

Chapter 0082

James looks up, and I see sadness, guilt, fear, and confusion in his eyes. And yet, he still does not answer me.

"ANSWER ME, D&&&IT!"

(James POV)

"Answer her, James," Luke demands.

I want do. I really do. But I am so scared. I have allowed Stephanie's death and Lily's role in it to define my life for the past six years. I now know that Lily was not to blame, but am I ready to cast negativity on Stephanie... the she-wolf that I loved — "that you thought you loved," Luke corrects me — for almost my whole life?

Worse, what if Lily does not understand why I blamed her? What if my explanation makes her hate me more? What if, after I tell her, she ends the meeting and walks away?

"You owe it to Lily to tell her the truth," Luke tells me. "If she does not forgive you, then... then we will figure something else out. But tell her, James. Please."

I look at the ocean, take a deep breath, and slowly begin to lay it all out there.

"The night that Stephanie died, we were watching a movie

together. She got a text around midnight. She did not let me see the text, but she said that it was from you. You snuck out of the house to meet a boy in the woods, and you got lost. You needed her to come and rescue you.”

I take a quick glance at Lily. She is watching me intently. I look back at the ocean. My mind brings me back to the memories and emotions of that fateful day. I continue the story almost as though I am telling it in real time.

“I was angry. Really angry. You should not have been in the woods late at night, much less in the woods to fool around with a boy. I wanted to go with Stephanie to rescue you... and to teach you a lesson... but Stephanie insisted that she go by herself. She said you would be embarrassed if anyone else knew what you had been up to. So I let her go.

An hour later, I got a mind-link from the pack warriors saying that you had been seen running out of the woods screaming for help.

We all rushed to the woods, and we found....”

I pause, feeling myself get choked up by the memory. “...we found what was left of Stephanie. It was awful. Her clothes ... her hair... her blood... I have never seen anything like it. It was as though the rogues had literally eaten her alive. I was so angry and hurt and upset. My whole life, I had been told that your sister was my future. And yet, there I was, looking at my future literally reduced to a pile of blood, hair, and torn clothing.”

I put my head in my hands, as I feel my own tears threaten to fall. "I wanted someone to blame. The rogues were long gone before we got there. I knew you had not killed Stephanie with your own hands, but... if you had not been out in the woods fooling around with a boy... if you had not asked Stephanie to rescue you... everything would have been different. Stephanie would still be here."

"And she would be your mate?" Lily asks quietly.

"And Stephanie would be my mate," I confirm without thinking.

"JAMES!!!!" Luke cuts in. "What did you just say to her?!?!?!?!?! TAKE IT BACK! LILY IS OUR MATE!!!!!"

I lift my head up, and look at Lily. Her eyes are bloodshot, and I can literally feel the heartbreak emanating off of her body.

"James, if you are here because you think that I can replace Stephanie for you, you should know... I may look like Stephanie, but I am not her. Nor do I want to be."

Chapter 0083

(James POV)

"James, if you are here because you think that I can replace Stephanie, you should know... I am not Stephanie. Nor do I want to be."

I look at Lily in confusion. "Is that what you think? That I am here because I want you to replace your sister?"

"Of course that is what she thinks, you a&&hole!" Luke links me. "Tell her it is not true!!!"

"I am not her, James," Lily repeats.

"I know that, Lily!" I respond, almost angrily.

"Maybe you know that now... but that day at the waterfall...."

Oh, my Goddess. I had forgotten about the waterfall. I am an even bigger idiot than I thought.

I reach out and take Lily's hand. "Lily, you are my mate. I admit that I used to think that Stephanie was... but I was wrong. We were all wrong. You are my mate. You."

"You mean that I am your second chance mate."

"No, Lily, I mean that you are my first mate, my true mate, my only mate. Unless you had another mate that I am unaware of, which I am pretty sure is impossible, we are first

and true mates.”

Lily shakes her head. She seems to be struggling with accepting all of this. “But you loved Stephanie. I cannot compete with her, and I do not want to.”

I sigh. “I did love Stephanie. Or at least I thought I did. I can’t change that. But she is gone now, and my prior love for her does not impact how I am feeling about you right now.”

Still holding her hand, I reach over and stroke her cheek with my other hand. She immediately recoils from my touch and yanks her hand away from me.

“No, James. Do not try to use the mate bond or the sparks as a weapon against me. I am trying to be serious here.”

So she does still feel the sparks.

“The day that we rejected each other, I made some important decisions. I decided that I would no longer allow myself to live underneath Stephanie’s shadow; to be bullied and ridiculed; or to spend time with people who do not want me or care about me. Life is better for me now that I have left West Mountain. I am doing well in school; I am making new friends; I have people around me who truly care about me.”

“You mean Brady,” I say bitterly. “You mean you have Brady around to care about you.”

She nods. “Brady, yes. But not just Brady. Dr. Hyder and his

wife have become like surrogate parents for me. And I have friends now... friends who do not look at me like I am a murderer. Friends who are not embarrassed to be seen hanging out with me. Friends who do not...."

Her voice trails off, and I cannot help but wonder what else she was going to say. Whatever it was, she drops it and looks up in the sky.

"Look, James, I do not know what you expected when you came out here, but you cannot expect me to give up my new life for that hell-hole that was my old one."

Lily's words gut me. Was life really that bad for her at West Mountain?

"Yes, you a&&. You saw her medical records, and you know as well as I do that we have not even scratched the surface of what was really going on," Luke chastises me.

"Lily, I... Lily, I never...."

I cannot finish my sentence. The words escape me. I have no idea what to do to make things better. I do not know if it is even possible. Perhaps it really is too late.

I take a deep breath. I have to keep trying.

"Lily, I know that it is largely my fault that your life was the way that it was back then. I messed up. Badly. But, please, hear me when I tell you that I want to make it up to you. You are my Goddess-chosen mate, and that means something."

"But I am not Stephanie."

"Stop saying that. I do not want you to be her," I say confidently. "I want you to be you."

Lily's next words floor me.

"Do you know who that is?"

(Lily POV)

I hear and feel so much sincerity and regret in James' words that I find myself in an internal war with myself.

Part of me wants to accept the mate bond and jump into his arms. Another part of me wants to keep standing up for myself, and to do everything in my power to prevent going back to the bad situation that I escaped from.

"Are you standing up for yourself or are you putting up walls?" Rose asks me.