

# HOWL AT THE MOON

Asha

IT ALL FELT STRANGE, REALLY; staying in a house with all of these damn memories circling through it. The air was stifling, thick, floating above her head like a heavy cloud.

She could barely breathe and all.

Still...she was filled with a sense of duty to be there. She *loved*, and she loved deeply. She had friends who needed her; well, one of them at least. Even if he had difficulty admitting it right now.

She sat on the couch closest to the window in the living room of the little house in Portland, flipping through a wedding magazine. The best way to distract herself from present matters was to think about her wedding; however shallow that seemed.

However, no matter how many pictures of smiling brides and doting grooms encompassed her sight, she couldn't think of what the hell she wanted. And she thought of the way it had turned out for her friends, of course: all shattered dreams and tacit resentment. The whole ordeal was enough to draw her nearer to God.

Or maybe in the opposite direction.

The house was quiet and it smelled of her friend, Natalie - the flowered scent of her shampoo, her citrusy perfume, the aroma of even her laundry detergent. It was as though she'd just left only seconds before, leaving a marked memory of everything she was in her wake.

That was the haunting idea of it all, anyway.

Scotty had gone down the street with Brandon to get some groceries. The refrigerator had molded food in it, reeking of cold, decaying flesh. Brandon wasn't really

eating nowadays. But hell, who could blame him?

Once the loudest and the boldest in the room, Brandon Greene had become only a shadow of himself, lurking through the hallways of an abandoned home with a gaping hole in his chest.

Her warm embraces and sometimes hallowed words of encouragement could only do so much, right?

*"You look like her,"* he'd said to her once. *"You fucking look like her..."*

He was drunk that time, she was sure of it. He sort of loomed over her, eyes eerily narrowed in her direction, swaying subtly. Scotty had gone to bed. But she...*she* was still awake for some reason, sitting by the window in that very living room, as though waiting for something to happen.

*"Brandon, what are you talking about?"*

Toggleing his head from side to side as though to rattle himself out of a dream, he cleared his throat and muttered, *"Nothing, Ash. Nothing. Just fucking forget it."*

But nothing could have prepared her for that very evening.

*Nothing.*

She was sitting alone in the living room of the house in Portland. Reality had set in very harshly around her, as she was now the only female in their once foursome, and still, almost absolutely, wasn't the center of attention.

All focus lied on Natalie Savannah Chandler Greene, and even in her absence, her presence encircled the house like a fucking ghost, taunting them.

*Focus on the wedding, Ash. Focus on your wedding. You're marrying Scotland. You're marrying Scotland.*

Cycling that around in her head for a while, she could breathe a little easier, even now that she was alone, and her fiancé was out with Brandon Greene doing God knows what and where. She was the one who had to be the sense of reason in all of this; coaching her Scotty to keep a level head and his wits about him while his creation (that being Brandon and Natalie) was crumbling before his eyes.

Once, while they were getting ready for bed, he even had the audacity to say: *"I'm the one who put them together, Ash. What the fuck are they doing?"*

Really? So, he was the one who put their hearts in their chests, certain amorous thoughts in their brains, stirred their chemistry just right to make them perfect for each other?

He was *God* all of a sudden?

Asha couldn't help but roll her eyes and scoff at the love of her life. Who the fuck did he think he was? How quick he was to forget that she'd been there, too. For all of their *bullshit*.

Natalie's bullshit, mostly.

And, like the friend she was, she swam around in it, lopped it in her hair, even bathed in her bullshit. It was a tough job trying to encourage that girl to embrace her feelings, however good or bad, and stop running away like a damned chicken. The current state of affairs proved that she didn't listen very well, nor had she come to terms with whatever she was wrestling with. What exactly did they all expect to happen?

SHE FLIPS ANOTHER COUPLE OF PAGES, and Scotty comes storming into the house, panting.

"What the hell's the matter with you," she asks, sitting up.

The look on his face startles even a fortress like her, and in a state of internal panic, she desperately stalls herself from running toward him.

"I can't find him."

"What do you mean you can't find him?"

He shrugs, dumbfounded. "I don't know. I turned away for one second, when I turned back he was gone."

She got to her feet, dropping the magazine on the floor. "I don't think I'm understanding what you're saying. How do you lose a six-foot-four, two-hundred-and-twenty-pound grown man?"

He shrugs again. "I don't fucking know, Ash. He's just gone and he's not answering his phone."

"Jesus Christ. What happened?"

"I took him to a bar, and..."

"Why the fuck did you take him to a bar, Scotland?"

She was yelling. She was mad...so very, very fucking mad. "That is the last place that you should be taking him."

"I know, I know. But we were riding in his car, and he discovered one of Natalie's old jackets while he was looking for something under the seat. And it smelled just like

her, he said. Still. Then, I thought he was going to lose it, because he got one of those looks in his eye. I haven't seen that look since he discovered that she was dating that Anthony guy years ago. So I took the keys from him and I drove him to the nearest bar..."

"Yea? And what happened...?"

He was still panting. "Then he drank a few. You know...Brandon Greene and beer...and I...I bent down to tie my shoe...when I stood back up...he was gone...fucking gone."

"Oh, my God..."

"I raced outside to see where he'd gone...to the bathrooms, too...even asked a couple of people...just gone, Asha. And the only person who would even begin to know where to find him is nowhere to be found..."

"I can't...I can't..."

"What are we supposed to do? Call the cops?"

"No, you fool." She sighed heavily, placing the back of her hand to her forehead.

"We need to go find him."

"You mean, two people who have only been living here a couple of weeks, go to find someone, lurking the streets intoxicated?"

She nodded. "What else do you suggest? Go to bed and hope he returns in the morning? And if he doesn't, then what?"

"Good point. Come on..."

He reached for her hand and led her out of the house. She didn't want to let him know how scared she was. She didn't want to let him know what she thought might come of Brandon if they didn't find him. And he damn sure was correct: Natalie Chandler Greene, without hesitation, would've known where he was, would've anticipated why he may have reacted that way, and would've known when he'd return to his senses. She may have been bat-shit crazy, but she knew Brandon Greene.

Disregarding the quick sting of envy, she climbed into Brandon's truck with Scotty behind the wheel. Edging down the short driveway, he looked at her. "So, do we go left or right?"

"Close your eyes and turn the wheel." "If I do that, then we'll die."

"You know...when I first met you, I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

You were so confident and so sure of yourself. And you were so confident in Brandon and Natalie...”

“And? What do you think of me now?”

“I think that we were both just placed in an awkward situation, and you’ve taken on a role that I’ve never seen you take on. And I think I love it.”

He leaned across the console and pushed his lips into hers. “I’m so glad that I’m making you my wife.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

BUT HOW DID THEY GET THERE, EXACTLY? She remembered when they got the frantic call from Brandon several weeks ago. Tears sprung to her eyes at the sound of his voice. “It’s Natalie...and the baby...we’re in California...it’s bad.”

Pooling whatever money they had for two redeye flights across the country, they came across a very disheveled Brandon Greene and his sedated wife in a hospital bed, with the grayish remains of tears, painted across her cheeks. They tried to provide as much comfort and support as they could; they’d lost the baby, everything was crumbling around them, and there was so much unspoken tension between them that it almost felt laughable. Here were two of the most loving people that she knew, who’d grown together, adored and admired and respected each other for years, who’d fought for each other...giving up.

What did something so devastating amount to, really?

And there was no denying how much Brandon loved that girl. He’d done his own set of fighting over the years. Hell, when she was involved with Anthony, however lackluster the relationship was, that Brandon Greene, in a bout of his own drunkenness, looked her square in the eye and said, “Asha, I don’t give a fuck how long it takes, I don’t give a fuck how hopeless it seems, I don’t give a fuck who this Anthony guy is to her...Natalie Savannah Chandler is mine. Do you hear me? She’s mine. She’s always been mine, and she’ll always be mine. She knows it, we all know it. You’re not supposed to let go of someone you’ve loved from the beginning, are you? You’re supposed to just give up?”

He made a fair point. You weren’t supposed to give up...no matter how much of a

fool you made of yourself. She learned that a long time ago. She and Scotty were meant to walk away from each other...but she couldn't, not for the fucking life of her, imagine her life without him.

Stuck together like glue, the two of them. For better or worse.

The feeling was overwhelming; enough to make her scream with delight or fear or panic or something otherworldly.

Now, her only regret is that she'd explained to Natalie her feelings toward Scotty. Maybe it would have helped her understand the gravity of it all; maybe it would have helped her appreciate her love for Brandon on a greater scale.

But it's all useless now...she was gone. And her friends were running after someone who was too heartbroken to breathe as a direct result. What a shit-storm.

Scotty drove through the neighborhood methodically, slowly, searching. "This is hopeless. I can't believe that we were even thinking about moving here, babe."

"I think that was more for our friends than the city."

"Fair enough. But still. How the hell are we supposed to find someone here?"

"I don't know. But we must have the faith that we will. Otherwise we're going to be driving for a while...blindly."

So, he kept on driving, venturing out into other neighborhoods, passing by content locals and such as the sky above their heads faded with the sunset. There was an easygoingness in the city; a general understanding that stress proved futile, and a leniency toward indulgence and leisure. Envious of them, she mindlessly reached for Scotty's hand as if it were a last desperate attempt at seeking comfort. She knew that her fiancé looked toward Brandon and Natalie's relationship for a sense of the way things were meant to work. However arduous or dramatic their journey was, they did have something that seemed to work for quite a while – a mutual trust and understanding and a deeper, unfathomable type of love.

The now disparity between them probably left Scotty feeling uneasy and fearful, as though a similar fate lie in wait for them.

She refused to believe it. She only wanted to focus on the present. They belonged together, and whatever was happening with Brandon and Natalie Greene had no bearing on them.

She made a silent vow to keep reminding herself of that every day.

SHE WASN'T SURE HOW THEY MADE IT DOWNTOWN, but there they were, easing through the streets slowly. The sky had fallen completely and Scotty's breathing was a little uneasy.

"Try calling him," he said. "He might pick up. He might've calmed down."

But she knew better: when it came to Natalie, Brandon never really knew calm. Especially when he had no way of reaching her, like a thirsty peddler with no water in sight.

She picked up her phone, however, to indulge her fiancé anyway, and dialed Brandon's number.

No answer.

Scotty sensed it. "Jesus, this is hopeless."

And he felt so hopeless that he almost ran into the back of a car just ahead of him, only halting when she yelled his name and braced her flattened palm against his chest.

"Shit!" he screamed. "I'm so sorry, baby."

He pulled the truck aside, as the truck trailing him blew his horn in agitation.

"Just take a deep breath," she murmured, turning toward him. "You want me to drive?"

He shook his head. "No, no...I'm fine. Let's just keep going."

Then a flash of light or something caught her eye. Looking beyond Scotty, she saw someone stalking along the sidewalk purposefully, glancing down at a sheet of paper just often enough to prove that he was looking for something. He was tall, shrouded in shadows, black hair shaggy and unkempt. Narrowing her eyes, her heart began to pound. "Scott...look..."

Following her gaze, he inhaled sharply, unhooking his seatbelt. "Stay here, baby..."

She nodded compliantly and braced herself, realizing that perhaps she should have been the one to go and retrieve the man across the street. She didn't really want to see Scotty get beaten to a pulp by an outraged man who had just lost the love of his life.

If, in fact, that was Brandon Greene lurking on the sidewalk.

Scotty stopped just in front of the man, grasping at his broad shoulders. A semblance of recognition crossed the shaggy-haired man's face, and he stopped, as though he was a sleepwalker who'd been awakened unexpectedly.

They shuffled back and forth for a few seconds, and she could tell that Brandon was resisting. He then shoved Scotty aside with so much force that it knocked him into the side of a building. She gasped, unhooking her seatbelt, anticipating. Unrelenting, Scotty charged toward Brandon again, only to be shoved aside a second time, with potent gestures and a pointed finger of warning to follow.

Moved to action, Asha Castile exited the truck, and raced across the street, stopping just before Brandon Greene, whose eyes she had difficulty recognizing immediately.

He didn't seem to recognize her, either.

Baby blue eyes grayed with dismay, dark hair grown to an almost full beard, Brandon Greene looked nothing like himself. She rapidly felt heartbroken.

"Jesus, B."

"Do you want to know something, Ash?" "What's that, Brandon?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes. Just as long as it doesn't involve you shoving myself or my fiancé..." "That's fair...as long as you don't stop me...are you ready for this?"

She folded her arms. "I suppose..."

A smile crawled about his face, almost unpleasantly, as though it didn't fit. "I know where my wife is..."

Her heart stopped. "What? Where?"

He pointed up toward a high-rise just a few paces down from where they stood. Brows furrowed, Asha anxiously shifted her weight from one foot to the next.

"Here? Why here?"

He then lifted a sheet of paper up to her view. Scotty stepped forward to her side. "You see this? Do you fucking see it? This is the address, in Natalie's handwriting. Do you see it?"

"Yes, I see it, Brandon..."

Scotty then placed a hand on her arm. "C'mon, man...you don't want to do this..."

"I don't? I don't? You don't think I deserve a fucking explanation for what she did? You don't think I deserve to know why she decided to leave without consulting me. I want some goddamned answers..."

Asha stepped forward cautiously. "B., you're not well...please...come with us...get

some rest...”

“I’m perfectly fine, Ash. You know why? You really want to know why? Because I’m about to see my wife again. I’m about to see my fucking wife...and I’m going to tie her down so she doesn’t leave me again. Because I don’t want to feel like this anymore, you hear me? Are you hearing me right now, Ash?”

“I hear you, Brandon. I really do. I know exactly how you feel.”

“Do you? You have no fucking idea how I feel, Asha.” His voice was raised, and he stood much closer to her, staring down at her ardently. “I have proof right here in my fucking hand that she wanted me to find her. I was meant to find this. She left this for me!”

“You don’t know that, Brandon. You don’t know that.”

“She’s here, Ash.” His voice was breaking, shoulders curving, face reddening.

“She’s here, I know it.”

She reached up cautiously, placing a hand to the side of his jaw. “Brandon...”

He knew better.

Then, he crumbled into tears, collapsing into his arms, his hard, muscled body rippling and shuddering against hers. She cried a little bit, too.

“She’s gone, Brandon...she’s gone...she doesn’t want to be found...we all need to accept this, baby...we all do...she’s gone...let’s go home...I know it hurts...but you need rest...you can’t live like this anymore, baby...you can’t do this anymore...she’s gone...let’s go home...”

WHILE BRANDON SLEPT OFF THE ALCOHOL IN HIS SYSTEM, she and

Scotty lay on their backs in the guest bedroom, where a half-assembled crib sat hauntingly in the corner of the room.

Scotty sighed. “What the hell happened today...?”

She bounced her shoulders weakly. “I don’t know, babe. I really just don’t know.”

“I’ve never seen him like that before...that fucking scared me.”

“It’s Natalie, babe. It’s...Natalie. Who else, but her?”

“Where the hell is she? Why the hell did she do that?”

Before answering impulsively, she stopped herself. She thought meaningfully

about who Natalie was as a person and why she would've made such a decision. Indecisive and fearful as she was, she had a hard time believing that Natalie would be moved to such a devastating action without just cause. Natalie Chandler, the docile and introverted southern belle, was analytical and acute, mulling over every possible scenario before coming to a conclusion.

The decision to leave had not been taken lightly. She knew, without a shadow of a doubt the effect it would have on herself and on Brandon. It could not have been easy. Asha then thought about what had occurred in the past few months, and what might have been different, aside from the gigantic, unexpected move to Portland. And an image struck her: an Italian-cut designer suit, dark-rimmed glasses, wavy light brown hair, round green eyes, and an aloof disposition. The foresight haunted her, like the silhouettes of jagged tree limbs on a toddler's bedroom wall in the middle of the night.

And she couldn't shake the unsettled feeling in her gut. She then remembered wandering through the hospital, looking for Brandon, and stopping short in the corridor, startled.

She realized something; of which related to the mysterious scribbled address, the high-rise luxury condos in Brandon's view, and Natalie's disappearance... Scotty looked at her. "Hey...you okay over there? You got really quiet."

Shaking the eerie feeling off of her, she cleared her throat and replied, "I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know..."

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