

Mated in the Shadow of My Sister

Chapter 4: Living in the Shadows

(6 years later)

(Lily POV)

Six years have now passed since that fateful day that Stephanie died.

I wish that I could say that life has moved on, and that we have found good in the bad... but for the most part, it isn't true. Stephanie is just as much a part of this pack today as she was before she died. And the grief felt in the pack is just as raw and angry as it was that first day.

If anything has changed, it is that --instead of Stephanie being out in the center of things-- she lives on almost like a shadow over everything. She now has a couple of streets named after her --Stephanie Lane and Steffie Avenue (her nickname was "Steffie"); the local coffee shops sell a couple of drinks dedicated to her; and you can quite literally find some of her favorite outfits on display in glass cases at various places throughout the pack.

Even more bizarre, the day she died was turned into a pack holiday, as was her birthday. Everyone but pack omegas have both days off from work, school, and training, and there are somber celebrations and remembrances planned to commemorate each occasion.

I once made the mistake of asking my parents whether this was a normal reaction to the death of a single she-wolf. We can love and miss her, but to continue to hold large ceremonies every year? And to treat her as a saint and forget that she had a human side too? That seemed a bit too much to me. As far as I know, the pack has never done this for any other luna or future luna, and it only honors 2-3 historical alphas in such a manner.

I was rewarded for my questions by being called jealous and hateful. (I also received a significant beating, but beatings had become commonplace from my mother, so I cannot say that my question necessarily triggered the beating I received that day. Plus, the beating hurt far less than what I received before Stephanie died. But for the slight pain and who did the beating, I almost would not have minded.)

Overall, I think the worst part of losing Stephanie six years ago wasn't losing Stephanie... it was how losing Stephanie impacted my relationship with my parents and other pack members.

Before Stephanie died, I was well aware that Stephanie was my parents' favorite. My older brother Nick and I would even joke about it from time to time. But even though Stephanie was their favorite, they still treated me really well and loved me. They never would have raised a hand to me before Stephanie died.

After Stephanie died, however, my parents could barely look at me. And when they did, I saw the unmistakable wish in their eyes that it had been me, not Stephanie, that died that fateful night.

In addition, my parents stopped caring about my well-being generally. I lived in their house until I was 17, but I was responsible for my own meals and necessities. I was forced to take on a part-time job at a nearby diner just to ensure I had clothes and food to eat. (I technically could have eaten the food that was available in the packhouse, but the dirty looks and mean comments made by my parents, James, and other pack members were enough to make that an unrealistic option.)

Also, in case you are wondering, I have not celebrated a birthday since Stephanie died. Not one single soul other than Rose has bothered to tell me happy birthday. No one even bothered to ask me whether I had received my wolf. That wasn't because birthdays stopped being important; it was just mine whose meaning changed.

I attended plenty of birthday parties, and the pack hosted plenty of 14th birthday celebrations. In fact, I think it was because of one of those birthday celebrations that someone finally questioned whether I had received a wolf. It was a legitimate question, given that I was over 14 and never joined a pack run. Rose encouraged me early on to skip them "for safety reasons," and I was all too happy to do so.

Had anyone bothered to ask me directly about my wolf or about why I was skipping the pack runs, I would have been honest... but no one ever did. Instead, a rumor spread that I was wolfless. Pack members speculated that I lost my wolf as a result of post-traumatic stress from losing Stephanie and/or guilt for what I had done to Stephanie.

That latter theory was the one that really got under my skin, because I knew that was a theory and rumor spread by James. Shortly after Stephanie's funeral, he told my parents and most of the pack that Stephanie was only in the forest that night to save me. He also said I had gone out to meet a boy. I have no idea why he would say such things; I have never had a boyfriend and Stephanie was the one who asked me to meet her in the forest.

This rumor was the main reason that I received a beating from my mother the night of my first shift. And it probably adds to the reason that pack members feel free to wish me dead.

Notably, though, I have never dared to defend myself. To tell the truth would be the equivalent of talking negatively of both Stephanie and our future alpha.... and would likely lead to a death sentence.

So instead, I have always just pushed through. One of the ways that I have survived is to hold on to the faith that one day things will be different. Another thing that I have done is take every last opportunity to leave the pack.

For example, I hurried through high school so that I could graduate early, and I then went away to college. To avoid coming home, I have been loading up on credit hours and taking every term of school -including the mini winter sessions-- that I can get. I am also taking advantage of a

unique expedited program offered just for werewolves doctors. Given all of these things, I actually expect that I can become a fully licensed werewolf doctor in just a couple more years.

Until I become fully licensed and independent, I will have to continue to bear the shadow of my sister and the pain that comes with it. I am required to be present for both of her holidays --all pack members are; there are no exceptions-- but thankfully those are among the very few times that I can reliably be found at the Western Mountain pack these days.

My ultimate goal is to meet my mate and become a pack doctor in his pack... which I pray to the Moon Goddess is not the Western Mountain pack. If, Goddess forbid, my mate is in this pack, perhaps I can convince him to transfer packs with me.

Goddess willing.

Tomorrow is my birthday. I guess we will find out then.