rabbits never change.

This house is where his mother grew up, and it’s nice— far nicer than the house he grew up in, but he could never be upset about that. It was left for Grace in her parents’ will and their passing happened to coincide with Mike’s graduation, so for as long as she’s had it she’s been the sole occupant. At first he had worried about her loneliness, seeing as the house was once occupied by a full family and three dogs. Whenever he’d asked she’d denied any sadness, being the responsible single mother she was, and instead told him she saw right through his attempts to get a dog.

With time, Grace grew into the house, and now it’s hard to imagine anyone else living here. Her car is parked alone out front, hopefully signifying that her “lady friend” has already left. Mike assumes (prays) that he doesn’t have to have that meeting today in addition to the lecture he’s about to get.

The porch is dusty in the same spots, and there’s a jar of something suspicious next to the ashtray. Mike wants to lean over and sniff it to see if it might be moonshine, but also knows better than to investigate random curiosities just for the hell of it. His fingers twitch.

The door is open so he lets himself in, toeing out of his shoes and looking around to discover that
not much has changed. There’s a new garish painting hanging beside the coat rack; Mike frowns at all the bright green whorls and gold accents. If he keeps staring it might hurt his eyes, so instead he follows a familiar scent towards the kitchen.

His ma doesn’t notice him walk in at first, humming along to Lionel Richie as she washes her hands. Recently Mike has become the sort of person who has spent ample time reliving memories, both good and bad; his trauma has morphed his brain into a montage of images and sounds and people that he sees every time he closes his eyes. This is one of the good memories; it’s like walking backwards through time into his childhood. Daylight is shining down on the saucer in the window piled high with cigarette butts, and everything feels warm and smells like oranges.

Knocking gently on the doorframe so he doesn’t startle her, Mike steps towards his mother as she turns around. “Hey, ma.”

She doesn’t run to him, but instead opens her arms and waits for him to come embrace her. He does, feeling a bit like a dead man walking to an angel. It’s been too long since he’s actually seen his ma. “Michael,” she whispers into his shoulder, a good amount of relief and joy behind the name. “It’s good to see you. You’ve had me so worried, kid.”

He means to say ‘it’s good to see you too’ or ‘don’t stop worrying just yet’ but instead a muffled “I missed you” comes out of his mouth. It’s hard to hear since he speaks into the fabric of her sweater, but he knows Grace hears him. They hug until something on the stove starts to bubble in protest, and then she finally pulls away. “Sorry to make you worry.”

“I’ve heard that one before.” She shakes her head, but she still looks glad to have him here, smiling despite the nagging, “Usually I have to worry about you running off with your friends, not you lying to all your friends— and me.”

Mike winces. “Sorry.”

His mother turns the burner on the stove off, and then opens the oven to peek inside. Mike, unsure if he’s still going to get a lecture for disappearing for almost two weeks, takes a seat at the dining room table. The contents of the oven turn out to be an ugly brown loaf that looks severely burnt, and Mike grimaces. It smells better than it looks.

“No muffins, huh, ma?” he tries as a joke.

Grace rolls her eyes and it makes her look like Shae. “It’s biscotti,” she tells him, peeling away parchment paper and carefully sitting the loaf down onto a wire rack. “For coffee. I got the recipe from a friend.”

He bats his eyes, ever unable to control his tongue. “A sleep-over friend?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” his mother grins. “It’s got orange peel and cranberries in it. It’s supposed to be delicious, but I think I might have bungled it somehow.”

She takes a seat opposite him, and suddenly the anxiety that has been blissfully absent all morning reappears. She’s going to make him talk, and Mike has stories that he can’t tell his mother right now. He can’t tell her about the cannibalism, and he doesn’t even want to broach the subject of his return to the mountain. The honesty will be too painful. “Cranberries!” Mike exclaims, like the impulsive loud dullard he is. “Right! That’s what that smell is; I couldn’t quite place it.”

Grace sees right through him like only a good mother would, and she takes off her oven mitts one at a time before speaking. “Michael. If you have to tell me something, just tell me. Or did you
really just stop by to steal food and then drive back home?”

Home is the word that catches him off-guard, and sits low in his stomach. Mike swallows, and even though it’s going to hurt to be honest, he has to tell her what little truth he can right now. “Home,” he starts, and his voice nearly gives out, so he starts again. His ma’s eyes are watching him like a hawk. “I, uh, I have something to tell you. The old friend I reconnected with is Josh.”

“Mike,” Grace starts to interrupt, but he holds up his hand to cut her off.

“No, I… he’s alive, ma. He’s just in a bad state right now, he… um… he got sick, kind of, and I’m not sure if he’s ever going to get better.” This feels exactly how telling his mother about his first girlfriend felt, with all the awkwardness and badly hidden excitement and affection. He wonders if someday he’s going to tell her about getting engaged, and if it’s going to sound exactly like this. I made a promise. I want to be with them and they need me there. Forever. “He’s still living up on that mountain that the Washingtons own in Alberta, and he needs… I don’t know about treatment, but he needs company. He needs my company.”

“Michael—“

Again, he cuts her off, and now he can’t filter himself at all, barely managing to keep the wendigo details out of the story. “I know I’ve told you I’m so scared of that mountain, and I am, but it’s getting better the more time I spend there. I’ve been up there, and I’m getting better. I have to go back, ma, I can’t keep living in Vancouver and pretending everything that happened didn’t happen and that I’m just a normal person. So I’m going up there to live on Blackwood with Josh for— I don’t know. For a while.”

“Oh, Michael,” Grace sighs, resting her head in her hands. She doesn’t look as stressed or freaked out as he expected; she looks sort of tired, and weirdly amused. “Are you ever going to stop giving me heart attacks, kid?”

He opens his mouth to answer but before he can collect anything to say, his mother says “Melinda Washington called me this morning,” and his heart drops into his stomach.

“What?” he manages to stammer out, going completely white.

“She called me this morning,” Grace repeats. “Before you got here.” Mike is stunned. He thinks he couldn’t actually move if he tried. As he feels heat starting to rise to his face, all he can do is sit frozen and stare at his ma, who is leaning her chin on her hand with great interest. “She had assumed you already told me everything, and I laughed, because usually I can’t get you to stop telling me stories. But the one time you stumble into something truly fantastic, I don’t get to hear any of the details firsthand.”

Mike croaks out, “Everything?”

“Everything,” she confirms, and then lowers her voice like she’s sharing gossip. “Are you really a werewolf, honey?”

It feels like a loaded question, and all Mike can think about is Melinda holding up a steak to his nose and telling him it’s raw. He shakes his head, dumbly, and then blinks, and then nods. “Yeah. I wasn’t going to tell you.” His voice is barely audible. He knew this would have to happen eventually, but doing cool tricks for his friends is one thing while having to tell his mother he’s dangerous is another.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Grace says, and holds out her hand. He grabs for it, feeling once more like a
leper offered redemption, and gently cradles it between all his good fingers. “I’m glad you did.”

“You believe me?” he whispers.

And maybe she’s just humouring him, but she squeezes his palm and smiles softly. “I believe you.” It’s better than any other benediction he could ever receive. “You don’t have to prove it to me; especially not in the kitchen. I don’t want dog hair in my biscotti.” They laugh together at that, Mike’s laughter strangled and embarrassed and Grace’s light and easy. “A mother just knows some things. Like how you probably don’t have to work so hard to convince me Josh needs your company.”

“Ma,” Mike begs her, and if his face was pink before it’s bright red now. His sexuality has been something they’ve tiptoed around, like the floorboard in the hallway that always creaks when you step on it. They both know something’s up with that, but if nobody’s willing to do anything about it, then it can stay unbothered for a few more months. “Jesus. Can we have one big conversation at a time, please?”

“Sure, kiddo,” Grace humours him, wise smile not leaving her features. She peers over his shoulder to the box he’d abandoned in the hall, and raises an eyebrow. “Did you bring me something other than news and the smell of weed?”

Mike stammers but ends up deciding arguing is pointless, and just goes to pick up the box. Inside is a silver pot with a black handle; the bottom is scorched irreparably. (Mike knows; he went hard at that thing with some steel wool and nothing helped at all.) “Here,” he says, handing it over to his mother.

Her face softens instantly. He knows she can smell the same burnt oil, taste the same charred popcorn, and hear the same laughter that he can. He forgot how it feels to share nice memories with someone. “This has a lot of value to me,” he starts, clipped and honest, “and I thought it would be a nice reminder that I’m thinking of you.”

Grace ducks her head, hiding whatever tears might be lingering in her eyes. “I don’t want it,” she says, after a long moment of full silence. “It’s all burnt at the bottom.”

There’s a laugh behind her voice, and Mike sees straight through her façade: she wants him to keep it. She reaches up to drag her knuckle across her eye and they both pretend she isn’t crying. She speaks again, one hand pressed to her face like a sad orangutan. Like she’s worried the tears will flood the house. Her other hand clutches the table. Mike puts the pot away, watching her silently.

Finally, she speaks, and her voice is like nothing he’s heard before. “You didn’t really know your grandparents, not as much as they probably would have liked, but… they weren’t around, much, when I was a kid. I never wanted that for you, but I think I might have overcorrected too hard. I just hope I haven’t been too much of a pain in your ass; I’m only trying to protect you however I can.”

Mike thinks of Shae, and of Erika, and Melinda. “You know how grateful I am for you, ma.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Grace waves a hand, wiping away the last of her tears. She meets his eyes, and smiles again—but it’s tainted somehow. He’s not sure he likes having to be mature and worry about his mother; it was a lot easier to be a kid and just fuck around forever with no consequences. “That beard makes you look so much like your dad, Michael.”

He stays for a couple hours after that, and when he finally heads out Grace sends him with a jug of lemonade and a freshly baked peach cobbler that she had admitted was store-bought. “I can’t stand peaches,” she tells him as they repack his car because apparently the way he’d packed it was
‘ridiculously inefficient’. “But you don’t say no to cobbler, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Mike closes the trunk.

Grace hugs him, trying to convey with pats and her tight grip what words can’t get across. “You have to call me once a day,” she demands. “Otherwise I’ll call the Mounties on you and Joshua.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll have proper cell reception until I’m settled in,” he hums. “But… once a week. Promise.”

Pulling away, his mother shrugs. “That’s the best anyone can hope for, I guess.”

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**Chris:** Let me know when you get there safe?
**Mike:** I’ll let you know.
**Mike:** Stopped by my moms first but I’m leaving now
**Chris:** OK.
**Mike:** Do you remember what happened last night?
**Chris:** I’m not sure you should be texting and driving.
**Chris:** I remember you turning into a werewolf and that was before we got high.
**Chris:** Probably in your top five worst parties ever
**Mike:** I’m a pro driver
**Mike:** WTF? You didn’t have a good time?
**Chris:** I didn’t say that.
**Mike:** You haven’t BEEN to my top 5 worst parties ever
**Mike:** oh good I’m glad
**Chris:** You and your hand doesn’t count as a party.
**Mike:** CHRIS
**Mike:** Are you with Emily
**Mike:** That was a devastating distinctly Emily line
**Chris:** No I’m alone.

**Mike:** Sorry, I lost service.
**Chris:** It’s okay.
**Chris:** Where are you?
**Mike:** Buttfuck nowhere

*(MESSAGE NOT SENT)*

**Mike:** I think I lost service for good

*(MESSAGE NOT SENT)*

**Mike:** I wish I’d asked you to come with me

He deletes that one before he can make the mistake of sending it.
The revelation only hits when Mount Madahee finally appears on the horizon, cresting into view through his dusty windshield. The sight of the peak settles his bones, easing unconscious tension and triggering the realization: he’s been away from Josh and Shae too long.

“That’s ridiculous,” Mike says to the radio. Nobody responds except Blue Oyster Cult, who continue to croon at him in blissful ignorance. “I just saw them.”

And yet every creek send bolts of emotion through his veins, accompanied by memories that are impossible to ignore. His knuckles twitch on the steering wheel as he remembers padding through water with Shae in his other body; his wolf body. Mike’s brain plays tricks on him, splicing wendigos into shadows and wolves into streams. On a marbled pass covered in avalanche signage, his gaze wanders up to the hills in search of mine entrances.

But so much of the Rockies have yet to be touched by colonization and capitalism, even this close to the Trans-Canadian Highway. The last structure he entered was a crappy gas station two hours ago, and the crappy coffee he bought there has gone cold in his cup holder. He’s too far west for campgrounds and too far east for farmland; even in springtime this road is too cold for humans.

An eighteen-wheeler semi-truck careens by him, temporarily distracting him from his thoughts. But when they pass he spies a cave halfway up the hill. The cave’s entrance is partially obscured by some white leaves Mike can’t identify, and even after passing it the image is stuck in his head like a picture burnt to an LCD screen. If he speeds the rest of the way to the mountain, it doesn’t matter. This road is too cold for humans but he is not human. He’s been away too long.

This time, Mike arrives on the correct side of the mountain. The posters warning visitors about Victor Milgram have all been plastered over or taken down, presumably by the same people who put up new posters warning people to stay away. As worrying as the crime scene tape is, Mike feels grateful to see the posters because it might, in fact, keep people away. He tries to avoid thinking about anyone coming up here in the past few days, focusing his thoughts on the immediate objective; scaling the mountain.

As it turns out, scaling a mountain is a hell of a lot easier when you’ve got a cable car to carry you to the peak. It’s almost hard to believe that it took him so long the first time when now he can load all his things into the gondola and expect to arrive in a matter of minutes. Mike throws his worldly possessions into the car and squeezes onto the seat between his duffel bag and backpack. For a terrifying moment as the wires grind to life he thinks he might have to do two trips, but then the car starts to move and he sighs heavily.

He’s so relaxed he almost doesn’t see it, zoning out for most of the ride up the mountain. Only when he’s narrowing his eyes at what might be a deer does the glass window come into proper focus—and he sees it. Mike rocks to his feet, and the cable car rocks with him; for a terrifying moment he thinks he’s thrown it off its rhythm and he’s going to die falling down the mountain.

Thankfully, after a horrible screech of complaint that could put wendigo cries to shame, the cable car starts moving again. Mike finds it hard to be relieved, still stuck looking at the stain on the window. The red stain on the window. The stain on the window that is definitely blood.

Now that he’s noticed it it’s hard to turn his werewolf senses off, and the only thing stopping him from licking it like a kid cleaning off a plate is the overwhelming fear coursing through his veins. The scent permeates his nostrils and refuses to leave, as if his nose has the ability to focus.
Mike’s mind races as he tries to think of why the hell there would be bloodstains inside the cable car, and he comes up with only bad scenarios. Someone came up to investigate the rumours and met their untimely end. Shae and Josh lost their temper and got in a brawl. Josh went full berserker Wendigowag and Shae didn’t make it out alive. Josh went Wendigowag and to stop him, Shae had to—

“God,” Mike shakes his head, trying to clear out the thought. He can’t believe that. He has to believe that it’s not blood from either of them, and that it’s just a fluke. Maybe it’s fake blood left over from the prank, but Mike’s nose is telling him otherwise.

By the time he reaches the top his anxiety is buzzing around his head like a hornet, and he can hear his pulse thudding louder than anything else. When he lifts his bags up he sees blood smeared across the bottom of one, smudged all over the floor of the cable car. It’s a wonder he didn’t notice it before. “Oh, god,” he groans again, shouldering the bag and trying not to freak out.

Unfortunately the next thing he sees doesn’t exactly quell his apprehension. When he exits the cable car station there’s a clear line of blood in the frigid dirt, and the patches of snow still littered around the path are all red and brown. It isn’t fresh blood, but it’s definitely not corn syrup and food colouring.

Before he can think any better of it, Mike howls. He doesn’t think he means to howl, he thinks he meant to call out Josh and Shae’s names in case they’re outside— but from his human throat comes a surprisingly animal noise. It almost hurts his untrained vocal cords, and he feels stupider for having done it.

No response comes from the silent mountain except a birdcall, and Mike tries hard to ignore his pounding heart. He walks up the cold path alone and lonely, using his new strength to carry all his bags and his new senses to constantly look around for signs of life. He doesn’t find anything except a flighty squirrel and a small murder of crows. “Gonna hope that’s not an omen,” he mutters to himself.

He makes it over a small stone bridge when suddenly a new wave of smell hits him— one that thankfully isn’t blood. There is no struggle to identify the source; Mike recognizes the inexpressible feeling the moment he feels it. He knows it is Josh, and a moment later he recognizes a second scent as Shae. Sangfroid sets in, dissolving his anxiety.

In one moment he’s looking around sniffing the air like a lost bloodhound, and in the next he is tackled by a force that appears out of nowhere. His bags fly out of his hand and Mike can’t even pause to pick them up, winded and restrained by the skeleton monster wrapped around his torso. “Sorry,” Josh says into his shoulder, breathless and grinning. “Couldn’t help it.”

“Wh” is all he gets the chance to say before a second force hits both of them, knocking Mike onto his back and Josh into his lap. Mike’s head thuds hard against the cold forest floor but Josh doesn’t climb off him. Mike’s field of vision consists of the sky, the treetops, the crows flying away, and Shae and Josh peering down at him curiously. Shae’s wearing one of Hannah’s old beanies and Josh is only wearing a t-shirt, which is disturbing before Mike remembers that none of them are human so they don’t exactly need to layer.

His hand climbs up and rests on Josh’s side. Even though Shae is right there standing over them he doesn’t move it, palm warm against Josh’s cold ribs. A thousand things run through his head of what he needs to say but none of them seem urgent now like they did in the car, and he blinks slowly until his smile matches Josh and Shae’s. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Shae beams, offering him a hand up. Mike pulls his hand away from Josh’s side to take it,
lifting Josh into the air with him as he stands. Josh clambers off him and Mike hopes he’s not imagining the reluctance there. “You came back!”

“Obviously,” Mike snorts. There’s no bite to his words, and Shae’s tone is earnest. They embrace and he holds the hug for a long moment, squeezing her shoulder to express what words can’t. “I told you I would.”

“You didn’t exactly hurry,” Josh huffs, and Mike pulls away to look at him with incredulity. “We were making bets on how long you’d stay.”

Something solemn flickers across Shae’s face, but her tone is still cheery. “I win.”

“Yeah, I-O-U,” Josh rolls his eyes, still smiling.

“I said I was only going for a few days,” Mike protests, picking up his bloody and now muddy bags from the ground. Neither Josh nor Shae offer to help carry anything, because their monstrosity extends to their etiquette. “Nice to know you missed me.”

He expects Shae to scoff and Josh to make a joke, not for both of them to stare at him with relief shining through their smiles. They reply in unison, “We did,” and something jumps in Mike’s heart like someone triggered a tripwire.

Before he can ask anything else, he remembers the urgent thought that can’t wait for later and he narrows his eyes at the pair. “Wait. Why is there blood at the cable car station?”

“Oh, we fought a bear,” Shae says in the most matter-of-fact blasé way that anyone will ever utter those words.

There’s a joke somewhere in some joke book that will never be published, not even as a zine, because it’s not funny. The joke goes something like “a werewolf and a wendigo are given a weekend alone to themselves…” and no matter how long Mike could have contemplated different punchlines, he’s not sure he’d ever come up with the answer.

As it turns out, the werewolf and the wendigo decided to spend time together decorating and fighting a bear. In his brief absence Shae and Josh have made a proper home out of the lodge, which they show off in excitement as Mike unpacks his things. The living room looks like a frat member’s bedroom, with video game systems and movies strewn everywhere and junk food wrappers on every surface. Mike can’t help but think that Melinda would hate it, and it makes the room even more appealing.

Every surface in the kitchen and upstairs bathroom has been scrubbed raw, except the kitchen sink which is piled high with dirty dishes. Mike still appreciates the effort made, and when he asks after the cleaner’s name Shae snorts as Josh just looks self-conscious. “You were gone, and I was bored,” he drawls. Mike can hardly argue with that.

The basement is still filled with monk costumes and dollhouses but the heat has been on for so long that they don’t have to put their shoes on to walk around, although Josh and Shae both encourage him to do so. “We’re going to the freezer,” Shae explains like Mike is dumb for even asking why, which doesn’t inspire comfort.

He follows anyway, and is horrified when he discovers why exactly they’re going to the freezer.
The semi-organized system in place to keep track of food has been shoved aside, literally. Shelves have been pushed to the back and boxes flattened, all to make room for the biggest carcass of any animal Mike has ever seen.

“Oh my god,” Mike gags, and has to take a step back. The smell is overpowering, and he leaves the freezer. The door closes behind him and he sees Josh and Shae’s confused faces through it before they follow him out. “Oh, my god. Oh my god. You kept the bear.”

“Well. Come on,” Josh starts, and then falters. “Were we not supposed to keep meat in the freezer?”

“You keep Tofurky in the freezer,” Shae accuses.

“Are you just upset because you haven’t eaten raw meat in a few days?”

“No,” Mike starts, and then stops, because he has actually eaten raw meat in the past few days but he doesn’t think Josh needs to know that. Not when the raw meat came from his mother basically force-feeding it to Mike. “You… how did you kill it?”

“Josh tricked it into falling off a cliff, and then I ripped its throat out,” Shae says as plainly as ‘I set the oven to 350 and put the cookies in for an hour.’ “It was fun.”

There’s no discernible head so all that’s visible through the glass pane in the freezer door is a huge lump of meat, one that could plausibly belong to any part of the bear. The motion sensor switches off the light and the freezer is plunged back into darkness, and Mike shivers. “And… why? Did you just get hungry?”

He directs the question at Josh instead of Shae, who rolls his eyes. “It made the first move,” Josh says, unimpressed. “Shae was outside and it tried to attack her.”

Mike turns his gaze on Shae. “Did it hurt you?”

“No,” she scoffs.

“It took a swipe at her,” Josh corrects, reaching over to pull Shae’s shirt up. The long scar across her chest from before is still there, alongside a matching new scar sliced into her ribcage—two long claw marks. The more recent scar is bright red and still healing but fortunately it doesn’t appear to be infected.

Mike watches curiously, expecting Josh’s hand to be smacked away; but instead Shae just looks a little humiliated. “It’s nothing,” she mumbles. “It would have been worse if Josh didn’t come help me.”

“I heard her howling, so I went to help,” Josh steps in, radiating obvious pride. It’s such an unusual look on him that Mike doesn’t know what to think. “We had fun, and now we have dinner for the next couple weeks. Win-win.”

Shae lowers her shirt again, grinning at Josh. Mike’s heart hurts for reasons he can’t say aloud, reasons that would ruin Josh’s good mood and newfound comradery. Seeing Josh like this almost exactly parallels the memories Mike has of seeing Josh with Hannah and Beth. He has more than his fair share of mental and emotional problems but nobody could ever say that Josh wasn’t a great older brother.

Shae and Josh’s interaction is clearly providing something they both need; someone to rely on and protect. Mike quirks an eyebrow, trying not to grin too obviously. “Seems like you two really
Josh opens his mouth to undoubtedly make some snarky joke but before he can, Shae answers with an earnest smile, “Yes. We have. Josh has terrible taste in movies, but he’s my friend now.”

The noise Josh produces is not quite a wendigo shriek but it is certainly not human. “*Excuse me? I have terrible taste in movies?!*”

“That’s right,” Shae nods, turning back to Mike. “We’ve been making our way through his favourites, and they’re all bad. Maybe now that you’re here again we can go back to watching *Home Alone.*”

Praying that they let the conversation move away from the bear-filled freezer, Mike beckons Josh and Shae to follow him back upstairs. Thankfully, they do. “Maybe we can pick something out together,” he suggests, ignoring Josh’s muttering about auteurs of horror and Shae’s lack of taste. “Have you seen *Harry Potter? You’d like Sirius a lot.*”

“If she didn’t like *The Witch,* I don’t think she’ll like *Harry Potter.*”

“You watched *The Witch?*!”

“I made him turn it off the first scene,” Shae yawns. “The secret to getting Joshua to turn a movie off is to ask him questions about every single thing until you ask one he doesn’t know how to answer, and then he gets mad and turns it off and runs outside.”

Josh’s cheeks go pink. “I do not!”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” Mike grins. “Have you two been together the whole last three days? You’re almost finishing each other’s sentences.” He tries to keep the jealousy out of his tone, but isn’t entirely sure if he’s successful.

Shae holds the basement door open and he and Josh go through. “No, we took breaks,” she mutters, sounding almost sad about it. Then she shakes herself off. “Whenever Josh needs space I go up to my cabin. Maybe I’ll head over there now!”

Her last sentence is accompanied by an exaggerated wink that Mike has no idea how to process, and the flush on Josh’s face only reddens. Shae wiggles her eyebrows at them before bounding away, and she’s hardly out the door before she starts to transform into a wolf. As exit maneuvers go, it’s freakishly reminiscent of something Jess would do.

The door swings shut behind her and Mike is left alone in the living room with Josh, who keeps switching between staring directly at him and looking anywhere but. Mike runs his fingers through his beard awkwardly, watching Josh’s gaze dart around the room. “I’m not sure if I like this new gruesome twosome thing,” he says, for lack of another topic. He rehearsed so many speeches on his drive back, but now that he’s here standing in front of Josh it’s hard to remember anything. “Did you two get along okay while I was gone?”

“You’re not my babysitter,” Josh says suddenly, turning to face him. His eyes sear into Mike as he searches for something unknown, and Mike has no idea if he finds it or not. The tension as Josh examines him only lasts a second, and then Josh is turning away again, rotating on the spot. “C’mon, I want to show you what I did with the bedrooms.”
They don’t go into Hannah or Beth’s room for obvious reasons, but Mike is surprised when they pass the guest room in favour of heading straight for the master bedroom. Before he can say anything about this being Melinda and Bob’s room Josh opens the door, awkwardly standing to the side. “I thought you might want to keep sleeping here,” he mutters. “You know, if you’re going to stick around for a bit.”

“Hey…” Mike begins, but before he can say anything Josh takes one of his bags and carries it over to the closet. The Washingtons’ old clothes have been cleared out and one of the obnoxious paintings is missing, replaced by a photo from one of Josh’s albums. It’s too small for the frame but it has all their smiling faces; this must have been taken right before summer vacation because Sam already has a horrible sunburn. “I haven’t seen this one before.”

“That one made the yearbook,” Josh says, already walking out of the room. Mike follows, bewildered. “Han was so upset they used it because she thought it was really unflattering, but I like it.”

He tries again. “Josh—”

“And now for mi casa,” Josh smoothly cuts him off, opening the door to his own room. It’s been cleaned even more since the last time Mike was in here, and the whole room smells like Pine-Sol. There’s something alarming about the sterility of the walls, and Mike could swear a couple posters and shelves are missing. But he supposes it’s good that Josh cleaned, even if Mike is going through intense jamais vu. “Not that I really sleep anywhere but the ceiling these days.”

“I can’t tell if that’s a joke or not,” Mike narrows his eyes.

“I hope you don’t have sleep paralysis already, because oh boy would that be confusing.” Josh’s tone is sardonic as always but there’s an acidic, nervous edge to all his words. Mike wishes (not for the first time) that he could just read Josh’s mind so he wouldn’t have to spend all this time overthinking about everything he says. It would just be another power to add to the list. “Is that a demon in the corner of your room or is it your old pal Josh Wash? Trick question. The answer is both.”

“Josh,” Mike repeats, and steps towards him.

Josh doesn’t exactly jump backwards but it’s a close thing. His back slams against the desk none too lightly and Mike sighs, putting some distance between them. He sits down on the bed and Josh doesn’t come to join him, staring at him from across the room. For the son of millionaires it’s still a small bedroom so there isn’t really that much space between them at all. If Josh wanted to sit next to him, he could come over faster than Mike’s eyes could process it.

After silence so tense that they could hear a pin drop, Mike sighs. “Demons don’t wear plain t-shirts.”


“God, I missed you,” Mike blurts out before he can help it. His eyes close in mortification and when he opens them, Josh is staring at him with an expression torn between fear and doubt. Because Mike is a coward, he quickly changes his tune. “Everyone misses you.”

“Everyone?” Fear suddenly blossoms across Josh’s face, as sudden as his blush from before. “You saw everyone?”

“Yep,” Mike nods. “I even saw your mom. That’s not a joke, I literally saw your—hey—”
Before he can get another word out Josh has a hand on each side of his face, having vaulted across the room in the split second between Mike’s sentences. Mike winces, half-expecting Josh to rip his skull in half. But all Josh does is hold his head carefully, tilting his jaw up so he can make better eye contact. Mike is a little terrified and a little turned-on. “Why,” Josh shrieks, “would you go see my mom?”

“She deserves to know you’re okay,” Mike breathes, words coming out strangled even though Josh isn’t touching his throat. He knows that this is not a positive moment and that he should probably be gearing up for a fight, but he keeps getting distracted by the chilled palms and fingertips against his face. “So I told her, and she…”

“She what.”

“She made me transform,” Mike blurts out. His plans were to tell Josh this in a few days or weeks or never, but apparently plans change. “So that she knew if I was telling the truth.”

Josh deflates, slowly dragging his fingers down the side of Mike’s face. His nails are still too short to be considered claws but Mike suspects he’ll have to cut them soon again. “How did she make you transform?”

“It’s fine, it was nothing,” Mike lies. He’s pretty Josh can see straight through him but thankfully he doesn’t press. “Anyway, I’m glad I went; she said she’s gonna talk to the police and have them call the investigation off. So you won’t be eating any more cops. And she made me promise to take care of you, and I said I would.” How’s that for not your babysitter.

Josh is speechless for once, finally sinking down to sit beside Mike on the bed. The mattress hardly moves under his weight. Maybe later they can go barbeque up some bear together to get some meat on his skeletal monster friend’s bones. After a long moment of thought, Josh eventually looks over at him and asks, “You saw Chris?”

Mike believes he knows himself well; at least, he’d like to think that he has some understanding of who he is as a person. While he tries to stay humble as much as possible he knows he’s got issues with narcissism, and the worst side effect of his vanity is jealousy. When he’s not actively being loved or complimented or shown affection his shallow petty jealousy morphs into green-eyed envious loneliness, which is so much worse to handle.

But even as he wrestles with jealousy at Josh’s question there’s another side to him that wants to explore; the part of his identity that still remains unfamiliar. That part of him wants desperately to ask Josh about the mischief he and Chris created in blanket forts that left both of them blushing about it years later. That part of him is jealous too, but the jealousy comes from being excluded.

Instead of expressing any of this because he doesn’t have the first clue how, Mike reaches out and grabs Josh’s arm. Instantly he regrets the motion, because while Josh’s hands are cold his other parts are warm. “Oh my god, dude,” Mike replies, “you have no idea how much he misses you. It’s the only thing he talked about the whole time.”

Josh leans in with hungry eyes, and Mike swallows another wave of jealousy. “Really?”

“Uh, yeah. He was so mad I wouldn’t let him come back with me.”

As soon as it started the moment ends, and Josh gulps down a nervous, sharp breath. His excitement is replaced by terror at the thought of Chris coming to visit, and Mike feels simultaneously very relieved and very guilty. “Oh no, that would not be good. If he came here. No.”
“Yeah, not for a while at least,” Mike squeezes Josh’s arm gently, which seems to assuage some of his fear. “Imagine how he would have freaked out about the bear.”

There’s still a haunted look in Josh’s eyes so Mike reluctantly pulls his hand away, but in the next instant Josh smiles. “Imagine if Sam had seen it.”

“Oh, god,” Mike laughs, and Josh laughs with him. “Imagine the lecture.”

“She can’t even drink milk. We’d never hear the end of it.”

“Yeah, she’d be all, bears are friends, not food!”

“But then again, I can’t imagine Sam was happy to find out I was alive.”

“Wh—” Mike’s vision flashes for a second and he turns to face Josh so fast he nearly breaks his neck. “Are you serious?”

Josh looks hollowed out, dark eyes and a heavy frown only adding to his skeletal look. “The last time I saw her, I was—”

“Sam wanted to come back with me today.” Mike is aware he’s being loud but he can’t simmer down, too upset by the idea. “She wanted to come and I said no because it isn’t safe. If she and Chris and the others could be here right now, they would. We’re still your friends, you fucking asshole.”

Josh isn’t visibly breathing, almost paralyzed as he stares. “Mike—”

“I’m sorry, that was too far, but I just—”

“Your eyes,” Josh stops him, and suddenly there’s a cold hand on his chest. “You’re transforming.”

“What?” Mike blinks and suddenly the world is righted; he didn’t even notice that everything had gone colourless. He doesn’t feel any different otherwise and the usual rush of fur across his skin simply didn’t happen. “I’m sorry, I don’t… what just happened?”

“I don’t know,” Josh shakes his head, still mesmerized. “You just got worked up, I guess. Your eyes went all dark.”

“Sorry,” Mike breathes, embarrassment setting in now that his head is clear. “That’s never happened before.”

Finally Josh pulls his hand away from where it’s curled around Mike’s shoulder, and he blinks at the loss of contact. Josh coughs. “Anyway. You were telling me about how much everyone missed me. What about Jessica?”

“She was really surprised to hear that you were alive, and she was scared when I explained the wendigo stuff to her but… she got it, I think. Why I needed to come back.” Mike sighs. He can’t resist adding, “She sure didn’t miss me very much, if the way she dumped me is any indicator.”

“Whoa, whoa, she broke up with you?” Josh wrinkles his nose, and it’s such a distinctly human expression that it almost looks out of place on his jagged face. “Why?”

“She likes Matt.” Mike feels like he’s back in high school again. “And they might get together, because he dumped Emily. It must be the season, because Chris and Ashley just broke up too.”
Josh pales. “What?”

“Yeah,” Mike shrugs. “They’re okay, though. Everyone seems okay with everything—even Em, which is bizarre. I feel like they’re all moving on into new relationships and realizing what they need and want, and I’m just… whatever, dude, you don’t want to hear about this.”

“I’m sorry,” Josh offers.

“It’s fine. It was inevitable, I wasn’t into it anymore either—”

“No, not about that,” Josh snaps. “I mean, about that too, but I’m sorry for always being a dick to you.” Mike turns to watch him curiously. “And… for being a dick in general. And for what I said before I left about how you can’t stay with anyone.”

“Oh.” The apology catches Mike off-guard. He’d nearly forgotten about their fight last week that had caused his departure in the first place. He bitterly points out, “Well, clearly you were right.”

He expects Josh to say ‘regardless I shouldn’t have said it’ or some bullshit apology that will fix their fight like a bandage over a bullet wound. Instead, Josh twists his hands together fretfully, choosing his words with great care. “Maybe… you’re going to stay here? Maybe you’re going to stay with me.”

The self-effacing suggestion comes out nervous but rehearsed like Josh has prepared it beforehand. Mike is suddenly helpless under the force of his gaze, and he wants nothing more than to reach forward and take those cold flighty hands into his own grasp. “I will,” he promises. His hands rest on his knees. “For as long as you need.”

Josh stops fidgeting, staring at him with urgency. “What if that’s forever?”

“Then I’ll stay for forever,” Mike says. It’s the easiest thing he’s ever decided.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

My god. In ten days it'll have been a YEAR since the last update. I'm so, so sorry for the delay! In my defense, this last year has been a rollercoaster. For one, I moved back to Alberta myself… so life imitates art, I guess? I hope this almost twenty-thousand-word chapter (yikes) makes up for the year (minus ten days) it took to post. I want to thank everyone who has commented, bookmarked this, left kudos, or reached out to my tumblr inbox. You’re all so kind and it really makes me happy to know that other people are enjoying this story. I hope you like this chapter; it's got quite frankly a ridiculous amount of flirting! Finally, three years later, the slow burn is starting to ignite.

CONTENT WARNINGS for this chapter: light sexual content, hallucinations brought on by trauma.

ALSO! jennafare made a wonderful fanmix for this fic which you can find here. It was so amazing to see this gift, and it really inspired me to get back in the saddle and update this story. I totally recommend listening while you read!

Springtime on Madahee means provincially pink wild roses poking inquisitive buds out through the blanket of snow, and no short supply of food to hunt. As the local wildlife comes out of hibernation so does Shae’s appetite; if Mike had thought her ravenous before, it’s nothing compared to how much she eats now.

Their chase today has taken them closer to the peak than Mike would usually prefer. Up here the dirt is still frozen, and the air is too thin for humans, but for werewolves it’s easier to catch prey. At least that’s what Shae indicated before they headed out despite Mike’s lack of understanding.

But now, standing close to the precipice of a cliff, he thinks he gets it. There’s something about the thin, cold air that makes March feel like October and helps them pinpoint the smell they’re chasing. The deer smell like venison already, like warmth and satisfaction and a need. Mike’s nose twitches and his paws scrape the rock beneath them, silently pleading.

Shae looks over at him, her ears twitching and tail wagging. Not only can she see how eager he is, she can feel it too; she must be able to pick up the scent of their prey. A breeze wafts up the cliff and Mike and Shae both growl, low and unintelligible but obviously excited. Shae rears back but right as she’s about to lunge over the cliff, a crack from above scares them both.

Mike tries to swear, twisting his neck a direction it doesn’t turn, but all that his throat can create is a startled bark. Shae backs away from the edge, looking up above them instead. Brought on by that first bolt of thunder, the clouds that have been sulking over their heads all afternoon throw a sudden but heavy tantrum. In one second drops are starting to roll off their fur and in the next, it’s pouring.

Their immunity and temperature regulation should protect them from catching a cold, but Mike doesn’t much like the idea of wandering around the mountain during a rainstorm. When he glances over the cliff the deer are gone, spooked by the lucky storm.
Shae butts her head gently into his neck, and then starts padding away. Mike trails behind her, and as they slog down the mountain the rain only gets heavier and heavier. For once, Shae has the good sense not to transform until they’re back inside the lodge, dripping onto the hardwood and naked as the day they were born.

Josh’s head pops up from his spot on the couch, and quickly his sharp face turns into a frown. “Oh, Jesus, assholes,” he groans, ducking back behind the cushions. “Get some clothes on.”

Colour is the last aspect of humanity to return, so Mike misses the blues of Josh’s eyes. Shae heads to the kitchen to towel off and Mike reaches for the pile of clothes he’d haphazardly thrown off this morning. “That’s all? What about a nice welcome home, honey?”

“Welcome home, dipshit,” Josh says without looking over again. He sounds hoarse, like he might have been napping. When Mike strains his nose the room smells like Josh, and like orange juice, and—he realizes, jaw dropping—like sex. Mike half-wants to tease Josh about it, but instead he quickly pulls his pants on before his body can betray him.

Shae must be able to smell it too but she makes no comment, re-entering with a towel tied around her waist. Mike and Josh exchange a look; she looks nothing like Sam, but the outfit is still amusing. “What?”

“Nothing,” Mike snorts, shaking out his hair in an attempt at making his beard look less scraggly. He’s certain he fails entirely. Before he can think better of it, he blurts out, “What’ve you been up to all day?”

“Nothing,” Josh echoes him, raising a curious eyebrow. Shae remains silent. If no one else is going to bring it up, Mike sure isn’t going to say anything. “Where’s dinner?”

“We lost dinner,” Shae says mournfully. “But there’s always bear in the meat freezer.”

“Is that Arrested Development?” Mike narrows his eyes. “Did you get her started on Arrested Development?”

“Not yet.” Josh pouts a little as Mike pulls his shirt down into place. “I wanted to eat something fresh.”

“You’re welcome to join us on our next hunt.” Shae yawns, stretching her arms up over her head. The towel stays in place somehow; Mike wonders if the Washington’s towels come with special Velcro or something. “After dark, of course.”

A thought occurs to Mike, and he speaks it without thinking. “Hey, we haven’t tried taking you out in the rain yet!” Josh and Shae both look his way without comprehension, and he scratches the back of his neck. “I mean, it’s cloudy out, so maybe... you could try going outside now?”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“But there’s no direct sunlight,” Mike wheedles.

Josh folds in on himself. “I don’t... I don’t know. The last time I was out during the day was when we left the cave, and it burned. I don’t wanna go through that again.”

Mike has a dozen retorts on the tip of his tongue; that they should at least try, that maybe being in a cave for three weeks affected Josh’s wendigo sensitivities, that a little Vitamin D wouldn’t go unnoticed because right now Josh looks like a vampire. But the storm outside is growing torrential and Mike would rather wipe the miserable look off Josh’s face.
“Maybe we’ll test it out some other day,” he suggests, hoping he sounds like a supportive friend instead of a government scientist from some 80s monster movie. Fortunately Josh’s distress melts into relief, and he nods. It’s only one out of hundreds of promises that they’ve made to each other regarding the future, but this one is especially comforting to Mike because it suggests progress.

“It smells too much like boys in here,” Shae mutters, wiping her face off with a dishrag and then tossing it back towards the kitchen. Mike stands perfectly still as Josh fights the urge to flee, and both their faces flood with embarrassed colour. “We need some more girls up in this joint.”

One task that Josh and Shae have made no headway on is cleaning, which is wholly unsurprising. Now that Mike has all his worldly possessions with him and Melinda’s full consent to live here, he wants to make the lodge at least livable, if not comfortable. For obvious reasons, their cleaning has to start in the basement.

“Obvious how?” Josh parrots back, interrupting his lecture. Mike glares at him, but the world’s worst wendigo continues, unbothered, “There’s lots of other areas that are just as disgusting. I never got around to cleaning up the Saw room either; maybe we should stop by and clean up my bisected corpse.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“The Saw room?” Shae shivers, which Mike knows is for dramatic whiny effect. If he, a newly converted werewolf, is already able to block out the cold, then Shae can use her years of experience to do the same. She runs her hands over her biceps, histrionic and unconvincing. “Is that different than the room with all the knives hanging from the ceiling?”

“Oh, the gun room?” Josh tsks. “That’s where the confessions were supposed to happen. One of these days I’ll run you through the whole synopsis. Maybe we can do, like, a guided tour…”

“I don’t think so,” Mike says, giving Josh a meaningful glance. The attached meaning in this instance is stop, and possibly why, and probably what the fuck. “Let’s let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Can we also let fake ghosts and dolls lie?”

“Wait,” Shae cuts in, narrowing her eyes. “So this creepy basement is only this messy because of you two, right?”

“Not me,” Mike scoffs. “Just Josh.”

“Well, if you hadn’t signed up for the first prank—”

“But, hang on,” Shae says. “Regardless, I am not responsible. So why do I have to help clean up?”

“Because if I call a cleaning crew to come up the mountain, Josh will eat them.”

“Only if they look tasty.” There’s no telling if he’s joking.

Eventually Shae volunteers to clean out the freezer, sectioning and portioning the bear meat into a neater system. Mike suspects she’s only keeping herself busy with that task so that she can dispose of all the expired food by just eating it, but he doesn’t really care to complain. Her absence gives him some much-desired alone time with Josh, even if that alone time consists of scrubbing dirty floors and throwing away pig carcasses.
Mike is in the middle of the latter task when Josh speaks up for the tenth time in the last five minutes. “Technically we don’t have to clean down here,” he starts hypothesizing, and Mike rolls his eyes as he ties up what feels like his hundredth garbage bag of pig meat. “The hotel isn’t a part of the mansion, it’s just underneath it. You’re not going to make us go clean the mines out after this, right?”

“We’ll see how much we get done today,” Mike grunts, tossing the bag down the hall to join the others. When he turns back Josh is staring at him with open interest, and Mike blinks, stymied. “What?”

He mumbles, “You’ve changed.”

“Why? Because I don’t want to live above a crime scene?”

“No, not what I meant. I don’t think the old Mike Munroe would have been able to free-throw five hundred pounds like that.”

“Maybe you didn’t know the old Mike Munroe very well,” Mike teases, secretly pleased by the compliment. “I used to be buff.”

Josh laughs so hard he nearly keels over. “That’s, uh, horseshit,” he points an accusing finger at Mike, whose blush fades in favour of indignation. “I remember a class president who drank Starbucks every day and wore tight polos, not a— not a mountain man with a thick beard and muscles.”

Almost as soon as he’s said it Josh becomes powerfully embarrassed, leaning against the dusty wall he’s made almost no headway on. Mike wipes off his hands on a rag, tossing it away before walking over to stand beside Josh. His heart is pounding a mile a minute; he wonders if Josh can hear it.

Mike hasn’t had a good excuse to put his charm on in a while, and now seems the perfect time. “I had the muscles back then too,” he feigns irritation, leaning against the same wall. Josh doesn’t move away, head swiveling to look at him. Mike doesn’t know when he stopped finding those sharp wendigo teeth repellent—if he’s honest with himself, he thinks the joy at seeing Josh has always outweighed the disgust at seeing a monster. And sometimes the monstrous part is captivating too. “That’s why the polos were so tight.”

“Oh, that’s why.” Josh grins at him, mischievous as ever. The nostalgia at seeing that smile takes Mike back, but doesn’t knock him out of the moment entirely. “Jess and I used to wonder if your mom just didn’t know how to do laundry right.”

“Hey, don’t talk smack about my mom,” Mike gasps. He reaches up to shove Josh’s shoulder; too light to hurt but too hard to ignore. Josh’s skin is solid beneath his touch and warmer than Mike would have expected. “I did my own laundry because unlike a spoiled rich kid, I knew the value of hard work.”

Josh raises an eyebrow. “Is that why you’re making me clean up this whole hotel? Because you think I’m a spoiled rich kid?”

“No,” Mike starts to protest, worried he’s gone too far. But there’s still a smile playing on Josh’s lips, signifying that this isn’t like their old fights. Maybe they’ve come too far to ever fight the same way again, dynamic irreparably changed. Before he can restrain himself, he says, “Maybe I just want to see you break a sweat.”
“Oh,” Josh stutters, eyes wide. Now Mike can hear his heart pounding, an undisguisable reassurance that this isn’t all happening in Mike’s head. “Then maybe instead of cleaning—”

Of course they’re interrupted, because the universe hates Mike. Shae’s voice is too quiet to be heard as she calls from the other room, but Mike and Josh have both been blessed and cursed with supernatural hearing. After a torn glance, Josh reluctantly steps towards the noise, pushing himself off the wall and walking away. Mike follows, heart left wanting and toes smarting as he kicks a box out of the way in frustration.

It turns out Shae has made much more progress than they have, probably due to the lack of flirting or company on her end. The bear face is gone from the freezer window, and the restaurant itself has been cleaned a little too. Some of the carcasses that Mike and Josh hadn’t reached yet are missing, but Mike chooses to let that slide due to Shae’s good work.

She’s not in the restaurant, so Josh and Mike follow the clean path through the kitchen and down the hall. There they find her in a room that Mike doesn’t recognize but that Josh clearly does, judging by the way he freezes at the threshold.

“I found this,” Shae says, gesturing to a projector. No image is displayed on the wall but Josh’s face goes chalky anyway. “It looks expensive; do you want me to bring it upstairs?”

“No,” Josh hisses, and he sounds strangled enough that Shae notices and turns around. With a heavy breath, he leans against the doorframe for support. “It’s not that expensive,” he finishes, trying hard to sound normal.

Mike can only guess that this is a part of the prank that involved Chris and Ashley, and he must have missed out. In a move that startles both of them, his hand brushes against Josh’s lower back. Josh jumps but Mike doesn’t pull away, steadying himself and leaving his hand there.

Josh glances over at him, expression unreadable, and Mike can only hope that Josh sees how badly Mike wants him to forgive himself. There’s no point living the rest of their lives in guilt; Hannah and Beth are dead for good, and no amount of evil magic is going to change that. The only thing they can hope to do now is clean out the skeletons in their closet and slowly start owning up to their pasts, so that they can hope for a future.

There’s no way Josh can read all that in a simple look but something about Mike’s face (or his warm hand) appears to comfort him. Shae’s eyes dart between them curiously, and Mike can only imagine the questions she’ll bombard him with later. “Well… it looks expensive.”

“That one’s only like a hundred dollars,” Josh sniffs, standing up straighter. Mike pulls his hand away, shoving it awkwardly into his back pocket. “I have way nicer ones upstairs.”

Suddenly a great idea occurs to Mike.

The springtime and change in weather must be transforming everyone, because as they act on Mike’s idea two new things happen simultaneously. Number one: Shae makes popcorn, which Mike thinks counts as her first time cooking for them. (Raw hare does not count as a meal, even if Shae offers them possibly poisonous berries and calls it a salad.) Mike’s instinct as the appointed house chef is to hover around the kitchen but Shae waves him off.

The second event is Josh cleaning of his own volition; when Mike points this out a lampshade is
lobbed in his direction. “Of course I’ve cleaned before,” Josh scowls, returning to his task of sweeping under the seats and checking around for garbage. “I’m not actually a spoiled rich kid, you asshole.”

“Just a rich kid, then?” Mike catches the empty mug thrown at him, grinning and tossing it back. Josh’s arm flies up to catch it before it can shatter. “Anyway. I don’t mind cleaning if it’s for a good cause—and this is an undeniably great cause. You should have said something earlier, Michael.”

“Somehow I didn’t think of it,” Mike says, spreading blankets over the newly cleaned seats. The theatre is illuminated by a blank blue screen; they still haven’t decided what movie they’re watching yet, but Josh and Shae had quickly latched onto Mike’s idea. It makes perfect sense to have movie night in the actual movie theatre, instead of sitting around the messy living room. If there’s an added benefit of replacing bad memories with good ones, well. Mike will take whatever he can get.

Josh’s teeth shine in the dim light, and Mike has to remind himself that sharp teeth are scary and not hot. His problem is that on Josh, they are hot. “One time, Chris and I locked ourselves in here for twelve hours so we could watch all of Lord of The Rings,” the wendigo beams, and that does wonders for killing Mike’s mood.

“One time I got laid in a movie theatre,” Mike grins at him, sliding into a seat. Josh rolls his eyes. “I guess we had different high school experiences… unless Gollum got you two in the mood.”

Josh sits beside him. “More like Aragorn.”

“Wait, wh—”

“Okay, I’m here! I succeeded!” For the second time in less than an hour Shae interrupts them, and both Josh and Mike twist their heads to look back at her. True to her word, she’s holding two big bowls of yellow buttery popcorn under each arm; she smells like her usual scent, but there’s a definite undercurrent of smoke. “Kind of!”

Josh looks triumphant. “Did you cave and use the microwave?”

“I may have,” Shae says, passing one bowl to Josh and the other to Mike. “Did you two decide what we’re watching?”

“Rocky Horror Picture Show,” says Mike as Josh says, “Rosemary’s Baby.”

Half an hour of zealous arguing later, Josh falls silent in the middle of an ardent rant and stares down at Shae, who has fallen asleep between them. Her head lolls against Mike’s shoulder and popcorn has spilled all over her lap. The blank blue screen is still staring at them impassively and Mike yawns; no more is said. They all fall asleep before anyone can decide what to watch.

Some parts of the old hotel stay untouched as days and nights fly by, cloudy and rainy but filled with fond memories. Over the next few weeks they eventually clean up the basement. It never reaches the level of spotlessness that Melinda would probably strive for, and Mike is uncertain that they would pass any health inspections. But they get rid of all the creepy shit and make it livable.
The work is helpful for Mike—he finally has something to do with his hands other than sit around twiddling his thumbs and trying not to flirt with Josh. The downside is that he’s actually using his hands, not his much more capable and durable paws. For the most part he’s invulnerable so splinters and scrapes do little more than annoy him. But eventually, he stumbles onto the straw that breaks the werewolf’s back as he’s fixing up the library. He’s three shelves into a bookcase, building from the top-down and sweating his dick off, when he scuffs his hand against the wood and accidentally chips a nail.

Josh is the first to react, perking up from where he’s been sprawled into a recliner for the last hour. A second later when the blood actually starts to swell, Shae lifts her head out of whichever Nancy Drew Mystery she’s reading and sniffs the air.

“Ow,” Mike whines, shaking his hand and glaring at his friends. “Stop looking at me like that. Fish are friends, not food.”

Shae exchanges a look with Josh and Mike wishes that telepathy were one of his werewolf senses. He wipes the blood off on his jeans, earning a haughty look from Josh (as if ‘Mr. I Eat Raw Meat Before Bed and Hide The Bones Under My Mattress For Mike To Find Later’ has any moral high ground regarding hygiene).

When Mike examines his hand again, he makes an unfortunate discovery—the yellow polish Jess put on in Vancouver has entirely disintegrated. The grief he feels only grows as he looks at the other seven nails and realizes he’s kind of let his nails go to absolute shit. Most of the colour has been scraped off his pinky and ring finger, and the polish on the rest is all chipped around the edges, whittled down and ugly. “Shae, are you any good at painting nails?” he asks distractedly.

“Uh,” Shae starts, glancing down at her own unpainted nails. “I don’t really know how, but I could… try?”

Josh is already putting away his Stephen King. “I know how,” he supplies, disappearing up the stairs. When he returns, his palms are cupped around at least ten different bottles of nail polish, straight from Hannah’s stash. One is aquamarine and reminds him of Sam, so Mike selects it. Josh unceremoniously dumps the other colours down onto the nearest armchair and informs him, “That was Han’s favourite.”

Mike watches Josh’s face carefully for any signs of distress but there is no apparent vitriol fueling the words, only honest and simple nostalgia. Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Mike takes a seat and holds out his hands for Josh. It’s probably the least professional nail salon in existence (they could have at least gone upstairs), but Mike has no complaints.

Josh takes Mike’s palm into his dangerous grasp and Mike doesn’t tear his eyes away, continuing to examine his face. The pulse of grief that Mike feels every time he thinks about Hannah is still omnipresent, but the ache is easier to ignore. The very idea of forgetting his grief feels like a betrayal but he doesn’t have time to dwell on it right now. He focuses on Josh.

Josh’s gaze is intent as he swipes the polish onto Mike’s nails, brush barely providing any sensation except when he slips over the edge of the nail. “You ever done this before?” Mike asks, still observing Josh.

“Yeah, Beth and Han always made me do their nails,” Josh huffs like it was a big annoyance, even though he volunteered for this task and nobody asked him. “I told them to go to a salon, but I think they liked getting it done for free.”

“You know what they say about the Washingtons,” Mike jokes. “You’re a real thrifty bunch.”
“Shut up,” Josh rolls his eyes, painting the tip of Mike’s thumb bright teal. Despite all his bullshit about how he used to do his sisters’ nails Josh is not doing an exemplary job, smudging polish everywhere and not even covering the whole nail. Mike doesn’t complain, eyes fixed on Josh as he works in earnest.

Every day that passes without Josh consuming human meat seems to be helping. Where before there was a gash along his cheek his skin has healed now, leaving only a long Joker-esque scar in its place. When Mike first saw him his eyes were bugging out of his head, but now his lids have grown back and Mike could almost count his eyelashes.

He tries to count them but before he can reach any substantial number Josh catches his gaze, pinning Mike under it. Not for the first time Mike wonders what it must be like to see through his wendigo eyes; sometimes he and Shae have to wave a hand for Josh to see them at all. The anomaly of having a friend whose vision works through movement hasn’t quite become commonplace yet, and Mike is still struggling to adapt.

Josh hasn’t looked away yet. Shae has returned to her Nancy Drew and seems to be assiduously making her way through it, so Mike takes the opportunity to move his palm up along the inside of Josh’s wrist. He slides the heel of his hand a little further up Josh’s forearm before Josh catches him, instantly rebuking him.

“Hey, don’t move,” Josh chides him. Shae doesn’t glance up but Mike still feels exposed, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He is reminded of his mother’s confession and bad joke about having a friend over (“hand in the nookie jar”) and frowns. Josh takes his frown as a response and pulls back, actually stepping away to put some distance between them.

Thanks to Mike’s lack of a full ten fingers it doesn’t take long before Josh has finished two coats, when he steps back to look over his work in pride. “There,” he says, triumphant like he’s accomplished something great. “What do you think, cowboy?”

What Mike thinks is that they really should have scrubbed the yellow polish off first. Patches of yellow are still peeking out from under the blue. In summation, Josh has done an absolutely terrible job. The truth of this must clearly be displayed on Mike’s face because Josh scowls, and then throws his hands in the air in surrender. “I think they look great.”

Despite how they look, which is most certainly not great, Mike ends up leaving them as is anyway. He begins to clean up the skin around his nails but every swipe of acetone is a reminder that he’s erasing the sincere work Josh put in, so he quickly desists. Besides, there is something hideously endearing about the complementary patches of yellow underneath the blue.

The next realization about his nails comes from the two other members of his pack, during one of their nightly walks around the mountain. In one moment Mike is glancing up at the waxing moon, and in the next he’s on his hands and knees, tearing off his clothes as neatly as he can. He doesn’t want to even start to think about how many shirts and pants he’s ruined since becoming a werewolf.

Thankfully, the wolf version of Mike doesn’t care at all about finances or money spent on clothing. He howls happily at the light in the sky, and then bumps his head into his two compatriots’ knees — almost acting like a domesticated cat.
Josh scratches behind his wolf ears and Mike’s heart feels too full of love. Then Shae (still human, remarkably) gasps in adoration, falling to her knees. She reaches for Mike’s discarded pile of clothing in a desperate hurry, and pulls out an item that Mike distantly realizes is his own cell phone.

For the first time in his life, Mike doesn’t know how to pose for his picture. He awkwardly bares his teeth at the camera, and Shae and Josh laugh. The individual phrases and words are lost to his ears but he recognizes phonemes and generic sounds, and laughter tastes sweet on his tongue.

The desire to understand why his friends are laughing is quickly followed by his transformation; Shae and Josh both turn away as Mike begins to recover his humanity. He’s well-adjusted to this now (as much as anyone can be, anyway) and he reaches for his underwear first, so he isn’t just on his hands and knees butt-naked in the forest. “What?” is the first breathless word he spits out when he regains the ability to speak. “What’s so funny?”

Shae shows him the picture and it almost looks alien to Mike; it’s hard to imagine that the big, brown wolf on his phone screen is him. After his wonder has faded he realizes why she took a picture; the only thing defining the wolf as inimitable are his claws, which are painted with blue and yellow spots.

Mike rolls his eyes, unable to swallow down his wide smile. He sends the picture of his painted claws to his mom.

Melinda makes good on her word, and within a week of Mike’s return an email arrives, with details on how to use the lodge’s many amenities. Mike hands it straight over to Josh, who scoffs and rolls his eyes and then spends the next four hours talking non-stop about it.

The most worrying detail is that she still wants to send a construction crew up the mountain to rebuild the lodge, an idea despised by everyone. Shae looks appalled at the very idea, asking who Melinda thinks she is, exactly.

“They own the mountain,” Mike shrugs. Despite her entire personality he feels sorry for Melinda, left without her husband or her children and unable to support the child she still has left. Grace would be going ballistic; hell, Grace would be climbing the mountain herself to come see them.

Shae glowers. “You can’t own a mountain.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have someone come fix this place up,” Mike mutters. “I mean, we could stay in the other cabin, we wouldn’t even need to see them.”

“Sure,” Josh drawls, head still bent over Mike’s phone. He must have the email memorized by now; especially the last sentence: Tell Josh I love him so much. “It would be nice to have someone new to eat.”

Mike scowls. “This place is still a wreck,” he points out, madly gesticulating at the building over their heads. “That chandelier still needs to be fixed, and the outside needs some serious renovation.”

“The only person I trust to fix this place is you,” Josh retorts, which feels like a heavily loaded sentence.
Shae glances between them, not bothering to hide her shit-eating grin. Mike only lasts a minute before caving in. “Yeah, alright. Fine. No crew.”

Now that the rain has started it feels like it might never end.

They spend their nights outside, all three enjoying their supernaturally blessed immune systems to the full extent. Nobody catches pneumonia, even when the rain doesn’t stop all night and Shae keeps sneezing like nature is trying to infect her body with something she can’t possibly catch. By the morning, she fights it off.

The rain reminds Mike of Vancouver in good and bad ways. The friends that he has there are close enough to be called family, and he thinks he’ll never fall out of love with the city and its patches of nature. Even in its metropolitan heart he could always hide under a tree or inhale the scent of the Pacific anywhere he went.

But the bad memories tend to loom heavier than the good; Mike remembers going back to high school after the first trip up to Blackwood with his head hung in shame. Before any of them had known Beth or Hannah’s fate he’d prepared for the worst, which now means he’s been grieving for over a year. To him, Vancouver feels too large and unpredictable. As strange as it is to live on a mountain, something about Blackwood feels safe now— like Mike has traversed this territory and there are no surprises left to him.

Mike has made a spot for himself on the porch to ruminate over all this, which is where Shae finds him, watching the rain in the middle of the afternoon. The torrent is relentless, beating down into rabbit holes and hidden caves and, undoubtedly, the mines.

The wooden planks that constitute the porch are not damp, but something about the humidity makes them feel not dry either. Shae takes a seat beside him regardless, swinging her legs out into the rainy air. She’s wearing a pair of capris that Mike has never seen before, suggesting they might not belong to any of the Washingtons and might be Shae’s own clothes. She greets him with a simple, “Hey.”

“Hi.” They sit in companionable silence. Shae has never understood the purpose of small talk and Mike feels comfortable enough not to fill the dead spaces in their conversation with idle one-liners, so neither speaks up. He realizes anew how much he missed her.

Another wave of rain beats down against the ground, flooding an already overwhelmed puddle anew. Mike watches the waves of water ripple over the dirt and it strikes his memory in an unusual way; he is suddenly and vividly reminded of the beach in Vancouver. “There was something I wanted to show you,” he remembers, reaching for his phone.

In retrospect the video seems embarrassing, especially when Shae watches it with all the keen eagerness of someone who has suffered years without friendship. Mike shows her the dark photographs he took of the Vancouver beach last time he was there, and Shae looks at each and every blurry one with wide, quixotic eyes.

But the video causes something else entirely. Shae takes his phone, wordlessly watching Mike make a fool of himself on camera. All Mike can focus on are the bags under his eyes. It looks like he spent the drive to BC crying like a romantic lead.
“Prepare to be amazed… whenever I remember how to transform…” Mike sighs at his own cheesiness just as the Mike on camera sighs. “Any second now.”

Mike is hardly an auteur of film like Josh, but the way the camera falls from his hands is almost cinematic. Unfortunately for any monster lovers the video doesn’t do a very good job capturing his werewolf transformation. Instead his phone falls to the sand, and as he romps around the beach and tears off his clothes, all that can be seen on camera is the moon’s reflection in the ocean.

Shae’s eyes well up with tears.

“Are you--” Mike begins, but Shae just nods fervently and scrolls back to the beginning of the video. The last thing Mike wants is to hear his own voice again, but Shae is hardly paying attention to him at all. Her focus is entirely consumed by the video, chest rising and falling with the tide on screen.

Mike sits back and rubs his eyes, listening to Shae play the video again. And again. By the fifth time she starts it he has resigned himself to his fate, so when silence falls it takes him a moment to realize she’s done.

“Shae,” he tries again. Both of her hands are curled around his phone and her head is hanging forward, heavy with unknown thoughts, but Shae looks up after a moment.

“I have family there,” she mumbles, tone unusual. “Out by the coast.”

Shae does not elaborate, and she does not offer him his phone back. Mike settles for rubbing her lower back gently; she leans into the touch but says no more. Maybe her silence is what prompts Mike’s next words, spilling out before he’s even aware what he’s saying. “Keep it.”

That finally makes Shae turn to look at him, curious and confused. “I mean,” he stutters. “I don’t need it; I’ll just use it when I need to call people. Like, my mom, and the others every once in a while. But you can take photos on it, and stuff. If you want.”

Shae nods, blinking back dampness. “Are you sure?”

He is. “Yeah.”

“Thank you,” she mumbles, pressing back into him. Mike pats the knees of her capris, and they sit and watch the rain in peace.

A minute passes, and Shae wipes her eyes, usual grin sliding back into place. “What are you gonna do without all your selfies?”

Even though they turn down her initial offer Melinda is still determined to take care of her son, and the next email is blunter. She gives Mike a date and time to head down the mountain, and a tracking number for an unfamiliar postal service. The days slide by and Mike doesn’t think much of it until Shae brings him the phone one morning, where a reminder has popped up to go collect Melinda’s care package (alone, with an emoticon wincing).

Mike pulls on a blue windbreaker and searches the lodge for an umbrella. He comes up short and ends up just wearing his hood over a toque and hoping for the best; it’s not like he’s going to catch pneumonia anyway. It only occurs to him once he’s in the cable car that he probably should have
mentally prepared for this task. Even though he’s been spending hours each night and day with Shae and Josh, this is his first interaction with a human in a while.

He wishes he’d brought his phone to frantically reread the email. All he needs to do is sign for the package and then put it— whatever it is— back into the cable car and bring it back to the lodge. He wonders if he should have brought a pen.

Inexplicably Mike wishes Josh was there. He glances out the window at the forest beneath, where the canopy of trees has started to grow and recover from the damage done by cold, and by fire. The spring is slowly warming the mountain and healing everything that happened this winter, unshakable in its regeneration.

When he arrives at the bottom the delivery courier is already there, bouncing awkwardly from foot-to-foot under the shade of the station’s roof. She doesn’t look soaked to the skin but it’s a close thing. Her hair is wet and curly, framing her face and drawing attention to her dark eyes and thin lips. Beside her is a pile of packages stacked almost as tall as she is, threatening to fall off their handcart and tumble back down the mountain.

“Hey, I hope you weren’t waiting long,” Mike greets her, halting her nervous bouncing.

If his tone is suspicious, the woman doesn’t seem to notice— or care. “Not too long,” she shrugs, and reaches into her pocket to pull out a dry tablet. Mike is reminded instantly and embarrassingly of Chris. “Do you really live up there?”

“Sure do,” Mike shrugs back, swallowing a bad joke about werewolves. He moves into the dry area caused by the overhang, and the woman hands him the tablet. He checks a box to agree that he received his shipment in good shape and on time, even though he has yet to check exactly what that shipment is. “Come back on a day with better weather and I’ll give you a tour.”

He couldn’t say why he offers her that, because it isn’t like he truly means it. The Blackwood Hotel hasn’t been operating in decades, and her only tour guides would be the monsters that Mike calls roommates. His vanity is well aware of how this must look; a rugged, mysterious mountain man coming down from the peak (where he presumably lives alone) to greet a gorgeous woman. A year ago, he would have jumped at this opportunity (and probably scored) but now he can only imagine what Josh would say if he brought anyone else around.

His panic must show on his face, or maybe the courier isn’t a fan of bright blue windbreakers, because she just snorts and takes the tablet back from him. “I’m good, thanks.”

They check the weight specifications together and then she helps him carry all the boxes into the car; Mike is too polite to tell her that he could do it himself much easier and faster. When they’re finished, she doesn’t stick around, heading back around the station and lugging her handcart through the rain. Mike watches her go and tries to ignore the relief in his chest.

Melinda’s idea of ‘necessities’ is mostly food, with a couple wild cards thrown in. Mike confiscates the perishable items before Shae or Josh can dig into their new supply, but Josh seems preoccupied searching for something else. He finally finds a letter tucked between batteries and lightbulbs, and darts away so fast that Shae jumps off the ground in shock.

Josh doesn’t resurface for half an hour, and when he returns, he’s in much better spirits than usual. Nobody brings it up but the smile on his face improves everyone’s mood. Mike’s opinion of Melinda shifts yet again, although he still doesn’t want to get to know her any more than necessary.
The spring reconstructs them all faster than should be possible, like hurried metamorphosis. Within a week Mike has fully settled back into the lodge but things are different now, and not only because he doesn’t have a phone. Shae and Josh are more comfortable than before; with each other and with themselves. Their transformation is less visible than his—neither of them grow thick beards or toned muscles (Shae’s already got that covered)—but Mike still notices the changes.

Shae is more comfortable than ever around Josh, all fears of the monster who had caused her such grief gone thanks to their newfound friendship. She jokes with him and sometimes sounds like Beth, but if Josh notices the resemblance, he doesn’t seem to mind at all.

Josh has grown more comfortable around Mike than ever before, which makes sense in some ways and is completely confounding in others. It makes sense that Josh can let his guard down since there’s no girls around here for Mike to trip over himself impressing (Shae has made it clear she’s uninterested). It also makes sense that since they’re in close quarters their awkward dynamic as opposite ends of the popular kid spectrum would grow less awkward as they discover common interests and forget old rivalries.

What doesn’t make sense is the easy way Josh slinks around him sometimes, like they’ve always been this close. Mike doesn’t know if he’s trying to force their friendship because he’s desperate for companionship or if he’s interested in something else, and it’s driving him up the wall a little. One afternoon, he catches a nickname mid-sentence, and then realizes he’s heard Josh use that nickname for him a handful of times before and somehow, he’s never caught on until now. Mike blurts out, “What was that?” interrupting Josh mid-sentence.

The wendigo just rolls his eyes and repeats, “I said we should probably go catch something fresh to eat, and then I suggested that maybe you and Shae could do the honours since it’s, you know, noon.” He gestures at the nearest window, where sunlight is almost entirely blocked out by blinds. They could really use some blackout curtains, but Mike is hesitant to ask Melinda for those when it might be better to slowly put Josh through exposure therapy until the light doesn’t hurt him anymore.

“No,” Mike shakes his head. “You said ‘we should probably go catch something fresh to eat, cowboy.’” He wrinkles his nose up in thought. How has he never noticed that before? “Is this like a, like, a, what the fuck do you call Chris again?”

“Cochise?”

“Sure, that.” Mike squints. “Is that the same—cowboy? Why are you calling me that?” Now that he says it aloud he’s sure Josh has called him this before, always with the same smug grin he’s wearing now. It’s got to be a reference to some racist old Hollywood movie, but Mike isn’t as up to date on his film history as Josh is. He’s pretty sure he could spend the rest of his life watching movies and he still wouldn’t even come close.

“You’ll get it someday,” Josh says, grin splitting his face. His teeth are sharp, and Mike has to force himself to blink. “I don’t like giving away punchlines.”

“Now I’m worried it’s an insult.”

Josh just smiles wider. “Go get me lunch.”
Mike frowns suspiciously but he goes anyway to get lunch. He’s fine with the preservative-filled food from the shipment, but Josh starving wouldn’t do anyone any good. Besides, he always feels like he needs a moment alone after dealing with Josh when he’s acting like that, which is, for some reason, how he acts most of the time these days.

Try as he might, Mike can’t figure it out. Josh, known flirt, never would have given Mike the time of day in high school. The closest they ever got was drunkenly play-fighting at parties or Josh hitting on his girlfriends right in front of him. In fact, the only guy for Josh to ever target had been Chris— except to the best of Mike’s knowledge, nothing ever really happened beyond friendship.

Distracted with thoughts of Josh’s photo of Chris in the blanket fort, Mike nearly trips over a tree root. Okay, maybe he does trip and eat shit, but if a werewolf falls in the forest and nobody’s around to see it, did it really happen? He stands and dusts himself off, trying hard not to be embarrassed. Maybe Chris would be a good person to ask about the nickname. It’s probably some John Wayne reference or a joke about his beard.

“Cowboy,” Mike mutters under his breath thoughtfully. He’s so caught up in his own thoughts that he doesn’t hear the growling until it’s almost too late.

His nose catches the scent before any of his other senses clue in, and as the body slams into him he turns to face it. Pain blooms across his leg— real pain, pain sharper than he should even be able to feel, and Mike howls so loud it sends birds flying out of the canopy. Worse than the pain is the panic, because even though he knows he’s invulnerable and supernaturally powerful, none of that seems to have stopped a fucking mountain lion from biting into his thigh.

The cougar’s claws scrape across his calves and slice through his jeans, which sucks for multiple reasons. Mike doesn’t have time to mourn his pants, busy howling and trying to pull the animal off of him. It’s easier said than done, but finally he manages to wrench its jaw open and shove it away. He’s already half-transformed so it’s easy for his legs to follow suit, but even as the fur spreads downwards and his tail grows, Mike still feels nothing but overwhelming pain. He makes quick work of the cougar; it’s strong, but he’s stronger. Right before he delivers the killing blow, the mountain lion lets out a horrific call, sounding more like a bird than a feline. Mike rears back, and in that split second the cougar twists over itself to roll out of reach, and then it bounds away.

“Fuck,” Mike breathes, blinking over and over as the ache in his leg does not subside. He transforms back into human form, colour returning to the world around him. His heart is still racing. He didn’t know he could even still get scared like this. For a moment Mike is worried he might cry from the untenable pain and the residual nerves, but as he stares up at the overcast grey sky, no tears come; only more swears. “Fuck!”

The cougar doesn’t return for a second round which is a blessing, and Mike is torn between being relieved he didn’t have to kill it and being upset that it’s still out there. He settles on agonized, since the pain is still coursing through his leg. It’s as bad as the bear trap; worse, maybe, because it shouldn’t be happening. Not on this level, anyway.

Mike takes a step, wobbles, and then sits on the ground by the same tree root that tripped him up earlier. “Sweet and sugary suffering succotash,” he groans, pressing his fingers into the gashes on his leg even though that hurts too. Pressure is important, right? He feels like pressure is probably important. Bandages would be even better, but he can’t go around ripping every single shirt he owns. That would really be living up to the werewolf stereotype.

Chuckling bitterly at his own thoughts, Mike tries to get to his feet again with no luck. Hopefully the wound will heal on its own because cougars aren’t venomous or anything, so he might just
have to camp out here in the woods for a bit. He doesn’t relish the idea but he can’t think of anything better to do, since Shae has his phone anyway. Mike keeps pushing down on the wound with his good hand while kneading around the area with his other hand gently, trying to force his magic werewolf healing to do its job.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t work. He isn’t sure how long he’s been outside, especially since the sun is barely visible behind the thick cloud cover. If it rains, Mike might consider crawling back to the lodge like a soldier through a trench—it would be miserable, rotten work, but at least then he wouldn’t be a sitting duck, waiting for the cougar’s return.

Mike is minutes from actually scooching across the mountain when something jumps from tree to tree in his peripheral. He blanches and tries to climb to his feet quickly, but before he can take a single step the creature lands in front of him. Thankfully, this one isn’t a cougar; Mike is relieved to see a familiar wendigo.

“What the fuck,” Josh says, sounding too human for someone who just played spider-monkey through the forest. He steps forward to catch Mike right before his leg gives out again, and Mike is surprised Josh can hold him up. He wraps around Mike’s shoulders, and they kneel to the ground together, slowly. “I said get lunch, not be lunch. What the fuck!”

“You should see the other guy,” Mike tries, with a corny smile that Josh does not return. He clarifies, hastily, “Cougar. It was a cougar and it took me by surprise, and I think it must’ve hit an artery or something because I’m not healing.”

“Show me,” Josh insists, so Mike pulls his hand away without thinking. He doesn’t look down at the mess of blood and denim, gaze fixed on Josh’s face. His nose is flaring with each breath, and his damaged lips are trembling—just barely, but at this distance Mike can see that he’s holding himself back.

Mike reaches up with his non-bloody hand, curling his two fingers and thumb around Josh’s shoulder. Josh snaps up to look at him, still breathing hard. “Are you…” Mike hesitates, taken aback at the realization that he isn’t scared at all. Not even a little bit. He should be more scared of the cannibal monster, considering he’s got an open wound, but the second Josh arrived Mike’s fear basically evaporated. “Is it… you’re hungry?”

Josh licks his lips, and then seems to register what Mike said a couple seconds too late. “What? No, it’s not—it’s not you, it’s the day.” And Mike realizes suddenly that the pained expression isn’t from Josh struggling not to eat him; the problem is that he’s a wendigo outdoors in the middle of the fucking afternoon.

Mike pushes himself up, almost banging his forehead into Josh’s in the process. “Oh crap, I wasn’t even thinking— why are you outside? How are you outside, isn’t this hurting you? You’re not gonna catch fire or anything, are you?” Without thinking he brings his palm up to the side of Josh’s face, checking his temperature and cupping his cheek.

Josh feels cold as ever, which is a relief, but he grimaces. “It feels like I should be,” he mutters grimly, and then shakes his head. “It’s fine, it’s just—it fucking hurts, is all. But I heard you screaming and howling, and I didn’t know if Shae would come help in time so, I… I came,” he winces again.

Mike tries not to be hideously touched by that, and he fails entirely. “Well, fuck, here,” he says, pulling away from Josh so that he can tug his own shirt off, distracted thoroughly from the agony in his leg. Josh doesn’t protest as Mike holds the shirt over his head like a tarp. Although it can’t possibly block out the daylight entirely, the shirt and the cloud cover seem to work together to help
Josh a little. He definitely breathes easier once Mike is holding it up, even as blood drips down Mike’s wrist onto his shoulder.

“Oh, Josh groans, eyes fluttering closed, and then when they reopen, “okay,” and he’s lifting Mike up. His leg still hurts too much to move but Josh lifts him slightly, so Mike follows suit and leans on his other leg and on Josh as best he can. “Okay,” Josh repeats a third time, starting to walk.

They look like contestants in some weird potato sack race judged by Jigsaw, but thankfully Josh doesn’t burn and Mike doesn’t crumple again. The walk back to the lodge is glacial at first but speeds up as Mike’s skin starts to heal, and the bleeding finally stops. By the time they see the building Mike can walk mostly on his own, but he stays close to Josh to hold up the shirt.

They stay silent until they finally get inside, collapsing onto different ends of the couch. Curiously, Josh watches Mike’s skin heal as Mike just stares at his shirt, bunched up in Josh’s fists. Eventually Josh says, gaze still fixed on Mike’s thigh, “I wonder what cougar would even taste like.”

Mike blinks, and then smirks so broadly it hurts his face. “Oh, I’ve tried it. Just ask your mom.”

The resulting shriek is so loud that Shae comes hurtling in a few minutes later, hackles raised as she looks around for the danger and only finds the two of them locked in a pillow fight to the death.

After Mike’s leg has healed (overnight) and Josh stops dodging around every sunbeam in the house, they decide that testing Josh’s capabilities is a good idea; if they find out what he can do before there are any threats around, then maybe they can avoid more emergencies altogether. Shae is the one who ultimately convinces him, with an off-hand comment about how she’s curious to, for once and for all, end the werewolf versus wendigo debate and choose a definitively stronger winner.

Even as he complains about the reverse psychology the goading seems to work on Josh. They settle on a testing ground: the makeshift field by the cable car station. Mike wants to make a joke about a snowball fight but nobody’s around to understand it. He makes a note to text Jess later, instead focusing on the training happening in front of him.

Shae and Josh tussle around for a bit until Josh wins, pinning Shae down and screeching triumphantly. Shae is motionless on the dewy ground— pouting miserably— which gives Mike a good idea.

“Don’t move,” he yells to Shae, standing up from the picnic bench. “Josh, get up. Shae, don’t— just lie there, and see if he can see you.”

“I can see you,” Josh tells Shae, getting to his feet but not walking away. Shae doesn’t move a muscle, and neither does Mike. “I can see her,” Josh says again, this time in indignation. “I’m only half a monster, you know.”

“Then come find me,” Mike says, staying still exactly where he is. He digs his heels into the ground and then doesn’t even chance moving his toes in his shoes, breathing minutely through his nose and trying to focus on stillness.

He feels idiotic, like he’s in the Queen’s Guard and can’t move an inch lest he lose his head (or
job, or whatever is really at stake over there, he’s not really sure). Josh’s nose flares as he storms over to the bench, and Mike is about to give the whole game away when Josh marches right up to the wrong spot, seething. “I can see you,” he repeats, seething as he glares at thin air.

It’s late but it isn’t pitch black outside or anything; the crescent moon is more than enough light for Josh to see both Mike and Shae. Or it should be, anyway—apparently being only half a monster has its limitations after dark.

Eventually Mike takes pity on Josh, raising his hands in surrender. Josh’s neck snaps over to look his way instantaneously, and his glare darkens. Mike grins, and that small movement makes Josh’s frown even worse. “I’m sorry,” he offers, grin going sheepish. “But hey, now we know.”

“I already knew, asshat,” Josh grumbles, still unhappy about having been fooled. “It’s not this bad during the day, it’s just… I can’t see at night anyway. Humans can’t see at night anyway.”

“We’ll get Melinda to send you some glasses,” Mike laughs, reaching out to pat Josh’s shoulder gently. The motion seems to calm him even if he still looks like he’s considering eating Mike for dinner—or would it be breakfast? Josh doesn’t reciprocate the touch or do anything much other than stare, so Mike retrieves his hand, feeling embarrassed.

His embarrassment is not alleviated by Shae saying from the ground, “That would look cute, right, Mike? Josh in glasses.” Mike rolls his eyes and wishes he had a snowball to pelt her with, and Josh just drops his gaze. Mike isn’t sure whether to be relieved, concerned, or disappointed that he didn’t make one of his usual lecherous jokes. He settles on relief, especially with the smirk on Shae’s face. Thankfully when she continues she’s on a new track. “Hey, I’ve got another idea. You can see me, but can you catch me?”

“Duh,” Josh says, not even taking a step as Shae gets to her feet and sprints away. He lets her get just to the edge of the field before he moves like lightning. If Mike hadn’t been watching so keenly, he wouldn’t have been able to see a thing, and even with his enhanced vision it’s still hard to pin down the moment he leaves. He has the passing thought that he’d like to film Josh, and play it back in slow-motion, just to see exactly how he moves like that. Unnatural doesn’t even begin to describe it.

Shae is fast but Josh is faster, and they wrestle more until Shae manages to shove him off and bound away. This time Josh doesn’t let her get a head start, following right on her heels. The comparison to lightning is frighteningly accurate, when it seems like there should be a crack of sound in the air every time Josh moves, like he’s appearing and disappearing too quickly to comprehend.

But as they chase each other around the field Mike starts to notice patterns, his instincts picking up on things he’d never notice otherwise. It’s all about the miniscule motion that he’d never usually spot; the orientation of an ankle, or an arm moving in a seemingly random direction. The two repeat their chase over and over until Shae runs away and Mike’s reflexes kick in. He steps forward to grab at thin air, except it isn’t just air when he grabs it. He has a twisting and live wendigo in his arms.

Josh turns to Mike, eyes wild and mouth open, and Mike doesn’t release the arm he’s got tucked around his chest, holding him still. Josh blinks, hunger dying on his lips as he drops himself into Mike’s grip and stares at him helplessly. No, not helpless; there’s something else there, but Josh certainly doesn’t look helpless. Taken aback, maybe.

“Nice catch, Mike,” Shae crows, and yet again Mike drops Josh like they’ve been caught doing something inappropriate, and Josh dusts himself off, not making eye contact. The world catches up
with them like a rush of blood back to their heads. All in all, it was a successful training session.

On one day, when he’s elected to go to sleep at a reasonable hour for once, Mike notices the mundanity of his bedtime routine like he’s never noticed it before. He brushes his teeth with too much toothpaste, rubbing his eyes and spitting without looking for the sink.

The hallway is empty as Shae and Josh never take to any sort of schedule, but Mike doesn’t mind. He peers out the window, up to where he knows the other cabin is, and utters a silent mental good night to the other werewolf.

He stops to wish the same to Josh, whose door is closed like usual. Mike does not harbour any illusion that Josh is inside peacefully sleeping, not on a night like this when the prey of Madahee must be crying his name.

Mike rests a hand against the doorframe without knocking, blinking slowly before continuing to his own room. It only strikes him when he’s inside, stripping off his shirt and rubbing his eyes again, that this is not his own room. This isn’t somewhere he’s supposed to be living at all; by rights he should be on a college campus somewhere, or in his apartment, or back in Penticton. Or with a lover.

Groaning as he settles onto the bedframe, Mike can’t help but spare a moment to mourn the life that could have been— but even as he considers it, he knows that what he has the opportunity for here far outshines any other life the world could offer him. As much as he hints about getting Josh reacclimated into society— it really would make a killer movie— Mike also knows that he’s selfish, and that he’ll stay here in his happy home with Josh and Shae for now, and for as long as he can, because he is happy and it is a home.

He’s about to go ask Shae for his phone to do some late-night inadvisable Instagramming, when someone knocks on his already open door. Mike looks up to see Josh there, peeking his head inside like he’s been standing in the hall for a minute already. Before Mike can ask him what’s up, he says, “I forgive you.”

And with that Josh turns and leaves, without clarifying for what. Mike doesn’t follow him, just contemplating the weird encounter until finally tucking himself in to sleep. He sleeps easy for the first time in months.

The change makes some tasks easier. Mike is less vain than he’s ever been before, not bothering with a haircare routine since sometimes hair grows all over his body and nobody will help him comb (not Josh or Shae, anyway, he asked them both and got laughed at twice). Menial labour is easier than ever; he spends his days cleaning and lifting and none of it exhausts him at all.

Some tasks, however, are harder than ever. Mike has steered clear of the mines because he’s still residually scared of the underground lake— he considers asking Melinda to drain it, but this mountain’s taken enough lives already. He cannot escape water in all its forms though, and one of the most common tasks that grates on him is bathing.

He’s a grown man (even if he is going through second puberty with the wolf stuff) so he really
doesn’t have any excuse to fear the bath. It’s not a knife, or a gun, or something reasonable to find triggering; it’s just a tub of warm water and soap. But every time he tries to bathe instead of showering, he finds himself worse for wear.

Every time he tries, the same things happen in the same order. He watches the tub fill with water; fine. He strips; all good. He spares a thought for how Josh used to have a camera feed in here; maybe a little weird, but fine. And then he looks down into the water and he sees Hannah.

Today, Mike is determined not to give up on himself or on the bathtub, refusing to acknowledge that he might have wasted an hour. He closes his eyes as he gets in, one leg at a time, and sinks into the hot water. It’s warm, clean, and could not be less like the lake. Mike relaxes, back against the porcelain as he exhales and inhales and lets himself loosen up.

Except. He still can’t bring himself to open his eyes.

“Fuck,” Mike whines, high and quiet, and shakes his head. “Fuck. Okay.” He reaches up blindly for the edges of the tub, fingers curling around the dryness to anchor him. He wills his fears away; when he opens his eyes, nothing will be in the water in front of him.

“Oh, okay,” he whispers.

He opens his eyes.

Nothing is there in front of him.

Mike laughs aloud, at first from shock and relief and then just good-naturedly, chuckling at his own fear. How trivial it seems now, to look down at his distorted feet and legs through the water. No sign of Hannah at all.

He takes a shallow breath in, and apparently letting his guard down enough to breathe is a mistake. Something is rising up in the water. He knows it isn’t true, but he can’t look away or tell his brain that it’s just a false vision. His heart beats faster as his legs flail out. Mike yelps, struggling for purchase as he tries to convince himself it isn’t real, repeating that phrase aloud.

Until someone knocks on his door, and calls out, “Hey, you good in there?”

It’s Josh, because of course it is, because the universe hates him. The blood is still gathering around his body, and Mike has the insane thought that he would hate for Josh to see him like this—not hallucinating, but really hurt like this. He tries to shove it away, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “Fine, just—I’m fine,” he responds. He’s almost certain he locked the door.

The door opens. He’s been wrong before. Mike’s eyes shoot open to see none of the imagined blood from before. Instead, he sees Josh standing in the open doorway with a hand on the knob, staring right at him.

It takes a moment for Mike to realize that he’s fully naked in the bath, but when he realizes, all he can do is try not to move and hope that Josh won’t see him. Josh rolls his eyes and crosses the room to sit on the floor beside the tub, still looking straight at him. “Even if it was dark in here, there’s ripples in the water,” Josh points out. “Don’t worry, I won’t peek.”

“That’s the least of my concerns,” Mike mumbles, even though he does lower his hands and cross his legs to try to maintain some semblance of dignity. “I’m, uh, I’m good.”

“Sure, you sounded good.”
“I am,” Mike insists, and then caves. “Mostly, I am, most of the time, it’s just. Sometimes it just… reminds me of the lake, and I see all this shit that isn’t there like I’m fucking crazy.” Josh raises an eyebrow but stays silent. “And m-maybe I am now, who knows? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have… I thought it’d be fine, but clearly, I’m not fucking ready for this, so, just… I’ll just stick to showers — for, for now. I’m good, I promise.”

Josh doesn’t reply, only adding to Mike’s incredible embarrassment. Instead he gets up and leaves, and Mike sighs and contemplates drowning. But Josh returns less than a minute later holding a huge bottle of bubble bath and dumps half of it into the bath. “There,” Josh says, stilted and nervous.

Mike grimaces, confused. “I don’t know if that’ll—”

“No, here,” Josh reaches forward and dangles his hand into the bathtub. This time Mike freezes up for an entirely different reason, but if Josh notices he doesn’t say or do anything. He agitates the water until a couple bubbles start to form, swirling it around slowly. His sleeve is too short to get wet, but it doesn’t seem like he cares anyway— Mike has the sudden suspicion that if he asked Josh to bathe with him, he would. The water’s surface is soon obscured by soap, and Josh looks up at Mike expectantly. “There. No reflection.”

“Oh,” Mike says weakly, and before he can thank Josh the guy turns on his heel and strides out of the bathroom, holding his dripping hand in a fist at his side. Mike is left staring at the closing door, blushing and grateful and suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling it’s way too soon to have. He touches his left hand with his right, tracing over a lost vein.

Josh is spinning out like a car crash right before their eyes. Chris keeps looking away, aghast at the sight of his best friend spiraling into his worst crisis yet, but Mike is transfixed. Josh keeps throwing out barbs in the hopes that one of the insults will catch like a burr on cotton, so that they’ll have to waste the whole night here with him, in this cold and muddy shed.

Neither of them is falling for his act; Chris is busy having the emotional journey of his life (dead, then alive; gone, then responsible) and Mike is in the second stage of mourning. Except that isn’t correct— he was, once, when this was really happening. But this isn’t real, it’s a shade of a memory summoned up by his subconscious. Although Jess is gone right now, Mike knows where she is in real life.

Once he’s had that realization the dream seems to blur around him, but Josh and Chris don’t notice anything amiss. Josh is off on some rant about Jessica or Ashley or someone, and Mike looks down at his hand just to check if he’s still holding the gun.

“What are you gonna do, Mike? You’re gonna shoot me?” Josh parrots at him, a disgusting dream caricature of Emily’s desperate plea to remember their relationship. “Just little old me, tied up here and helpless?”

“Go back to the lodge,” Mike shouts at Chris, because that’s the script. Chris doesn’t take the gun from his hand, but he doesn’t do anything else either. “I’ll stay here with him, it’s fine. You should head back to the others.”

“They’ll be fine,” Chris reasons, pacing back and forth. Mike puts the gun down in bewilderment but when he notices Josh’s gaze wandering, he kicks it away to the other end of the shed. “They’ll
be alright. It’s Josh I’m worried about.”

“Oh, is this a sleepover?” Josh drawls, bouncing excitedly on his stool. “Can we order pizza?”

Now Mike can’t keep watching him, turning to observe the roof. The lack of a door. The gun lying by the haymow. Anything else, anything other than the friend he knows so well unhinged like this. Because now that he knows Josh better than ever before, it hurts to watch him like this.

Chris’ voice jolts Mike out of his avoidant surveillance, as does the touch on his forearm. Chris’ hand is warm even through the thick fabric of his jacket, and when Mike turns his head to look at the blond, he’s standing closer than before. “Is he okay?”

Mike blinks, thoughts slow and confused thanks to Chris’ closeness and the warmth of his skin. He peers over at Josh, who is watching them with hooded eyes. “No, he’s… I don’t think so. But he will be, once we get him off this fucking death trap of a mountain.” If we ever do.

Chris presses closer, stealing Mike’s attention back. He hums, “Are you?”

And suddenly the scene has taken a new turn, with Josh’s half-closed eyes watching them from where he’s bound to the post. Mike notices the height difference between Chris and himself more acutely than ever before, distracted by the minute motion of his eyes and hands and neck. When Chris swallows nervously, Mike ducks in to close the distance between their mouths.

He jolts awake, blood running hot like it had been after his fight with the mountain lion. He’s no stranger to dreams of that nature (he is, after all, an American man who lived through puberty) but it feels rude to impose those things onto his mental projection of Chris, who has never expressed any interest like that— let alone Josh, who had been watching them with his mouth hanging open. When Mike closes his eyes he can still imagine it.

Not rude, then. Some other inappropriate adjective.

Mike triple-checks that his door is locked, and then eases back into the dream, pulse thrumming beneath his skin.

Emily: I hope you’re behaving yourself up there. We’re watching An American Werewolf In London in your honour

“You don’t smile this much at texts from Jessica,” accuses Shae, holding up the text message for his inspection. Mike rolls his eyes but he’s still smiling when he takes the phone, even as Josh peeks over the edge of the couch curiously. “Emily’s one of your past… lovers, right?”

Lovers is better than mates, but just barely. Josh sits up fully, and Mike cringes. “No— I mean, yeah, that’s right, but… it’s fine.”

Mike: a) I am thanks mom
Mike: b) don’t say “in your honour”. I’m not dead lol
Mike: c) “We”? Is your sister in town?
Emily: Me and the others, idiot.
The reply is almost instant. Mike’s smile wavers a little as his imagination stretches out the wonderful and painful scene before him; everyone draped over the couch and rug in front of Chris’ flat-screen, or maybe crowding around Jessica’s staticky old television. Suddenly he misses them all so badly that it hurts— he misses Jessica’s yappy dog, and he misses Chris’ stupid goofy grin. He even misses Matt’s endless knowledge of sports that nobody else in the world cares about (luge? Seriously, dude, luge?) and Ashley’s references to animated TV shows that nobody else ever knew. He misses Sam coming over to cut his grilled cheese in halves and hold him as he cried. He doesn’t miss the crying, but the comfort— the love has left him wanting.

Mike: I’m glad you guys are getting the band back together.

He glances up from the phone to realize that Shae and Josh are both watching him with obvious interest, and coughs into his shoulder awkwardly. “What?”

The pair exchange a glance, and then Josh asks, almost hesitant, “You good?”

“All good, man,” Mike waves him off. The phone vibrates again, and he braces himself— but the next message makes him bark out a laugh.

Emily: Whatever, it’s not as fun without someone threatening my life
Mike: Oh Ashley couldn’t make it?

“So you and Emily still chat, then,” Josh comments. Mike considers setting him straight but then Emily replies again, and the picture makes him smile so wide that his face aches from it. He walks over to sit beside Josh on the couch, showing him the message:

Emily: LOL
Emily: (1 image attachment)

Sure enough his first guess had been right. They’re all piled on the floor by Chris’ sofa, with Sam leaning against Emily’s lap and Jess on her other side, holding up a peace sign. Matt has stacked three couch cushions underneath him and Ashley, who’s sitting next to the host himself. Chris has an empty space beside him, and he’s got his arm around said space with an exaggerated pout. There’s an empty space next to Jess too, and Mike makes the connection instantly.

It takes Josh a second, until Mike silently points at the spaces left for them. Then he’s smiling too, slow and tender and so vulnerable that Mike needs to give the phone back to Shae and go take a long, cold shower.

They work out a regular schedule for Mike to keep in touch, although he mostly ends up using the lodge’s phone out of convenience. He writes down a list of everyone’s numbers just in case Josh wants to use them, but he’s pretty sure that isn’t likely to happen for another month— or longer.

Undeterred, Mike continues to send the occasional picture of Josh and Shae to the group chat. Shae, at least, is excited about this, and soon starts sending selfies on her own. (Mike quickly becomes worried that he’s going to lose his title as Hottest Person In The Friend Group) He also makes sure to text Jess and Sam a couple times a week; sometimes he texts Emily too, but even if their relationship is rising the path upwards is still rocky.

He gets the most excited about texts from Chris, which are few and far between. He’s smart
enough to recognize the excitement for what it is. He also isn’t brave enough to look inwards and examine his feelings for Chris. It would be an uncertainty at the best of times, and now would be an exceptionally bad time, what with his new friendship with Josh.

Unfortunately, Chris asks about Josh a lot, which means that most of Mike’s replies are disappointing for everyone. At first he begs Josh to just pick up the phone and call, but every time he brings it up Josh disappears, sometimes for more than a day. Mike stays honest with Chris as best he can without breaking his heart.

He usually calls his mom once a week, and often dials Sam up afterwards. The latter conversations take much longer; while his mom is more concerned about his welfare, Sam is genuinely curious about every aspect of his life and has no problems with being nosy and no value for discretion.

“But how are you contributing to the food chain?” she demands on one call, as Mike struggles not to yawn. He’s superhuman, but even a werewolf can get tired of holding a phone up for endless and relentless interrogation. “I mean, is it sustainable for you and Shae to keep eating all the herbivores — like, the goats and rabbits and squirrels? Shouldn’t you be focusing on trying to develop an omnivorous diet?”

“Shae is the most omnivorous person I’ve ever met,” Mike laughs. “And I don’t know how much you remember about the mountain, but there’s sure no goats up here. I mean, we’ve got deer, but we don’t wanna eat them all before the summer’s out. Sorry.”

“For what? It’s fine!” Apparently Sam’s militant veganism doesn’t extend to werewolves. Good to know. “I mean, that’s great that you’re concerned about that. Are you eating berries, and roots? I could send you a field guide for identifying different plants.”

“Roots? Sam, I’m not a bear. I mean, my breakfast this morning was oatmeal, it’s not like…” Mike hears a pencil scratching across paper. “Are you taking notes?!”

“No! I mean, kind of! Ashley said she was writing something, and I just wanted to help her out,” Sam defends herself. Mike imagines a sheet that lists ‘OATS?’ and snorts. “So how often do you eat meat, then?”

“That and the beard,” she teases. Mike moves his arm so that he can slam his forehead into the table. “No, I’m just kidding! I haven’t talked about it with anyone else, I mean… I was just wondering. You send a lot of pictures of him.”

“Well, it’s not like that,” Mike says, defensive. Without any warning, his nerves kick off and he can suddenly sense someone about to interrupt his conversation. Thankfully it isn’t Josh; when he jerks his head up to look their way, Shae is the only one there. She’s probably curious as to why he’s been on the phone for nearly two hours. “If it was… I’d, uh, I’d let you know.”
“Yes, let me know,” Sam echoes, clearly delighted. “I think that’d be really good for him; well, I mean, for both of you!”

Mike blurts out, “I’m not lonely or anything,” and instantly regrets it. Shae visibly perks up and she takes a seat at the table beside him, wearing a gleeful grin. “I’m not!”

“I didn’t say you were!”

“No, I wasn’t— Shae, get out of here. I’m on the phone!” Mike swats at her hand, and Shae neatly dodges only to then smack his knuckles lightly.

“Oh, if you’re busy, I can go,” Sam offers, polite as ever. Mike flips their hands over and tries to slap their fists together; it fails as an attack and ends up being a plain old fist-bump. Shae cackles.

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“No, I wasn’t— Shae, get out of here. I’m on the phone!” Mike swats at her hand, and Shae neatly dodges only to then smack his knuckles lightly.

“Or! Maybe Shae could answer some of my questions?”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Shae, you want to help Sam write Ashley’s book?”

“I want to go eat something,” Shae complains. “I’m hungry.”

“Omnivorous,” Mike mumbles. “Yeah, uh, sorry, Sam, I might have to let you go. Raincheck on that?”

“Worth a try,” replies Sam. He can almost hear her smiling. “Anyway, it was nice talking to you.”

The rain lets up for the next few hours, as if the skies have also brightened from the conversation with Sam. He almost dislikes the good weather; the desolate, nonstop showers have seemed like a fitting punishment for his late-night deviances. With that fresh on his mind from his phone call with Sam, Mike tries hard to feel the guilt he thinks he deserves, but he does not exactly have time to sit around and wallow or write in a diary or go find a confession box. Not when Shae has decided to drag him halfway across the mountain.

The sun is peeking out in the east, indecisive if it wants to make its debut today at all, but the sky is still mostly overcast above their heads. The cloud cover is a relief; both Shae and Mike are sweating but the air is crisp and clean, and their clothing doesn’t cling to them the way it would if they were starting at the base of the mountain.

One of the funny benefits of the reversed existence they’re living is starting most of their hikes at the peak, trampling downhill before they must climb back up. Mike doesn’t mind; it’s easier to think of the climb as a warm-up, and the physical toll is a fraction of what it would be for humans.

Shae doesn’t seem bothered either, stopping every few seconds to take pictures. Mike ponders what will happen when the phone’s memory fills up. Maybe they can get Melinda to splurge for a camera; they really should be documenting the beauty of this mountain. It would be good to have something nice for the others to remember it by, instead of their personalized nightmares. Also, it would help convince his mom he isn’t making this entire thing up.

Mike peers over Shae’s shoulder when she beckons him over to look at the photos. They aren’t exactly going to win her any money in a contest, but there’s a rustic charm to them— if you ignore the lack of focus. Mike squints at the screen, reaching around her to crank the brightness up. It’s mostly close-up shots of shrubbery, nothing panoramic. In one, Mike’s foot is hiding underneath a wild rose bush. “You like flowers?”
Shae snorts. “Everyone likes flowers.” She pockets the phone, walking into the brush so she can show Mike a favourite. He follows, making sure not to step on any spiky plants; Shae doesn’t seem to care, marching forward until she reaches a bush with flat white flowers and long green leaves. “Isn’t this one cool? I could be a wedding photographer.”

Mike raises an eyebrow. “Are you into weddings?” It seems wildly out of character.

“No.” Shae fingers the petals between her hands lightly, shrugging. “I don’t really care about romance and all of that junk. I’ve never… I don’t know. Not all of us can be playboys like you.”

“Ha,” Mike crows, and then he sets her straight with stories about Jess and Emily and everyone preceding that. His kill count isn’t as long as he’d like everyone to believe, but the conversation still fills up enough time to distract them. They make it to the base of the mountain and halfway back before they notice Shae’s skin.

She’s been idly scratching for a while; nails dragging over her wrists and then along her arms in repetitive motions. Mike didn’t think anything was strange about that. Sometimes having fur just feels like that, like a phantom limb— except one that can spring into life again with just a thought. But when Shae finally looks at herself and stops short, Mike looks too, and then grimaces. “What happened?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Shae shoots back, instantly grouchy. Her skin is irritated; there’s a red rash blooming over her hands and up her arms. It looks horrifically out of place, and Mike reaches to touch it before thinking better of that. “I guess… it was ’cause I touched that plant?”

“Uh, okay,” Mike says stupidly. He reaches for his phone to try to do some quick research but they’re out of range for internet here— and anyway, that would only result in phone numbers for centres that wouldn’t know how to deal with werewolf poison. “Should you wash it?”

They find the nearest creek and Shae submerges her arms, and it helps her irritation but they can’t very well stay here all day. A drop of rain hits Mike’s shoulder and he shoots a frown skyward, as if to ask ‘why now’. Shae senses the oncoming rain too, and she looks unusually nervous. “What do you think— what should I do?”

“I don’t know.” He frowns again, flummoxed. “Try transforming?”

“I don’t want to,” Shae says quickly. “I— that’ll just make it worse, I think. It hurts— it feels like it hurts in my fur somehow. Does that make any sense?”

“I mean, maybe it was something poisonous for dogs.” The rash on her hands and arms is visible now even through running water, and Mike winces. “I’m sorry, I don’t know; I mean, I don’t know anything about plants or, animals, or anything… wait. Hang on a second.”

He takes his phone from Shae, and dials; Sam picks up after the second ring. Mike can hear muffled folk music in the background. “Uh, hi! What’s up?”

“Hey, Sam, sorry to call you again.” Shae twists her head around and cranes her neck to stare up at him. Mike just shrugs and continues. “Any chance you could send over those field guides? Specifically, anything to do with poisonous plants?”

“Oh, geez,” she replies. “What happened? Do you know what it looks like?”

Mike grimaces. “… It was green. I think the leaves were—”

“I took a picture,” Shae interrupts, rolling her eyes. She removes an arm from the stream, shaking it
off and reaching up for the phone. “Just give me— just let me talk to her.”

“It’s not waterproof!"

“I’m not gonna drop it in the fucking river,” Shae hisses, and jumps to her feet, taking the phone. Mike doesn’t fight, too worried about the aggravated redness on her hands. “Hello? Yeah, I’m Shae. No, I’m fine— it’s just annoying. I don’t know, a six?”

Mike asks, “What’s a six,” and Shae waves him off to continue. He rolls his eyes even though she isn’t looking, and they get back onto the path to the cabin. Mike hasn’t been third-wheeled in a long time. In fact, he’s usually part of a couple making someone else feel like a third wheel. But as Shae and Sam chatter away Mike starts to feel disgruntled, and then bored, and then excited. Excited in the same way Sam had been earlier at the discussion of him and Josh.

Finally, Shae’s cabin comes into view and she ends the conversation abruptly. Mike only got to hear one side of it, but that doesn’t stop him from wiggling his eyebrows until she turns to look at him. The expression on Shae’s face is one of absolute confusion. It’s cute, and Mike laughs— until she clues in, and then he stops laughing and starts trying to fend off Shae’s red hands.

With time, the way that Mike thinks about his room changes. For one, he starts to consider it his room; not a master bedroom that belongs to someone else, and not the place that Josh’s parents stayed when they visited. (Weird.) And he doesn’t even consider the idea of taking up one of the newly clean guest bedrooms. Every night he finds himself happy to fall into the same familiar bed, and whenever he stops in the morning to consider that, he feels just as selfish as always.

But the strange guilt at having evaded the world’s responsibilities to steal away to a mountain doesn’t stop him from sleeping soundly every night— or day, sometimes. It’s hard to keep to a schedule when Josh is in the same hall. That isn’t something Mike would share with him, but it’s the unfortunate truth. Some nights, he wakes up to the jarring sound of sobbing from down the hall.

The first time it happened, Mike hesitated outside the door for a good minute before a particularly pitiful sob tore his heart open. Nobody came to answer his knock so he ended up entering alone, and the sight inside was even more heart-wrenching. When Josh cries in the middle of the night he’s usually in a deep sleep, sobbing while still entrenched in a nightmare.

It was hard to wake him up the first time, but with time, Mike learns the tricks. He doesn’t shake the guy, just sits beside him and moves a hand quickly in front of his face. Mike’s damaged but warm flesh is usually enough of an incentive for Josh to wake up, and when that fails Mike takes to tapping his shoulder. Josh comes back to reality the same way every time— he awakens with a start, still breathing hard and crying, and then he reaches to grab the closest part of Mike. Usually that’s his forearm, but Mike doesn’t mind the ironclad grip. After two minutes of silence and hard breathing as Josh tries to deduce what is real and what belongs to his nightmares, he apologizes, hoarse and quiet. Every time.

Mike never fights Josh on the apologies, although they make his stomach twist somewhat awfully. He can’t help but feel like he should be the one apologizing, because Josh wouldn’t have nightmares to this degree if Mike hadn’t abandoned him in that shed, or in the lake, or if they hadn’t orchestrated the prank on his sister in the first place. But Josh never brings it up in the mornings, and Mike doesn’t want to prolong Josh’s embarrassment at their late-night encounters,
so he stays quiet about it.

One night, there’s a variation in their pattern. Mike hasn’t needed to wake Josh up in a few nights; their days have been happy, and he’s pretty sure they’re on a streak for nobody getting triggered by anything. But then, an hour or so after midnight, a sharp, inhuman cry interrupts Mike’s sleep.

He doesn’t question it, rolling out of bed before he’s even opened his eyes. He practically sleep-walks down the hall, rubbing his temples and wishing the Washingtons had thought to install carpeting in their halls. The hardwood is cold under his bare feet, as is the doorknob in his hand.

He calls from the threshold, “Josh,” but the name has no effect. Josh has sweated through the sheets on his bed, and somehow managed to twist a blanket all around himself as he lies contorted, tense, and crying. His face is scrunched up like he’s in physical pain and the sight hurts Mike; he doesn’t hesitate to go wake Josh up.

Josh snaps back to consciousness, breathing as hard as usual. Mike watches him patiently, already drifting back into comforting dreams. After their routine two minutes of tension, Josh drops his grip on Mike’s shoulder and shuffles away on the bed. He doesn’t offer any illumination into his nightmares, just a terse nod and: “Thanks.”

“Welcome,” Mike mumbles back, and climbs off the mattress. Josh folds his arms over his chest, still sitting up—it makes him look smaller, somehow. Mike smiles (it’s half-grimace) and exits out to the hallway, ready to go to bed.

Except tonight, something possesses him. The door shuts, and Mike doesn’t pad back to his room; instead he stays in the frigid hallway, examining his own hands distractedly. He waits for the sound of Josh’s breathing to even out again, so that he can go back to bed knowing his friend is resting easy too. But his waiting is futile; two minutes pass, and then five, and there’s still no light snoring coming from the room.

Mike wants to burst in again to check, but if Josh was asleep, he’d know. Suddenly he realizes that he’s never once thought to check in with Josh about their nighttime visits. If Josh doesn’t go back to sleep after being woken up… well, that can’t be a good thing. Mike doesn’t want to deprive Josh of any extra rest, and more importantly, he doesn’t want anything to be weird between them. He heads back to his own room, mind churning with discomfort.

After that, when crying wakes Mike up in the middle of the night, he stares at the ceiling and counts dots on the plaster until the noise stops or until he falls asleep. He stops going into Josh’s room.

The spring showers have both advantages and disadvantages, although the latter outweigh the former on almost all counts. The lush undergrowth of the mountain floor is glad for the rain, and Madahee starts to become beautiful. But the regular downpour means that it becomes way harder to find dry wood or kindling for fires, so they end up relying on electrical heat most of the time. Besides the fact that it’s bad for the environment, it’s just miserable; Mike wants to be shackled up in his mountainside chalet next to a warm fire, not next to an ugly heater.

On one of his trips foraging for dry wood Mike gives up on anything usable, which is, of course, when he finds the perfect tree. It’s almost three times his height but something has broken it in half, so right now its branches have all bowed down to the forest floor. Mike would suspect
lightning strike or a wayward bear, but he’s noticed that Josh has a habit of jumping off of trees horizontally, like a spider monkey (or a glittery vampire).

The job is half-done, so Mike goes to find an axe and finish it. He leaves an irregular stump behind, as well as most of the branches, but it’s worth it to see the looks on Josh and Shae’s faces when he carries the broken logs over his shoulders.

Josh closes his jaw so that he can affect an unimpressed appearance. Mike doesn’t buy it; he knows he feels and looks like Superman. Except instead of a stoic steely expression, he’s grinning wide with pride. “Uh, what the hell are you gonna do with that, cowboy?”

“I’m gonna make us something nice for the place.” Mike drops the logs onto the ground and pulls the axe out of one. He hopes he resembles a hot, strong woodcutter and not Jack Torrance. “I thought it’d be fun to build something not from IKEA.”

“Nothing in our place is from IKEA,” Josh says, affronted by the perceived insult. Then, he seems to realize the use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ and all it implies. He coughs, hideously embarrassed, before retreating inside. “Whatever. Have fun. You know what they say about all work and no play.”

Mike pulls a face and shakes the axe in his direction. Josh doesn’t turn around, leaving Shae alone to ask, “Are you sure you can do that?”

“I mean, it’s a provincial park, but that’s about the last reason the cops have to come up here! And I’m not worried about, uh, spiritual damage or anything. The tree was already broken.”

“No. I meant, are you sure you can build something out of that?”

“Of course I can,” Mike squints at her. “I fixed the stairs, didn’t I?”

“Right.” Shae sounds entirely unconvinced, and she doesn’t stick around to watch him work, also going inside.

That suits him fine. Mike shoves off disappointment that nobody was impressed with him for cutting down a whole tree, and instead focuses on the thrilling task at hand. He sets to work.

He fails.

Quickly, he discovers that while fixing the stairs was doable, he is really, really bad at being a lumberjack. Maybe the mountain is punishing him for putting the bisected tree out of its misery, because it seems like both his material and tools are working against him. It takes him two days and nights before he gives up, and finally brings Shae and Josh around the back of the cabin to see the (rotten) fruits of his labour.

Josh laughs so hard he cries, whereas Shae just looks perplexed. Mike isn’t sure which reaction just hurts. “I’m sorry,” Shae asks, stepping forward but not touching the new carpentry. “What is it?”

“What—what is it? It’s a table,” Mike nearly yells. “Of course it’s a— what else could it be?!”

Josh wheezes, “There are nails sticking out of the leg.”

“Well, I never said I was a carpenter.”

“Yes, that much is evident.”
Shae squats in front of the table, like a procedural detective examining a corpse. “Why isn’t it sitting evenly on the ground?”

“It’s,” Mike flaps his hands around, and then drags them down his face. “I don’t know. I think it’d look nicer inside, you know. On a flat surface.”

“Great,” Josh giggles. “Let’s bring it inside.”

“We’re not fucking keeping it,” Mike grouses, and walks over to pick up the table and carry it away from the house. “This whole endeavor was a complete mista— stop laughing!”

“I can’t,” cries Josh, and when Mike looks at Shae for sympathy she’s smiling too. “I’m sorry, it’s just. It looks like modern art. Please can we keep it?”

Mike flips Josh off over his shoulder. He carries the table deep into the woods and leaves it there for some brave beaver to repurpose. He returns to the lodge grouchy but resigned, and he evades his housemates for the rest of the night.

The next morning when he wakes up, the table has returned—and replaced their doubtlessly expensive TV stand. Mike stares at it for a good ten minutes, trying to be irritated and not touched. He fails.

It hits him one day, with all the delicacy of a pillowcase of bricks. The realization leaves him gasping aloud, alone on the mountain. Thanks to Sam’s bright idea, he’s spending the day foraging for berries—it had sounded much more fun than it is. Most of the berries he finds are inedible and the edible ones don’t taste great; it would be nicer to search for live food. Hour by hour his entire day is consumed by the somewhat boring task, which naturally means his mind wanders. Mike thinks about trying to get Shae to watch his favourite movies, which leads to a vague and slow train of thought about Die Hard, which leads to him figuring it out.

Mike drops half his berries.

He brings the rest back to the lodge, flinging the bag down onto the kitchen counter before storming through the house to find Josh. He can’t smell Shae, but the wendigo’s scent is familiar by now; Mike hurries down to the basement. Sure enough, Josh is down there, feet kicked up by a window. He’s doing something on a laptop, but he glances up at Mike’s arrival. “Something I can help you with?”

“I figured it out,” Mike breathes. His fingertips are still stained purple with berries. “I mean, I think I— I think I figured it out.”

Josh raises a smooth eyebrow and swings his feet back down onto the ground. “Figured what out?”

“You keep on calling me cowboy. Is that— is it a motherfucking Die Hard reference?”

Josh stares. “… Duh.”
“Oh,” Mike grins, crazily happy. The joy blooms in his chest. “That’s my favourite movie.”

“Yeah. Duh. You only bring that up once a day.” Josh rolls his eyes and goes back to his computer, but Mike stays watching him for long enough to see a smile flicker across his face.

Three nights after the revelation, Mike gets woken up by crying again.

This time it starts out as a monstrous shriek that pierces his dreams and leaves him reaching for some sort of weapon, but quickly peters off into sobbing. It seems worse than it used to be, or maybe Mike is just getting worn out. It had felt like everything was going so well, and like Josh was finally, maybe, taking a turn for the better.

He stares at the ceiling and waits for the crying to stop. It doesn’t stop.

Finally, he gives up and shoves the blankets aside, getting out of bed and pacing down the hall. The crying sounds louder than usual, and Mike wonders if Shae can hear it from her cabin. Probably not, since she hasn’t stopped by to check on them. No, apparently that responsibility falls on his shoulders alone.

Mike pushes open the door to Josh’s room and doesn’t waste time, heading straight for the bed and waving his hand in front of Josh’s face. Josh startles awake, reaching forward and grabbing it. This time he intertwines their fingers and Mike is left staring stupidly at anything but their joined hands. At Josh’s sharp teeth. At his tearstained cheeks. Hell, at the ceiling.

A minute or so passes and then Josh heaves out a heavy breath. Mike waits for the usual thanks so that he can return to his own room, but instead Josh just lets his grip go lax and hangs his head. “I’m sorry,” he mutters.

Mike speaks, but it comes out half-yawn: “’s fine.”

“It’s annoying.” Josh sniffs. “I didn’t mean to wake you up again.”

“I always wake up,” Mike says, and then thinks better of it when Josh straightens up, looking wounded. “I mean! I just stopped coming in here because I realized that if I woke you up every time you had a nightmare, then you’d never go back to sleep. Sorry, man, I thought— I mean, you never said anything.”

Josh is silent and morose, until finally, he shrugs with one shoulder and makes eye contact again. His eyes, at least, look much healthier than when Mike had first seen him in his new state—even though they’re still damp from tears. “Yeah. Uh. I guess it’s been hard for me to sleep, since… the, since the lake, and stuff. I’ve just been having trouble sleeping alone.”

Before Mike can think any better of it, he instantly says, “You can sleep with me.”

Josh’s eyes bulge out of his head now, and tension returns to his shoulders.

“Not like that!” Mike adds, quickly but not soon enough. “I meant, just to comfort you. So that you don’t have to be alone.”

He assumes Josh is going to say ‘hard pass’ or any other refusal, since that isn’t exactly the kind of offer that friends usually make to friends. To his astonishment, Josh slides out of bed and then gets
to his feet, still teary but nodding gently. “Fine.”

“Fine,” Mike echoes, caught in disbelief. Josh leads the way back to his room, opening the door and then crawling into Mike’s bed. He’s wearing pajamas (well, pajama pants and a shirt with Pennywise on it) but somehow that just serves to make the sight more intimate. It makes everything more real. The real Joshua Washington is really here, in Mike’s real bed.

Mike is agog, and barely manages to close the door in shock. When he turns back around, Josh is already laying down on the cold side of the bed—and to Mike’s horror, he’s holding Mike’s most embarrassing possession under his chin. “God damn it!”

“Hey, language,” Josh laughs gently. He waves the white whale’s fins up and down, smiling at the toy. “He’s just a baby! Baaaby beluga in the deep blue sea…”

Mike wants to move, but he’s afraid that taking even one step into the room will make Josh flee out the window like a nervous cat. Or maybe taking one step forward will shatter this perfect dream, and he’ll wake up alone and have to listen to Josh crying all over again. “He’s not a baby, he’s almost as old as I am.”

“Aww,” Josh teases. “So should I be jealous that somebody’s been keeping your bed warm for years and years? Just joking, I think it’s cute that you sleep together every night.”

“Shut up and go to sleep,” Mike commands, walking over to fiddle with his bag in the closet. When he turns around a few minutes later, Josh has followed his instructions—or else he’s doing a great job at pretending to sleep. His mouth is hanging open, revealing his sharp rows of teeth, but all Mike can focus on is how relaxed he looks for once. He isn’t wound up into a ball or sobbing in anguish, he’s just curled around the tiny toy and peacefully resting.

Mike wishes he could take a snapshot of Josh like this, right now. Of course, he can’t, because he gave his phone to Shae, and because that would be a monumentally creepy thing to do anyway. Instead, he shuts the window and burrows under the covers next to Josh, and he falls asleep in record time.

After that they develop a new routine, one much more relaxing than Mike waking Josh up at 3:14 every night. Josh starts to adapt to a more human sleep schedule, and the main reason is that he always heads to Mike’s room to sleep, no questions asked.

Mike is sure that it should be weirder to share a bed with Josh. He has such intense and confused feelings for Josh that at this point there could not be a return to their old relationship. Instead they’re hurtling towards something new, one night at a time. The weird thing is that it isn’t weird at all. In fact, it’s kind of the best. They keep to their own sides of the mattress as best they can, but sometimes in the morning Josh’s fingers drag over his knuckles or their knees brush up against each other in the night. And yet, every night, Josh keeps returning. Maybe he really is just that lonely and in need of company, but Mike can’t help but get his hopes up.

Their pattern is broken one night when Mike awakens at five in the morning. For a minute he can’t place what’s wrong, he just feels deeply sad—then he looks at the cold and empty space next to him, and he figures it out. Josh is missing.

This isn’t entirely unexpected but when he goes to Josh’s room, he finds nobody there, and when
he glances down to the main floor Mike sees that the front door is hanging wide open.

His worry solidifies into panic and Mike transforms before he can help it, bounding down the stairs on all fours. He leaves his clothes behind him and takes off into the night, weaving between trees and howling occasionally.

Finally, his anxious howls are returned, and Mike whines in the direction of the noise. His brain, half-lucid and half-lupine, keeps coming up with worse and worse scenarios. Maybe the police had finally come to visit, or maybe Josh had attacked someone innocent.

He stumbles into the right clearing and sees Josh, unharmed and unbloodied, standing next to Shae. Despite her wolf form they both look curious, and in Josh’s case, amused. Mike transforms out of sheer embarrassment, reaching for long reeds to cover himself. It doesn’t do much, and Josh takes pity on him and his dignity, shrugging off his jacket and handing it over without being asked. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“ Couldn’t sl—” Mike accepts the coat, covering himself up and then realizing that it’s his coat. “You left!” Josh’s smirk widens so Mike adds, “You left the door wide freakin’ open; I mean, do you want wild animals to get in the house?”

“Hell yeah,” Shae says, sounding distinctly like Josh. “Free food.”

They high-five without looking at each other and Mike scoffs. “It’s late! You should both be asleep!”

Both werewolf and wendigo burst into laughter. Mike rolls his eyes and stomps back to the lodge, too annoyed to transform back and cut his travel time in two.

(When the sun rises two hours later Mike is still only half-asleep, and so he feels Josh crawl back into bed beside him, warm from the hunt and hopefully not covered in blood. Mike smiles into his pillow, and they both sleep in.)

The next care package of Melinda’s arrives with another letter, and Josh locks himself in his room to read it. This time, he doesn’t resurface for hours, and Mike eventually gets tired of pretending he’s not waiting for Josh to go to bed. He turns off the television and leaves the remote on his bad table, yawning even though he isn’t sleepy. His feet drag as he climbs the stairs, but the door to Josh’s room is firmly closed and locked.

Mike goes to bed, but he’s too worried to sleep. He lies awake past midnight, deep in anxious thought, when the doorknob finally turns.

Mike props himself up on his elbows but stays silent, waiting. Josh climbs into bed beside him, also silent; the moment stretches out but neither of them says a single word.

Without speaking, Josh breaks their pattern. He doesn’t fall asleep on the other side of the bed. Instead, he snuggles up close to Mike, facing away from him. Mike is taken aback but he doesn’t let himself second-guess it. He just moves forward on the mattress so that he can wrap his arms
around Josh, tight and close. Spooning comes easily to them, like this is the thousandth time they’ve held each other and not the first.

Mike’s heart is beating like a stallion’s, but all Josh does is take his good hand and hold it. Mike bites into his lip, wills his pulse to slow down, and then falls asleep almost instantly.

End Notes

This story has been, and continues to be, a labour of love. Let me know your thoughts! You can comment here or find me on tumblr at montparnasse.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!