



SOUTHERN WEREWOLF SISTERS
BOOK FIVE

EARNING EVERY



USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER MACKINNON

Earning Evey

Southern Werewolf Sisters

Book Five

Heather MacKinnon

OceanofPDF.com

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Chapter 1

Evey

“Evey. Wake up. I need you downstairs.”

I rolled over and cracked an eye open to find my older brother hovering over my bed. With a glance at the red numbers on my alarm clock, I huffed out a loud breath. “Abraham. It’s two in the damn mornin’!”

He took a step back, and for the first time, I noticed the worry in his eyes. “We have a situation downstairs, and I need you to help me deal with it.”

Okay, now I was awake.

I sat up in bed and swung my legs off the edge. “What’s goin’ on?”

Abey took a step backward toward my door like he was in a hurry. “We’ve had some new pack members show up early.”

I frowned as I shoved my arms in my bathrobe. “Now? They just showed up *now*?”

Abraham nodded. “Yeah. I’m not sure what’s goin’ on, but I thought you should be there with me.”

With a nod, I shoved my feet in some slippers and followed him into the hall. I was basically the manager of the lodge. Anything that didn’t have to do with the kitchen fell on my plate, and this definitely landed in that category.

“Do you know who it is?” I asked as I tried to remember the names of the wolves who were supposed to be joining our pack in the next few weeks.

In the past year or so, the population of our pack had boomed, and it seemed like it grew every month. I guess when the alpha started having kids, Asheville suddenly became a good place to raise a family. Whatever the reason, we had a surplus of new pack mates, and a lack of room.

“And where the hell are we gonna put ‘em?” I asked before I let him answer the first question.

Abraham sighed. “His name is Luke Adams, and I don’t know yet. That’s why I woke you up.”

I rolled my eyes as I followed him down the stairs and tried to recall whatever I could about Luke Adams. “I think he’s supposed to be moving into a pack house with his mate and twin daughters next month, right?”

Abraham scoffed. “Evey, you know I never remember that shit. You’d know more than me.”

My eyes rolled again without my permission, but I kept quiet. Abraham really did have a lot on his plate these days. Between running his construction business, leading this pack, and his three fifteen-month-old kids, the man was busy.

But, my boyfriend lived two hours away, and unfortunately, I still wasn’t a mother, so I had all the time in the world.

Yay me.

We were only halfway down the stairs when we heard the crying and both started to move faster. Abraham made it to the foyer just seconds before me and we both watched as Wes led a man and two screaming little girls inside.

“This is Luke Adams and his daughters,” Wes yelled to Abraham and me over the wailing.

My heart ached in my chest as I watched the two little blonde-haired girls cling to their dad’s legs like he was their only lifeline. I looked behind the big, dark-haired man, but didn’t see anyone else behind him.

“Weren’t there supposed to be four of you?” I asked, my voice just barely audible over the screaming.

The man’s eyes jumped to mine and everything stopped.

The lodge went quiet, and the world quit turning as I stared into his warm brown eyes, feeling every molecule in my body begin to shift. I’d never had such an instant connection to anyone in my entire life. It was like I already knew him, even though I was positive I’d never even seen him before.

Luke cleared his throat and looked away, finally releasing me from his hold. But my chest was still tightening around my pounding heart, and I was just thankful there was so much commotion that no one seemed to notice.

“We came without her,” he finally said, and my eyes snapped to his again.

Luke’s voice was deep and rich, like honey or a smooth bourbon, and it felt like I could bathe in that sound alone. I cleared my throat and ripped my gaze away from his. “I hope everything’s okay.” My voice was softer now, but he still heard it.

“Not really,” he said between gritted teeth.

His harsh answer was the reminder I needed, and I shook myself, hoping to clear some of the haze from my brain. I had no business thinking of or looking at Luke Adams like that. Not only was I in a relationship already, now was clearly not the time.

I took a step toward him, and his brown eyes flashed with caution. With my hands held up in surrender, I nodded toward one of the girls at his knees. “May I?”

Luke’s gaze was still suspicious as he eyed every person in the room. Finally, he slowly nodded, and I crossed the distance to pick up one of the distraught toddlers. “Hey, baby. Ssh,” I cooed as I rubbed her back and bounced her up and down.

“That’s Marigold,” Luke finally said, his voice gruffer than ever as he picked up the other girl. “She hasn’t napped since we left Texas three days ago and has been basically living off gas station food for the same amount of time.”

I could hear the shame in his voice, and it bothered me more than it should. “That’s okay,” I crooned into the top of Marigold’s greasy head. “Why don’t we get a couple puree pouches to take upstairs and then get a good night’s sleep?”

The little girl in my arms stopped crying and sat up straight, staring right into my eyes. Hers were the same mocha color as her dad’s, and I felt myself getting lost in her gaze too. “Pow?” she said, her voice so tiny but clear as a bell.

I frowned at her. “Pow?”

“It means pouch,” Luke supplied, and I dragged my eyes to him again. “They’re her favorite. I should have brought some from home, but we had to leave in a hurry,” he said as storm clouds rolled into his gaze and his hard jaw clenched.

I knew there was more to the story, just like I knew now was not the time to talk about it. With a little adjusting, I had Marigold on my hip, headed across the foyer. I waved Luke along with his other daughter. “We’ll stop in the kitchen on the way upstairs.”

“Where are you putting them?” Abraham called from behind us.

“We’ve got Bea’s room still unoccupied, and Del’s gonna be gone for another two months. They can have both.”

“No,” Luke said, his voice abrupt and loud even over the toddler still crying in his arms. “We’re not separating. We only need one room.”

My heart clenched as I met his eyes and read the determination there for myself. What the hell happened to this guy and his girls to make him this protective?

I nodded and turned to head toward the kitchen again. “That’s fine. Bea’s room is bigger so we can put ‘em there,” I called to Abraham. “Can you bring two pack ‘n plays in there for us?”

“On it,” Abey muttered before he headed for the stairs, leaving me alone with Luke and the two kids.

The other girl was still crying softly, and the sound was tearing at my insides. I glanced over my shoulder at them. “Is she okay?” I said as quietly as I could.

Luke sighed and shook his head. “They’ve had a rough couple of days.” His lips thinned and his jaw clenched again. “Actually, they’ve had a rough couple of years, really.” He let out a deep breath that seemed to age him. “But I think she’s just hungry and tired. I’ve hardly been able to get her to eat anything the whole time we were on the road and sleeping was a joke.”

The lines around his eyes were proof of how much he worried about his girls, and it affected me on a deeper level than I wanted to admit.

“Where in Texas did you guys come from?”

“Houston.”

“And it only took you three days to get here? With two-year-old twins?”

His eyes hardened until they were like chocolate diamonds. “Didn’t have a choice.”

I cleared my throat as we made it to the kitchen, and I headed for the pantry. “Well,” I said, my voice loud with a cheer I was barely able to fake. “Good thing all kids like pouches, right?”

“Pow!” Marigold yelled, and I laughed.

“See? Homegirl agrees with me.”

I found the basket we kept full of pouches and pulled a couple out for us. “We have those special tops that go on them

so they can't squeeze it all out too," I said as I handed one to Luke for the other girl.

He sighed. "Thank God."

I laughed. "These things really are a lifesaver, aren't they?" I said as I dug a couple of tops out of a drawer.

Luke nodded as he fit one on a pouch and handed it to the toddler in his arms. She stopped crying long enough to start sucking down the puree, and we both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Come on," I said as I carried Marigold out of the kitchen. "Let's get you guys settled upstairs. Are your things in your car? We can send Wes to grab them."

Luke cleared his throat as he followed me up the stairs. "I don't have anything with me," he said, his voice even deeper and filled with even more regret. "We had to leave in a hurry."

My stomach twisted, and I held the little girl in my arms a little tighter. "No problem. I'm sure I've got jammies in their size."

"2T?"

I waved my free hand. "Oh yeah. I've got ya covered."

He blew out a deep breath, and the band around my chest loosened just a little. It felt good to take that load off his shoulders, and I didn't want to know why that was.

We made it to the third floor just as Marigold finished her pouch, and that was when things took a turn.

"Pow."

"That's enough, Mari," Luke said from behind me. "We're goin' to bed now."

"Pow."

"Bed."

"Pow!"

“Bed.”

“POW.”

“You know,” I cut in as we made it to the third floor. “I could go grab her another one. It’s no big deal. We have tons.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice curt and clipped. “But she needs to get to bed.”

“POW!” Marigold screamed in my ear as she started to thrash.

“Damn it,” Luke muttered as he set the other girl down and reached for the toddler in my arms. “Mari, knock it off. It’s bedtime.”

“Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow.”

The girl he’d just put down started crying, and my heart started to ache again.

“Magnolia,” Luke muttered as he bent down and tried to pick up the other twin.

I rushed forward. “Let me.”

“I’ve got it,” he grunted as he struggled to juggle them both. “Just show me to our room, please.”

I swallowed hard but just nodded and tried to ignore the way his brusque tone affected me.

On the one hand, I wished he wasn’t being so pigheaded and would just allow me to help. On the other, his harsh voice was doing something to my insides, despite how much I tried to deny it.

I hurried down the hall to Bea’s old room and pushed open the door. The interior smelled musty, and I cringed as Luke walked past me, just barely still holding onto both girls. “I’m sorry. No one’s been in here to clean in a while. It might be a little dusty.”

He shrugged as he headed for the king-sized bed on the other side of the room. “As long as it’s safe,” he muttered.

Those five little words seemed simple, but for some reason, they made my blood run cold.

Why wouldn't they be safe here?

Were they not safe where they'd just come from?

And what weren't they safe from?

"Could you get those pjs for me?" Luke said, breaking me out of my thoughts. "And maybe some size five diapers if you have them. I just used my last couple before we got here."

His voice was strained with barely concealed emotion, but I couldn't tell which one. I must have stood there for too long because he added, "Please," in a way that I knew meant he'd have liked to say something else.

Like, *what the fuck are you just standing there looking at me for?*

But the truth was, the man was handsome.

Dark hair on his head, dark beard on his face, soul-deep brown eyes that I swore could see right through me. Hell, there was no lack of things to look at, but I had no business looking at anyone but my own damn boyfriend, so I turned away.

"Of course," I muttered. "I'll be right back."

I escaped from there, thankful to have a moment to breathe without his watchful gaze on me. As I turned toward my room, Abraham came hustling down the hall, hands full of folded up portable cribs.

"He in Bea's room?" Abey asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm just finding them some clothes."

Abraham snorted as he passed me. "Of course you'd have clothes in their size even though none of the kids in this lodge are that big yet."

"Hey!" I called after him. "They'll be that big someday! Why wouldn't you want to be prepared?"

Abraham ignored me as he knocked on Luke's door.

"They were on sale!" I tried one more time, but he didn't answer as he stepped inside the room and disappeared from view.

I shook off my brother's negativity and hurried through my door and into the back of my closet, where I kept future clothes for my nieces and nephews.

It was no secret that I loved to dress anyone who'd let me, and in the past year, I'd gained eleven new subjects who couldn't tell me no.

I quickly found two sets of footy pajamas in the totes full of clothes and tucked them under my arm as I left my room to grab a bag of diapers out of the hall. When I had everything I thought they'd need for the night, I sped back toward Bea's old room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a gruff voice answered, and I shook off the shiver it caused.

I inched the door open and was immediately greeted by two sets of screaming kids. "I've got jammies, diapers, and wipes," I called over the commotion.

Luke waved me inside and I did as he asked. As I got closer, I found him struggling with a squirming, slapping, and kicking Marigold, and the other one he called Magnolia sitting on the bed, still crying. Big fat tears rolled down her adorable little face, and it felt like everything inside me ached.

"Can I help?" I asked, my eyes still on Magnolia's wet cheeks.

"We're fine," Luke insisted, but his words were cut off with a grunt as Mari nailed him between the legs with a well-timed kick.

"Ouch," I whispered as he bent over and groaned.

Mari stopped bucking like a wild animal on the bed long enough to sit up and find her father doubled over in pain.

Her little lip quivered before she tipped her head back and began wailing.

The other twin's cries rose in volume too, and I turned to Luke again. "Please. Let me help."

He took a deep breath and nodded once. "Fine."

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Chapter 2

Luke

“Come here, baby girl,” she crooned as she scooped Maggie off the bed and into her arms.

I watched the woman comfort my daughter in a way I’d never seen anyone except me do. But when my eyes started searching for the shape of her body beneath her baggy sleep clothes, I had to look away.

“I never got your name,” I finally said as I turned back to Mari and started pulling off her three-day-old clothes.

“It’s Evelyn,” she mumbled, her voice soft and melodic as she rocked Maggie back and forth. “But everyone calls me Evey.”

I swallowed hard but didn’t answer.

She didn’t seem to notice as she continued to cuddle my daughter, rubbing her back and swinging her side to side as she whispered sweet words into her ear.

I tried to swallow again, but my throat was too full of regret.

Why couldn’t Holly ever be like this with them?

Why was it that a woman who just met Maggie could comfort her better than her own mother?

If things were even like this *some* of the time, maybe we wouldn’t have had to leave...

No.

I didn’t have a choice.

Once I knew what she'd been doing to them, I had to take them away. I had to protect them. Even if it meant leaving Holly behind.

“POW!” Mari screamed again as she kicked wildly, and I just missed getting a heel to the eye.

“Mari,” I said, my voice sterner now and creeping toward downright frustrated. “Honey. We need to get changed.”

“NO! POW!” she screamed, the tears still streaming down her face.

“Marigold, we need to go to bed. Now knock it off.”

“No! Pow! Mama! Dada! Nana! Nana! NANA!” she screamed until her voice broke. Mari dissolved into hysterics, tears and snot streaming down her face.

Her little cheeks were bright red, and my stomach cramped deep inside me because I knew this was my fault.

I'd ripped her from her home with nothing packed and no plan. Just the bone-deep feeling that I needed to protect them. And to do that, I needed to run.

Mari screamed louder, and now Maggie's cries were growing, and my head was fucking pounding. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. That was all the time it took for Mari to start gagging.

“No!” I yelled, but it was too late.

Marigold gagged and gagged, and finally, she threw up.

“Get Maggie out of here!” I yelled to Evey, but not quick enough.

Magnolia, having seen her sister puke, decided to join her.

All over Evey.

“Oh my God,” I said as I reached for Maggie, but then turned and reached for Mari, not sure what I should do. “I’m so sorry.”

Evey laughed, the sound like tinkling bells, and I looked back up at her. She was covered in regurgitated pouch, but she was still smiling and holding my little girl like she wasn’t a snotty vomit monster.

“It’s okay. It’s not the first time I’ve been puked on,” she said as she knelt down and set Maggie on the floor.

“Wait,” I said as she reached for the hem of her shirt and carefully pulled it over her head. I tried to drag my gaze away from her perfect golden skin, but I couldn’t. Thankfully, she was wearing a sports bra, but that did little to deter my wandering eyes.

“It’s fine,” she said as she tossed her dirty shirt aside and turned to Maggie. “Come on, sweets. We need to get these dirty clothes off and get in the bath.”

I stood there stupidly for a moment before I realized she had Magnolia taken care of, which meant I could focus on a still-screaming Mari.

“Come on, baby,” I muttered as I started pulling her dirty clothes off too. “We need to take a bath.”

“Baf?”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face.

Man, I fucking loved these girls.

It didn’t matter how bad things got or how dark shit might seem. These two little people could always put a smile on my face.

“Yes, baby. We’re gonna take a baf.”

I watched as Evey picked up Maggie in only her full diaper and walk her across the room to what I assumed was a bathroom. Scooping a half-naked Mari into my arms, I followed her.

Evey already had the water in the giant soaking tub running while Maggie played on the floor with a couple loofahs.

“Don’t worry,” she called over her shoulder. “Those were clean. I figured they might be interesting enough to keep her attention for a couple minutes.”

I sat Mari down next to her sister and the girls both began inspecting the mesh sponges.

“You’re pretty good at this.”

She laughed again, and I don’t know why, but that sound seemed to make the room a little brighter. “I’m an aunt of eleven nieces and nephews. I’ve got tons of experience.”

“Holy shit.”

“Sit!” Mari yelled, and I winced.

“Damn it,” I muttered.

“Jammit!”

“You should just stop talking,” Evey said around another giggle.

I sighed. “Yeah. That’s probably for the best.”

“The water is almost ready,” she said as she stood up straight and wiped her wet hand on her pants. I tried my best to keep my eyes on hers, but that was almost impossible with her standing half-naked in front of me. “I’m gonna grab some towels and soap from the hall.”

She walked away while I floundered with a response. Finally, I choked out, “Okay,” just as she disappeared from view.

I shook my head and turned back to the girls. Evey was a distraction I didn’t need and couldn’t afford.

“Come on, ladies. Let’s get ready for the bath,” I muttered as I grabbed one of them and started pulling the tabs

on her diaper. The thing was so heavy with urine it was hanging from her hips, and my stomach twisted again.

I was all they had, and I was doing a shit job of taking care of them.

Problem was, Holly always controlled all the money, and I'd only been able to steal two hundred dollars from her wallet before I left with the girls. Between fuel and tolls, there was barely anything left over, and I'd used the last five to get them milk at a gas station.

Our situation was feeling more hopeless by the moment.

I'd only come to this pack because my cousin mentioned it once years ago and said he had a good alpha. Hopefully, we were far enough away that Holly wouldn't follow.

As I took in the diaper rashes on my girls and their greasy, stringy hair, I wondered if I'd done the right thing.

Maybe I should have kept them in their home and tried to make Holly leave.

Maybe I should have talked to her and tried to work things out.

But after what I saw that night, I knew I couldn't let it slide. Even now, I could still hear Maggie shriek as her mother pinched her chubby little legs.

And the bruises that dotted their arms and legs told a story I couldn't fucking ignore.

My blood pressure soared, and I had to grip the edge of the tub to keep myself from losing my mind and destroying this whole nice-ass bathroom.

The *only* thing that kept me still, that kept the destruction from leaking out of my fists, were my two little girls, their big brown eyes looking up at me like I was their whole world. I knew I needed to keep my shit together for them, if nothing else.

But God damn, it felt like the weight of this guilt would fucking crush me.

“Okay, I got towels, I got wash cloths, I got baby soap, and I got a couple bath toys in case they get antsy.”

Evey whirled into the bathroom, bringing this energy and light with her that seemed to lessen the load on my shoulders, if only a little bit.

I cleared my throat and picked up Mari to put her in the bath. Maggie joined her a second later, and both girls began splashing, their giggles filling the room and lightening the band around my chest some more.

Evey knelt next to me, her little body bringing with it so much heat it felt like she'd scorch me through my clothes. “You wanna split the difference?”

I shook my head, but her sweet vanilla scent was clouding my brain and my heart was thumping so hard in my chest I could barely hear over it. “Huh?”

She giggled, and my pulse skipped one whole beat. “You want me to take one and you take one?”

I cleared my throat. “Oh. Uh. No, that's okay. I can handle it.”

Evey turned to look at me, her bright blue eyes drilling into the side of my face until I finally turned to meet them. A warmth settled on my arm, and I looked down to see her little hand on me. “Just let me help.”

“Really. It's—”

“The sooner you quit arguin', the sooner we can get these girls in bed.”

I opened my mouth to say something else, but shut it instead. She was right. The most important thing was getting these poor kids in a bed after so many sleepless nights on the road. I needed to set aside my pride and let her help a little.

I blew out a deep breath. “Okay. You're right. Thanks.”

She finally pulled her hand off my arm, and I swore it felt ice cold as soon as she took all her warmth with her. “I’m happy to help, Luke.”

My name from her lips stopped my heart dead in my chest again. Why did it sound so... right?

I cleared my throat but didn’t say anything as she filled a cup of water and poured it carefully over Mari’s head. She offered quiet praise as my feisty girl sat there and let Evey wash her hair.

Finally, I pulled my head out of my ass and started getting Maggie cleaned up too. “You’re really good with her,” I said with a nod toward Mari. “She doesn’t usually do well with getting her hair washed.”

Evey turned to me with pursed lips. “So, you’re telling me you gave me the difficult twin?”

“No! I, uh, I mean—”

She laughed again, and that belt around my chest loosened a little more. “I’m just messin’ with you. Marigold is a sweetheart.”

A dark chuckle rumbled out of me as I remembered all the times her mom complained about how difficult of a child she was. “I’m glad you think so,” I said softly. “She hasn’t heard that much in her life.”

The words almost got stuck on their way up, but I spat them out anyway.

Evey turned to frown at me. “I can’t imagine why.”

I shrugged as I washed the soap out of Maggie’s hair. “Marigold is... spirited. She’s always been advanced. She walked early, talked early, which also meant she talked *back* early...” I trailed off as I thought about all the times Holly called Mari a brat because she was acting out.

I’d tried to explain to her that toddlers are supposed to test limits and push boundaries, but she was convinced Mari

was a bad kid. It made me sick just thinking about how many awful things she'd said about my poor girl.

"I think she's perfect just the way she is," Evey said, breaking me out of my dark thoughts and shining her light right on them. "Spirited is good. We need more spunky girls in the world."

I snorted as I grabbed a washcloth and began to clean Maggie. "Spunky is an understatement."

Evey giggled, and Mari joined her, the sound so fucking sweet my teeth ached. "What about Magnolia? Is she spunky too?"

I wiped some suds off my girl's forehead and gave her a smile. "My Maggie can be spunky for sure, but she's a lover, not a fighter. She's never met a person, place, or thing that she didn't love, and I'm scared that kind of attitude is going to do nothing but cause her pain in the end," I said, my voice trailing off as I admitted that out loud for the first time.

It wasn't like I really had anyone to talk about parenting stuff to. Holly never wanted to be bothered, and I always felt bad taking any more time from the sweet lady who watched the girls all day. Ms. Nancy already did enough for too little.

"Nah," Evey said, breaking me out of a dark place once again. "She's got Mari here to stick up for her. That's what sisters are for."

God, I hoped she was right.

"All right, I think these girls look clean enough," she announced next. "Think it's time to get out of the bath?"

Shit.

"Out?" Maggie asked, her voice so quiet, but I knew it meant nothing but trouble.

"Oh, no," I muttered as I stood up and grabbed a towel. "We can't announce it's time to get out, we just have to do it,"

I whispered to her as Maggie started whining and Mari spoke up

“Out?” she echoed Maggie.

“Yes, honey,” I said with a sigh. “It’s time to get out and get to bed.”

“No.”

I sighed again as Maggie started to cry and Mari yelled, “No!”

“Hey!” Evey yelled over the commotion. “Who wants to hear a bedtime story?”

Mari stopped yelling for a moment, and I took that opportunity to grab her out of the bath and wrap her in a towel as Evey did the same with Maggie.

“Do you two like stories?” Evey said to Maggie as she dried her off.

“They *love* stories,” I answered for them.

“Okay,” she said softly as she rubbed Maggie’s blonde curls with the towel. “*Brown bear, brown bear, what do you see?*”

We slowly worked on getting their diapers on and pjs zipped up as Evey recited the whole damn book from memory. When she was finally done, she looked up at me with a sheepish expression. “I’ve read that a lot to Abraham’s kids. It’s a favorite.”

“The alpha?”

She nodded. “I could probably recite a few more if you think it’ll help.”

I waved her on. “Please. They’ll love it.”

She smiled softly and everything inside me cramped. Fuck, she was stunning.

“Okay, how about *Llama Llama Red Pajama?*”

Mari squealed as Evey started to tell that story too, and soon the girls were dressed, their hair still damp, but dry enough and ready for bed.

Or so I thought.

Maggie was still wailing, and Mari was still screaming thirty minutes later, and it felt like this night would never end.

“I’ve got an idea,” Evey yelled over the chaos.

“Thank God.”

She shot me a crooked smile, and I hoped like hell the noise covered how hard it made my heart pound.

I shook my head and watched as Evey unzipped Maggie’s jammies to her belly button and then pressed the girl’s bare chest against her own. Evey began to hum a tuneless song and Maggie’s cries were already quieting.

“How the hell did you do that?” I asked over Mari’s yells.

She shrugged, but there was a soft smile on her face as she leaned her head against Maggie’s and closed her eyes. “Babies like skin to skin. I thought it was worth a shot. And I think the humming helps to settle them too.”

Fuck yeah, it was worth a shot.

I set Mari down on the bed and ripped my shirt off before unzipping her pjs. When I pulled her back into my arms, she struggled for the first minute or two, but eventually, miraculously, she settled too.

“Holy shit,” I whispered to Evey.

“Sit,” Mari whispered back.

Evey giggled, and for the first time in days, it felt like maybe I’d actually made the right decision. Maybe I hadn’t just fucked up these girls beyond repair. And hell, maybe I’d just found a friend in this strange new pack.

Chapter 3

Evey

“Dada? Hi. Hi, Dada.”

The tiny little voice broke through the heavy curtain of sleep, and I tried to roll away from it.

Except there was a big, warm mountain in my way.

I tried to roll the other way, but a band around my waist stopped me from getting too far.

“Dada? Dada? Hi, Dada.”

The words finally penetrated my hazy brain, and I cracked an eye open to stare at an unfamiliar ceiling. With a look around, I realized I was still in Bea’s room and both the twins were up. It had taken a while to get them to settle, and then they’d woken up every thirty minutes for hours. I wasn’t sure when they finally fell into a deep sleep because I’d passed out too.

The warm belt on my midsection tightened, and I looked down to find a thick arm wrapped around me. I followed the tan skin and corded muscles up to a handsome face, still slack with sleep.

My chest constricted as I took a long moment to really study Luke. He looked so different. Peaceful. Relaxed. Nothing like the anxious man I’d spent hours with last night.

But I shouldn’t have been in bed with him, regardless of how innocent it was. And I sure as hell shouldn’t have been enjoying being in his arms as much as I was.

His full lips were parted, and a soft snore fell out, startling him awake.

“Wha...?” he mumbled as he pulled me closer and squeezed me tighter.

“Um,” I squeaked, and Luke froze.

I held still beneath him as I felt his dark gaze meet my skin. “Evey?” he said, his voice cracking from not using it for so long.

“Hi,” I said with an awkward wave. My voice was too high-pitched, but hopefully he didn’t notice.

“Hi!” one of the twins echoed, and Luke turned to them.

“Dada! Hi!”

His lips curled with a smile before he looked back down at me. Instantly, the smile was gone as he ripped his arm away like it burned. “Shit. Sorry.”

“Sit!”

“Fuck,” Luke mumbled, and this time, thankfully, the girls didn’t hear.

He scrambled out of bed and stood up, but that wasn’t the only thing standing.

My cheeks heated as I turned away from the large tent in his pants and cleared my throat. “Sorry. I guess I fell asleep.”

I climbed off the mattress as I watched Luke scrub a hand down his face out of the corner of my eye. “Listen, Evey, I’m not... I mean that wasn’t... I can’t just—”

I held up a hand, each word out of his mouth more difficult to listen to than the last. “Luke. Please. You don’t have to say anything. This was nothing. We both just passed out after a long night.”

He blew out a deep breath. “Right. Because you know, I can’t—”

I could tell he was going to give me a list of all the reasons he couldn't date me, and I didn't think I could stand to hear them.

"I have a boyfriend," I blurted before he could finish his sentence.

Luke's eyes went wide. "What?" he whispered.

I cleared my throat and nodded. "Yeah. Been together for a few months now and things are going great," I lied. "So, we don't need to talk about this again. It was innocent, it was an accident, and it didn't mean anything. Right?"

Luke continued to stare at me, his brown eyes getting harder with every second that passed. Finally he looked away, his jaw clenched tight. "Right. It didn't mean *anything*."

Well, okay. Now that stung a little.

I giggled through the uncomfortable feeling frothing in my stomach and took a couple steps toward the exit. "Great. Perfect." I was halfway to the door when I stopped and glanced at the twins. "Are you all set? Do you need help getting them ready for the day?"

Luke's eyes narrowed before he turned away from me. "No. I can take care of them myself."

I swallowed hard as I realized all the progress we'd made last night was gone. Another few steps backward and I asked, "What about clothes? You probably need something for them to wear today, right?"

His jaw ticked with tension. "They can just stay in their pjs."

"Then what are they going to wear to bed tonight?"

"I'll figure it out."

I let his harsh tone roll right off my back as I turned to open the door. "I'll grab a couple outfits and bring them back here."

"I don't need you to do that."

“And then I can get started on some breakfast for them,” I continued, like I hadn’t heard him. “Eggs and fruit, okay?”

“Evey. We don’t need your help.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes with the clothes,” I yelled over my shoulder as I stepped into the hall.

“Leave them outside the door!” he called after me.

I walked away like Luke Adams hadn’t just ruffled every feather I had.

I couldn’t understand why he’d let me help him last night, but couldn’t seem to stand to look at me now. The questions continued to zip through my head as I hurried into my room and slammed the door behind me.

That was easily one of the longest nights of my life. Even longer than the night Bea brought home five tiny newborns I’d agreed to help with.

I thumped my head against my door a few times, hoping to knock some sense into me. Sure, maybe my relationship was nothing like a romance novel, but that was okay. Not everyone got a white knight. Some of us just got the boy next door who’d always been sweet to them.

My phone rang at that exact moment, and I knew deep down in my bones who it was. Sure enough, when I picked up my cell, Matthias’ name was scrawled across the top of the screen.

I took a deep breath and answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Evey! I’ve been trying to reach you all morning!”

With a frown, I glanced across my room at my alarm clock. “It’s only nine!”

“Yeah, and you’re normally up by seven.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but shut it instead. There was no point. He knew me well enough to already know he

was right.

“Okay, but since when are you up this early?” I asked instead.

“Had the overnight watch,” he said with a grunt, and I knew that meant he was getting dressed after running naked as a wolf all night.

That image should have done something for me, but it didn't, and I knew that was a problem. “How'd it go?” I asked as I crossed the room to my closet to find some clothes for the twins.

“Why?” he asked, and I stopped short.

Why did he sound suspicious?

“I just wanted to know how it went,” I said slowly, wondering which part of that question was making him react like that.

“Oh. Uh. Fine,” he said, his voice cracking at the end. He cleared his throat and tried again. “How, uh, was your night?”

I didn't know why he was acting so dodgy, but to be honest, I didn't have the energy to care.

Don't get me wrong. He was an amazing guy, and we'd been friends for years. I cared about him a lot, and I always would. I just didn't feel that *thing* with him. That gut churning, palm sweating, can't think straight *thing* I'd been expecting.

I'd thought it would come with time. That maybe I'd looked at Matthias as a friend for so long that it might take a little while to feel something else for him. But we'd been together for almost half a year, and I was still waiting.

“Evey?” he asked, his rich voice breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Oh. Uh. We had some new packmates show up unannounced, so I was dealing with them for most of the night.”

“That’s nice. Hey, I’ve got a couple days off coming up, and I was thinking about driving up to see you. Do you have anything going on this week?”

My heart slammed into the back of my throat as I thought about Matthias coming here right now. But why should I feel that way? I hadn’t done anything inappropriate with Luke and had no intention to. There was no reason Matthias couldn’t come home for a long weekend and spend it with his girlfriend.

I just kinda wished that girlfriend wasn’t me.

“Um, I don’t think I’ve got anything goin’ on, but I can check when I get to my office,” I said as I rummaged through a tote full of little clothes. “Can I call you back then?”

“Sure, that works. I’ve gotta go. Love you. Bye,” he said before the line went dead.

I froze in place, my heart thumping painfully in my chest.

We’d never used the L-word before. Not in fourteen years of friendship or six months of dating had either of us professed to love the other. Now that four-letter word hung awkwardly in the air, too big and bright to be ignored.

“I’m not caffeinated enough for this crap,” I muttered as I pulled out a couple lightweight outfits for the girls and slung them over my shoulder.

I hurried down the hall to Luke’s door, and despite the urge to go in there and help, I set the clothes on the ground outside and knocked before walking away. He didn’t come out to get them before I got to my room, and I decided that was for the best.

I really didn’t need to see that man again before brushing my teeth.

My shower was as quick as I could make it, and twenty minutes later, I had my wet hair slicked back into a bun and a full face of make-up.

Now I felt ready to take on the day.

Or at least go make a cup of coffee.

Luke wasn't anywhere to be seen when I left my room, and I'm not too proud to admit I walked slower than I ever had down the hall, but he still didn't show up. When I made it to the stairs, I shook myself.

"Get a grip, McCoy," I muttered as I took the first step.

Just as I did, the hallway burst into chaos.

"EE!"

My face broke into a smile, and I turned around to find my nephew running straight toward me. I caught him with just inches to spare before he flung himself down the stairs.

"Franklin McCoy, have you lost your mind?"

"EE!"

I giggled just as Abraham ran out of his room.
"Franklin!"

"I've got him!"

My brother turned his wide, scared eyes toward me, and his tense shoulders finally fell. "Thank God." He marched right toward us, and Franklin clung tighter to me. "Franky, what are you doin' over here? You know you're not allowed near the stairs."

He held out his arms for his son, and the boy gladly jumped into them. "EE," he said, as if that explained everything.

Abraham sighed and shook his head. "I don't care that you saw your Aunty Evey. You can't go near the stairs."

"You really need to buy a baby gate for this floor," I said as I started down the steps again.

Abey scoffed. "I'm not *buying* a baby gate. I'm building one."

I rolled my eyes, but honestly wasn't surprised. My brother had been working with his hands since we were kids, and he was proud as hell of everything he built. This whole lodge was his creation come to life, and I had no doubt he had the perfect design for a gate already in mind.

"Well, you better make it fast," I said as I rounded the first bend in the staircase. "You've got two more little ones livin' up here now."

Abraham's eyes widened, and he nodded slowly. "You're right." He sighed. "I'm on it."

He turned and walked away with his son in his arms, and I could already see the stress bunching his shoulders.

Abraham's construction business had been booming just as much as his pack, and it was getting harder and harder for him to keep up. I was sure he'd planned to build that gate months ago and just hadn't had the spare time or hands to get it done.

"Mornin', Evey."

I looked up to find Ms. Elsie at the stove, stirring a pot of oatmeal. "Mornin'!" I called. "Hey, do you know if we've still got Abey's kids' highchairs lyin' around?"

Ms. Elsie turned back around and wiped her hands on her apron. "You know, I think we put 'em downstairs in the storage room."

"Okay, thanks," I called as I hustled out of the kitchen. I knew she'd have questions, and I didn't feel like answering them.

Luke and those girls had been through enough in the past few days. The least I could do was make sure the kitchen was ready for them to eat breakfast when they got downstairs.

I found the highchairs right where Ms. Elsie said they'd be. After my brother built custom tables for both his kids and Callie's, they'd rendered the typical highchairs useless. Thankfully, someone thought to save them.

The walk back upstairs was awkward since the things were huge, but I made it to the kitchen just as Luke arrived with his girls.

“Hey, there!” I called. “Just in time!”

Luke turned cautious eyes to me and the whole world ground to a stop again. His dark brown gaze seemed to stare right into my soul as I stood there. Finally, he looked away and readjusted his hold on the girl in his arms. “I was hoping you could spare another couple pouches for the girls. I can pay you back.”

“Pow,” said the girl in his arms, and now I knew it was Mari.

“Sure you guys can have some pows, but maybe after some real breakfast?” I asked, my eyes on Luke now.

He looked more uncomfortable than ever as he shifted from foot to food. “The pouches are fine,” he grit out.

I frowned. “What are *you* gonna eat?”

“I’m not hungry.”

I pursed my lips and tilted my head to the side. “When was the last time you ate?”

His eyes flashed a warning that I didn’t pay attention to. “Yesterday. I think.”

I rolled my eyes and waved him and the girls in as I struggled beneath the giant highchairs. “C’mon. We’ve got plenty of food and you all could probably do with a good meal.”

“Evey,” he growled as he hurried to follow me, his voice hushed. “I can’t pay for any of this.”

I turned to him with another frown. “What are you talkin’ about? You don’t have to pay for breakfast.”

Luke pursed his lips. “So, this is all just free? Out of the kindness of your heart?”

I shook my head slowly. “I mean, it’ll come out of your tithes...?”

Hadn’t this guy ever lived in a pack before? Didn’t he know how this worked?

His eyes narrowed again, and his voice dropped even lower. “I can’t afford *anything*. I have *nothing*.”

Luke’s voice broke on that last word, and my heart slammed against my rib cage. I could see the load weighing down his shoulders and I wanted nothing more than to take it from him. Unfortunately, I had a feeling there was a lot more to the demons in his eyes than being broke. There was something deeper and darker going on, but I had no right to ask what.

I reached out and rested my hand on his forearm anyway, feeling the unbridled strength beneath my fingers. I swallowed hard and met his deep brown eyes. “We’ll figure it out, okay?”

I didn’t know how I’d do that, only that I wouldn’t stop trying until I did.

Chapter 4

Luke

“We’ll figure it out, okay?”

I stared into Evey’s ocean blue eyes and for a one whole second, I believed her. It felt like somehow, this tiny beautiful woman would solve every problem I had with just a wave of her delicate fingers.

“Pow?” Mari asked, and I shook my head to clear it.

Evey’s hand slid off my arm, and just like last time, I missed it already. “You can have a pow after breakfast, honeybuns,” she called as she shuffled away carrying two giant highchairs.

“Evey,” I said before I could stop myself.

She turned to look at me, and for one long moment, the entire world disappeared. Her eyes seemed to go on forever, like I could stare into them for hours and never run out of things to marvel at. My chest squeezed tight as she looked right back at me, her gaze so open and honest it felt like I knew her already.

I cleared my throat and shook my head as I walked over to her with Mari in my arms and Maggie following close behind. “Why don’t you take her?” I said, thrusting Marigold forward, “and I’ll take those.”

Evey shrugged and set the massive contraptions on the floor. “Works for me.” She held out her arms to Mari and said, “Come here, pretty girl.”

My daughter hesitated for only a moment before she reached for Evey too. I watched as she slung Mari onto her hip

and held out a hand to Maggie. “You too, princess. Let’s go.”

Magnolia shuffled forward shyly to take her hand, but Evey acted like she didn’t notice. “What are we gonna have for breakfast, ladies?” she asked as she walked over to the kitchen island full of steamy trays of food. “Do you like bacon?”

“Camel eggs!” Mari cheered in her arms.

Evey turned around to give me a questioning look, and I laughed. “That means *scrambled eggs*.”

Evey shot me such a beautiful smile it almost blew me back a step before she turned to Maggie. “How about you, sweets? You a fan of camel eggs too?”

“Des,” Maggie said with a nod of her little head.

Evey’s grin was bright again as she set Mari on her feet next to her sister. “Sounds good. Two sets of camel eggs comin’ right up.”

The girls giggled, and the load on my shoulders seemed to lighten just a little. Thanks to Evey, of course.

I ripped my gaze away from the three of them to focus on the complicated highchairs in front of me. Thankfully, I was able to get them unfolded before Evey walked over with two plates of food and my girls trailing close behind her.

“We also got pancakes,” Evey announced, using my daughters’ silly word. I spotted the pancakes she mentioned, but also found a handful of blueberries on each plate.

My stomach cramped because berries were rarely a luxury we could afford. Even now, I had to wonder how much a meal like this would cost me. And worse, how much those tithes she mentioned were going to be.

“Just the eggs would have been fine,” I muttered as I strapped Mari into one of the highchairs.

Evey waved my words away as she buckled the strap around Maggie’s waist and clicked the tray on top. “Who

wants to just eat camel eggs for breakfast?”

A chuckle huffed out of my chest before I could stop it, and I was rewarded with another bright smile from her.

Goddamn. She was beautiful.

“Milk?” Maggie asked, and my insides were back to being crushed.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I muttered to her. “I don’t have milk, but we can probably—”

“I got it!” Evey said as she walked away. “Straw cups okay?” she yelled over her shoulder.

I didn’t have time to answer before Mari started yelling for her breakfast. I set their plates on their trays and watched as they started shoveling food into their mouths. My guts were churning again as I realized how hungry they must have been.

Fuck!

I’d been starving my daughters because I’d decided to run away from their mom with no money and no plan.

I’d fucked up *again*.

What if this stunted their growth?

What if it weakened their immune system?

What if—

“Here’s some milk,” Evey announced as she plopped sippy cups on both girls’ trays. “And I brought some pouches for when they’re done with breakfast. Do you wanna go get a plate?”

With the light streaming in from the skylights in the ceiling, she honestly looked like a goddamn angel.

Hell, maybe she was.

Maybe that was why everything seemed to get better the moment I laid eyes on her.

“Luke?” she said, and my name on her lips did something to me on a deeper level than I wanted to admit.

I cleared my throat and tried to concentrate on her question. “I’m good.”

She sighed and plunked down a cup of coffee next to my elbow. “That’s for you and it’s just cream and sugar,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Evey was gone before I could respond, and already I missed her light. I sighed and turned back to the girls, both of their mouths full of food.

“Poffee?” Mari asked.

I grinned at her and picked up the mug Evey left me. “Yes, smart girl. That’s coffee.”

“Sip.”

I laughed outright this time and did as she asked. You knew you were dependent on coffee when even your toddler encouraged you to drink it.

By the time Evey got back, I’d drained half the cup, and the girls were almost done with their breakfasts. She placed a plate full of food in front of my face and sat down on the opposite side of the table with her own dish.

“What’s this?” I asked, although I had a feeling I already knew.

“Camel eggs,” she said between bites.

“Dada!” Mari yelled. “Camel eggs!”

I picked up my plate and turned to her with a laugh. “Here, baby girl. Have some of Dada’s camel eggs.”

I scooped half of them onto her plate and half onto Maggie’s before I sat back down to watch them eat.

“There’s more up there,” Evey said.

I turned to her just as she picked up her own mug of coffee and took a long sip. My eyes were drawn to her slender

neck and the gentle bobbing of her throat. Finally, she stopped drinking and tipped her head forward again to look at me.

“Luke?”

I shook my head. “Yeah?”

“There’s more food up there. Go help yourself.”

I looked down at the sausage and toast on my plate and shook my head again. “This is fine.”

She let out a deep breath before standing from the table again and disappearing. When she came back, she had another plate full of food in her hands that she set in front of me.

“Evey,” I started, but she shot me a look that stopped anything else from coming out of my mouth.

“Everyone who lives in the lodge gets free meals. You live in the lodge now, so you get to eat anything you want,” she said. Her brows dipped lower over her angry eyes as she stabbed a piece of sausage and shoved it in her mouth.

I sighed and leaned closer. The point was to have our conversation be more private, but now her sweet scent was clouding my head and I could hardly concentrate. “Evey. We don’t have the money to live here,” I murmured.

She shrugged and drained the rest of her coffee. “That’s okay. If someone can’t pay their tithes, they work on pack lands to make the money.”

I just barely caught the first hint of light at the end of the tunnel. “Really? I can work to live here? But what about the girls? I have no one to watch them.”

She waved my words away again. “Don’t worry about the girls. Do you have any skills we could use around here?”

I couldn’t help the way my lips curled with a grin. For the first time in probably years, I actually felt proud of what I did for a living. “I’m a carpenter by trade.”

Evey’s eyes lit up. “That’s perfect! There’s tons of things that need fixin’ around here, and I’m sure Abey could

use the extra help.”

“Abey?”

She giggled, and that sound brightened the whole kitchen. “Sorry. Abraham. He owns a construction business, and he’s always lookin’ for good help. Especially werewolves. I’m sure he’d have a spot for you too.”

My heart leapt at the opportunity, but with a glance at my girls, I knew I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t leave them alone. Not again. Not after what happened last time.

I swallowed hard and shook my head. “I’d prefer to work around here if that’s possible.”

Evey shrugged. “That’s fine. Like I said, Abey has a mile-long list of stuff that needs doin’ around here.”

My palms began to sweat as that tiny light in the distance grew. “When do you think I could talk to Abraham about that?”

“Talk to Abraham about what?” a voice boomed from behind me.

I turned to find the man who’d greeted us with Evey last night, standing there with his arms full of children.

“EE!” the little boy in his elbow yelled, and then the other two children followed suit.

“EE!”

“EE!”

“EE?”

That last one was more uncertain and came from Mari sitting behind me. She seemed fascinated by the new little arrivals to the kitchen.

“Mornin’ pumpkins!” Evey crowed at the kids squirming in Abraham’s arms as she stood from her chair. She swiped a little girl from him and snuggled her to her chest. “Hey, my little Gracey girl. How are you this mornin’?”

“EE,” the little girl cooed as she laid her head on Evey’s shoulder.

She was like a damn baby whisperer. All these kids were so enamored by her.

Honestly, I could relate.

But I needed to get my head out of my ass for the moment, so I cleared my throat and everyone’s eyes jumped to me. “I was wondering if there was any carpentry work I could be hired to do around here.”

Abraham’s face lit up. “You have experience?”

I nodded. “My dad taught me everything he knew. I’ve been hangin’ sheetrock and layin’ tile since I was a kid.”

“Perfect. When can you start?” he asked over his shoulder as he walked toward an odd-shaped table with six holes in it.

“As soon as possible.”

“What are you gonna do with the girls?” Evey interjected.

“I’ll have to bring them with me,” I muttered.

“How are you gonna get any work done while watchin’ two little ones?” she asked as she set her fork down.

“I’ll figure it out.”

“That does sound like a lot to handle,” Abraham chimed in as he sat one of the kids in his arms inside a hole in that weird table and buckled a strap around her waist. “Why don’t you leave ‘em with the other kids?”

“Nora and Sophie already have six of ‘em to watch,” Evey spoke up. “You really think they can handle another two?”

He shrugged as he took his third child from Evey’s arms. “Maybe not.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just bring them with me. I’ll figure it out,” I tried again, but it seemed like they weren’t listening.

“They can come with me to work,” Evey suggested.

“You do have a good-sized office,” Abraham said. “That’ll do. Luke, you can start today,” he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

“Wait,” I called, but he didn’t hear or just flat-out ignored me. I turned to Evey. “Mari and Maggie aren’t going to work with you. They aren’t leaving my fucking sight!” I said louder than I’d meant to.

Evey’s eyes weren’t wide with fear like I’d thought they’d be. Instead, they were soft with understanding that I didn’t know what to do with.

“I work in the lodge too. We’d be right down the hall from here. You could come see them anytime you want.”

The offer seemed good, but I’d been burned before, and I was *never* taking their safety for granted again. “No,” I finally said. “They come with me. They *stay* with me.”

This time I expected an eye roll or even a sarcastic remark, but she didn’t do that. No, Evey just nodded and took a sip of her coffee. “Okay. I’ll come with you then and help you watch them. I can bring my laptop and work from wherever you are today.”

My chest squeezed tight at her sweetness while my stomach cramped with fear.

Why was she being so nice to us?

What was in this for her?

Why would she go out of her way and do so much for strangers?

“That’s really not—”

“MAMA!” three little voices yelled at once, and my words were lost in the mayhem.

Evey giggled as I turned to find a tall blonde woman heading toward the table full of Abraham's kids.

"Hello, my angels! Did you miss me?" she sang as she reached down to nuzzle each one of them.

"Mama?"

The stomach ache was back and worse than ever as I turned to Maggie. "That's *their* mama, honey."

Her pale brows scrunched together as Mari spoke up. "Mama?"

Fuck.

My eyes darted between my daughters' confused gazes as I tried to find a way out of this, but it felt like I was drowning. Like every goddamn decision I'd made in the past four days had done nothing but ruin their lives. Like I was a sorry excuse for a father, and I didn't deserve a single inch of these girls.

But like a lifeline, Evey spoke up and, somehow, made it better again. "That's Ellie," she explained to the girls. "And you two look like you could use a pouch!"

"Pow!" they both yelled, all thoughts of their missing mama gone for the time being.

Evey began handing out puree pouches, her smile wide, and I marveled again at this woman. I wondered how she did it. How she managed to be so much to so many people. Did she even have enough left over for herself at the end of the day? Or did she just give and give without end?

"So, Luke," Abraham said as he arrived at the cluster of tables again, his arms full of plates piled high with food. "Have you ever built a baby gate before?"

I shook my head, but already I was thinking about the things I'd need. "No. Can't say that I have. Where did you want to put it?"

“Third floor landing. There are too many kids livin’ up there now and we need to make sure we keep them safe and away from those stairs.”

Knowing this job was not just to protect my little girls, but other kids too was enough for me. “I’ll figure it out,” I promised.

How I’d do that while watching my twins I wasn’t sure, but I had a gut-feeling that Evey would be an integral part of that too.

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Chapter 5

Evey

“So, your dad taught you how to do all this?” I asked as I plucked a blade of grass out of the ground.

I’d finished my work a while ago and spent the time since then alternating between watching the girls and watching him.

Luke turned to look at me, probably surprised I’d broken the awkward silence between us, but what did he expect? That I was going to sit here while he worked and ignored me all day?

No. I needed something to keep my mind off the thick muscles peeking out of his tight white t-shirt, and his dark eyes that swung my way every couple of minutes. He probably thought I didn’t notice, but how could I not when his gaze felt like it burned everywhere it touched?

“Yeah. He was a carpenter too,” Luke finally said, and I’d almost forgotten the question I’d asked.

But now that he was in an answering mood...

“Are you two close?”

He shrugged as he leaned over to measure a piece of wood. “We’re not *not* close, but I haven’t seen him much in the past few years.”

“Why’s that?” I couldn’t imagine having a dad and not seeing him. That was just unfathomable.

Luke shrugged again, but this time his shoulders stayed hunched. “Just had a lot goin’ on.” I continued to stare at him, not willing to believe that was the only excuse he had for not

seeing his own damn father. Finally, he huffed out an irritated breath and said, “Last time I saw him, he made it clear he didn’t approve of my life choices. So I haven’t talked to him since.”

I waited for more, but when it was clear he needed a nudge, I asked, “What life choices? It seems like you’re a good dad who provides for his family. Are you a secret drug fiend? Or a closet axe-murderer?”

He shot me an unimpressed look, but I didn’t miss the way his lips twitched with a smile. “No. Smartass.”

“Smar-pass!” Mari echoed, and Luke cringed.

I couldn’t help the giggle, and even from where I sat, I could see his dark eyes lighten. “Okay, then what were the life choices he didn’t agree with?” I tried again.

Luke’s expression hardened as he went back to his work. “Let’s just say, he was not looking forward to becoming a grandpa.”

My eyes widened as I glanced at the perfect little girls plucking wildflowers and sticking them in their hair. How could anyone not want to be a part of their lives? I hadn’t even known them a full day yet, but I already had trouble imagining a world where these two precious souls didn’t exist.

“Why?” was all I could get past the lump in my throat.

I could hear his teeth grinding, and I honestly didn’t think he was going to answer. But finally, he spat, “I think his bigger problem was *who* I was having kids with.”

This was the first time he’d mentioned the twins’ mother, and thousands of questions filled my mouth. With great restraint, I swallowed them all down but one. “He didn’t care for your mate?”

Luke’s jaw ticked with how hard he was clenching it. “She was never my *mate*. She was a woman I was casually seeing who got pregnant. When we found out about the twins, I chose to stay and try to make it work.” His hands gripped the

sawhorse so hard it groaned. “Funny how that turned out to be the best and worst decision I ever made,” he finally said.

I had a feeling he didn’t want to talk about it anymore, but I couldn’t keep quiet. There were too many questions brewing inside me about this man and his two sweet daughters. I had a feeling the shadows in his eyes had to do with them, and it made my stomach churn. I didn’t want to know, just like I knew I needed to know.

I cleared my throat and glanced at the girls, happily oblivious to our conversation, before I asked, “How’s that?”

He turned to me, his expression clear he hadn’t expected me to ask, but here we were. Luke ran a rough hand through his dark hair before he blew out a deep breath and got back to work. I thought he was planning to ignore me until he finally spoke, his voice so quiet I could barely make it out.

“Those two little girls are easily the best thing I’ve ever done. If I wasn’t around, if they hadn’t had me these past couple of years, I don’t want to even think about what could have happened to them. But that meant I was stuck with a woman I didn’t want to be with.”

Thinking about him with another woman was not a welcome picture, and I shoved it aside as fast as I could. The fact that I cared so deeply about a man I just met was something I pushed away even quicker. “If she was so awful, why didn’t you leave with the girls sooner?”

I could tell I’d struck a nerve with that last question, but it was innocent. I honestly wanted to know what kept him with someone like that.

His teeth were grinding again as he stared at me, and I had a feeling he was struggling with what to say next. Finally, he grit out, “She made me believe we were better off together. That the girls would be happier with their family intact. But that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

Luke stood there, hands trembling and shoulders heaving with big, uneven breaths. I could hear his heart

pounding from here and everything in me want to go to him.

Without thinking too hard about it, I climbed to my feet and crossed the distance between us. When I was close enough, I reached out and laid my hand on his thick forearm.

Luke froze beneath my touch, and my heart stopped beating for a moment. I didn't know if he wanted me to pull away, but something told me to stay where I was. That somehow, he needed this.

His skin was so warm beneath my fingers, I wondered if I felt cold to him.

"You were only doing what you thought was right. No one can blame you for that."

He scoffed. "No? *I* blame me. I blame me for not seeing through her lies and manipulations sooner. I blame me for not realizing what a toxic presence she was in our lives. I blame me for not knowing what she was doing to them..."

His voice trailed off and my heart stopped beating again, my blood running cold in my veins. "Luke," I whispered, my eyes darting to Mari and Maggie again, as if I'd find some injury I hadn't seen before. They were fine, of course, but my stomach still frothed with acid just thinking about someone hurting them. "What did she do?"

Luke turned to me, his face devastated and his eyes hollow. "She was hurting them," he choked out. "When they got in trouble or cried over something. She'd hurt them for being bad."

It was worse than I'd thought.

The bile was creeping up my throat, but I had to know the full story. "How?"

Luke shrugged, his gaze far away, like he was still there living this nightmare. "I don't know. I never saw her do it. I'd find the bruises on them at night, but just thought it was normal toddler stuff. I should have known they shouldn't have

marks under their arms or on their thighs and bellies,” he bit out.

He squeezed his eyes closed and I could feel the tension radiating through his body. I couldn't imagine the kind of guilt he had to be dealing with. I couldn't imagine how heavy the regret must have felt. Like a crushing load.

I swallowed past the tears I could feel forming in my throat and tightened my hand around him. “Hey. Look at them.” When he wouldn't pick his head up, I tugged on his arm. “Look at your little girls,” I said again, my voice sterner this time.

When Luke finally picked his head up, I watched as his face softened when he caught sight of Mari and Maggie. “They're fine,” I assured him. “They're beautiful, and smart, and perfect, and that's thanks to you. They're going to forget about any bad stuff that happened to them. *You're* going to fill their little memories with good times from now on, okay?”

His Adam's apple bobbed with a harsh swallow, eyes still locked on his daughters. “What if it's not enough?” he whispered before his deep brown eyes met mine. “What if I can't fill them with enough good to outweigh the bad?”

My chest ached so bad it felt like my ribs would crack. I squeezed his arm a little harder and nodded to the twins. “Look at them,” I said again. “You've *already* filled them with enough good.”

Luke's full lips curled with a tiny grin as he stared at his daughters. But when he turned to me, it slowly changed. Gone was the soft smile and glassy eyes. Now his gaze was slowly morphing, slowly becoming something more.

Something warm.

Something consuming.

Something life-changing and earth-shattering.

Something so big and beautiful, it made my knees weak.

“Evey,” he finally said, his voice so deep and rich it sent a shiver racing down my spine.

Before I could respond, someone else yelled my name. We both froze before turning slowly to the sound, but I already knew what I’d find.

“EE?” one of the twins called, but I could hardly spare them a glance.

Because Matthias was walking across the clearing, headed straight for us, brows dipped in confusion as his eyes darted from me to Luke and back again. I slid my hand off Luke as Matthias pulled me into his arms.

“Hey, Evey,” he murmured in my ear before he pulled back to kiss me on the cheek.

His mouth was warm and familiar, like I was kissing a cousin. There was nothing there but a tiny voice telling me this was wrong.

I pulled away as soon as I could without hurting his feelings, but that all went to hell the moment I opened my mouth. “What are you doing here?” I asked, wincing when I realized that shouldn’t have been my first question.

Matthias frowned. “I told you I was coming home.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “But you didn’t say *today*.”

Matthias shook his head, frown deepening before he looked over my shoulder and froze. “Luke?”

It was my turn to freeze in place as Matthias walked around me to get to our new packmate.

“Hey, man! What are you doing here?” Matthias asked, as he slapped Luke on the shoulder.

The twins wandered closer as my heart thumped in my chest and my mind raced to figure out what the *hell* was going on right now.

“We just got here last night,” Luke said, his brown eyes flashing to me for the briefest second.

Matthias turned to look at me next. “This was the new pack member you were dealing with?”

I nodded slowly. “Yes,” I said just as slowly. “How do you know him?”

Matthias chuckled, but it was Luke who answered. “He’s my cousin. He’s the one who told me about this pack.”

Only through sheer grit did I keep my jaw from falling open at that news. My eyes darted between the two men, noticing for the first time the noses and brow bones they shared. It wasn’t obvious to the untrained eye, but I’d known Matthias long enough, and I’d spent plenty of time studying Luke today.

“Oh,” I squeaked, at a loss for what else to say.

Luke spoke up again. “How do you know Evey?”

My stomach fell as Matthias turned to answer him, but there was nothing I could do to stop his words. “Uh, she’s my girlfriend?” he said almost like a question.

Those words seemed to echo in my head, and I wondered if they did for anyone else, too. I couldn’t bear to look at either of them, so I focused on the girls at my knees instead.

“Is it snack time?”

“Nack! Nack! Nack! Nack!” they both chanted, and I laughed. The sound might have been a little too high-pitched, but it was the best I could do.

“You don’t have to—” Luke began just as Matthias spoke.

“I was hoping we could go get some lunch together,” my *boyfriend* said.

It felt like I needed to remind myself of his title.

My eyes darted from Luke’s tensed jaw to Matthias’ hopeful expression. “I, uh, have work to do,” I said lamely. “And I’m helping Luke watch his girls while he works today.”

Matthias' face slowly fell, along with my stomach, before Luke spoke up. "No problem. I don't need the help."

I almost winced as he threw up that big ass wall right in between us again. "It's okay. You're workin' with power tools and stuff. You need someone to keep an eye on them."

"We could do dinner instead," Matthias piped up.

Honestly, I wasn't any more excited about that idea.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a good enough excuse to get out of that one.

"Okay, sure."

"No," Luke interjected, his tone louder and harsher than it was a minute ago. "I've got them. You two have fun on your lunch date."

Was it my imagination that those last few words were harder for him to spit out than the others? Or just a fantasy?

"Nack?" a tiny voice asked, and I looked down to find both girls staring at me.

"No," Luke said again, his voice only slightly softer than before. "We're gonna go have lunch, Mari."

"Do you need to go back inside, or can we leave from here?" Matthias asked, and it took everything in me to keep my eyes on him.

I swallowed past my dry throat. "I'm good to go like this. I can just bring my laptop with me."

"Great," he said, his smile so wide and bright it was easy to remember why I'd agreed to be his girlfriend in the first place. Matthias was handsome, and sweet, and so good to me.

He just didn't *do it* for me, you know?

"See you around, Luke," Matthias said, as he grabbed my wrist and started walking.

I tossed a look behind me. “Ms. Elsie should have lunch ready in the kitchen already,” I called to him. “Go on and help yourselves!”

I didn’t know if Luke would listen to me or not, but I had to hope he’d at least let the girls eat what they wanted. If he decided to go without again, I could just get him an extra plate at dinner.

“So, how about Italian? I’ve been craving Antonio’s for weeks,” Matthias said, unaware or maybe just ignoring the tension radiating through my body.

As for me, all I wanted was to be back in the lodge having lunch with Luke and his girls. I knew that meant something, just like I knew I didn’t want to know what that was.

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Chapter 6

Luke

“Nack?” Mari’s little voice asked as I watched Evey walk away with Matthias.

My feet itched to follow them. My hands shook with the need to rip his arm off her. But what right did I have to do that?

She’d told me she had a boyfriend. I just never imagined it would be my cousin. The man who was the reason we were here in the first place.

What were the fucking odds?

“Nack?” Maggie asked this time, and now I knew they were hungry.

I could hardly get Magnolia to eat most days, so if she was asking for food, that meant it was time to go find something to eat.

“You know what, baby girl?” I said as I crouched down to look her in the eyes. “It’s lunchtime. You wanna go inside and find something to eat?”

Maggie nodded while Mari piped up, “No, nack.”

I shook my head and straightened back up, pulling my wild child into my arms and holding out a hand for Maggie. “Come on, honey. We’ll go find something good to eat for lunch.”

“Nack,” Marigold insisted.

I shook my head. “No nack, Mari. It’s lunchtime.”

“Nack time.”

I bit back a smile. “Okay, you know what? Let’s go see what kinds of snacks we can find to put on your plate.” *Like a lunch*, I added in my head.

Marigold seemed appeased for the moment, and I took that opportunity to throw another look over my shoulder. When I did, I caught Evey already staring at me.

Was it my imagination that she looked reluctant? Or was I just seeing what I wanted to see?

Before I had a chance to find out, she turned the corner around the side of the lodge and was out of view. I tried to remind myself that I had no reason to be upset. That she was allowed to go out to lunch with her boyfriend.

But why did it feel like such a betrayal?

Why did it feel like Matthias was walking away with *my* woman?

Why was every single atom in my body screaming at me to get her back?

With the last of my willpower, I turned away from where I’d last seen her and climbed the stairs to the back door of the lodge. Evey had said there’d be lunch for us in the kitchen, but I didn’t know what to expect.

“Well, hey there, new guy,” a voice called from across the room.

I turned to find an elderly woman with pale blue eyes and gray hair twisted into a bun staring at me. “Um. Hi?”

She wiped her hands on her apron before waving us over. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Ms. Elsie and I run the kitchen. What are your names?”

I swallowed the trepidation and introduced my daughters. “This is Marigold and Magnolia.”

Ms. Elsie clutched her hands to her chest. “Aren’t they just perfect?” She bent down to look Maggie in the eyes. “Are you hungry for lunch, little one?”

Magnolia turned to me before looking at Ms. Elsie and nodding. The kind older werewolf smiled back at her and stood up straight again. “I made soup and Texas toast for lunch, but if there’s something else y’all want, I’d be happy to make it.”

I didn’t know how the twins with their limited spoon skills would do with soup, but I guess we were going to give it a try. “Soup is fine. Thanks so much, Ms. Elsie.”

She watched us through narrowed eyes as I ushered the girls toward the vat of creamy soup. “Are they good with spoons?” she asked.

I shot her a weak smile. “Not the best.”

She nodded once. “I was gonna make the other kids some chicken nuggets and zucchini fries. Would they like something like that?”

“Fry fry!” Mari yelled

Ms. Elsie laughed. “Fry fries comin’ right up!”

I tried to tell her making my kids a special meal wasn’t necessary, but she wouldn’t listen. Within minutes, she had their meal in the air fryer and began rummaging through the fridge again. “How about yogurt? Or fruit? What else do they want with their lunch?” she called.

My stomach cramped. “The nuggets and fries are fine.”

“Fry fry!” Mari called again, and I tickled her ribs.

Ms. Elsie straightened up to shoot me a look. “If that’s really all you think they’ll eat, then fine. If that’s all you really wanna give them, then fine. But if you’re worried about eatin’ the food in this house, I’m tellin’ you, I’m not gonna have it.”

“Ms. Elsie—”

“Nope,” she yelled over me. “I run the kitchen and I buy the food. We’ve got plenty for the three of you, and it warms my heart to see folks havin’ a good meal. So do an old lady a favor and let me get you a nice lunch today.”

Well, hell. When she put it that way...

I sighed. "They're big fans of fruit. Just about any kind would do."

Ms. Elsie grinned and nodded. "How about strawberries and melon?"

"That would be great."

Her smile widened, but almost disappeared the moment I asked her if she needed any help. "I don't need anyone in my kitchen. Get you and your girls somethin' to drink and your food will be ready in a few minutes."

I did as she asked, grabbing a couple straw cups with her directions and filling them with milk for the girls. I grabbed a glass of tap water for myself and ignored the glare I got from Ms. Elsie for it.

"Where did you folks come from?" Ms. Elsie asked, as she pattered around the kitchen.

I snuck a glance at the girls, who were happily sipping on their milk and watching a video on my phone before turning to her. "We're from Texas."

Ms. Elsie whistled. "Y'all are a long way from home."

My stomach cramped. "Let's hope it's far enough," I muttered.

I kept my eyes on my glass, but I could feel her knowing gaze on me. "You folks runnin' from somethin'?"

The air whooshed out of my lungs at her direct question, but I nodded. "You could say that."

"Somethin' *you* did?" she clarified.

I shook my head. "No. Nothin' like that."

She nodded slowly. "Are y'all okay?"

My eyes darted to hers, finding nothing but compassion and support there. "I think we're okay."

I couldn't help that my thoughts turned to the reason we were doing okay.

Evey.

"That's good to hear," Ms. Elsie said, before she turned back around.

I watched her for another long moment, wondering what it was about this place. This pack. The wolves in it. Why were they all so concerned about people they'd just met? Why were they all so willing to help us?

It felt like I needed to be prepared for the other shoe to drop. That this was all too good to be true.

"Okay, lunch is ready!" Ms. Elsie called, and I shook myself out of those dark thoughts.

She carried the food over as I led the girls to the highchairs and strapped them in. The moment the plates hit their trays, they both dug in, and I was instantly grateful I'd accepted Ms. Elsie's offer.

"If y'all need anything else, you let me know," she said as she walked away.

I'd just settled down to my own lunch when Ms. Elsie came walking back over with another bowl of soup. I opened my mouth to tell her I had plenty of food, but she took a seat opposite me and started eating before I got the chance.

"Mmm mmm," she muttered. "Needs more garlic."

I took a bite and shook my head. "It's delicious." She huffed in disagreement, and I chuckled. "Seriously. Do you know the last time I had a home-cooked meal like this?"

Ms. Elsie looked up, her eyes critical. "You don't cook?"

I shrugged and swallowed another spoonful before answering. "I can do basic stuff, but I usually get home too late to cook."

Her gaze softened as she glanced at my girls. “And them? Did someone cook for them?”

Guilt sloshed through my veins as I shook my head. “Their mother wasn’t much of a homemaker, so if she was with them, they got takeout. If no one could get them from the sitter’s before dinner, she’d feed them whatever she had in her freezer.”

Ms. Elsie shook her head slowly. “Well, we’ll be fattening you all up here.”

I chuckled around another bite. “I look forward to that.”

She smiled back at me before we settled into a comfortable silence. A few other werewolves came and went from the kitchen, but it was quiet in our corner as we all ate.

However, there was too much I wanted to know for me to be silent for long.

“I thought Matthias was a member of this pack.”

Ms. Elsie swallowed and dabbed her lips with a napkin. “He is. But he’s been spendin’ a lot of time in Charlotte these days.”

“How come?”

“Our Beatrice became the alpha down there, and we have a couple enforcers that stayed to support her. It wasn’t an... easy transition from the old leadership,” she finished awkwardly. “But with this pack growin’ so quick, we almost have too many enforcers than we know what to do with. So Abey has basically loaned them to Bea for however long she needs ‘em.”

“How did a member of this pack become the alpha of another? Did she mate into it?”

Ms. Elsie chuckled. “Oh, hell no. And you better never let Bea hear you say that!” She shook her head. “Bea was our beta, and the only reason she wasn’t our alpha is because that position is held by her older brother.”

My jaw fell open. “Wait, Bea is Evey and Abraham’s sister?”

She nodded slowly and lowered her voice. “There are five of ‘em.”

“Five of what?”

“McCoy’s. Abey, Bea, Callie, Del, and Evey.”

“That’s... a lot,” I finished like an idiot.

But Ms. Elsie just laughed again. “Yeah, and now that they’re almost all mated and havin’ kids, there’s even more McCoy’s in this house than ever.”

I swallowed hard, unsure whether I could get away with asking this next question. “They’re *all* mated?”

Ms. Elsie nodded again. “All but one have found their fated mates.”

My jaw hit the table again. “They all found their *fated* mates?” I whispered.

She smirked. “Sure have. We think it has something to do with the original werewolf, but we’re not sure.”

I shook my head. “Original werewolf?”

She chuckled. “That’s a story for another day,” she said before tipping her bowl back to drink the last few sips.

I could feel our time ending, and I figured I had time for only one last question. “Who’s the one who hasn’t found their fated mate yet?” I asked, although I was pretty sure I already knew.

Ms. Elsie turned those knowing eyes back my way. “Evelyn’s the last of ‘em left single.”

I cleared my throat, the words almost sticking on their way out. “I thought she was dating Matthias.”

She waved a hand as she stood up and grabbed both our empty bowls. “That ain’t nothin’ but two lonely souls tryin’ to fill a hole they aren’t meant for.”

I tried to respond, but by the time I figured out something to say, she'd already walked off. Which was probably good because I don't think it was anything intelligent.

With a glance at my girls, I could see it was nap time. Maggie's eyes were only half-mast, and Mari was twirling her blonde hair with a greasy finger.

“Ready for nap-nap girls?”

Maggie perked up, whereas, predictably, Mari shook her head. I found a pack of wipes on a nearby table and borrowed a few to clean up the girls. We left our plates and thanks with Ms. Elsie before I carried both girls upstairs.

Mari put up a little bit of a fight, but Maggie was asleep within minutes, and thankfully her younger sister followed soon after. I lay in bed and listened to their even heartbeats and slow breaths as I tried to keep my own lids open.

I really should have used their naptime to get some more work done, but without a monitor, I couldn't go far. Besides, the room was dim and cool, the perfect atmosphere for a nap, and even though there were a million other things I should have done, I slept instead.

It seemed like years later when a soft tap on the door pulled me from the comatose sleep I'd just had. With a glance at the snoozing toddlers, I hurried across the room before they knocked again.

I flung open the door and stepped outside before I even registered who was there. It didn't take long for her sweet vanilla scent to invade my senses, though.

“Sorry,” Evey whispered, although that wasn't necessary out in the hall.

I looked around for Matthias, but she was alone. Not knowing if that was a good thing or not, I couldn't help the question that slipped out of my mouth. “Where's your boyfriend?”

Evey's eyes shuttered, and she looked down before answering. "He's around somewhere. Catching up with some of the other enforcers, I guess." She cleared her throat and met my eyes again. "I brought the kids home doughnut holes. Can the girls have one?"

My heart squeezed tight inside my chest at her sweet gesture, but I couldn't get past the image of my cousin's lips on her, and that shit was making me hostile. "They're sleeping."

I could see in her eyes that my tone affected her, just like I knew she wouldn't let it show beyond that. "Okay. How about I leave a few for them?"

"That's not necessary."

I knew she was just being nice, but I also knew she was dating my cousin.

Why was she doing this then? Why was she being so sweet I couldn't think about anything but her? Why was she tempting me in a way no other woman ever had?

"Do you not want them to have the damn things, or are you just bein' a stubborn ass?"

Her blunt observation almost blew me back a step, but instead, it just made me angrier. "Why are you doing this?"

"Why am I trying to give two little girls a couple doughnut holes?"

I growled and took a step closer, my hands reaching for her arms without my permission. "Why are you doing so much for us? What's in it for you?"

I could see the way my questions hurt her, but I couldn't take them back now. Her blue eyes swam with pain, but she tipped her chin in the air anyway. "I'm the manager of the lodge. It's my job to make sure you're taken care of. And you're a single father with twin two-year-olds. Obviously, you could use the help."

I studied her face, willing there to be something more to it. “Is that it?”

Her gaze narrowed. “I care about Maggie and Mari. They’re good girls and I want whatever’s best for them.”

I dragged her closer, until our breaths mixed, and now I could *feel* the way her heart pounded for me. “Is that it?” I asked again.

Her eyes widened, and for one fraction of a second, she let me all the way in. I saw she was telling the truth, but now I knew it went deeper. Before I could see anything else, she blinked and looked away, pulling out of my grasp at the same time.

She shoved a greasy paper bag into my hand and took another step back. “That’s for the girls. I’ll see you guys at dinner.”

Evey disappeared behind her bedroom door moments later and it took everything in me not to follow her. If the muffled cries of my daughters hadn’t reached me in that instant, I didn’t know what might have happened.

And those thoughts kept me up for hours that night.

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Chapter 7

Evey

“Are you sure you can’t stay a little longer? The pack cookout is in a couple hours.”

Matthias shook his head, face paler than I’d ever seen it. He’d only been here four days, but he looked like he’d aged ten years. “I can’t, Evey. I’m sorry.”

I gave him a genuine smile, even though I knew I’d miss him when he was gone. “It’s okay. I understand.”

And I did. I’d seen the toll it takes on fated mates when they’re separated. I knew how sick a wolf could get.

And as I looked at the big bags under Matthias’ eyes and the way each step seemed to take more effort than the last, I knew that’s what was happening.

Someone else had found their fated mate, and it wasn’t me.

Of course, I was incredibly happy for Matthias, but I couldn’t help being a little sad for myself at the same time.

“Evey, you know how sorry I am about this, right?” he asked as we came to a stop beside his truck.

I rolled my eyes and gave him a playful shove. “Mattias. I was about to break up with you, too.”

He caught my hand with a chuckle. “Yeah, but I beat you to it.”

I laughed as I fought against his hold. “Okay, but you only wanted to break up with me because you found your fated mate. I wanted to break up with you just because.”

Matthias paused, his face falling. “That hurt, Evey.”

I froze, my eyes going wide as I shook my head. “I was just kidding! I mean, I’m not, but I am. I didn’t mean it like that!”

He could only keep up the injured look another few seconds before he broke out in loud bellows of laughter. “Oh my God, you should have seen your face!”

“Matthias,” I grumbled as I shoved him away again.

He almost lost his balance, and that was another reminder of how sick he was. And how much he needed to get back to his mate.

“*I’m kidding,*” he squealed, trying to imitate my voice. “*I’m mean, but I’m not that mean.*”

I giggled and gave him another shove. “I don’t sound like that.”

He shook his head before he pulled me into his arms and took a deep breath. “I’m glad you aren’t mad at me. I wouldn’t have been able to take that,” he whispered into the top of my head.

I sighed and wrapped my arms around his waist. “Of course not. We were friends first and nothin’s gonna change that.”

He squeezed me tight for a moment before he pulled away to look me in the eyes. “You know I meant it when I said I love you, right?”

I knew he didn’t mean he was *in* love with me, so I nodded. “And you know I love you too.”

He smiled and leaned in to kiss my cheek. “I’ll be back in a couple weeks,” he said as he took a step away from me.

“Bring her with you.”

His grin spread even further. “You’re gonna love her.”

“I can’t wait,” I called as he climbed into his truck.

He threw me a wave as he drove away, and I turned around before he reached the end of the driveway. That was a nice and short chapter I was happy to close. Matthias and I would always be friends, but now we both knew that was all we were meant to be.

I was headed back toward the lodge, not understanding why my chest was squeezing so tight when I heard his voice.

“Too bad your boyfriend had to leave early.”

A gasp flew out of my mouth as I looked up to find Luke standing in the shadows of the massive house. “What are you doing?” I asked, my words still breathy with shock.

“I’m surprised you didn’t go with him,” he continued like he hadn’t heard me.

Regaining my equilibrium, I shook my head and walked past him. I knew if I didn’t, I was bound to make a fool of myself.

I’d hardly seen Luke since Matthias got here, and I didn’t know if that was by design or not. He was still staying in the lodge with his girls, but I never saw them outside of their room and rarely caught them during mealtimes.

I thought I’d at least have his working hours to spend with them, but since Matthias didn’t have duty while he was in Asheville, he’d been helping to watch the girls.

Which rendered me basically useless. Something I wasn’t used to feeling, and frankly, didn’t care for at all.

“Why are you ignoring me?” he called.

I stopped walking and closed my eyes, taking a second to breathe in deep before I reacted to his words.

Luke hadn’t said more than *good morning* or *have a good night* to me in more than three days, and he had the nerve to expect me to just answer his questions? Like we were friends, and he could just casually ask about my relationship?

The irritation was sizzling deep inside me, making it hard to stay calm. Luke's dark brown eyes and chiseled jaw line didn't make matters any easier because I didn't know whether to stare or glare.

"Why are you so worried about me and my relationship?" I fired back at him as soon as I got my tongue working.

Luke's eyes widened before narrowing at me again. "Well, someone should be. I think I spent more time with him these past few days than you did."

I almost laughed, but only because I felt like crying.

What I wouldn't have given to be a part of those afternoons with him and the girls. Did he know how much I envied Matthias? How much I'd missed them all week?

I stared into Luke's hard eyes and knew I needed to tell him the truth. I'd kept quiet out of respect for Matthias, but he'd just left to be with his fated mate. I figured that probably let me off the hook.

"That's because we aren't dating anymore," I said with a sigh. "We broke up the day he got here."

Luke jerked back in surprise. "Wait, what? Why didn't I know about this?"

The better question was: *why did that make my heart beat faster?*

With great effort, I swallowed down the butterflies and rolled my eyes. "Ask Matthias. I've hardly seen you in days."

I didn't mean to spit out that sentence with so much fire, but there it was. All the angst and regret I'd felt this week bubbled up and boiled over in the form of sharp words.

There was no escaping it, and now I'd just have to live with the consequences.

Luke looked uncomfortable as he eyed me. "You... wanted to see me? I mean *us*," he hurried to add.

My heart slammed against the back of my throat so hard I almost couldn't speak. "Of course," I finally choked out. "I really... *care* about... *the girls*. I liked being a part of their lives." I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "I missed them," I whispered as I looked at him again.

I held his gaze for as long as I could before I finally had to look away. "Evey," he began, but I started talking again.

"It's fine. I know you were just catchin' up with your cousin. I'm glad you two had the time together."

"That's not—"

"Hopefully I'll get to see y'all at mealtimes more often at least," I continued as I took a step away from him toward the lodge.

"Evey. Of course—"

"And hopefully you bring the girls to the pack cookout tonight."

Luke sighed. "Yeah, Ms. Elsie made me promise to bring 'em."

I nodded my head over and over as I took another step away, everything in me begging to run. "Where are the girls, anyway?"

He dug in his pocket and pulled out a little monitor. "Ellie lent me this. They're napping."

I nodded again. "Okay, good. I guess I'll see you at the barbecue tonight," I called as I turned around and walked away.

"Yeah!" Luke said to my back. "See ya."

I didn't wait around to find out if he had anything else to say. I'd already made myself look stupid enough. Now it was time to go find an outfit for tonight that could make me forget how dumb I felt.

Luke

“Can I have this dance?”

I froze as the slightly familiar voice reached me.

“Dog!” Mari yelled, and I shook my head so I could focus on her.

“Sure, honey. You can have more hot dog,” I said as I scraped a few more cut-up pieces onto her plate, my eyes darting around me to find the source of the voice.

“What took you so long to ask?” a male voice responded, and this time I couldn’t stop myself from finding the source of the conversation.

One table over, I found Evey’s sister Callie holding her hand out to her mate and blew out a discreet breath of relief. That was why the voice wasn’t entirely familiar. It wasn’t the one I listened for every waking hour.

The two of them took off as I doled some more food out to Mari. Maggie, predictably, was already done and playing with a wipe.

“That girl looks like she wants to dance.”

I looked up just as Ms. Elsie took a seat at our table and dug into a huge plate of food. “Huh?” I said stupidly as I wrestled with Maggie to clean her face.

Ms. Elsie nodded over my shoulder before taking a sip of her sweet tea. I turned to look, but judging by the tightness in my chest, I had a feeling I knew who I’d find.

Evey stood a couple tables away, her soft floral dress swishing around her thighs as she swayed to the music. My eyes ate up every available inch of her until I finally dragged myself back to the conversation with Ms. Elsie.

“What about her?” I asked.

Ms. Elsie huffed like she knew I was full of shit, too. “Son, you better go over there and ask her to dance before someone else does.”

My stomach dropped at the thought of her in someone else’s arms. It was bad enough I’d been imagining her with Matthias all week. Now I knew they’d been broken up that whole time, it felt like I could breathe again.

But now, faced with *doing* something about all the shit swirling around in my system, I was terrified.

I cleared my throat and looked down at Maggie’s tray. “She just broke up with my cousin. I can’t do that to him.”

Ms. Elsie chuckled. “I wouldn’t worry about Matthias. He’s halfway back to his fated mate by now.”

My head jerked up to look at her. “What?”

She nodded, a knowing look in her pale blue eyes. “He came up here to break it off with Evey because he found his mate. Don’t think we’ll be seein’ him for a while,” she commented in an offhanded way.

Matthias broke up with Evey? Matthias found his fated mate?

Why didn’t I know about any of this? Why hadn’t he mentioned something during all that time we spent together?

Even as I asked the questions, I already knew the answers. I’d spent any available time purposely steering our conversation toward reminiscing about the past, because I was terrified he’d mention Evey and I’d lose my shit.

My heart raced faster as I realized I was running out of excuses, and dancing with Evey was becoming more real by the second.

“I’m feeding the girls right now,” I said, even though I knew they were basically finished.

Ms. Elsie knew it too, and she waved away my excuse. “They’re almost done. I can handle it from here.”

Part of me wanted to protest letting her watch the girls, but I knew that would be stupid. Ms. Elsie didn't have a mean bone in her body, but I also didn't want to see what would happen if I suggested the girls wouldn't be safe with her.

And realistically, it wasn't like I was leaving them overnight or anything. I'd be a few feet away, dancing with Evey.

My heart stopped in my chest as those words ran through my head at top speeds.

I'd be *dancing with Evey*.

I'd get to put my hands on her again.

I'd get to have her tight body against mine again.

I'd get to inhale her sugar-sweet scent, making sure I'd never forget the simple notes.

I swallowed hard and shook my head.

But I didn't know how to *do* this shit.

How to be a dad and also be a man.

How to go after what I wanted while making sure my girls were taken care of.

I was all they had, and I refused to put my wants above theirs.

"Luke," Ms. Elsie said, finally breaking me out of the spiral my thoughts had led to. "It's one dance. We'll be right here. Go have a little fun."

I blew out a deep breath, took a look at each girl to make sure they were all set, and then nodded. "Okay."

Ms. Elsie grinned, but I hardly noticed. My palms were so sweaty I had to rub them against my jeans as I stood. I shot one last glance over my shoulder at the girls, but Ms. Elsie shooed me away, and I turned with a half-smile on my face.

That slowly melted as I watched Evey.

Her dark curly hair crept down her back, legs looking longer than ever in a pair of heels. But it was her face I couldn't stop staring at. I could only see half of it, but every inch was perfect. Every inch was so beautiful, I felt like I could stare at her all day.

So I finally made it to her side and realized I'd wasted all that time looking at her and not figuring out what I was going to say. And when she looked up at me, hurt still swimming in her blue gaze, I knew there was more than one thing I had to make up for.

Apologies and explanations all crowded my mouth, none of them feeling right. Or like enough.

So when she finally raised a brow at me, I spit out the only thing I could think of in that moment.

“Dance with me?”

Her pink lips fell open with a soft gasp that shot straight to my gut. Evey stared at my outstretched hand for a long time before she finally placed her palm on mine.

“Okay.”

My heart slammed into the back of my throat, where it pounded uncontrollably. She was so warm and soft, I never wanted to let go.

I led her onto the dancefloor and stepped into her space, ignoring her next gasp and the way it made my pants tighten even more. Her vanilla scent filled the air between us, and I gladly breathed her in.

We started to sway, and I didn't question the way my body seemed to already know hers. I didn't wonder why her curves were familiar or bother to ask how it felt natural to hold her like this.

I knew in that moment nothing had ever made more sense than Evey. Nothing had ever been so crystal clear, so obvious as her lithe body against mine.

Now I just had to figure out how I could be anything to her while also being everything to my two girls.

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Chapter 8

Evey

“I’m... sorry,” Luke whispered into my ear, and I just barely fought off a shiver.

“For what?”

He chuckled, blowing strands of hair off my neck, and this time, I couldn’t stop my reaction to him. “There are too many things to list, and I’d probably forget half of them because I can be a real asshole sometimes.” He pulled back and caught my gaze. “But can I just summarize and apologize for hurting your feelings?”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I furiously blinked them away. If I smudged my eyeliner being a big baby, I was gonna be pissed. “It’s okay.”

He shook his head, his brown eyes somehow hard and soft at the same time. “It’s not okay. You’ve been nothing but a goddamn angel since we got here, and I was a dick to you. I’m sorry.”

A watery chuckle fell from my lips. “I’m not an angel, Luke. I’m just trying to help.”

He pulled me closer, and I gasped when I felt his arousal wedged between us. “You *are* an angel and you *have* been helpful.” He leaned down until his lips just barely grazed the shell of my ear. “You’ve also been kind, and gracious, and selfless, and so damn sweet you make it hard to breathe sometimes.”

All the oxygen in my body seemed to escape as I stood there, staring up into his endless brown eyes. “Luke.”

He shook his head and leaned an inch closer. His lips were so close I could almost taste them, and my hands shook with how much I wanted him to kiss me.

“Being angry was so much easier than facing the fact that I want you so bad I can’t think straight. This whole time, I thought you were someone else’s. I thought you were *my cousin’s*.”

I shook my head, gaze still locked on his. “I’m not. I don’t belong to anyone.” That wasn’t supposed to sound so heavy with melancholy, but it was, and I knew he heard it.

“Evey,” he began before another tiny voice interrupted.

“EE!”

My smile was wide as I turned to find the girls running toward us. I crouched down carefully in my short dress and caught Maggie as she came flying at me. “Hey, pretty girl,” I said as I squeezed her tight.

When I stood back up with her on my hip, I found Luke holding Mari, a wide smile on his face. “I guess our dance is over.”

I shrugged. “Now we have new partners,” I said before I dipped Maggie low, laughing along with her high-pitched giggles.

“Dans, Dada! Dans!” Mari yelled, and he started spinning her around the dancefloor.

I watched them as I dipped and twirled Maggie, my heart feeling whole for the first time in a long time.

We must have spent another hour dancing them around the clearing before Luke finally called it. “I think it’s probably about time for bed.”

“No bed,” Mari yelled.

Luke shook his head, but he was still smiling, and I couldn’t help but do the same. “Could they have some pie first?” I asked, my voice as sweet as I could make it.

His grin turned soft as he nodded. “I think that sounds fair.”

“You girls want some of Ms. Elsie’s famous pie?” I asked them.

Maggie nodded while Mari cheered, and I laughed. “Let’s go then,” I said with a wave for Luke to follow me up to the tables of food.

After some debate between me and the twins, we decided on a slice of pumpkin and a slice of apple pie for them to split. With our plates in hand, we walked back over to an empty table, and I sat down with Maggie on my lap.

“EE!” Mari yelled, her little hands outstretched for me.

My heart warmed my chest as I waved her over. “Come on, cutie. I got two knees.”

She giggled as she ran over and climbed onto my lap. Now, with both girls sitting on me, I could barely see the table, but it didn’t matter. I was just happy to be near them again and soaking up all this two-year-old energy.

“My pucky,” Mari said, her tone letting me know I needed to tune back in to what they were doing.

I peered over her shoulder and saw her defending her pumpkin pie from her sister’s encroaching fork.

“Mari,” Luke warned from across the table. “You need to share with your sister.”

The little girl shook her head and slid her plate farther away from Maggie. “No. My pucky.”

“Pucky!” Maggie yelled, and I knew we were moments away from a full-blown fight.

I turned panicked eyes to Luke, but he just smiled and leaned over the table with a butter knife. “Brought this because I had a feeling,” he muttered as he cut both slices in half and split them between the girls. “Now you both have pucky pie,” he announced, and they cheered.

“You’re pretty great at this dad stuff,” I said as I smoothed some hair off Mari’s forehead.

Luke’s cheeks turned pink, and he grabbed the back of his neck, his eyes on the table. “Yeah?”

I frowned. “Haven’t you heard that before?”

He shrugged and looked away.

My heart ached for the man who tried so hard to parent these kids, and apparently, had never heard how amazing he was at it. “I know a good dad when I see one,” I assured him as I wiped some apple goo off Maggie’s chin. “I had an awesome dad, so trust me when I say, you’re doing it right.”

His dark eyes darted to mine, indecision and doubt flooding their depths. “It really doesn’t feel like I’ve done much right lately,” he confessed, his voice soft.

My chest squeezed even tighter, and I longed to touch him, even just to hold his hand. I shook my head and squeezed the girls closer. “Mari, are you happy?”

“Pappy!”

I giggled, my eyes jumping to Luke when I heard him laugh, too. “What about you, Maggie? Are you happy here?”

“Des,” she said with a serious nod.

I turned back to Luke with an expectant expression. “Well, they took a vote, and you lost. Looks like you made the right decision coming here. You’re a good dad. Sorry.”

His smile grew and grew until he tipped his head back and barked out a loud laugh. When he looked at me again, there was something in his eyes I couldn’t name. Something profound and exciting. Something that made me want to swim in his gaze and crawl out of my skin at the same time.

“I can think of one right decision I’ve made,” he finally said.

Every part of me froze except my pounding heart. It thumped in my chest wildly as Luke stared at me, making sure

I knew exactly what decision he meant.

Which was *me*.

I cleared my throat and looked down at the tops of the girls' heads. "You think so? I don't seem to be anyone's right decision these days," I said, a tiny bit of bitterness seeping into my tone.

It wasn't that I wasn't happy for Matthias and everyone else who'd found their fated mates. It was just that I wanted to find mine, too. I wanted to find the person that was meant to be mine. It didn't seem like such an outrageous request, but maybe I was wrong.

Maybe it just wasn't meant to be for me.

Maybe I'd just have to meet someone and fall in love like regular people do.

Maybe I didn't have a soulmate.

"I know so," Luke said, breaking me out of thoughts with a voice so full of conviction, I couldn't help but believe him.

I met his gaze again and let myself believe his words. That he was at least happy to have me around. I just didn't know in what kind of capacity he wanted me.

"I think it's time for bed," Luke announced.

Maggie pushed her plate away and held her hands out for him while Mari folded her arms across her chest. I tickled her ribs until she finally laughed, and we stood up together.

"Thanks for havin' dessert with us," Luke said as he walked over to take Mari from me.

"It was my pleasure," I assured all of them, pinching the girls' cheeks as I did. "Do you have jammies for them?"

Luke's face turned pink again as he shifted from foot to foot. "I washed their jammies in the tub this morning. They should be dry by now."

My jaw fell open as I tried to figure out what to focus on first. “We have several washer and dryers you could have used.”

Luke shrugged. “It’s fine. I’ve hand-washed their clothes before.”

“I also have more jammies I could have given you.”

“You’ve already done a lot for us,” he argued.

I rolled my eyes. “I lent you some clothes I bought for my nieces and nephews. You can just give them back when they outgrow them and call it even.”

Luke huffed out a breath as he shifted a squirming Mari in his arms. “It just feels like you’re always givin’ and we’re always takin’.”

“Okay, fine. Then give me something back.”

He froze in place like he hadn’t expected that from me. Honestly, I hadn’t either, but I was sick of fighting him over it.

“Like what?” he finally said, his voice so deep and rich I had to fight off a shiver.

I tried to hold his gaze, but with all the dirty thoughts running around my head, I couldn’t. I finally looked away and shrugged. “Guess you’ll have to figure something out,” I said as I walked off toward the lodge.

“Where are you going?” he asked, his voice irritated as he struggled to keep up with me.

I sighed and grabbed a toddler from his arms so he didn’t accidentally drop one of their squirming bodies. “To get the girls clean jammies and clothes for tomorrow.”

“Evey. You’ve left us enough clothes outside our bedroom door.”

My heart fluttered at his acknowledgment of that. I’d been leaving outfits in the hall for them every night, so they’d have something to wear in the morning. But up until then, he’d never mentioned them.

“Besides,” he added before I could respond, “I washed their clothes, too. It’ll all be clean and dry by morning.”

I sighed again as we climbed the back stairs to the lodge. “Remind me to show you the laundry room tomorrow.”

“Why do you have so many 2T clothes anyway? All the other kids in the lodge are smaller than that.”

I shot him a wide smile. “I like to shop, and I like to be prepared.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh. So you’re one of those.”

“One of who exactly?” I asked as we headed up the steps to the third floor.

“The type of person who obsesses over little baby clothes. I bet you bought your nieces and nephews all kinds of ridiculous things like brand-name sneakers before they could walk, and designer binkies.”

My jaw fell open at his accusations.

And how accurate they were.

“Listen, I’m a bargain shopper,” I began, but he just waved my words away.

“You don’t have to explain anything. I know your type.”

I huffed out a breath. “You say it like it’s a bad thing,” I groused.

He chuckled. “Nah. My mom was the same way. When she found out about the twins, she went crazy buying crap.” There was a wistful smile on his face that slowly fell. “But Holly thought she was trying to mother our unborn children and made her take it all back.”

I swallowed down all the nasty things I wanted to say about the girls’ mom and instead said, “She doesn’t seem like a very nice person.”

Luke laughed again. “Yeah. You could say that.”

There'd been one question simmering in my mind for days, and I finally couldn't hold it back any longer. "Is she gonna come here lookin' for you guys?" I asked softly, hoping I was vague enough that the girls wouldn't understand.

Luke sighed. "I don't think so. She never liked being a mother, so I don't think she'd miss them too much." His words were lined with a sharp edge, and I didn't blame him.

How could a mom not miss her kids?

"But weren't you all supposed to come here? Doesn't she already know where you are?"

"She doesn't care about anything that doesn't benefit her. She agreed to move to North Carolina with us, but only because we were being evicted from our apartment and had nowhere else to go. She doesn't trust alphas, but with no other options, she had to agree to let me find us a pack somewhere. She never asked where, though."

I had another mouthful of things I wanted to say, but I swallowed them all down except, "Well, it seems like you're better off without her."

Luke huffed out a breath as we made it to the top floor and headed down our hall. "I know I am. I just don't know if they are too."

His dark eyes swung to the little girl snuggled in my arms, and I could see all the doubt and worry swimming in them. I didn't want to remind him of all the bad things their mom had done to them, but I also didn't want him to second-guess himself anymore.

"They're safe here. You all are," I said instead.

I could see how those words affected him, and when he nodded, I knew they'd done the job. We stopped outside their door, and I slid a sleepy Maggie into his arms.

"I'll go grab pjs and be right back," I said and walked away before he could protest.

I was back within minutes and tapped softly on the door before leaving the jammies in a small pile on the floor. I'd just made it to my room when I heard him call my name.

When I spun around, I found him storming across the hall toward me, his eyes lit with desire and his jaw set with determination. Before I could say anything, he cupped my face in his big hands and pressed his lips against mine.

My breath caught in my lungs and every organ froze as I kissed Luke, his intoxicating scent overwhelming me. It was warm and spicy, but homey at the same time. Like hot apple cider. It was so hard to define, but it was all Luke and I wanted to bathe in it.

His hands drifted into my hair so he could cup the back of my head and deepen our kiss. Time stopped meaning anything as I got lost in him. In the way his big body eclipsed mine, and the gut-deep rightness I felt with him touching me like this.

It was like we were always meant to kiss, and we'd just been wasting all this time for nothing.

When Luke finally ripped his mouth away from mine, we were both breathless. I licked my lips and his eyes burned hotter. "Evey," he breathed. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He growled softly before closing the distance between us and kissing me again. This one was harder and faster, but full of passion and just enough to make my knees weak before he pulled away. "I'll see you in the morning," he said before he turned around and walked away.

I was left with his taste on my tongue and my heart in my throat, wondering where the hell this was going.

Chapter 9

Luke

“We took a vote, and you lost,” I informed a one-eyed Evey. The other was closed with sleep, and she looked so adorable I almost felt bad for knocking on her door and waking her up. But then I thought about spending any more time without her and changed my mind. “You’re coming to breakfast with us.”

She yawned and leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms across her chest. “I am, am I?”

“EE,” Mari called and Evey’s face split with a sleepy smile before she crouched down to look at my daughter.

“What’s up, buttercup?”

“Bekky,” Mari informed her.

I opened my mouth to explain what that meant, but there was no need.

“It’s time for bekky?” Evey asked, her tone just as serious. “Well, if you insist,” she said around another yawn as she held out a hand to Mari.

Marigold wanted to be held though, so she reached both arms out to Evey and was picked up and sitting on her hip within moments. “I want it known that you can’t be judged for your morning breath before eight A.M.”

I laughed as I followed her down the hall, Maggie in my arms. “Hey. It’s eight o’ three. We’re not complete barbarians.”

She turned around with a giggle that almost stopped me dead in my tracks.

Why was she so much more beautiful in the morning?

This was the second time I'd seen her just waking up, and it was as potent as the last. Maybe it was the lack of make-up. Without it, I could see her real beauty. The natural kind that came from within as much as it showed on the outside.

Maybe it was because all her expressions were softer and lined with sleepiness, like an adorable little sloth.

I didn't know why she was so cute first thing in the morning, but now I knew I'd be waking her up for breakfast every day.

"I smell camel eggs," Evey announced when we made it to the stairs.

"Yay!" Mari cheered as Evey carried her down the steps.

I followed, my heart full as the two ladies in front of me had a nonsensical conversation that they were both deep into. It made me want to laugh, but I didn't dare interrupt.

"Mississi!" Mari yelled when they made it to the kitchen.

Evey cocked a head in her direction. "*Mississippi?*"

This time, I did laugh. "No, she's trying to say Ms. Elsie."

"Mississi," Mari said again, as if to say *that's what I meant*.

"Good morning, precious girls!" Ms. Elsie called, and they both squirmed until we let them down so they could run over to her. Mari and Maggie wrapped their little arms around her legs, and I could see what that meant to the older lady.

"What do you two want for breakfast today?"

"Camel eggs," Mari answered.

"Pamcake," Maggie said next.

“Camel eggs and pamcakes comin’ right up,” she said as she patted their little blonde heads.

“You don’t need to make them separate meals,” I spoke up. “Whatever you’ve got for today is fine for them.”

Ms. Elsie waved my words away like usual. “I’ve already got camel eggs made, and I always keep some of my frozen pamcakes in the freezer. Just need to microwave them.”

I shook my head at her use of my daughters’ made-up words. “Okay. Thanks,” I said reluctantly.

She nodded like she won and turned to shuffle over to the freezer. I looked back to commiserate with Evey, but she was crouched down again, talking to the girls.

“You two want some milk?”

“Milk! Milk! Milk!” they both chanted, and she stood up with a smile that almost knocked me back a step.

“I’ll go grab their cups,” she said, but I caught her before she could get far.

I stared at my hand wrapped around her delicate arm and let my thoughts run wild.

In my head, I pulled her closer until we were chest to chest. Her tight frame would fit me like a glove, just like it did last night.

My eyes darted to hers as I rubbed my thumb over the racing pulse in her wrist. “I can go get their milk,” I finally said, my voice gritty with pent-up tension.

Evey blinked up at me a few times before she finally spoke. “I can—” she said before stopping to clear her throat. “I can do it.”

I shook my head and dragged her a step closer. Now her hard nipples were rubbing against my chest, and I wanted to rip her shirt off and explore them for myself. “Evey,” I growled, unable to keep the desire from leaking into my tone. “Please. Just sit with them for a minute and I’ll be right back.”

She nodded once, and I hurried away, glad to have some distance from her intoxicating scent. Although I regretted every step I took in the opposite direction, it was necessary.

I should not be this turned on so early in the morning.

With two milk cups and two mugs of coffee in my hands, I walked back over to our table to find my girls already strapped into their highchairs.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I muttered as I handed the girls their milk.

Evey shrugged, her smile almost blinding as I handed her a cup of coffee already made how she liked it. “I’m happy to help, Luke.”

The sincerity dripped from her words, but I couldn’t help wondering *for how long?*

These weren’t her kids.

They weren’t her obligation or responsibility.

Hell, I could barely get their own mother to take care of them.

Why would Evey, a single woman with no kids, want to take on two that didn’t even belong to her?

Why would anyone?

I needed to make sure I never asked her to do more than she was willing to. I needed to make sure she didn’t get sick of helping us. I needed to make sure she couldn’t resent us like their mother did.

Breakfast was quiet and simple, and the dark thoughts slowly dissipated as I watched my girls get along with Evey. It was clear they had a better time when she was around, and I never should have tried to keep them apart.

But if I was being honest, I wasn’t trying to keep the girls away from Evey. I was trying to keep *me* away from Evey.

I didn't trust myself to breathe in her sweet scent and have her hot little body anywhere near mine. There wasn't a single inch of me that didn't want Evey, and although that had to be obvious, it didn't mean I had to act on it.

What would I have to offer her, anyway?

I was broke, I lived in her brother's house, and the only employment I had was odd jobs around pack lands. She'd be signing up to be with a man who could barely take care of himself, and two kids that weren't her blood.

Who would want all that?

"Mo pancake." A tiny voice broke me out of my dark thoughts.

Evey giggled and slid some pancake off her plate and onto Mari's. "Man, she's such a good talker," she muttered to me, and my chest filled with pride.

"Yeah. Hard to believe she's the younger one."

Evey shook her head, smile bright. "What? By a few minutes?"

I shrugged, the grin on my face wide too. "Thirteen, to be exact."

She laughed again, and like always, that sound seemed to have this power. It instantly smoothed out the edges of my anxiety and lessened the load on my shoulders. I didn't know how she could do all that with a simple sound, but she was Evey. I wouldn't put anything past her.

"It's even harder to believe they'll be two soon. It feels like they were just born last week."

Evey reached out and tucked some hair behind Maggie's ear before it could land in her syrup. "When's their birthday?"

"What's today?"

She giggled again. "The fifth."

Damn it.

I sighed. “That means there’s less than two weeks, and I don’t even have anything for them yet.”

Evey’s eyes darted to mine, mouth falling open. “Wait, what? You’re telling me their birthday is in less than two weeks? How many days exactly?”

“Uh,” I said slowly as I counted in my head. “Nine?”

“Nine?” she yelled. “Jeez Louise, that’s tight, but I can make it work.”

I frowned. “Make what work?”

She turned a sheepish smile my way. “Make their second birthday party work?”

I was already shaking my head. “No. I can’t afford a party for them. I’ll be lucky if I can pick them up a couple presents at the Dollar General. A party is out of the question.”

“Oh, please!” she squealed, hands clasped beneath her chin. “I can use a ton of stuff we have from past birthday parties, and I’ll pay for the rest.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Can you just clarify which part of that plan you object to?”

“All of it.”

“You object to me using free decorations for your daughters’ second birthday party?”

“Yes. Wait, no. That’s not the problem.”

“Do you not want them to have a birthday party?”

“No! Of course I want them to have a party! I just can’t afford one.”

“You don’t need to pay for anything! I’ll take care of it all!”

“No,” I said with a firm shake of my head. “I can’t let you do that. You’ve already done so much for us.”

“Okay, so what’s one more thing?”

I almost laughed, but this wasn’t funny. “Evey. No. You’re not throwing a party for them.”

“Come *on*, Luke,” she whined, and even though my name was distorted, I still liked the way it sounded coming from her. “I promise I won’t spend that much. Just some food and a cake. And I can get that from Walmart! It’ll cost next to nothing.”

I opened my mouth to argue some more, but Mari beat me to it.

“Pake?”

My eyes squeezed closed for a moment before I turned to face Marigold. “Are you all done with breakfast, sweetheart?”

“Pake,” she said again. She was more certain this time. Like she wasn’t going to let me change the subject that easily.

My mind raced with ways to fix this.

By the time their birthday rolled around, I’ll have worked on pack lands for a full two weeks. Hopefully that meant I’d get a paycheck before then and I could afford to at least get them a cupcake to share from the grocery store.

If I didn’t get paid before then, I was out of fucking options.

Maybe I could trick them, but even as the idea formed in my mind, it didn’t feel right. But truthfully, Mari and Maggie were too young to know what day was what. If I had to wait for a paycheck, I could just tell them that day was their birthday, and they’d never know the difference.

I’d feel like a scumbag, but at least they wouldn’t be disappointed.

“Yes, sweets. Cake,” Evey answered before I could form a coherent thought. “We’re gonna ask Ms. Elsie to make you a cake for your birthday. What do ya think?”

“Pake!” Mari cheered, and Maggie clapped along with her.

I turned to Evey, ready to argue some more, but she held up a hand. “I can throw a party for zero dollars.”

I sighed. “How, Evey?”

Her smile brightened, like she’d been waiting for me to ask. “I’ll figure it out. I like a challenge.”

Maybe that was why she liked us so much.

“Just say yes, and I’ll throw them a great little party for free. Nothing too crazy, just some fun games and good food.”

“Evey,” I warned, searching for reasons to tell her no.

I was sick of taking from her. Sick of always being on the receiving end of her handouts. I wanted to be the one who helped solve her problems, not give her new ones.

“Please,” she whined, clasped hands beneath her chin again.

“Peas!” Mari chimed in.

“Deas!” Maggie added.

I sighed, wondering how the hell I was going to say no to all their adorable faces. Finally, I whispered, “Why are you doing this?”

Evey’s expression fell before she glanced at my girls. “I want them to have a good birthday party.”

“Why does that even matter to you?”

She frowned. “Because they’re great girls. They deserve it.”

“But it’s not your responsibility,” I tried again.

Why wasn’t she getting this?

Why wasn't she understanding they weren't hers to take care of?

Why didn't she know that she didn't have to do any of this?

I could tell by the way her ocean blue eyes pierced into mine that she saw right through my questions and qualms. She knew what I was really asking, and I could tell it bothered her. Finally, she lowered her head and her voice. "I love them too."

And for one moment, I sat there and wondered how a woman who just met my girls could already love them.

But most of all, what it would feel like to be loved by her, too.

"Evey..." I began, but my voice trailed off before I could finish the thought. Her words had left me stunned, and all I could do was sit there and stare.

"It's just a party, Luke," she said, but I don't think either of us believed that. "Please," she said again.

"Peas."

"Deas."

I laughed at the identical looks on all three of their faces and sighed. "Okay. Yeah. That would be great."

"Yay!" Evey squealed, clapping her hands and bouncing in her seat.

"Day!" Mari screamed too, her chubby little hands slapping together just as hard as Evey's.

I knew I should have said no. Knew I needed to put a stop to Evey's over-indulgence and excessive generosity, but how could I? When it put a smile like that on her face and even made my girls happy, how could I say no?

"All right, let's get cleaned up from breakfast," I said as I collected the girls' empty plates. "Dada's gotta get to work."

“Are you still making that gate?” Evey asked as she picked up a pack of wipes and started cleaning their sticky little fingers.

I would have told her not to bother, but I knew I’d be wasting my breath.

“Yeah, I’m actually installing it today.”

“Great. I can go over party stuff with you while you do that.”

I turned to her with a frown. “Huh?”

Her cheeks turned pink, and it made her look even prettier. “I just figured since Matthias is gone, you’d need me to help watch the girls again.”

Goddamn, the list of things I needed her for just grew every day.

“We’ll be fine on our own if you’re busy,” I said carefully. I should have just outright told her no, or at least tried to, but a sick part of me wanted her to spend the day with us. There was the argument that she was good for the girls, but I knew that wasn’t the whole truth.

Evey looked up at me with a tentative smile. “I’m not too busy to help you watch them,” she said, her voice so uncertain, all I wanted to do was kiss her.

Knowing that wasn’t an option, I just nodded. “Okay, then I’m sure the girls would love to spend the afternoon with you.”

I figured it was unnecessary to tell her how much I’d enjoy it too.

Chapter 10

Evey

“Are you sure you don’t wanna come with us?” I asked around a mouthful of ice cream.

I tried to act like his answer didn’t mean much to me, but the truth was, it did.

Tonight I was going out with all my siblings and their mates to see our sister perform and I really, *really* wanted Luke to come too. Not only did I not want to be the ninth wheel like usual, I also just liked being around him.

I’d basically spent this entire week with Luke and his girls, and I’d loved every second. Mari and Maggie were so smart and funny, they were like constant entertainment. You really couldn’t be in a bad mood around those two.

Luke didn’t talk much unless I dragged it out of him, but I always felt him watching. Watching me, watching his girls. He was always present, even if his silence made him seem distant.

Despite his efforts to remain aloof, I’d used this week to get to know him better, and the more I learned, the more there was to like.

“I have no one to watch the girls,” he finally said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I shrugged. “They’ll be asleep by then, and there are like a dozen people in this pack who could watch over them for you.”

His jaw clenched. “I wouldn’t be able to pay them,” he said, his voice hard, but lower than before.

I shoved another spoonful of ice cream in my mouth and shrugged again. “Barter your skills for some babysitting. People do it all the time.”

He held my gaze for a long moment before finally looking away. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

My hopes fell, but I made sure my shoulders stayed straight as I said. “Okay, no worries. I just thought you could use a night out. And maybe a beer.”

Luke chuckled once, and the sound raced right down my spine. “Nah, I’d go for the hard stuff.”

I smiled wide at him. “Okay,” I said as I ate another bite. “Let me know if you change your mind.” Hopefully, my words didn’t sound as desperate as I felt.

Now I knew there was no hope of Luke coming along, a night out with my mated sisters and brother sounded a hell of a lot less fun.

I loved them all, of course, but being with my four siblings and their significant others at the same time was a bit overwhelming. They tried to not make it awkward, but they were fated. No one expected them to be able to keep their hands to themselves for long.

Didn’t mean I needed to see it. And it sure didn’t mean I needed to stand around in a dress I could barely breathe in and watch them fondle each other.

But I’d promised Del I’d be at her show, and I hadn’t seen my older sister in months. I had to go whether I liked it or not.

The positives of this situation weren’t very obvious, but I tried to focus on them anyway as my spoon scraped the bottom of the bowl.

I hadn’t seen Del and Theo in a while, so it would be nice to reconnect with them.

I also hadn’t watched them perform their new duet yet, so that was exciting.

And I'd just bought a gorgeous new dress that I couldn't wait to wear tonight.

And I hadn't been out with all my siblings in over a year because they were parents now.

I struggled to come up with something else, but that was the end of my list of gratitude. I just hoped it would be enough to turn my mood around.

"I wish I could," Luke said, his usually smooth voice rough with some kind of pent-up emotion. "If things were different..." his words trailed off, and I had a feeling he didn't know how to finish his sentence.

If things were different, what?

Maybe he'd want to go out with me?

Maybe he'd want to date me?

I got why he couldn't go there right now, but why was it so hard for him to say? My stomach twisted into a knot as I realized he might not have wanted to finish his sentence because it wasn't true.

Maybe he was just trying to let me down easy.

Maybe he really wasn't interested, and he was trying to avoid hurting my feelings.

My gut churned harder as another thought slithered through my mind.

What if he thought he had to pretend to be interested, so I'd keep helping him with the girls? What if he thought my assistance was dependent on me feeling like he wanted me?

Oh, I felt like I was gonna be sick.

"It's fine," I squeaked as I stood with my bowl in my hand. "I totally get it," I added, my voice still too high-pitched. With a nod at the girls, I said, "Do you need any help gettin' them upstairs to bed?"

I felt obligated to ask because it was something I'd have naturally done before this conversation, but every part of me was hoping he'd turn me down.

Please say no.

Please say no.

Please say no.

All I wanted to do was run to my room and hide under my bed. The hurt was buried deep beneath the embarrassment, but it was there. Now, I wanted to be alone where I could lick my wounds in peace.

“No, no,” Luke said predictably. “I’ve got it under control. You have fun tonight.”

Was it my imagination, or was there a hint of regret in his words?

No, Evelyn.

That’s just what you want to hear.

With a stiff nod, I said, “Thanks, Luke.” A much more natural smile stretched across my face as I leaned over Maggie’s highchair. “See ya tomorrow, Magnolia,” I said, before I kissed the top of her little head. “Sweet dreams, Marigold,” I said to the other toddler, leaning down to also press my lips against her hair. “I’ll see you two in the morning!” I called as I walked away.

“EE!”

“EE!”

“EE has to go bye-bye,” Luke muttered.

“No!” a tiny voice yelled, and I already knew it was Mari. “EE! EE! EE!”

My heart shredded inside my chest as their little cries grew and I hurried to throw my bowl in the dishwasher. I rushed back over to their table as soon as I could. “Hey, hey,

hey,” I said softly as I reached their side. “What’s goin’ on here, ladies?”

Mari had little tears in her eyes, and my heart cracked right down the middle. “EE,” she sobbed.

I didn’t wait for permission from Luke. I couldn’t. I needed to get to her. To hold her. I needed to do whatever it took to stop her from being so sad.

In moments, I had the tray off and her straps unbuckled so I could pull her into my arms. Mari’s little hands rested on the back of my neck and her face tucked into my shoulder as I swayed her back and forth. “See, baby. EE’s here. I’m not goin’ anywhere yet.”

Mari sniffled as a new cry went up from nearby.

“EE!” Maggie wailed, and I couldn’t help smiling.

“I got her,” Luke muttered as he walked around us.

When he had her extracted from her highchair, I took a seat and held out my free arm. “I’ll take her too,” I said.

Maggie’s pudgy little hands were reaching for me already, and the moment I had her in my arms, it felt like my heart was whole again. Seeing their sad faces and hearing their cries for me was too much. It hurt me to see them hurt.

“Come on, girls,” Luke said. “We need to go upstairs to bed and let EE get ready.”

They both tightened their arms around me, and I giggled. “I don’t think they’re ready to let go,” I said as I squeezed them back just as hard.

Luke smiled as he rolled his eyes. “Is it *them* who doesn’t want to let go? Or *you*?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe it’s both.”

He laughed, his eyes so light and happy I wanted to sit here all night and stare at them. But then he cleared his throat and looked away, and the spell was broken again. “I really do need to get them up to bed.”

I shook my head to clear the haze brought on by his presence and stood up, both girls still in my arms. “Guess I’m carrying them upstairs like this,” I said with a laugh.

Luke smirked. “I’ve got a better idea,” he said as he approached us. “Hold on to them.”

“Why?” I asked seconds before he scooped me into his arms and pulled me against his chest. “Luke,” I squealed. “What are you doing?”

I was breathless, and I hoped he’d chalk it up to fright and not the fact that being so close to him messed with my equilibrium.

“I’m trying to get my girls to bed,” he said, the smile still on his face as he carried us across the kitchen.

“Night, girls!” Ms. Elsie called, but Luke didn’t slow.

“Night, Ms. Elsie,” he yelled over his shoulder.

“Nigh-Nigh!” Mari hollered next to where she was lying on my chest.

I giggled, and she looked up at me, her eyes the same warm chocolate as her father’s, and my heart melted a little in my chest. Both girls babbled at us as Luke carried our combined weight upstairs without even breaking a sweat.

When he reached my door, he set me on my feet and started trying to pull the girls out of my arms. “Come on, honey. EE needs to go night night.”

“EE nigh nigh?” Mari asked, her pretty brown eyes on me again.

I hated to lie to them, but I knew they wouldn’t go to sleep if they thought I was up somewhere having a good time without them. So I faked a yawn and nodded. “Yeah, EE’s tired. I need to go night night.”

Mari’s face turned serious as Luke pulled Maggie from my arms too. “Nigh nigh, EE,” she said, her tiny little voice so sweet I couldn’t help leaning in and kissing her soft cheek.

“Thanks, sweets. I’ll see you two pretty girls in the morning,” I said as I slipped behind my door.

I knew every second I stood there would make it that much harder to walk away. But it already felt like I was missing out. It felt like I should be with Luke right now, getting them in their jammies and reading them stories.

I’d known before then my attachment to the twins ran deep. Now I knew it was to the bone. Which also meant it would only end in heartache for me, because they weren’t mine, and I wouldn’t get to keep them forever.

With a heavy heart, I began adjusting my daytime makeup into nighttime makeup and re-curling my hair. Honestly, I wore so much product every day as it was, I didn’t need to do much to go out. Which was good because my heart really wasn’t in it today.

I had to lie on my bed to zip my dress, and as I did, I wondered why I was bothering. The tight material hugged every one of my curves, and the nude color of the fabric almost made it look like I had nothing on.

A perfect dress if you’re trying to tempt a man like Luke into seeing you as something more than a friend. Not so much when it was just going to be you and your siblings.

With a sigh, I grabbed my clutch, stuffed my phone inside, and left my room. I’d only taken one step before I noticed the tight feeling in my chest and knew I wasn’t alone.

I slowly spun around on my six-inch heels and found Luke leaning against the wall outside his bedroom, arms folded across his chest but his dark eyes saying plenty.

I cleared my throat. “Hey, Luke. What are you doin’ out here?”

I suddenly felt awkward, and way overdressed.

What was wrong with me?

Why did I need to wear a cocktail dress to a damn concert venue?

Why couldn't I just wear jeans and a t-shirt like a normal person?

Luke continued to stare at me before he finally ripped his gaze away and coughed. "I'm waiting for the girls to fall asleep," he finally said, his voice rough.

I shuffled back a step, wishing there was a potted plant to hide behind. Or a sinkhole to get swallowed up by.

"How was bedtime?" I asked, aiming for casual but probably landing somewhere closer to hysterical.

He met my eyes again, and I stopped trying to escape. It was like his gaze had ensnared me and I couldn't move. "They went down fine after they stopped asking for you."

My heart melted again, and I glanced past Luke to where I knew they were sleeping. "Sorry."

Luke chuckled and shook his head, dragging my gaze back to him. "Don't be sorry. I'm grateful you're the kind of woman my girls can love so much."

His words rang with sincerity through the quiet hallway, echoing and growing in my mind as I tried to control the way my heart wanted to jump out of my chest and race toward him. "Luke," I said, but that was all I got out before the hallway erupted in chaos.

My sister Callie's door was open and three distinct screams were coming from within. I shook the tension from my body and watched as she closed the door behind her and thumped her head against the wood.

"I take it bedtime's not going well?" I asked.

Callie shook her head, eyes still closed. "It's like they hate sleep," she whispered. "Who hates sleep? Everyone loves to sleep. But not my kids."

I tried to hold in the giggle, but it slipped out anyway. Luke chuckled once too, and my gaze swung his way for a moment before landing on my sister again, who was now glaring at me.

“It’s easy to laugh when you don’t know what it’s like, Evelyn,” she spat.

Her words sliced right through me, deeper than I thought they could, and I stood there frozen as they bled. Callie’s pale blue eyes widened as she realized what she’d said, but we both knew the damage was done.

With all the dignity I could muster, I nodded, my eyes staring at something over her shoulder. “You’re right, Callie. I don’t know what it’s like. I’m gonna go see if Abey and Ellie are ready to leave,” I said as I turned around.

Callie called my name, but I kept walking. I couldn’t stop. I knew if I did, the tears would be close behind, and I wasn’t smudging my eyeliner for her bitch ass.

I walked down the hall as slowly as I could with this urge to run racing through my limbs. When I finally made it to Abraham’s room, I took a deep breath and knocked.

Ellie opened the door, and the first thing out of her mouth was, “You look like you could use a hug.”

A single tearless sob fell out of my mouth as I stepped into her arms. “You have no idea,” I whispered.

Chapter 11

Evey

“Do you think they’re all still asleep?” Ellie asked from the front seat.

My brother rolled his eyes as he pulled into the venue’s parking lot. “Ellie, they’ve been sleepin’ through the night since two months old. I’m sure they’re sleepin’ right now too.”

My sister-in-law nodded, but I could tell her mind was far away. If I had to guess, it was back on pack lands with her triplets.

Abey parked his truck, and I patted the top of Ellie’s head as I slid across the seat and carefully climbed out. “They’re fine,” I said. “And Ms. Elsie will call you if they’re not.”

“What if they have a nightmare and wake up and I’m not there? What if they need me and I’m at a stupid show instead of taking care of my babies? No,” she said with a shake of her head. “Abraham, take me home,” she said as she tried to get back in the truck.

My brother chuckled as he grabbed her around the waist. “We’re not goin’ home. We’re gonna have a drink and a dance and then we’ll get home to our babies. Okay?”

Ellie didn’t look convinced.

“Listen, how about we call Ms. Elsie and ask her to make sure she calls us if they make a sound. That way you’ll know exactly what’s goin’ on at home.”

“But what if they need me and I’m not there?” Ellie asked again.

Abraham laughed again and kissed her cheek. “They’ll be fine for one night. If they wake up and find out it’s Ms. Elsie takin’ care of ‘em, they’ll be ecstatic. You know how much those kids love her.”

Ellie nodded, her shoulders slowly falling. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.”

He kissed her again and set her on her feet. “I’m always right, baby.”

She backhanded him in the chest, but he caught her hand and kissed it too. Their sweet antics made my heart happy and heavy at the same time. I was so glad they’d found each other, but couldn’t help wishing the same for myself.

“Do you think Bea’s already here?” I asked as I walked away, hoping they’d follow.

“I texted her on the ride here,” Ellie piped up as she caught up to me. “She said they were finding our table.”

I almost laughed at the way things had changed in just a couple of years.

Gone were the dirty dive bars where Del had to sing over the sound of crashing pool balls. Now she was playing in a ballroom, and we got to sit in the reserved section at an actual table.

And I was so damn proud of her.

We made it inside and found Bea with her mate, Will. “Where’s Callie?” she asked as we grabbed seats around the table.

She was looking at me for the answer, but I wasn’t in the mood to talk about Callista, so I studied the drink menu in front of me instead.

“I think she was still trying to get the kids down,” Ellie finally supplied. “She’ll probably be here soon.”

“Ugh, I hope it’s not the eighteen-month sleep regression because I’ve heard that’s not fun at all.”

“Oh, we’re anxiously awaiting that lovely phase,” Ellie said before the two launched into stories about their kids.

I tuned them out while my thoughts turned to Luke and the girls. He’d mentioned that Mari had been giving him a hard time at night, and I wondered how she was doing.

Bea’s room had become theirs, and I hadn’t been back inside since the night they got here. It had turned into this great divide between us. This impenetrable wall. This clear distinction between me and them.

Every time I watched them disappear behind that door, it felt like I was losing them. Like they were going somewhere I wasn’t allowed to follow. Like one time I might not get them back.

My mind was in heavy snarls, so I didn’t even notice Callie had made it to our table until she spoke up. “Sorry we’re late,” she said with a huff as she plopped into a seat.

“Did you get the kids down?” Ellie asked with a sympathetic smile.

Callie sighed as her mate, Wyatt, wrapped his hand around hers. “Barely.”

The whole table offered coos of empathy, but I remained silent. I’d been reminded once already that I didn’t know what it was like. I didn’t need to hear it again.

“Actually, Luke came over to help us put them down. He was so helpful,” Callie continued, and I finally turned to look at her. “He kept Poppy occupied in the hall while we got the other two down. We might still be there if he hadn’t stepped in.”

My heart thundered in my chest, and I just hoped the venue was loud enough that no one could hear.

“He’s *such* a good dad,” Ellie gushed next. “And you can tell how much he loves those girls. They’re so lucky to have him.”

My chest warmed hearing my family talk so highly of him. But all too soon, the attention swung to me, and I wasn't prepared.

"You spend a lot of time with them, don't you?" Callie asked.

I sat up straighter in my seat and tried for a nonchalant shrug. "Yeah, I've been helping him with the girls. He *is* outnumbered," I said with a forced chuckle.

Ellie groaned. "Aren't we all?"

I shot her a smile, but it was short-lived.

"Yeah, I thought something was going on between you two since you're always together," my brother spoke up next.

I turned my sharp gaze his way. "No," I said, my voice more stern than I'd meant it. "Nothing's going on between us."

Except, of course, that kiss we shared days ago that was still branded in my mind and every other inch of me he'd touched.

My heart squeezed painfully as those long minutes played inside my head. I could even smell his warm, spicy scent.

The empty chair next to me got pulled out, and just like I'd dreamed him to life, Luke sat down next to me, his face split with a smile.

"Luke," I said with a gasp, an answering grin pulling at my lips. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged as he snagged the menu from my hands. "That drink you mentioned sounded too good to resist."

I continued to watch him, and the smile slowly spread across my face as I stared at his handsome profile. "And the girls?"

He shot me a soft look. "Asleep. And Ms. Nora's got the monitor."

I nodded. “She’s great with kids.”

Luke sighed as he tossed the menu onto the table. “I know she is. I also know the girls probably won’t wake up.” He blew out another deep breath and lowered his voice. “Doesn’t make it any easier to leave them. Especially after what happened last time.”

He still hadn’t given me all the details of the night they left Texas, but I didn’t really need them. I had enough mental images of those poor girls getting hurt to last me a lifetime. It didn’t matter, though. I knew leaving his daughters in someone else’s care was hard for him.

“Then why’d you do it?” I asked, my voice so soft I wasn’t sure he’d hear over the noise in the venue.

But his deep brown eyes met mine, and for one whole second, he lowered his walls and I saw right through him. The raw emotion there froze all the air in my lungs. “Your offer was too good to refuse,” he finally said.

I was starting to feel the effects of not breathing when Luke leaned in to whisper, “And I couldn’t imagine someone else getting to dance with you in that dress.”

All at once, I sucked in a huge lungful of air and started choking on absolutely nothing.

I slid my chair out and leaned over as I tried to catch my breath. Luke chuckled and patted me on the back. “You catch a fly or somethin’?”

I turned my head to glare at him, but the effect was ruined as another debilitating cough wracked my lungs. Luke laughed again, and I’d have been pissed if the sound wasn’t so soothing.

When I finally pulled myself back together, tears streamed down my cheeks, and I knew my face was red, but worse, my whole family was staring at me.

“You all right?” Ellie asked, a secret grin on her face.

I gave her a glare too. “Just fine,” I wheezed.

Luke's warm hand was still on my back, and I wondered if he meant to do that or not.

"I thought you weren't able to come with us," my brother asked, his voice laced with suspicion.

I turned my fiery gaze his way, but he ignored me.

Luke left his hand on my back as he shrugged. "I got Ms. Nora to agree to keep an ear out for the girls if I built her a couple planters for her yard."

"You have to make her *two* planters just for her to listen to a monitor?" I asked.

Luke's hand slid off my back as his smile turned strained. "She also lent me five bucks for gas to get here."

My stomach churned because I knew that admission felt like a confession. Just like I knew what it cost him to even ask her for the money.

"Do y'all remember when we first left Charlotte, and I had to work that trash removal job before my construction company got off the ground?" Abraham asked.

My heart leapt in my chest as I realized what he was doing, and I hurried to answer. "Yeah, and we were sleepin' outside, and some nights had to catch our dinner."

Abraham and the rest of my siblings nodded, their faces somber as we all remembered. "That was while you were still building the lodge," Bea spoke up.

"Yeah, and y'all were working in fast food, but I found that great paying job removing mountains of shit from people's houses. It was disgusting, and I smelled like ass at the end of every day, but it was money when we needed it." Abraham turned to smile at Luke. "I'd much rather have made a couple planters than clean up twenty years' worth of cat shit off someone's carpet."

Luke shrugged, but I could tell some of the tension was gone. "Yeah, I've definitely done worse for less."

Abey chuckled. “Haven’t we all?”

Everyone nodded except for Ellie. “The law firm I worked at was my first job,” she said, her voice timid. “And now I work with Callie. I guess I’ve never had a crappy job.”

Abraham laughed and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “You say that like all three of our kids didn’t have blowouts at the same time yesterday.”

Ellie laughed, but backhanded him anyway. “Hey! Being a mom isn’t a crappy job. It’s the best one yet.”

Her words were like salt in my wounds that never quite went away.

Thankfully, the lights went dim, and the music started to play at that moment, so I didn’t have to pretend I wasn’t wrecked from her offhanded statement.

Luke leaned in to whisper in my ear and all the bad thoughts disappeared. “Is this first act your sister?”

I shook my head, my hair getting caught in his beard he was so close. “No, she’s on second.”

“Does that mean I have to wait all that time to dance with you?”

My heart jumped in my chest and took off at a gallop as I shook my head. “You don’t have to wait.”

“Perfect,” he muttered before he stood and held out his hand. “Will you dance with me?”

My heart was clogging my throat too much for me to speak, so I just nodded and reached for him. He pulled me from my seat and led me onto the floor, where the audience had already rushed toward the stage.

Luke kept us back near the edge of the crowd, spinning me around until I faced away from him and dragging my body back toward his. Luke’s big hands wrapped around my waist as he began to sway us back and forth.

“Have you heard this band before?” he asked, his breath tickling my ear.

I shook my head. “No, but I like them,” I said over my shoulder.

Luke shrugged as he gripped me tighter and pulled me closer. “I think I could dance to anything with you.”

My heart slammed against my ribs as his words echoed in my mind, and I tried to remember to keep breathing. Luke’s body was so big and hard and warm against mine, it made me want to know what it would feel like without all the clothes between us.

“At least this time our dance won’t get interrupted,” he said, his voice deep as it bounced across my skin.

Somehow, I was able to pull off a decent shrug. “I didn’t mind the interruption,” I said truthfully.

Luke’s hands froze on me for a second and I stopped breathing again. “I know you didn’t,” he muttered. I wondered why his voice sounded so strange, but when he spoke again, it was back to normal. “But I’m still happy to have you to myself.”

My heart flopped pitifully in my chest again, and I knew I wasn’t strong enough for this. Just when I’d gathered the courage to say something, his hands began to move.

They slid up my torso, tracing every curve along the way. But when they got to my heaving chest, he just barely skimmed the bottom of my breasts before trailing back down to my hips.

All at once, it was too much for me.

Too intense.

Too confusing.

Too *everything*.

I pulled out of Luke’s arms and spun around to face him. “I don’t get it,” I said as I tried to find my words.

“Don’t get what?” he said with a frown, his hands reaching for me again.

I sidestepped them as I shook my head. “You haven’t even given me a pat on the back since you kissed me days ago, and now you’re here doing this? I don’t *get it*,” I said again.

Luke blew out a deep breath and looked down for a moment before meeting my eyes again. “I was scared to let the girls see us like that. I didn’t know if it would confuse them or upset them. I didn’t know if it would hurt them if things stopped being like that for us. I just... wanted to protect them.”

My heart was hammering away as I tried to make sense of everything he’d just said. “So...” I said slowly as I gathered my thoughts. “You wanted to kiss me again, you just didn’t want it to affect the girls?”

A smile was tugging at the corners of his lips. “That sounds about right.”

“Then why didn’t you just kiss me after they went to bed?”

He laughed, his hands reaching for me again and dragging me close. “I didn’t think that was fair to you. I didn’t think you’d only want after bedtime kisses.”

I shrugged as my hands drifted to his chest and I stared at them instead of him. “I would have been happy with *any* kisses.”

Luke chuckled and pulled me even closer. “Good. Because I’ve *really* wanted to kiss you again,” he said before his lips met mine.

Chapter 12

Luke

“*Fuck*. You taste so sweet,” I groaned as I wrenched my mouth away from hers.

I knew if I didn’t, I wasn’t going to stop, and I needed to. We were still in the middle of a packed concert venue and her whole family was within view. That all added up to me pulling back a bit and cooling it for now.

My forehead fell against hers with a soft thump, and I struggled to catch my breath as she giggled. “You gonna make it?” she asked, humor lacing her words.

I sighed and reached down to kiss her soft lips one more time because I honestly couldn’t help myself. With that last little taste, I straightened back up and met her eyes. “I’ll be all right as long as I get to be alone with you for a few minutes tonight.”

Her racing heart was like music to my ears, and I watched as her pretty pink lips spread into a grin. “That could probably be arranged.”

My hands reached for her without my permission, and I pulled her close again so I could whisper in her ear. “Thank fuck,” I breathed. “Because I was not done kissing you, but I can’t keep doin’ that in front of all these people.”

She pulled back with a mischievous smile and a shrug. “I didn’t even notice them.”

Fuck.

How did this woman have the power to make me feel ten feet tall with a grin and a few choice words?

How did she constantly take all the stress and worry from my life and somehow make it better?

Why did *everything* start to go right the moment she walked into my life?

Before I could answer any of those questions, the people around us started screaming, and we both turned to the stage.

A woman who looked just like a curvier version of Evey strutted onto the stage with a big smile and a guitar around her neck. “Hey, y’all! I’m Del McCoy and I’m so happy to be home in Asheville with all you folks!”

The crowd yelled louder, and even Evey started whistling from beside me. With a smile, I pulled her into my arms again, content to hold her from behind while she watched her sister perform.

It shouldn’t have felt so natural to be with her like this, but it did. Like my arms were always meant to be around her. Like she had no business being anywhere but by my side.

Del started singing on stage, and Evey began swaying to the music. I matched her tempo and closed my eyes as our bodies moved perfectly in sync.

Hours could have passed that way and I wouldn’t have noticed. For the first time in what felt like forever, I was doing something *I* wanted to do. I was doing something selfish. I was doing something just for me.

A voice inside that would always be a dad first warned this might not be in my girls’ best interest. That getting closer to this woman so soon after I left their mother would just hurt them in the end.

But then I remembered all the times they’d asked for Evey when she wasn’t around. And how their little eyes lit up whenever they saw her. Or how amazing she always treated my daughters. She was ten times more compassionate and understanding than their mother had ever been.

There was a lull in the music seconds before the crowd erupted in screams again. I looked up to find a man stalk on stage with a guitar, his eyes on Del. She had a huge smile on her face, and I knew this must be her mate.

“Do y’all know Theo Moore?” she said into her microphone, and the audience yelled louder. She giggled, the sound similar to Evey’s, but much deeper than her bell-like tone. “Okay, good, because he wanted to come sing a song with me if that’s okay with you.”

More yelling, and they both started strumming their guitars, eyes locked on each other again. Finally, the man leaned into her microphone and said, “This is *Love You Through*.”

The whole mood of the place shifted as the two of them sang about a relationship that could withstand anything. I’d seen that kind of love between my parents, but never imagined I’d find it for myself.

Who’d want a man with the kind of baggage I carried?

Who’d want to be responsible for two little girls who weren’t theirs?

I looked down and stared at the side of Evey’s face, wondering if she really might be the one who’d look past all that. Maybe I’d actually found someone who’d see my girls for the gift they were and not a curse like others would.

She must have felt my stare because she turned to me, her smile so goddamn beautiful I couldn’t breathe. I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek because I wanted to know if it was as soft as it looked.

And it was.

With an immense amount of self-control, I pulled away and spun her around to face me. She giggled with the abrupt movement, but her laughter faded as I dragged her close, and she could feel exactly what she was doing to me.

“Luke,” she gasped, but I just shook my head.

If I acknowledged how hard I was or how bad I wanted her right now, I'd never make it through this dance. And she deserved one goddamn dance from me, at least.

Without a word, I pulled her to one side and dipped her low. Evey's head fell back, and my eyes ate up every inch of her graceful neck. I swung her around and then back upright and she giggled again, making me even harder.

Emotions were still clogging my throat, so I kept quiet as I pulled her close and waltzed us around the dancefloor. My moves might have been a little proper for a place like this, but when I met her gaze, I knew she didn't care.

Evey's crystal clear blue eyes hid nothing as she stared at me. I could see how deep this ran. How much it meant.

It scared me as much as it excited me.

I spun her away, watching her twirl before I yanked her back to my chest. She fell against me with a breathless laugh, and I knew I couldn't wait any longer.

I needed to tell her what she meant to me. I needed her to know how much better our lives were with her in them. I needed her to know I liked her more than I'd ever liked anyone else in my life.

Before I could get a word out, the music faded and Del spoke up again. "That's it for me, Asheville! Thanks for comin' out!"

The crowd cheered, and Evey pulled away so she could clap for her sister too. When the venue finally quieted again, she grabbed my hand. "Come on. Let's go see Del."

I swallowed those words down and followed as she met up with her other siblings. The next few minutes were a blur of security guards and badges being flashed, but finally, we were led into a dressing room where six werewolf men and Del stood waiting.

Evey left my side and rushed to wrap her sister in a hug as I stood assessing the rest of the room.

Most of them were tattooed and muscled, and I recognized one as the man who sang on stage with Del. She'd called him Theo Moore.

"Wait a second!" one of them yelled, and the whole room went silent. When I turned to him, I found his blue eyes already locked on me. "Who brought the fresh meat?"

"Declan, you're annoying," Del said as she shoved his shoulder.

The man barely moved, a mischievous smile still on his face.

"That's Luke," Evey piped up, and all eyes turned toward her. "He and his daughters joined our pack a couple weeks ago."

"Aah," Del sang. "So, this is the new guy." Evey's face turned a pretty shade of pink as she reached out to flick her sister on the arm. It didn't seem to make a difference because Del kept talking. "I've heard a lot about you and your girls."

My heart thundered in my chest as my eyes darted from Evey to Del.

She'd been talking about us to her sister?

What did that mean?

That we were an interesting topic of conversation? Or an important one?

I shook my head and crossed the room to shake her hand. "I've heard a lot about you too. It's nice to meet you."

Del's smile grew as she looked back at her sister. "Handsome *and* polite? Damn, girl."

I could feel my cheeks heating too, but Evey's blush had spread to her chest now.

"Wait a damn second!" Declan yelled again, and the room went quiet once more. "Are you two dating?"

Evey's eyes met mine for a brief second before she turned back to Declan and waved her hands between us. "Oh, no. No, no. We're not dating."

Declan eyed her up and down like he didn't believe her. "I thought you were saving yourself for *me*, Evey," he said, eyes big and pleading as he stared at her.

And although logically I knew he was probably kidding because he just seemed like the type, the thought of her dating someone else made me violent.

I fisted my hands to stop myself from reaching for him. But then Evey laughed and most of the anger fled my system just as fast.

"Declan, you know damn well I've been turnin' you down for over a year," Evey said, her words soothing the raw places inside me.

The sandy-haired werewolf actually pouted. "I thought you were just playin' hard to get."

I almost laughed with her this time.

Except Evey being with him still wasn't fucking funny.

"Can't believe you're dating *someone else*," Declan muttered as he dug his boot into the thin carpet beneath his feet.

"We're not—" Evey began, but Theo stepped forward and spoke over her.

"I'm Theo, man. Nice to meet you," he said to me, hand outstretched.

I shook it and gave him the best smile I could manage under the circumstances. "You too. You did great out there."

He shrugged. "That's my favorite song of the night," he said with a glance over his shoulder at Del.

"Okay folks, we're out of time," the werewolf in the suit called over the other conversations happening in the room. "You all need to get on stage."

The men said their goodbyes and filed out of the room as Evey slid up beside me. “Did you want to see them perform? Or are you ready to leave?”

Damn. Why did that simple sentence make me hard?

I leaned in close, letting her sweet vanilla scent drive me fucking crazy again. “I’m ready when you are.”

She let out a shaky breath and nodded. “Okay,” she said as she took a step away from me. “Hey, y’all. We’re gonna get goin’.”

Every single pair of eyes in that room swung to her before they looked at me.

“You’re not gonna stay to watch the band play?” Del asked, but there was a knowing smile on her face, and I had a feeling she was only asking because she wanted to make her sister uncomfortable.

Evey shrugged, even though her face was turning pink again. “He has to go relieve his sitter.”

Del’s red lips just spread wider with a smile. “And what about you? Why don’t you stay ‘til the end?”

Evey blanched. “Oh. Um. I’m kinda tired, actually. I’ve been getting up early with the girls this week.”

Guilt streaked through me, along with a healthy dose of panic. “You never said you were tired of getting up with us in the morning,” I whispered, my words still sounding frantic despite how soft they were. “We won’t wake you up again. You don’t have to get up early just for us. You can sleep as late as you want.”

“No!” she yelled before lowering her voice. “No. I like eating breakfast with you guys. Waking up to y’all is the best part of my day.”

My heart thumped so hard I actually winced. I stared into her eyes, and that urge to tell her how I felt got so strong again it was almost overwhelming.

“All right, let’s go,” Callie said as she stepped up. “We’ve got a show to catch. Drive safe, Luke,” she tossed over her shoulder as she herded the rest of them out the door.

I knew a savior when I saw one.

“Think there’s a back exit?” I asked.

Evey turned to me with a grin. “I bet the security knows,” she said before she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door.

We found a bouncer and the exit quickly and made our way to my truck. As we climbed inside, I realized this was the first time she’d ever been in it.

Just like I was just realizing this was the first time we’d ever been alone together.

The air between us seemed to sizzle as Evey pulled the seatbelt across her chest and buckled herself in. “Did you have a good time tonight?” she asked as I navigated us through the packed parking lot.

I shot her a short, curious grin before focusing on the road again.

Did she not feel this electricity between us?

Was she not drowning in desire right now like I was?

Was this really one-sided?

I cleared my throat. “It was fun. Although I never got that beer.”

She laughed, and I couldn’t help sneaking looks at her as she did. “Aw, I’m sorry, Luke. Next time we go out, the first round is on me.”

Next time?

Those two short words made my heart feel like it was going to break through my ribs. But I shook my head and scoffed. “You really think *you* owe *me* something?”

She turned to frown at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I snuck another look at her and saw the truth there for myself. She really didn’t get what I was saying. She really didn’t understand just how deeply I was indebted to her.

I shook my head but couldn’t help smiling. “Never mind.”

She continued to frown at me for a moment before shrugging. “Where’d you learn to dance like that, anyway?”

Now my smile grew even more. “My mom taught me. Said it would come in handy one day.”

“Guess she was right.”

I looked at Evey again, glowing from the other side of my cab like a goddamn goddess. “She really was,” I murmured.

We drove for a long time in this charged silence, but when we were just a couple miles from the lodge, Evey cleared her throat. “Hey,” she squeaked. “Make this next left.”

With a questioning glance at her, which she ignored, I did what she said, turning down a narrow dirt path that led deep into the woods. “This is where you wanted me to go?” I asked as we bounced around the truck on the uneven road.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice breaking again. “Just follow this until the end.”

I didn’t question her again as I drove for a couple long minutes in silence. The road really was shit, and I was just starting to worry about my suspension when the trees cleared and a tranquil lake appeared.

Evey cleared her throat again, and now that the damn truck wasn’t being so loud, I could hear the way her heart was racing. “You can pull over up there,” she said, pointing to a small clearing.

I did what she said without a word, but inside, the questions were relentless. When I finally had it in park, I turned to her, waiting for an explanation.

Evey was squirming in her seat, hands gripping the belt as she looked anywhere but at me.

“Where are we?” I asked softly, like anything louder would spook her.

She giggled, but the sound was bordering on hysterical. “This is, um, a place people like to go to be alone. Sometimes. If that’s what they’re into,” she babbled.

I stared at her perfect profile, my dick hardening in my pants and my hands shaking on the steering wheel. “Are you saying you brought me to your packs’ make-out spot?”

Evey laughed again, the sound even more unsure. “Maybe?”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and slid across the bench. “Thank fuck.”

Chapter 13

Evey

“Luke,” I gasped as he grabbed my hips and lifted me into the air. He sat me on his lap, and I sucked in another sharp breath.

He chuckled as his hands slid to my ass. “It’s been like that all night,” he muttered, his voice deep and gravelly. “I’ve been hard since I saw you in this damn dress.” My eyes fell closed as he made his way up my back, his fingers finding my zipper.

“What do you have against my dress?” I breathed, my heart thundering so loud I almost couldn’t hear myself speak.

Luke slowly unzipped me, his rough hands palming the skin he revealed. “It’s beautiful, but I want to see what’s beneath it.”

My breath caught in my throat as he pulled away and let the top of my dress sag to my waist. Luke’s eyes widened as he stared at my heaving chest and my nipples felt so hard they actually hurt.

His gaze finally darted to me. “You have your nipple pierced,” he said, his voice barely loud enough to hear.

I swallowed hard and nodded as he reached out to cup the breast with the barbell in it. “I was supposed to get them both done, but after the first, I chickened out.”

He laughed, his breath blowing against my flushed skin and making me tremble. “That sounds like you.”

My face heated as I crossed my arms over my chest. “Hey, it hurt, okay? I thought my nipple was gonna fall off.”

He laughed as he grabbed my wrists and dragged them away so he could see me again. “I think you’re perfect like this,” he said, his eyes locked on my breasts, hands rising to touch them again. “Now I get one of each,” he murmured as he leaned down to suck the unpierced nipple into his mouth.

The sensation of his warm tongue on my skin mixed with the underlying ownership in his words made me cry out in the quiet truck.

Luke laughed as he pinched the other nipple. “You’re a screamer, huh?” he asked as his lips trailed up my neck. “Good thing you brought me somewhere so private.”

I shook my head as his mouth made its way to mine. “I’m not a screamer,” I said, working to make my voice even.

He chuckled again. “We’ll see about that.”

His lips met mine, and I moaned as his hands skimmed down to my waist again. I sat up on my knees so he could drag my dress to my hips and pull his pants down. My body moved without my permission, rubbing against his hard tip. I sighed at the pressure building.

“Evey,” he said with a growl as he grabbed my hips and held me still. “If you don’t stop, this won’t last long.”

I slid my arms around his neck and pressed my chest against his. “Touch me,” I whispered in his ear. “Please.”

He groaned as his hands slid to my ass and he cupped my bare skin. Luke spread me apart and dipped his fingers beneath my damp panties. I gasped at the intrusion before pushing myself harder against his hand.

He laughed and slid one thick finger deep inside me. “You like that?”

I nodded. “Yes. More. Please,” I panted.

His chuckle seemed to race right through me as he obliged. He added another finger and plunged them in and out of me faster and faster as I writhed on his lap. I'd never had a climax surge so fast, but I was almost there, and we'd just gotten started.

Luke leaned down to pull my pierced nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. Finally it was too much, and I screamed as I came on his hand, my body shaking so hard it felt like I'd shift right out of my human skin.

Before I could recover, Luke lifted me again, but this time, when he lowered me, I was impaled by his thick length. I gasped loudly, the breath frozen in my lungs as he seemed to go on and on and on.

When I finally reached the end, I sat there with my arms around his neck, trying to breathe through all the sensations.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice rough with strain.

I giggled. “Yeah. I'm just not used to someone so... big.”

He laughed and gripped my hips harder before leaning in to whisper, “I don't know whether to be jealous you're comparing me to another man's cock or be happy you're so impressed with mine.”

I shook my head and closed my eyes as I began to rock back and forth on his lap. “Don't be jealous. None of them mattered.”

Everything froze inside me as I realized what I'd just let slip. I cracked an eye open to see Luke also still, his dark eyes on me.

“Evey,” he began, but I shook my head.

“No,” I said, my heart already tripping over itself to run as far away from this conversation as possible. “No more questions. No more talking. Just touch me.”

I started gyrating on his lap again, hoping to distract him from my accidental confession, but I already had a feeling it wasn't helping. When he growled and flipped us onto the seat with him hovering over me, I thought my plan had finally worked, but then he opened his mouth.

"I won't ask you any more questions, but I'm not done talkin'," he said as he thrust deep inside me.

My head fell back, and I gripped his biceps hard as he continued to slide in and out at a brutal tempo.

Luke leaned in close and whispered in my ear, "The three days it took us to get here were the darkest of my goddamn life. It felt like an endless night without a single ray of light for us to follow. All I had was the address of this pack and the hope it would be a safe home for my girls." He paused for a minute and used both hands to brush the hair off my face. "And then we met you and got so much more than we ever could have asked for."

I gasped, my eyes jumping to his, but he wasn't finished.

"The second I saw you, it was like the fucking sun had risen. Like I could finally see a way out of the nightmare I'd been in for years. Like there might actually be a chance my girls and I could make it through this upheaval. And that's all because of you."

My throat was clogged with tears and denial, but I didn't get a chance to voice any of it.

Luke slid his big hand down my bare thigh and yanked it up around his hip. At this new angle, he hit deeper than ever, and I was just barely hanging on.

"I don't know what we ever did to deserve you," he continued as he thrust into me harder. "But I swear you're the best goddamn thing that's ever happened to us."

A tear slid down my face at the same time the most powerful orgasm I'd ever had ripped through my body. More tears fell as I screamed his name and shook uncontrollably

beneath him. Finally, Luke stilled too, and I could feel him emptying inside of me.

I gasped, my eyes flying wide open. “Luke! Did you use a condom?”

His face blanched above me as he looked between us like he didn’t already know the answer. “Fuck. No. I didn’t.”

My heart raced in my chest, but instead of fear, all I felt was a tiny thrill of excitement. I raced back through the calendar and estimated I wasn’t exactly in my fertile window, but it was still a slight possibility.

Why didn’t that scare the crap out of me?

“It’s okay,” I breathed.

Luke pulled out of me and sat back on the seat with a thump. “No, no, no, no, no,” he said as he ran his hands through his dark hair.

“Luke?” I said as I sat back up and pulled my dress over my naked chest.

“I can’t have any more fucking kids right now!” he screamed, his voice echoing in the small confines of the truck. “I can’t even afford the two I already have!”

I reached out to touch his arm, but he jumped when I did, so I pulled back. “Relax. It’s not a big deal. I’m not even really at the right part of my cycle.”

He turned wide, terrified eyes to me and I could actually feel the fear radiating off him. “Evey, I can’t have more kids. Not when I don’t even have a job. Not when I don’t have a place to fucking live.”

I frowned. “You work for the pack. You live in the lodge.”

He scoffed as he pulled his boxers and jeans back up around his waist. “I work odd jobs for the alpha and live in his sister’s old room. I have no clothes for my kids, I have no money to buy them food, so I rely on the pack to feed us too. I

barely have anything to offer my daughters, and I sure as hell don't have shit to give another set of kids."

I swallowed past the thick emotion clogging my throat and nodded. I wasn't sure why his words cut right to my core, but they did.

Maybe I'd foolishly believed I could have a future with this man. One where we all became a family and one day added to it. One where I got to keep these girls and this man that had come to mean so much to me.

But that obviously wasn't the case.

I cleared my throat and slid my dress back into place. "I wouldn't worry too much. I'm not supposed to ovulate for another week and a half."

"I have no fucking clue what that means."

I would have laughed, but I felt too much like crying. "It just means it would be really unlikely for me to get pregnant tonight."

He blew out a deep breath and slumped against the seat. "Thank fuck," he muttered.

I giggled, but the sound was off and a little hysterical sounding. "Yeah, I'm sure it'll be fine," I said as I opened the driver's side door and slid out.

I took an extra second to compose myself as I walked around the back of the truck. I needed to remember Luke didn't owe me anything. He already had a family of his own. Why would he want more?

By the time I got to the passenger door, Luke was outside, his expression apologetic. "Evey, I'm sorry," he said as he walked forward and grasped my arms. "I didn't mean to freak out like that." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he stepped even closer, eliminating all the distance between us. "This has nothing to do with you, okay? I'm the fucking wreck here. I'm the asshole whose life is in pieces. *I'm* the problem."

My heart ached, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching out to cup his face. "I think you're doin' a great job." He scoffed, and I tilted his head to meet my eyes. "Don't you remember I just asked the girls the other day if they were happy? Do you recall what they said?"

Luke rolled his eyes and pulled out of my grasp. "They're two. Cheerios make them happy."

"And a good dad would know that," I fired back. He turned to shoot a narrow-eyed look at me, but I just shrugged. "You're not getting me to admit you're anything but an amazing father. Those girls are healthy, happy, and well looked after. Anything else isn't important."

His expression changed, and in an instant, he was in front of me again, his thick arms wrapped around my waist and his lips on my neck. "Have I ever told you how incredible you are?" he asked, his voice rumbling along my skin.

I fought off a shiver. "No. I don't think you have."

He shook his head.

"Have I told you how much better my life is with you in it?"

I smiled as he kissed his way up my throat toward my face. "You may have mentioned that before."

Luke chuckled, and it sent a shiver racing down my spine. "Then, have I told you I think about you all the time? That whenever we're not together, I'm counting down the minutes until I see you again?"

He pulled back to look me in the eyes again, and I shook my head. "No," I whispered. "I didn't know that."

He cupped my face and tilted it further back. Now it felt like every thought and emotion I had was laid bare for him. Like there was absolutely nothing I could hide.

"I don't know what this is," he muttered, his eyes darting to my lips. "But I'm sick of questioning it," he said before he leaned down and kissed me.

We wasted a lot of time kissing against the side of his truck. Our hands explored, but not in the frantic way we had before. This time, it was almost like we were slowly studying each other. Like we had nowhere else we had to be.

Except that wasn't true.

Luke finally pulled back with a sigh and rested his forehead against mine. "I should really get back," he said, the regret in his voice making me smile.

"You can always kiss me during naptime tomorrow," I suggested.

He laughed and leaned down to kiss me again. "I like the way you think, McCoy."

His hands seemed to linger as he let go and took a step back. "We should do this again," he said, his eyes already lit with desire.

I laughed. "Yeah, you can just come down to my room next time. There's no need to be doin' the devil's dance in a dang truck."

Luke's lips trembled before he let out a loud laugh that startled an owl from a nearby tree. "Doin' the devil's dance," he said with another chuckle as he opened the passenger door for me. "Where do you learn shit like that?"

I shrugged as I carefully climbed into the cab. "Here and there."

He laughed again and closed my door before getting in on his side. The ride back to pack lands was short, but filled with easy conversation. I was glad the change in our status hadn't affected our friendship.

When we pulled up to the lodge, an enforcer was there to greet us.

"Luke, you gotta get upstairs," Colton said. "The girls have been losin' their minds for the past thirty minutes."

“What?” he yelled as he ran toward the house. “Why didn’t anyone call me?” he shouted over his shoulder.

“She wouldn’t let us,” Colton called back, but we were already well ahead of him.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” I said as I tried to catch up to him in my high heels.

“I knew this was a mistake,” he muttered, and my heart fell to the pit of my stomach.

We made it to the third floor in record time and the first person we found was Ms. Nora.

“What the hell happened?” Luke said instead of *hello*.

Ms. Nora held up her hands, her face flushed with anger. “They were sleeping peacefully the whole time you were gone.”

“Then what the hell happened?” he yelled again as he stormed past her on the way to his room.

I could hear the girls wailing from here and I picked up the pace too, my heart aching for their pitiful cries.

“And why the hell are they alone?” he snarled, the sound so vicious even I took a step back.

Ms. Nora stopped short, eyes wide with fear. “She wouldn’t let me back in.”

“*She* who?” he growled.

But someone behind us spoke up before she could.

“Hey, Lukey!”

We both froze before slowly spinning to face the high-pitched voice.

I immediately knew who she was. I recognized her curly blonde hair and the tiny freckles on her nose. I’d seen her every single morning in those two little girls I’d fallen in love with.

“Holly?” Luke asked, confirming what I already knew.

It was the twins' mother and Luke's ex.

What the hell is she doing here?

"I'm here for the girls' birthday!" she said, as if she heard my question. "I can't believe they turn two tomorrow!"

Luke shook his head, eyes darting over her shoulder as the girls' cries got louder. "What's wrong with the girls?"

"I just woke them up to say happy birthday, and they threw a fit."

My hands shook with anger, but I remained where I was as Luke stormed toward the sound of the girls' cries. When he flung open the door, the screams got louder, and Luke hurried into the room with Holly hot on his heels.

The door was closed behind them, and all at once, my biggest fears were realized.

Here I was, standing on this side of that door, knowing I wasn't allowed in there. Knowing I wouldn't be welcome in there. Knowing despite it all, I'd never have a place in there.

If I'd known losing them all was the price for getting Luke to myself, I never would have even danced with him.

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Chapter 14

Luke

“Ugh, were they always this loud?” Holly whined behind me as I rushed toward Mari. She looked like the one closest to puking, so she was top priority.

“Hey, hey, hey,” I cooed in her ear as she wrapped her little arms around my neck. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

“Dada,” she cried, and my heart broke right in half.

I turned to shoot a glare at Holly. “Why would you wake them up in the middle of the night?”

She just rolled her eyes. “It was after midnight. I wanted to say happy birthday. How does that make me the bad guy?”

Stomach acid ate at my insides as I tried to control my anger. Instead of answering Holly, I turned to Maggie and picked her up, too. She wasn’t crying as hard as Mari had been, but her quiet little whimpers almost hurt worse.

“Hey, Maggie baby,” I whispered in her ear. “It’s late, my love. We need to go night-night.”

Maggie nodded, her little face rubbing the side of my neck as she did. “Dink,” she said.

“Dink,” Mari parroted, and I smiled.

“Sure, baby girls. Let’s get a drink.”

I walked them over to my nightstand and sat on the bed before grabbing the sippy cup full of water I kept up here for them. Maggie let her little sister have the first sip, and I watched as my poor, sleepy girls shared their water.

When they were done, Mari handed it back to me. “Are you two ready for night-night now?”

“Des,” Maggie said.

“No,” Mari countered.

I chuckled. “Okay Mari-girl, why don’t you sit on the bed with a toy while I put your sister down?”

Marigold’s eyes lit up as I handed her a borrowed stuffed animal, so she didn’t care when I walked away with her sister.

I held Maggie close and kissed her little cheeks over and over as I carried her to the pack ‘n play. Before I could set her down, Holly’s annoying voice broke through the quiet room.

“Can I say goodnight too?”

My whole body tensed, and Maggie shot me a questioning look. I worked to calm myself before saying, “Sure.”

Holly hurried over, bringing her sour citrus scent with her. Fuck, the smell turned my stomach.

“Nighty night, Magnolia,” Holly said as she reached across me to touch her.

I tensed again as I watched her put her hands on my daughter for the first time since that night. Those images flashed through my mind at warp speeds, and my stomach churned harder. With every ounce of self-control I possessed, I kept still as Holly patted Maggie on the back.

“Okay,” I said, pulling away so her hand fell off. “She needs to go to bed.”

Holly huffed like she was about to start shit, but I ignored her and laid Maggie in her bed. “Goodnight, sweet girl. I love you and I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

She smiled up at me before rolling onto her belly, and my heart ached in my chest. With a deep breath, I turned back

for her sister, prepared for the fight.

“Can I help?” Holly called after me.

“You’ve done enough.”

Holly tsked, but I ignored her as I tried to rationalize with my two-year-old about why it was time to sleep. Finally, after a fifteen-minute battle, Mari was in her bed on her belly and quiet. I gave her another few minutes of silence before I finally sighed in relief.

What a fucking night.

From the highest highs, to panic, to frustration, to outright anger.

And as my gaze swung to Holly sitting in a chair scrolling through her phone, it was the anger that resurfaced.

I snapped my fingers and her eyes jumped to mine. I motioned for her to follow as I quietly stalked out of the room and into the hallway. I’d halfway expected Evey to still be standing there, but that was ridiculous. She had better things to do than wait around for me.

Holly shut the door behind her, and the loud sound seemed to ricochet through the hall. “Easy,” I seethed.

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. It popped her tits up and out of her tank top, but I was past caring what her tits did. “This is really the welcome I get? After everything you did to me?”

My whole world was tinted red for a minute, and I squeezed my fists tight to stop myself from punching something. “Everything I did to you?” I repeated, my voice low and dangerous.

“Yes! You stole two hundred fucking dollars from my wallet! And then drove off and left the state, leaving me behind! Luke, I am your *mate*. How could you do that to me?”

My teeth were grinding so hard I thought my jaw would crack. “And what about the girls?”

She frowned. “What *about* the girls?”

My knuckles were groaning now with how hard I was squeezing my fists. “You seem to be worried about losing two hundred dollars and losing me, but you haven’t mentioned losing your daughters once.”

Holly’s mouth fell open, and I could actually see her grasping at straws. “When I said *you* left me, I meant *all* of you, obviously.”

“Okay, Holly,” I said as I walked past her. I knew if I stood there too much longer, I was going to do something I’d regret.

“Hey, I showed up for their birthday, didn’t I?” she yelled at my back. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

I stopped short and closed my eyes, willing the violence from my system.

But it wasn’t working.

I spun back around and pinned her with a glare that should have singed the fake eyelashes off her face. “Their birthday isn’t until Wednesday. You’d think as the woman who birthed them, you’d know that, but obviously, it’s not important enough for you to remember. So, what you did was show up where you’re not wanted and wake my girls up for *nothing*.”

Holly’s jaw fell open again. “They’re my girls too!” she yelled, but I turned around and walked away again. “And their birthday *is* today! It’s the eleventh!”

I shook my head but didn’t stop walking. “Their birthday is the fourteenth.”

“Ugh,” she screeched before she sprinted ahead and stopped in front of me. “Luke, can you be reasonable? You know I’m not good with dates.” I tried to walk around her, but she grabbed my wrist and wrapped both hands around it. “Listen, I’ve missed you, and I know you’ve missed me too.

I'm even willing to overlook the fact that you smell like another woman and sleep with you tonight."

I jerked my arm out of her hold like she'd burned me with her words. "*Fuck* no," I spat. "I'm not *sleeping* with you. I don't want anything to do with you."

Holly's blue eyes darkened, and her face turned red as she stared at me. "Luke, I am your mate and I'm the mother of those girls. I have rights."

I took a step forward before I could stop myself. "You are *not* my mate, and you lost your right to be Mari and Maggie's mother the moment you hurt them."

She gasped so loud it was like someone stabbed her. "*Hurt* them? What are you talking about? I would never hurt them!"

"I saw the goddamn bruises, Holly!" I yelled over her bullshit. "I heard them fucking crying that day I came home. I heard Mari yelling *no, Mama—*"

My voice cracked as I choked on the words, her tiny pleading voice tearing my insides apart. I reached up to grab handfuls of my hair and tugged on that instead of wringing Holly's neck.

When my scalp was burning and I finally thought I had control over myself, I let go and pinned her with another glare. "I know you hurt them. I know you'd been hurting them for a while. And let me promise you this, Holly: I will *never* give you the opportunity to hurt my girls ever again. I don't give a shit *who* you are."

Her face paled as she took a step toward me. When I backed up, she stopped advancing and stood there fidgeting with her hands. "Luke, what are you saying? That I can't be in your life anymore?"

"Holly, whatever we had was out of necessity for Maggie and Mari. I only stayed with you because I thought I had to for them. Now that I know they're better off without their mom, there's nothing keeping me with you."

Her eyes filled with tears as her lip trembled. “You can’t be serious. You can’t just walk away from me.”

“I already did,” I said before I turned to leave.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?” she called after me.

“Not my problem, Holly,” I said, but didn’t slow.

“You’re just going to leave me stranded here in bumfuck North Carolina?”

“You can get somewhere else as easily as you got here.”

“Luke,” she screeched, and I spun back around.

“Will you keep your fucking voice down?” I said, as I stormed back over to her. “There are other people sleeping in this house.”

“You can’t just walk away from me like I mean nothing.”

“Yes, I can. You’re the mother of my children, but you’re also the bitch that hurt them, so I don’t owe you goddamn thing.”

I turned to leave again, but her next question made me pause.

“What about the girls?”

“They’re better off without you,” I said as I started moving again.

“Can’t I just stay until their birthday?” she yelled, her voice too loud again. “You should have seen their little faces when I woke them up and they saw it was me. They were both yelling *Mama, Mama*. It was *so* cute.”

I could tell what she was doing, because she’d done it a thousand times before. Holly knew my one weakness was my girls. She’d never had any kind of control over me until

Maggie and Mari came into the picture, and I'd been forced into a relationship with her.

“Don't you think they'd want to spend some time with me after being apart for so long?”

Goddamn it.

Despite how awful of a mother Holly was, I knew my girls still loved her. They were too pure not to. They couldn't tell how deceptive and deceitful she was. They just knew she was their mama, and they loved her without question.

And she didn't deserve an ounce of it.

“Just let me stay until their birthday. That way I can find somewhere else to go after this, and I can spend some time with my monsters.”

“Don't call them that,” I fired back as I spun around to face her.

Holly rolled her eyes. “Come on, Luke. You're being ridiculous. You can't deny me the right to see my daughters on their birthday.”

“You don't even know when their birthday is,” I sneered.

She threw her hands in the air. “I'm sorry I'm not good with dates! Give me a fucking break. At least I was too early and not too late for their birthday!”

I shook my head at her asinine arguments, but they were working.

I knew despite all the shit she put them through, they were still going to wake up and ask for her. Just like I knew I didn't want to have to explain to them *again* why their mom was gone.

Maybe there was a chance Holly and I could co-parent. Maybe there was a way for us to both be in their lives in a healthy way.

But she hurt my girls.

I grit my teeth and shook my head again. “Fine,” I growled. “You can stay until after the party. Then you have to find somewhere else to go.”

“What party?”

My heart flipped in my chest, and my eyes darted to Evey’s door without my permission. I hoped she was sleeping in there and not up listening to our bullshit. Our night should have ended so much differently, and I blamed Holly for that.

She had the opposite of a Midas touch. Everything around her turned to shit instead of gold.

“A couple pack mates are throwing a little birthday party for the girls.”

Holly’s smile was as fake as her tan. “Oh yeah? That’s nice.”

She didn’t mean that.

“Yeah, they’re great here. They’ve really treated us like family.”

Her eyes narrowed when I said that, and I knew more shit was on the way. “Oh, do you normally fuck your family?”

“You’re sick, Holly,” I said as I turned to leave again.

“I just think it’s funny how you moved on so quickly,” she called after me.

“Didn’t need to move on from you because I was never in love with you,” I said over my shoulder.

She screeched again and I swear I’d never been closer to violence. “Holly,” I snapped as I turned back to her. “Shut the fuck up,” I whisper yelled.

Holly folded her arms across her chest. “Am I just supposed to stand here and let you disrespect me?”

“I’m not disrespecting you,” I said with a sigh. “I’m just telling you the truth. We were never in love.”

She sniffled, and I could tell even that was fake.
“Speak for yourself.”

Just barely holding back an eye-roll, I said, “Look, it’s late, and we’re both tired. Let’s just go to sleep, and we can talk more tomorrow.”

Holly wiped her eyes like there were actually tears there and nodded. “Okay, we can go to bed,” she said and turned back down the hall.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked as I caught up to her.

She frowned. “To bed?”

“Yeah. Where?”

Her brow furrowed even more. “With you?”

I shook my head. “Hell no. You’re not sleeping with me.”

“Where do you expect me to sleep?” she asked, her voice rising again.

“I don’t care. Your car. The woods. The floor. Take your pick,” I said as I pushed past her.

“You’re going to let the mother of your children sleep outside?” she yelled this time.

I turned back to her, fists clenched as tight as ever. “Let’s get one thing straight, Holly. You giving birth to those girls was the first and last good thing you’ve *ever* done.”

She opened her mouth to argue some more, but I cut her off and kept talking.

“I’ll let you sleep on the floor in our room for tonight only. Tomorrow you need to go to the alpha yourself and ask for a room.”

“Lukey, you know how I feel about alphas.”

Yeah, she hated they had more control than her.

“Yeah, and you know how I feel about you, but here we are.”

I turned around and headed back down the hall, not doubting she'd follow me. As I passed Evey's door, I had to restrain myself from reaching out and knocking. I had to convince myself I shouldn't try to give her a goodnight kiss.

Then I remembered I wasn't alone, and all those thoughts vanished.

I did *not* need Holly knowing anything about Evey. The more I could keep them apart, the better.

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Chapter 15

Evey

“EE!”

“EE!”

With my eyes still half-closed, I stumbled across my room toward the tiny knocks and tinier voices in the hall. When I got to the door, I flung it open to find Mari and Maggie’s sweet little faces smiling up at me.

“EE!” they both yelled, and I knelt down to pull them into my arms.

“Good morning, Magnolia,” I said and kissed her on the head. “Good morning, Marigold,” I said with another kiss for her. “How did you girls sleep last night?”

They launched into lively babble, and I pretended to understand everything they said.

“No way!” I whisper-yelled. “That’s unbelievable.”

The girls’ chatter only got louder and more excited as I urged them on.

“What happened next?” I said.

Luke laughed above us, and I shot him a tentative smile from my crouched position. His chocolate brown eyes were warmer than ever as he grinned back at me.

I had to blink the stars out of my eyes before I could continue my conversation with the girls. “Are you two ready for brekkie?”

“Bekky!” they both crowed, and I giggled as I straightened up.

“Guess it’s time for bekky,” I said to Luke.

His smile was still wide across his face, and it filled my chest to the brim with emotion. Part of me worried, in the light of day, he’d regret what we did yesterday. Especially considering the late-night guest he had.

But I didn’t see any of that in his gaze. There was just happiness and the tiniest bit of heat that was enough to make my belly clench deep inside me.

I wondered where the twins’ mother was, but before either of us could say anything else, another voice rang out in the hallway.

“Hey, where are you guys going?”

We both froze in place, Luke’s eyes turning hard while mine just widened.

“Mama?” Mari asked, her little voice confused, like she hadn’t expected to see her.

I turned to watch Holly walk down the hallway toward us, her blonde hair somehow still perfectly curled from the night before. In the sunlight, it was even easier to find the similarities between her and the girls, and each one was another tiny reminder that they weren’t mine.

It was then I realized she’d come out of Luke’s room and my stomach only churned harder.

Why would she be in their room?

Why would he let her sleep there?

And where exactly did she sleep?

I understood that was his daughters’ mother, but dang, it hadn’t even been twelve hours since he’d slept with me. Now there was another woman sharing a room with him?

“Hey,” Holly said again as she caught up to us, but her eyes were only on Luke. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Luke frowned. “Since when do you wake up before noon?”

Her cheeks turned pink as her eyes flashed with a warning. “I don’t always sleep ‘til noon,” she muttered, and Luke just scoffed. Holly’s angry eyes swung my way, and it felt like they’d melt my flesh. “And who is this?”

It seemed she was still only speaking to Luke, so I let him answer. He cleared his throat and my eyes jumped to his anxious gaze. “This is the alpha’s sister.”

Each of his words was another blow to my chest, leaving me covered in cuts and bruises.

I was the alpha’s sister.

No more. No less.

I was not a part of this family. I didn’t get a title, and I’d never had a more stark reminder.

With a shake of my head, I cleared my throat and held out a hand. “My name’s Evey. It’s nice to meet you.”

Holly stared at my outstretched limb like it was something she’d just run over.

Before she could say anything, a tiny voice rang out. “EE?”

I looked down at Mari and smiled. “Yes! I’m EE, smart girl.”

Mari grinned back up at me, and I yearned to lean down and kiss her little cheek, but I had a feeling Holly wouldn’t like that.

I finally turned back, and the look on her face made it clear I’d made the right decision. She finally grasped my fingers for a moment before pulling away. “I’m Holly. I’m the girls’ mother.”

Even though I already knew who and what she was to them, hearing it out loud made it real. I swallowed past the

lump in my throat. “It’s nice to meet you,” I said again, lying just as much as I had the last time I’d said it.

She didn’t answer me back, which told me all I needed to know about her. “Where are you guys going?” she asked Luke.

His gaze darted to mine, his expression clearly uncomfortable. “We’re going down to breakfast.”

“Bekky!” Mari yelled, and I couldn’t stop myself from reaching out to ruffle her messy hair.

When I looked back up at Holly, I felt the full force of her glare, but my spine stayed straight and my expression stayed neutral. You don’t grow up with a sister like Bea and cower before a simple bitch like Holly.

“Can I come?” she asked.

Luke’s eyes darted to mine again, but I looked away. This wasn’t my problem to handle, and I didn’t know what he wanted me to say anyway.

“Um. I’m not sure,” Luke said, his words trailing off and his eyes still on me. “It’s really only for residents.”

It seemed like he didn’t want her around any more than I did, and that made my broken heart beat just a little stronger.

Holly crossed her arms over her chest, making her boobs spill out of her shirt. “Well, what am I supposed to do then?”

Luke sighed. “I don’t know, Holly. Go to McDonald’s or something?”

“Madonna!” Mari yelled, and Luke sighed again.

“No McDonald’s today, honey. We’re goin’ downstairs to have camel eggs.”

“Camel eggs!” she yelled instead, and I couldn’t help giggling.

“I don’t know why you encourage their baby talk. You’re not doing them any favors.” Holly’s voice cut through the hallway like a hot knife.

My hackles were instantly raised, my hands clenching into fists as I watched her scowl at one of the best dads I’d ever met. How dare she criticize him after everything he’d done for these girls?

“Because they *are* babies, Holly,” he muttered as he picked Maggie up and sat her on his hip.

“No,” she argued. “They’re two, and they need to act like it.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re twenty-eight, and you still don’t act like it.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously, and I was done standing here listening to her bullshit. I bent down to pick up Mari, and she reached for me immediately. “If y’all want some time to talk, then go do it in private. These girls need breakfast and they shouldn’t have to sit through this crap.”

“Cap,” Mari said with a nod.

It made me want to laugh, but Holly just used it to be a jerk.

“This is who you bring around our girls?” she spat, her fiery gaze still only on him.

“Enough, Holly. You’ve said way worse in front of them.”

“But *I’m* their mother.”

Her words landed like embers on my body, sizzling as they burned through my flesh and burrowed into my soul.

She had rights, and I had nothing.

Would I never be allowed to forget?

Would I never get to be anything more than an outsider looking in?

I shook those dark thoughts off and turned to leave. "It's time for bekky," was all I was able to force past my numb lips as I walked away.

"Where do you think you're going with my daughter?" Holly yelled after me.

Before I could answer, Luke was at my side, doing it for me. "We're going to breakfast, Holly. The girls need to eat."

"Well, what the hell am I supposed to do?" she called after us.

"You're a big girl. I'm sure you can figure something out."

"I don't have any money! I don't have anywhere else to go!"

We'd just made it to the first landing on our way down the stairs when Luke spun around and speared her with a glare. "So, what, Holly? You came here expecting I'd just take care of you?"

Her bottom lip jutted out as she shrugged, and I almost rolled my eyes.

Luke shook his head. "I didn't ask you to come here. I don't want you here, and I don't owe you anything. I told you if you want to stay, you can talk to the alpha."

He turned to walk away, and I watched as her face fell, along with her shoulders.

I bit my lip and fought against it, but my mama's lessons on manners were too deeply ingrained in me. And I'd be damned if someone in my house went hungry.

"You can come to breakfast," I said, and her watery blue eyes darted to mine. "You're welcome to eat with us."

Holly sniffed and looked at Luke, but he was staring at me. "You don't have to do that," he muttered, and she gasped in outrage.

“It’s one meal. We always have plenty of food,” I said to him before turning back to Holly. “You can have some breakfast, and meet Abraham, and then y’all can discuss what happens next.”

I could feel how tense Luke was next to me, but what else could I have done? Let the woman starve just because she had everything I’d ever wanted?

She started down the steps, and I readjusted Mari in my arms before following Luke. It was a quiet trip, thankfully, and when we got to the kitchen, the everyday chaos was enough to ease the tense situation.

“Mississi!” Mari yelled as soon as she saw Ms. Elsie, and the elderly werewolf turned to smile at her.

“Ms. Marigold, did you get prettier overnight?”

Mari giggled as Maggie spoke up. “Hi! Hi, Mississi!”

Ms. Elsie rounded the island to say hello to her. “Ms. Magnolia, you look prettier too! Did you two have something special in your camel eggs yesterday?”

“Camel eggs!” they both screamed, and we all laughed.

“Yes, angels. Mississi has your camel eggs all ready for you.”

Holly scoffed from behind us, but Luke and I ignored her.

Ms. Elsie did not.

“Who do we have here?” she asked, her eyes focused over my shoulder.

Luke tensed next to me and I had a feeling he was struggling to answer that question, so I spoke up. “This is Holly. She’s Mari and Maggie’s mother. She came in last night for their birthday.”

Ms. Elsie nodded, her smile pleasant, but in her eyes, I could see the wheels turning. I didn’t know if Luke had ever

mentioned the past he had with Holly, but it looked like Ms. Elsie was already wary of her.

“It’s nice of you to show up so early, Holly,” the elderly werewolf said, her eyes hard. “I’m Ms. Elsie. I run the kitchen here in the lodge.”

Holly cleared her throat from behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see her fidgeting with her hands. “Hi,” was all she said, though.

I waited a moment to see if she’d speak again, but when the silence got uncomfortable, I broke it again. “Help yourself,” I said with a wave toward the steaming trays of food.

Ms. Elsie handed me and Luke plates for the girls, so we left Holly there and brought them over to their highchairs. Luke walked away to fetch us coffee and milk for the girls while I got them buckled into their seats. By the time he deposited the mugs and cups on our table, the girls were already digging into their food.

“You want your regular?” he asked me as Holly made it over to us, her expression guarded.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I said as I helped Maggie stab a piece of pancake with her fork.

Luke shot a glance at Holly before hurrying away. The girls’ mom hovered near a chair, but I ignored her. I’d be damned if I asked that woman to eat with me.

But she finally got over herself and took a seat, leaving us in this awkward bubble of silence.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last long. “So,” she said as she picked up a piece of bacon. “You two seem to have a little routine in place already, huh?”

I didn’t know where this was going, but I shrugged, my eyes still on the girls. “You could say that.”

“You could also say you’re trying too hard.”

Her sharp words did their job, but I kept my face neutral. “You could also say I stepped in and helped a single father when he needed it.”

“He’s *not* a single father.”

I shrugged. “He has been for the past few weeks.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but the sound of approaching footsteps froze her in place. Seconds later, Luke showed up, and she looked down at her plate as if nothing had happened.

As if her words hadn’t been battering my insides since she said them.

“Thanks,” I murmured as he set my usual bowl of oatmeal in front of me.

“You know, Lukey,” Holly spoke up, her nickname for him turning my stomach. “I was thinking, instead of a party full of strangers, why don’t the four of us do something special for the girls’ birthday.”

My spine stiffened, but I didn’t make any other movement, willing her words to mean nothing.

“These aren’t strangers,” he argued. “They’re our pack and the girls love them.”

“Yes, but they’re not *family*.”

Her words finally caught up to me, and my mouth started speaking before I could stop it. “Wait, you’re staying until their birthday?”

Holly turned her hard blue eyes my way. “Of course. I’m their *mother*.”

I grit my teeth and yanked my gaze away from her, hurt and betrayal slicing away at my insides. “That’s probably a good thing, actually,” I said as I stirred the fruit into my oatmeal, my brain working overtime to find a way out of this. “I’m going to be in Charlotte for a few days anyway. Now you’ll be here to help Luke.”

“Wait, what?” Luke said.

“Help Luke with what?” Holly asked at the same time.

I ignored Luke, sure that if I met his eyes, I’d start crying. “He needs someone to watch the girls during the day while he works.”

“There’s no daycare?” she whined, and I bit my tongue before I started cussing.

“What about the party?” Luke asked, and the pain in his voice broke off a tiny corner of my heart.

I finally met his eyes and did my best to ignore all the hurt in them. “I’ll be back in time for the party,” I promised. “I just need to go down to Charlotte for a few days.”

“But why?” he asked as he inched closer to me.

I swallowed hard past the lump in my throat and lied right to his face. “Bea called and asked if I’d come down for a couple days to help her with the kids.”

“Oh,” he said, shoulders falling.

All I wanted to do was tell him anything it took to get that look off his face. But with one glance at Holly, I knew I wouldn’t be able to stay here with that woman and not claw her eyes out. It was best for everyone if I left for a little while.

Now I just had to convince myself of that.

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Chapter 16

Evey

“Okay, Evey. That’s enough,” Bea announced as she burst into my room.

She was followed closely by five noisy little gremlins, and at the back of the pack was someone I hadn’t expected to see.

“Ellie?”

My brother’s mate and best friend gave me a tentative smile and a wave. “Hey, girl.”

“What are you doin’ here?” I asked as I struggled to sit up.

“Eeee!” one of Bea’s sons hollered, and I chuckled, which left me winded.

Ellie hurried over to help me up, her brows furrowed in concern. “You haven’t been answering your phone,” she explained.

“So you came all the way down here because my phone’s been off for two days?” I asked, skepticism running through my creaking words.

Ellie sighed, her brown eyes darting to Bea, who threw her hands in the air. “Okay, I called her. I knew I’d need reinforcements.”

“For what?” I asked.

Bea waved a hand at me slouched on the bed. “You haven’t left this room since you got here on Sunday. You’ve been leaving your trays of food outside the door, and I know

you're not sleeping because I can hear you in here crying all night."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Why were you listenin' outside my door?" I asked as the shame warmed my face.

Bea sighed and took a seat on the edge of my mattress, dragging her son Leo onto her lap. "Because you're worrying me. This isn't like you."

I rolled my eyes and looked away. "Sorry I can't always be *happy Aunt Evey*."

Ellie sat down next to me, her weight sending me crashing into her shoulder. She steadied me and said, "You don't have to *be* anything. We love you no matter what."

Tears burned the backs of my eyelids as I grabbed her hand and squeezed.

Bea sighed again, louder this time as Leo crawled off her lap to head toward me and she picked up Maverick instead. "You know, I was trying to let you figure it out yourself, but you're taking too long."

I frowned at my older sister. "What are you talking about?" I croaked, tears still clogging my throat. Leo finally made it to me, and I pulled him to my chest and squeezed. At a year and a half, he was old enough to be durable, but young enough to still be kinda squishy, and I took full advantage.

"You two are fated!" she yelled, startling Isla. Bea's face bunched with regret as she picked up her daughter and kissed her head. "I'm sorry, baby. Mama is just tryin' to get through to your thick auntie."

"I'm not thick," I shot back as Leo squirmed out of my hold. "But you're wrong. I'd know if I'd found my fated mate."

"Look at you!" Bea yelled again, but not as loud this time. "You haven't gotten out of this bed in days!"

"I'm fine, Bea," I deadpanned as Knox climbed over Ellie to get to me. I kissed his soft cheek and gave him a hug

too. “I’m just sad, okay? And tired.” I squeezed my eyes closed to stop the moisture from leaking out. “I’m so damn tired.”

Ellie gripped my hand harder. “Tired of what?”

Finally, I lost the battle with my tears. “I’m tired of being *alone*,” I choked out. “I’m tired of everyone getting to make their own families except me.”

“Evey, *we’re* all your family,” Bea argued.

I shook my head but couldn’t stop crying. “No, Bea. You’ve got a mate and five kids down here. Callie’s got a mate and three kids. Abey’s got Ellie and their three. Del doesn’t want kids, but she’s mated too, and always on the road. I’m the only one left. I’m the only one with no one.”

“You have us—” Ellie tried to say, but I cut her off.

“I know I have you,” I sniffed. “I know I have all my nieces and nephews,” I continued as I looked around the room. When I spotted sweet Jericho with tears in his eyes, I held out my arms and he came running. I pulled him and Knox close, kissing the tops of their heads. “I love being your sister and I love being their aunt, but I want more too. I want a partner. I want kids of my own. I want someone to finally call *me* mama—” My voice broke, and I stopped trying to speak.

Knox wiggled out of my arms and crawled toward the edge of the bed as Jericho snuggled closer. I hugged him tighter and rubbed his little back so he wouldn’t start crying too.

“Evey, *Luke* is your mate,” Ellie said, but I waved her away.

“Just because I want him doesn’t make him my mate,” I said, just barely able to push the words out.

Bea huffed out a breath. “Will you just listen to her?”

I sighed.

“You haven’t been answering your phone, so you have no idea what’s going on back home,” Ellie started, and my eyes instantly snapped to hers.

“What do you mean? What’s going on?” I asked, my voice sharp.

“Luke’s... not doing well.”

I sat up straight, and Jericho jumped in my arms. “What do you mean he’s not doin’ well?”

Ellie turned on the bed to face me. “Ev, he’s your fated mate. You’re both going through withdrawals right now.”

My heart thumped painfully in my chest, but I shook my head. “I don’t have a fated mate. If I did, I would have found him when all y’all found yours.”

“Says who?” Bea burst out.

I turned wide eyes to her. “Me?”

My sister shook her head and rose to her feet as that fire in her that never goes out climbed to the surface. “Evelyn McCoy, do you know how long Will had to wait to find me?”

“It’s hardly fair to compare me to your ancient mate.”

Her eyes narrowed and her fists clenched as Isla and Maverick danced in a circle around her legs. “Do you think fated mates just come along when you want them to? No. You find them when it’s time to find them and it all happens for a reason.”

“So, there’s a reason I’m still single?”

Bea’s jaw was tensed hard now as Leo joined the other two in dancing around their mother. “What would have happened if you’d met him two years ago when Abey met Ellie?”

I shrugged, but my mind raced with the possibilities as my stomach clenched tight. “I dunno,” I murmured.

“The hell you don’t! If you’d met him two years ago, then he never would have had those two little girls you love so much. You’d have your mate sooner, but you wouldn’t have Mari or Maggie. Now you tell me if you think that’s the way things should have been.”

I glared at her through my tears and handed Jericho to Ellie. Her words were making more sense than I wanted them to, and I was terrified to believe something so fantastical.

That I might have actually found my fated mate.

That I might actually have a place in the family I’d fallen in love with.

But I shook my head anyway, as I slid toward the edge of the bed. “You’re not right just because you think you are, Bea,” I muttered.

My sister huffed loudly over her kids’ nonsensical song. “Then get up and walk across the room if you think nothing’s wrong with you.” I turned to see her arms folded across her chest, looking formidable despite the three adorable toddlers dancing at her feet. “If Luke’s not your mate and you’re not going through withdrawals being away from him, then go walk to the bathroom without anyone’s help.”

I rolled my eyes and climbed to my feet. My body only stayed upright for a moment before my knees started shaking. I reached for the nightstand to steady myself, but it already felt like I’d run a marathon.

It was like I could hear Bea’s smug expression from here.

With all the grit I had inside me, I straightened back up and started walking. I only made it three steps before my legs buckled and I fell to one knee.

Ellie gasped, but it was Bea who hurried over to help me up. “Will you listen to me now?” she asked.

I looked up at her and couldn’t help the tears from falling again. “What if he doesn’t pick me?”

“Evey,” she started, but I shook my head.

“She’s the *mother* of his kids. How can I compete with that?”

She shook me a little, and I met her eyes again. “Because *you’re* his fated mate. *You* are the one who was born to be with him. And I’ve seen you two together,” she added, making my heart pound again. “It was obvious how much he cared about you.”

I blew out a shaky breath. “What about his girls? What if he doesn’t want me to be their mom?”

“Evey,” Ellie said, that one word a reprimand. “I’ve seen you with those girls. He’d be *lucky* to have you be their mom.”

“And before you ask,” Bea added, and I glanced at her, “*any* kid would be lucky to have you for a mom. You’re *everyone’s* favorite aunt and you’ve been mothering this family since you were a kid. You were born to be an amazing mom.”

The tears flowed freely now and Bea pulled me into her arms. I could feel multiple sets of little hands on my legs and I knew her kids were joining in on the group hug.

“I know how hard it was for you when we lost Mom,” Bea murmured into my ear and the tears fell harder. “I know you were supposed to be with her that day.”

“I told her I’d rather go hang out with my boyfriend,” I sobbed. “I picked a stupid boy over my mother.”

“Evey,” Bea said, her voice sterner than before. “If you’d been with Mom that day she got into the accident, we would have lost both of you. We were all so thankful you weren’t with her that day.”

I was crying too hard to answer her, but it didn’t seem she needed it.

“It’s time you stop worrying about everyone else, and do something just for you.”

I nodded but didn't answer as she held me tight and rocked me side to side. When I finally pulled myself back together, Bea let me go and picked up Leo. "I've got lunch on the way up for you and had your car filled with gas. Eat something, take a shower, and get on the road. You've got a party tomorrow, anyway."

I smiled through the moisture still leaking from my eyes and reached up to kiss her on the cheek. "Okay. Thanks, Bea."

She reached out and ruffled my hair as she walked by me, the rest of her kids following her in a row like little ducklings. "Anytime, baby sister."

Bea reached the door just as the kitchen manager arrived with a tray full of food. Ellie grabbed it for me and brought it over to the bed. "You sit and eat while I figure out something for you to wear," she said.

I laughed as I did what she said. "This feels like a strange reverse déjà vu."

Ellie turned around and grinned at me. "Yes. Finally, you're at my mercy," she said and cackled like a witch. "Now, where's your suitcase?"

I shook my head as I took a bite out of a turkey club sandwich, trying not to grimace at the ash-like flavor. "I didn't bring anything."

Ellie's mouth fell open in shock, her eyes bugging out of her head. "Evelyn McCoy traveled somewhere without a week's worth of stylish outfits and at least one cocktail dress?"

I threw my crust at her, but she dodged it easily. "I was in a hurry."

She rolled her eyes and turned to leave the room. "Been there, sister."

I laughed, remembering all the times she'd run off in a fit while she and Abey were figuring out their mess. "Where

are you goin'?" I called around another mouthful of tasteless food.

"I need to raid Bea's closet. I'll be back with options," she called over her shoulder before she disappeared behind the door.

I focused on eating as much as I could force down my throat while she was gone. I knew I'd need my strength just for the two-hour drive back to Asheville.

My thoughts kept turning to Luke and the girls, but I tried to shove them aside. If I spent too much time thinking about how this night would end, I knew I'd just chicken out and stay in Charlotte.

Good or bad, in the next couple of hours, I'd have a definitive answer about where my future was heading. I just wasn't sure I was ready for it.

"Come on, Evelyn. Just a few more miles. You can hold it that long," I muttered to myself.

But the truth was, I still had twenty miles 'til I got to pack lands, and I already knew my bladder wouldn't last.

I squeezed my thighs together and tried to focus on the Taylor Swift song on the radio, but it felt like my eyeballs were floating.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I chanted while I squirmed in my seat and squeezed my thighs together.

I drove through another five miles of country roads before I had to admit defeat. "All right!" I yelled over the radio as I slowed down and drove my car onto the side of the road. Thankfully, it was right next to a ditch where I could hide and relieve myself.

A few minutes later, an engine sounded in the distance headed my way, but I was already done. I climbed out of the ditch and spotted the dark pickup headed my way, but I still had plenty of time to get into my car.

Their engine revved as they seemed to speed up in the distance, but I didn't pay much attention as I turned my car back on and adjusted the radio.

That turned out to be a mistake.

I didn't realize how close the truck was until I glanced in my rearview mirror and saw it speeding right for me. I reached for the shifter to put the car in drive, but I didn't have enough time to get out of the way.

The truck slammed into the back of my car, sending me flying toward the windshield. The next few seconds seemed to take hours, and I still couldn't say what happened. All I knew was the shriek of twisting metal, the crash of breaking glass, and that every inch of my body was in excruciating pain.

But all at once, it stopped, and everything went black. I was positive I was dead. Or at least dying. There was no way someone could be in that much agony and it just go away on its own.

No. I was definitely dying, and now I just had to wait for the end to swallow me up. But it never came.

Instead, I heard a voice.

“Hey. I got her.”

My stomach cramped tight as I willed the death wishes away and focused on the man in the distance.

“She pulled over for something and I rammed my truck right into her. I don't think she had her seatbelt on yet, so she went through the windshield.”

I strained my ears, but the man was too far away for me to hear the voice on the other end of his call.

“Yeah, she looks dead to me,” he said, and the nonchalance in his tone made my blood run cold.

“I’m not touching a dead body, Holly.”

My heart stopped beating in my chest as my mind raced forward.

This wasn’t an anonymous accident. This man must have been watching for me, making sure I couldn’t return to pack lands.

“I can tell she’s dead, because her fucking spine is snapped in half!” he yelled into the phone.

My whole world imploded as I tried to concentrate on moving my body.

But I couldn’t.

Nothing would work. Not my hands, not my toes. All I could move was my head, and that wasn’t going to do me much good.

“Trust me. If she’s not dead yet, she’ll be dead soon. I’m not puttin’ my scent all over her when she’s dyin’ anyway.” His footsteps crunched away in the opposite direction as he kept talking. “I hope those brats are worth it,” he muttered, and fear slithered through my veins.

His voice faded into the distance before I heard a door slam shut, and it was gone all together. Moments later, his engine revved to life, and he drove off, leaving me to die in the woods.

Now that the adrenaline was waning in my system, I could feel the blackness encroaching again. It was so tempting to surrender. To give up the fight and let it all go away. But before I lost consciousness, their faces swam in front of my closed eyes, and I knew I had to do anything I could to get back to them.

Mari, Maggie, and Luke were worth holding on for.

But then the darkness took over, and I lost the fight.

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Chapter 17

Luke

“Have you heard from Evey today?”

Holly tsked from across the table, but I ignored her.

Abraham looked up from the mountain of food on his plate. “Huh?”

“Evey,” I said again, trying to rein in my temper.

I hadn’t slept or been able to stomach food in days, but it was this foreign pain I’d been battling since yesterday afternoon that really fueled my anger. It felt like an echo of someone else’s agony. Like it didn’t belong to me, and I was just a spectator.

I didn’t know what that meant, but I knew it couldn’t be good.

Too bad for Abraham the only patience I had left I saved for my daughters. “Have you heard from her? I’ve been calling her all day, and she hasn’t answered.”

I’d been handed an envelope of cash by Ms. Elsie yesterday and told it was my paycheck for the previous week. I knew payday wasn’t until Friday, just like I knew Evey must have had something to do with this.

But I didn’t care. It allowed me to buy a couple small things for the girls, and even prepay my cell for the next month, which allowed me to call and text Evey, but she hadn’t responded to any of it.

Abraham wiped his face with a napkin, brows beginning to furrow. “Ellie’s still down there in Charlotte. I’ll give her a call and see what’s goin’ on.”

I nodded, my heart starting to race for some reason I wasn't sure of. There was just this knot in the pit of my stomach that said something was wrong, and I needed to find out what.

Today was the girls' birthday party, although it wasn't supposed to start for another couple of hours. Evey promised she'd be back in time, but I didn't think she'd cut it this close.

Maybe she'd changed her mind.

Maybe she'd finally gotten a break from being my savior and decided she was tired of it.

Maybe she was never coming back.

"Dada!" Maggie called, and I focused on her.

"What's up, baby?"

She handed me the broken colored pencil in her hand.
"Mo."

I traded her for a fresh one and turned back to Abraham. He had his phone to his ear, and his expression made my heart trip.

"What time did she leave yesterday?"

"Yesterday?" I yelled as I jumped to my feet.

"Calm *down*," Holly sneered, and I ignored her.

She'd been following me around since she got here, and I'd honestly had enough. As soon as the party was over, I was getting rid of her.

But right now, my only focus was Evey.

The female voice on the other end of the line was getting frantic, and I could feel the answering anxiety racing through my veins. My feet itched to move. To run. To go find her. But with a glance at Mari and Maggie, I knew I couldn't do that.

I couldn't leave them alone with Holly, and I knew she'd steamroll over anyone else I asked to watch them. My

only option was to take them with me to go look for her.

“Okay, I’ll dispatch enforcers. We’ll start canvassing the highway for her.”

My heart shot to the back of my throat, and it felt like I’d choke on it. Abraham hung up, but immediately dialed another number.

“What did she say?” I croaked, but I could barely hear myself over my thundering pulse.

Abraham glanced at me and then away just as fast. “She left yesterday around four. She should have been here by dinner last night.”

Fear like I hadn’t felt since the night I ran away with my daughters slithered through my body. It settled deep into the pit of my stomach, where it festered and frothed, making me feel like I’d throw up my lunch.

“Wes? I need ten men now. Have them pair off into five groups and each take a different vehicle. You’ll come with me in my truck. We need them to cover every route from here to Charlotte.”

The man on the other end spoke, and Abraham swallowed hard. “We’re looking for signs of Evey or her car. She was supposed to be home eighteen hours ago.”

The more he talked, the more real this became, and it felt like I was drowning in fear.

This couldn’t be happening.

She couldn’t be missing.

There was no way I’d found someone as amazing as Evelyn McCoy, only to lose her because my ex ran her out of her own home.

No.

I absolutely would not believe that.

I stood up and patted my pockets, looking for my keys.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Holly snapped at me.

Abraham rose from his seat, eyes haunted as he turned to leave. I grabbed his arm before he could walk past me. “I’m coming too,” I said.

The alpha shook his head. “You need to stay here with your girls.”

“They’re coming with me,” I shot back. “We’re all going to look for Evey.”

“EE,” Mari yelled, and I took that as her agreeing with me.

Abraham sighed and shook his head. “I guess I can’t stop you.”

“No,” I said as I yanked Maggie out of her highchair. “You can’t.”

“You’re not taking them anywhere,” Holly spoke up.

Just the sound of her voice had the power to spike my blood pressure.

“Holly, you don’t have a say,” I informed her as I pulled Mari from her seat.

“I’m their mother, and I have rights!”

I set her down and turned to Holly, my jaw clenched so tight I almost couldn’t speak. “You lost your right to be their mother the moment you put your hands on them,” I spat, and someone nearby gasped. “The only reason I let you be around them now is, because I’m here to make sure you never hurt them again. The only reason you’re still in their lives *at all* is, because I know they love you.”

Holly tried to smother a grin, but I caught it.

“Make no mistake though,” I continued, “if I find even one hair out of place, you’ll never see them again.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Watch me.”

The kitchen was silent as Holly tried to burn me with her stare, and I tried to remember why I’d ever been interested in her. The quiet was broken by a ringtone, and we all turned to Abraham.

He pulled out his phone and frowned as he answered. “Clyde?”

“Hey, was that Evey’s car I just saw wrecked on the side of the highway? Is she okay?”

My heart stopped beating and fell to the pit of my stomach. I tried to process his words, but there were only a few that stood out to me.

Evey’s car...

Wrecked...

She okay...

Abraham cleared his throat, and I snapped out of my dark whirlwind of thoughts. “Where are you?”

“Heading North on 191. I’m about fifteen miles out from pack lands.”

I picked one girl up in each arm and started running.

“Clyde,” Abraham barked as he followed me. “Turn around and go back! Make sure it’s her car. She’s been missing since yesterday.”

“What?” he squawked, but I tuned out the rest.

None of it mattered now I had a destination. Now I had something to focus on instead of the unending questions and worries in my head.

I tried to clear my mind and focus on what I had to do, but I couldn’t stop obsessing over her.

What if she was hurt in the accident?

What if she was lost somewhere?

What if she was just fucking gone?

NO.

I couldn't think like that.

I couldn't let a dark thought like Evey being dead settle in my brain, because it would have fucking ruined me.

We'd just made it to the driveway when I heard her.

"Help."

It was so soft, just a whisper, not even as loud as the breeze, but I heard it and I was already running. Abraham called after me, but I didn't take the time to answer him.

I was halfway down the driveway when I saw her. She was just a lump of torn cloth and still a hundred yards away, but I'd recognize Evey anywhere.

With a burst of speed, I made it to her side and set the girls down as gently as I could before grabbing Evey.

She moaned as I rolled her over and my stomach dropped when I saw the state she was in. Evey's face was covered in blood and I couldn't even make out her features, but I didn't need to. I'd know her in the dark. I'd know her miles away. She was Evey, and I'd never mistake her scent or the way everything made sense when I was around her.

"Evey?" I whispered, my hands trembling as I tried to figure out what to do.

"EE?" Mari asked, her little voice sounding scared.

I glanced at her quickly, but Evey made another sound, and I had to turn back to her. By then, Abraham had caught up, along with a handful of other enforcers.

Ms. Nora's son, Wes, who was also the beta of the pack, walked up to my girls and grabbed their hands. "I can bring them to my mom," he offered, and I gave him a grateful nod. "You girls wanna go play with Ms. Nora in her garden?" he asked as he led them back up the hill.

“Stay with them, please,” I called after them, and he waved in acknowledgment.

Now I knew the girls would be taken care of, I could concentrate on Evey.

But I didn't know what the fuck to do.

Her face scrunched, and she shook her head as the panic left me frozen. Abraham pushed me aside, but I didn't move. I couldn't. I was never leaving her side again.

“Evey,” he called from next to me. “What happened? How did you get here?”

I listened to him as I tried to find a part of her that wasn't battered so I could lift her into my arms. Finally, I realized it would be impossible to avoid her injuries. Even though I knew it was going to hurt, I still had to move her. She needed to get to the pack doctor *now*.

She hissed as I slid my arms underneath her small frame, and my stomach pinched painfully. “Sorry, sorry,” I murmured as I carefully pulled her into my arms.

Evey cried out once but grit her teeth and let me pick her up. “Someone... hit... my car,” she croaked between heavy breaths.

Abraham kept pace next to me as I raced her as fast as I dared up to the doctor's house. “Did you see who? How did it happen?”

She shook her head and then hissed again, and my stomach cramped so hard I thought I'd be sick. “Didn't see him,” she spat. “Heard him.” Evey moaned and writhed in pain, and it was almost unbearable to watch. “Holly,” she gasped. “Sent him.”

Everything inside me froze, even though my feet kept racing me toward the pack houses. When my body finally caught up to my brain, I came to a dead stop, my wide eyes turning to the broken woman in my arms.

“What did you just say?” I asked, my voice so low even I could barely hear it.

Evey nodded, her teeth clenched tight again. “Holly... tried to kill me,” she finished, and that time, I knew what I heard.

“Abraham,” I called, but he didn’t answer me. Instead, the big werewolf wrapped his meaty arm around my shoulders and started walking us forward again.

“I’ve got it under control,” he said. “She’s being watched. Just get Evey help.”

My hands shook with anger, but I did as he asked, because he was right. Tearing my ex apart for this was not as important as getting Evey help.

But it was next on my list.

We made it to the pack doctor’s house, and Abraham rushed ahead to bang on his door. It was flung open by the time I got there, and I was directed to carry her into an exam room in the back. The doctor tried to get me to leave, but I think he might have seen how close to the edge I was, and he finally stopped bothering.

He started asking her questions, and I hung on every word she said. I needed to know what she’d been through, so I knew how to help her past this.

“I... stopped to pee.. on the... side of the road,” she whispered as the doctor stuck a needle in her arm. “The truck... slammed into me... as soon as... I got back in the car. I didn’t... have time... for a seatbelt... so I.. went through... windshield.”

My whole body tensed like I could feel the pain myself. Like I’d been the one tossed through a sheet of glass. My hands clenched into fists as I watched the doctor pump some kind of fluid into her arm. Evey took a series of deep breaths, and within a few moments, her shoulder slumped, and she sighed.

“I must have blacked out for a minute.” She was whispering, but her voice was stronger than before. “But when I came to again, I could hear the guy who hit me talking to Holly.” Evey stopped for a moment and squeezed her eyes closed. “Saying he hoped the girls were worth the trouble or somethin’...” Her words trailed off with a wince as the doctor touched something sensitive, and this time the rage was so swift it almost brought me to my knees.

I stumbled forward a step, but with a look from the doctor, I held myself still. “How did you get here?”

She laughed once, which made her wince again. “I passed out for a long time, and when I woke up again, it was dark out. My spine wasn’t fully healed yet, but it was enough for me to start crawling.”

My blood ran cold inside my veins. “Your spine?”

Evey swallowed hard as she nodded. “According to the guy who hit me, it was snapped in half,” she croaked.

The anger mixed with the fear, and together they were so powerful my body trembled. “So you crawled all the way back here?”

She shook her head. “I could walk for some of it.”

I ignored the doctor this time as I crossed the room and picked up her hand. It seemed like the only part of her not broken. “Why?” I whispered. “Why wouldn’t you just get back in your car and wait for someone to find you?”

Her blue eyes seemed to glow as they filled with tears, and she shook her head. “I promised Mari and Maggie I’d be here for their party.”

A crazed chuckle fell from my lips as I tried to control my emotions. “You crawled fifteen miles with a broken spine to get here for my girls’ birthday party?” I asked, my voice barely audible over my pounding heart.

She just shrugged again as a single tear slipped out. “I would never break a promise to them.”

My throat filled with so many words, and confessions, and revelations, it felt like I'd drown in them.

"Can you step aside now?" the doctor asked.

I pulled Evey's hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles before I let her go and took a seat across the room again.

I'd thought the worst was over, but the exam took too long, and there were too many things wrong with her.

Fractured spine.

Broken leg.

Cracked ribs.

The list didn't seem to end, and each new addition was like another lash across my back. Each one burned and bled and reminded me that Evey was paying for *my* mistakes. Just like my girls had. Just like my family had.

All of this was my fault.

All of this was *Holly's* fault.

I intended to make sure we both paid for this.

"Your spine is almost healed, but that leg is probably going to take a couple days."

"Why would my leg take so much longer to heal than my spine?"

The doctor sighed. "The werewolf body treats the most critical injury first, often sending all the healing power there. That's why your simple cuts and scrapes haven't been healed yet. That's why it'll take a little while for your leg to mend too."

"Then get me a walkin' cast 'cause I got things to do," Evey responded. The doctor had given her pain medication and electrolytes as soon as we got here, and it seemed to already be helping. Maybe too much.

“What do you have to do that’s more important than healing your broken bones?” the doctor asked.

“Kyle, I’m throwin’ a party for two two-year-olds in an hour. I can’t sit around here all day.”

I almost laughed, but nothing about this was even remotely funny. “Evey. Don’t worry about the party.”

She turned wide, incredulous eyes toward me. “Don’t worry about the party? It’s Maggie and Mari’s *birthday* party! They only turn two once and I wanna see the look on their faces when those girls jump in the inflatable playhouse for the first time!”

“Evey. You need to calm down,” the doctor warned.

I held up my hands in surrender. “Okay, Evey. Okay. We won’t cancel the party.”

“Cancelling the party was never an option!” she shot back, and the doctor gave me another glare.

“Evey,” I pleaded, hoping I could make this ridiculous woman see reason. “You were just in a car accident. You spent the night crawling through the woods to get here.”

I had to stop talking for a moment as the anger and regret swamped me. While I’d been safe inside *her* home, she’d been fighting for her life out in the cold, all because of my ex.

The rage was almost too much for me to handle.

I almost wasn’t strong enough to control it.

But then I caught Evey’s ocean blue eyes from across the room, and I finally let out the breath I’d been holding. “I just don’t want you worrying about a party the girls won’t miss when you’re hurt like this.”

“It’ll make me feel better to make them happy with this party,” she fired back, and I knew right then I’d been lying to myself.

I didn’t just *like* this woman.

I fucking *loved* her.

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Chapter 18

Evey

“I’m tellin’ you right now, Kyle. I’m *not* wearin’ a back brace. If I could crawl through the damn woods without one, then I can walk around my backyard without one. Just get me a walkin’ cast and let me get on with my day.”

“Evey,” the doctor said with a sigh. “This is not a simple fractured bone. You broke your *spine*.”

I saw Luke cringe out of the corner of my eye, and I hurried to keep talking before he joined in with Kyle, and they both ganged up against me.

“I promise I’ll take it easy. I’m just throwin’ a little backyard barbecue.”

“Evey, you’re not throwing anything, or I’ll drug you and keep you here all day.”

My jaw fell open at the mild-mannered doctor’s threat. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Try me, Evelyn.”

I rolled my eyes, but tried to placate him again. “Okay, so I’m not throwin’ the party. I’m... overseein’ a party being thrown. That good enough for you?”

The doctor tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling. “Why didn’t I just stick to treating humans?” he muttered to himself. Kyle let out a deep breath and turned to Luke. “Can you contain her?”

I shot him a glare, and he chuckled. “Not if my life depended on it.”

Kyle scowled while I grinned at his answer. “Can you at least subdue her?”

Luke stood from his seat in the corner and approached us. “I’ll make sure I protect her from herself. I won’t let her do anything too strenuous, and I’ll have her sitting and resting as often as I can.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the way they were talking about me, but being so close to Luke again was messing with every part of my body, so I let it go.

“I guess that’s good enough,” he mumbled as he walked across the room to a closet. He returned to my side with a walking cast, and I gave him a big smile. “Don’t make me regret this, Evelyn.”

I held up a hand like I was taking an oath. “I promise to take it easy.”

He shook his head but didn’t say anything else as he fit it on me. The doctor tried to get me to agree to crutches too, but I needed my hands, so I turned him down.

As soon as I was free, I clunked my way through his house, sure that if we stayed too much longer, he’d think of another reason to keep me here. Luke rushed ahead to open the door for me, but Abraham got to it first.

“Evey,” he breathed before he pulled me into his arms. I tried to stifle the little noises of pain, but he heard them and let me go just as fast. “Sorry! Sorry! I’m just so glad to see you up.”

Kyle scoffed, and I had to hide a smile as I shoved Abraham back through the door. “We were just on our way out.”

We made it to the gravel road before Abraham turned around to face us. His blue eyes scanned me up and down, his jaw clenching harder the longer he looked. Finally, he ripped his gaze off me to glare at Luke. “Your mate is on her way out now. If you had something you wanted to say to her, now’s the time.”

Luke stiffened. “She’s *not* my—”

“Wait, what?” I interrupted him.

Abraham pulled his harsh gaze off Luke to look at me. “Holly is being escorted off pack lands as we speak.”

I shook my head as I pushed past him. “We need to find out who she was working with. We need to find out what their plan for the girls is,” I said over my shoulder as I unevenly thumped down the road.

They both caught up to me easily, and I cursed the heavy cast on my leg.

“Where are you going?” my brother asked.

“I wanna talk to her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t care what you think, Abraham.”

“Evelyn.”

I came to an awkward stop and did my best to spin around and face him. “Abraham, it’s not *you* she tried to have run off the road. It’s not *you* who was left for dead in a ditch. I wanna look her in the eye and ask her why.”

Abraham sighed. “We’ve already questioned her. She won’t talk.”

I took off for the lodge again. “We’ll see about that.”

Luke caught up to me, but his face was buried in a phone I’d never seen before. “When did you get that?” I huffed, already out of breath from the short walk.

He shot me a smile, and I almost lost my footing. “When you got Ms. Elsie to give me my paycheck early.”

His warm brown gaze held me captive for a long moment before I shook my head and looked away. “I thought you’d want your pay before the girls’ birthday.”

He chuckled as he dialed a number and brought the phone to his ear. “That’s because you’re the sweetest, most

thoughtful person I've ever met."

This time I did trip over nothing, and only his hand on my arm kept me from falling. "You okay?" he asked. I shook my head, but didn't have a chance to answer before he started talking again. "Wes. How are the girls?"

Luke's hand was still on my arm as we walked, and I wondered if he noticed.

"Does your mom mind keeping them a little longer? I've got something to take care of."

I heard Wes assure him they were all having a great time, and he'd bring them back to the lodge whenever he wanted.

"Tell her I'll build her another five planters." Wes laughed and told him she'd shit herself over that news. A loud voice in the background reprimanded him for his language, and Luke chuckled too. "Okay, tell them I love them," he said and hung up.

"Ms. Nora's great with kids," I said, knowing how hesitant Luke was about leaving his girls alone with anyone.

He threw another smile my way, and my heart began to thump erratically. "She's almost as good with them as you are."

Luke looked away, but I continued to shoot him wary glances.

What was with him?

He was... smiling a lot. And he kept saying nice things to me.

It wasn't like he'd ever said *mean* things to me, but he'd never openly complimented me like this. And he sure as hell had never done it twice in a row.

The questions were too much for me to hold back, and I took a deep breath to fire one his way when another voice broke through the quiet October night.

“Get this shit *off* me!”

The air between us shifted as Abraham caught up and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Are you sure about this?” he muttered. “I don’t think you’re going to get the answers you’re looking for.”

“I just want to talk to her,” I whispered back as we approached the group of enforcers holding onto a struggling Holly.

“Let. Me. Go!” she roared, but the men ignored her.

Luke tensed beside me before he wrapped his arm around my waist and held on. Now that I was sandwiched by the two big men, I felt strong enough to say my piece.

“Holly,” I called, and she froze in place. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as she turned her wide eyes my way.

“How the fuck did you get here?” she breathed.

Luke twitched like he wanted to react, but squeezed my waist tighter and stayed quiet.

“Guess your buddy was wrong when he told you I was as good as dead.”

Her face went pale and her jaw fell open for a single second before she recovered and her angry, twisted features were back. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” She turned to Luke. “Can you tell them to let me go? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Abraham’s whole body began to vibrate as he pulled away from me to take a step toward Holly. “You almost killed my sister,” he snarled.

Holly rolled her eyes, but even from here, I could see the fear in them. “I didn’t know she was the alpha’s sister.” Abraham let loose a vicious growl and she hurried to add, “And I didn’t try to kill her! I’ve been on pack lands since I got here.”

“I heard him say your name,” I spoke up, and her gaze swung back to me. “I heard him talk about the girls. I know it was you.”

Holly narrowed her eyes at me, and I knew I was in for a verbal tirade, but another enforcer took that moment to join the party, tossing a dirty backpack onto the ground between us.

“We went through her stuff,” Brad said. “She’s got pipes and crystalized wolfsbane in there, along with an envelope full of cash.”

Luke’s whole body erupted in trembles as he clung to me. “You brought *drugs* here?” he asked, his voice low and so lethal it sent a shiver racing down my spine. “You left drugs around *my daughters*?” His volume was rising as his limbs shook harder, and I knew he was just barely hanging onto his humanity.

Holly shook her head, eyes wide and as innocent as she could make them. “That’s not mine! I don’t do drugs.”

Luke pulled his arm from around my waist but took my hand instead as he bent down to retrieve the backpack. The contents tinkled like glass as he maneuvered the bag, and I knew what we’d find in there.

Smoke-stained pipes and the acrid scent of burnt chemicals hit my nose, and I turned away. Luke, however, kept digging. He pushed the paraphernalia aside and pulled out a familiar envelope full of money.

Luke tossed the bag back on the ground and squeezed the cash in his fist. “You stole my check? The only goddamn money I have to take care of our children?”

“Oh, now they’re *our* children?”

He growled and took a menacing step forward, but his fingers were still entwined with mine, and I didn’t let him get far. “Luke,” I murmured, and he stopped trying to advance on her.

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath, and his hand tightened around mine as he speared her with a look that made *me* want to cower. “This was your final chance, Holly, and you fucked it up. You are *never* gonna see these girls again.”

“What?” she yelled. “You can’t do that. They’re *mine*.”

“Yes, I can. And no, they’re not.”

“I gave birth to them,” she screamed as she thrashed against the men holding her. Smoke began to rise from her bindings as the smell of cooking flesh hit my nose. “They belong to me! I can do what I want with them!”

I was almost blown back a step at her strange comments, but didn’t get a chance to say anything before Luke started talking again.

“You did this to yourself, Holly. I have no sympathy.”

The words weren’t even all the way out of his mouth before big, fat tears filled her eyes.

“You can’t do this to me,” she cried. “I have rights. They’re *my* daughters.”

Luke just shook his head and turned away as Abraham stepped in front of her. “My pack extended our hospitality to you, and you repaid us by trying to kill my sister. Your hands and feet have been bound in poison-dipped ropes and they’ll be left on you. My men have been instructed to drive you fifty miles from here and leave you there. You are hereby excommunicated from my lands and if you’re ever seen here again, you’ll get no mercy from us. We’ll kill you on sight.”

My heart raced at my brother’s cruel, emotionless tone, but Holly just got more violent.

“Fuck you! Fuck this pack! Fuck your sister!”

“You had *everything*, Holly,” I yelled over her hysterics. She paused for a moment and turned to me, her face red with anger as the tears still raced down her cheeks. “You had an amazing man, you had two of the most intelligent and

sweet little girls I've ever met, and you blew it. I don't think you ever loved Luke or Mari or Maggie. I don't even think you love yourself, but that's all you're gonna be left with in the end."

Holly was shocked silent for one long minute before her eyes narrowed and she sneered at me. "What, do you think *you're* gonna take my place? That you're gonna get to play house with *my* mate and pretend to be mama to *my* kids?" She threw her head back with a laugh and the sound curdled my stomach. "Luke will *never* be done with me, because I gave him those girls! He'll never love you like he loves me!"

Her words rang through my head, waking up every ghost and demon I'd ever had to battle. It was like she'd seen inside my head and knew exactly what to say to hurt me.

"That's enough," Abraham cut in. "Get rid of her."

The enforcers holding Holly began to drag her toward a van parked nearby, but she wasn't done.

"You'll never be Mari and Maggie's mom!" she continued to yell as two of them finally picked her up when it was clear she wasn't going willingly. "They'll never love you like they love me! They'll never call you mama! You'll never be anything to them!"

Her words sliced deeper than I thought they would, and I had to hold myself still and not flinch like I wanted to. Luke's hand squeezed mine hard as I stood there trying not to cry.

It was like she'd had a front row seat to every fear and insecurity I'd ever had.

That I'd never stack up.

That I'd never be enough.

That I'd fall so deeply in love with this family and never get their love in return.

"I'll always be their mama!" she screamed louder. "They're mine! They're mine!"

Finally, her shouts were muffled when the van door slammed shut, but the silence was loaded.

“Evey,” Luke began, but I shook my head.

If he tried to apologize or say something sweet now, I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep the hold I had on my tears. I knew I’d break down if he was nice to me at all, and I couldn’t do that right now. I had a party to throw.

With a sniff and a shake of my head, I turned to him with the most neutral expression I could offer. “We need to get goin’,” I said as I turned to head back toward the lodge. “We’ve got to get the back patio decorated, and the food set up before people start arrivin’.”

“What people?” Luke asked as he hurried to catch up to me.

Before I could answer, the sound of tires crunching over gravel broke the silence, and we all turned. There was a black sedan slowly heading up the driveway, and we all waited to see what was in store for us next.

The car parked alongside the others near the lodge, and the engine turned off before an elderly couple climbed out.

Luke left my side to stumble forward a step. “Mom? Dad?”

Chapter 19

Luke

“Lucas,” my mom whispered, and my legs shook with the power of hearing her voice again.

Last time I’d seen her, she’d told me I had to choose between having a relationship with them or staying with Holly, who was already pregnant with my girls. I couldn’t bear to give up my daughters, and so I’d chosen to walk away from my family.

It was the hardest thing I’d ever done, but I could never regret it, because I got Mari and Maggie out of the deal. But now they were here, looking at me like they still loved me. Looking at me like they might be able to forgive me.

But how?

I turned to Evey and found her beautiful face already looking up at me. “Did you do this?” I murmured.

Her lips twitched with a grin, and she shrugged. “I might have looked them up.”

The emotions bubbling inside me boiled over, and I laughed before pulling her into my arms. “Thank you,” I breathed into her sweet-smelling neck.

“Ew, are you crying?” another voice broke through the silence, and I turned around with a chuckle.

“Fuck off, Lena.”

My sister’s jaw fell open as she propped her hands on her hips. “That’s how you greet me after almost three years?”

My stomach twisted with regret, and the words died in my throat.

I'd had to cut off my relationship with Lena even before my parents. Holly had always had something against her. She'd tell me it was weird for grown siblings to be so close. She thought it was ridiculous when I'd call Lena my best friend.

One night, when Holly was about six months pregnant, she'd threatened to disappear if I didn't stop talking to Lena. She said she'd have our girls and then give them away to someone else, and I'd never see them again.

It sounded crazy, but I knew Holly was just deranged enough to follow through with her threat.

I'd met with Lena only once more after that, in secret, to explain the situation. She'd been mad, but she'd agreed. Sticking around for the girls was more important than everything else.

That was how I'd lost my best friend.

But now here she was. Standing in front of me with a smile that somehow said she didn't hate me, and I was having trouble believing this was actually happening.

Lena's smile fell a tiny bit. "Do I get a hug, or what?"

I laughed, but it was creaky and filled with too much emotion. My arm was still wrapped around Evey, so I dragged her with me toward my family. I finally let go when I made it to Lena so I could pull her into my arms and breathe in her familiar scent.

"I missed you, Lee Lee," I whispered.

A soft sob fell from her lips. "I missed you too, Lu Lu."

Evey snorted from beside me and I pulled back with a smile. "Lu Lu?" she asked, her brows almost touching her hairline. "I guess it's better than Lukey."

Lena pretended to gag. “Please never say that again.”

Evey giggled. “Deal.”

“Have y’all met?” I asked, as my eyes darted between the two still smiling at each other.

“We’ve all talked to Evey, but this is the first time we’re meeting her,” my mom answered as she walked over with my dad.

They each pulled me into tight hugs before they embraced Evey, too. I watched wide-eyed as my family held her close and thanked her over and over.

When they finally let go, I grabbed her hand again. “*How* did you do this?”

Evey shrugged. “I called around to a few packs until I found them and then I got the alpha’s people to get them a message. When they called me back, I told them about the party and they were excited to come. They did the rest.”

I shook my head at the way she tried to downplay her role in this. Like she wasn’t single-handedly responsible for reuniting my family.

“Where are the girls?” my mother asked, her voice brimming with this kind of fearful hope that tore at my insides.

“They’re with the sitter, Ms. Nora.”

Mom pulled her clasped hands to her chest. “Can I meet them?”

“Of course.”

“Um,” Evey piped up. “I hate to ask, but could we put the family reunion on hold for a little while?”

We all turned to her, and instead of cowering beneath so many troubled stares, she stood up straighter. “I’m sure y’all are dyin’ to meet Mari and Maggie, and trust me, you’re gonna love ‘em, but we’ve got a party to put together and I haven’t even started yet.”

“Evey got into a car accident yesterday,” I hurried to add. My mother gasped, and I had to swallow past the rage that still festered inside me when I thought about it. “Holly tried to have her killed. She had her spine and her leg broken along with a shit load of other internal injuries. She only just got home a few hours ago after crawling fifteen miles through the woods last night.”

My whole family turned horrified gazes to Evey, who finally looked uncomfortable. “I didn’t crawl the *whole* way,” she muttered. “When my back finally healed, I was able to walk for a while.”

“With a broken leg,” I deadpanned.

She shot a narrow-eyed look my way that just made me smile. “I *wasn’t* missin’ their party.”

I laughed and turned to my family. “Can you see why we love her so much?”

Those words felt so natural to say, and fell from my mouth so easily, but once they were out, they grew and seemed to get louder as we stood there. I glanced at Evey, who seemed to be frozen in shock, but her eyes had never been more wide open or vulnerable. I’d never been able to see so much in her gaze.

“Yes.” My dad finally broke the silence. “We’re all very fond of her.”

Evey’s cheeks turned the prettiest shade of pink before she looked away and cleared her throat. “If y’all don’t mind helpin’ me, we can get this place lookin’ perfect for the girls.”

“What do you need us to do?” Lena asked, and the tiny thread of concern I’d had instilled in me when it came to introducing women to my family disappeared.

This wasn’t just some woman.

This was *Evey*.

“Thankfully, Ms. Elsie and them are handlin’ all the food, so we just need to move some tables up to the patio,

decorate, and blow up the bounce house.”

“I call bounce house,” Lena said, her hand in the air.

“You got it,” Evey said as she started hobbling back toward the lodge. “I’ll show you the shed where we keep it stored.”

I hurried to her side and wrapped an arm around her waist. I’d been expecting a fight, but she just sighed and leaned into my hold. That tiny little gesture was enough to fill my whole damn chest with warmth.

“I’ll show Lena the shed. You need to sit down.”

She sighed. “I’ll sit upstairs on the patio so I can still direct.”

“Sounds good,” I said before bending to scoop her into my arms.

Evey gasped, and that tiny sound made my dick harden. With a Herculean effort, I ignored the way her body fit against mine and focused on what we had to do. “Dad and I can move the tables.”

“I can decorate!” Mom called from behind me.

Evey took a deep breath and relaxed in my hold, her eyes falling closed for a moment. Now that she wasn’t exuding her trademark sass, I could tell how tired she was. How much the past twenty-four hours had taken out of her.

Guilt swamped me immediately.

She shouldn’t have been worrying about a party for two-year-olds who wouldn’t even remember it. She should have been taking care of herself.

“Evey, I should really take you upstairs to bed. You should be resting.”

She cracked a pretty blue eye open to stare at me. “Those sentences wouldn’t ever both happen at the same time,” she breathed.

I laughed hard, but my dick was straining against my zipper, and I was thankful my family hadn't heard her. "Save that energy for when you're whole again," I muttered as I climbed the back steps.

Evey's smile was wide. "I can do that."

I shook my head, but inside, I was so happy to have her back in my arms, joking and smiling at me like I hung the fucking moon myself.

Holly was gone. My family was back in my life. My girls were happy and healthy. And I had Evey. I honestly couldn't imagine how I could get any luckier.

"Listen, Luke, I need to talk to you about something," she began, but before she could say more, someone started yelling.

"Oh my God, Evey!" Callie hollered as she yanked open the sliding glass door and hurried over to us. "I just heard about what happened! Are you okay?" she asked as her hands fluttered around Evey like she'd fix her herself.

Evey patted me on the shoulder and I reluctantly set her on her feet so she could pull her sister into her arms. "It's okay. I'm okay."

Callie's shoulders shook as she cried, and I felt her fear echoing in me.

We'd been so close to losing her. *I'd* been so close to losing the first woman who I'd ever really cared about.

The first woman I'd ever really *loved*.

It wasn't just the adoration that my girls and the rest of the world felt for this woman. No, I loved her so much deeper than that. So much *more* than that.

I loved her sweet heart, I loved her sassy attitude, I loved how much she loved everyone else. I'd never felt anything like this before, and the more I focused on those feelings, the bigger they grew until they felt too large to stay inside me.

It was like I needed to get them out or I'd explode.

But as Callie finally pulled away to wipe at her face, I realized this wasn't the place for heartfelt revelations. There'd be plenty of time later to tell her what she meant to me. Right now, we had a party to throw.

"Evey, why don't you tell my mom what you wanted to do with the decorations and then go upstairs and get ready with Callie?"

Evey turned to me with a frown before she glanced down at herself and winced. "Yeah. I don't want the girls seeing me like this," she muttered, and that feeling inside me only grew. "Callie, can you grab the big box in the downstairs closet and bring it out here?" Her sister left to do that as Evey turned to my mom and started explaining her vision.

After a thorough rundown, complete with a drawing, Evey finally left us to take care of the party while she took care of herself. I knew it wasn't easy for her to walk away from something she cared so much about, but we all promised we'd carry out her plans exactly.

When she was finally gone, my mom chuckled and started rifling through the box of decorations. "She's really somethin', huh?"

Her words dredged up bad memories of introducing Holly to my family, and I tensed. I didn't want to hear they didn't like Evey. I didn't want to hear I'd have to choose again because at this very moment, I knew who I couldn't live without.

I cleared my throat and got to work hanging streamers. "Yeah, she's got a tendency of drivin' herself kinda crazy over stuff like this."

Mom laughed again. "Yes. I can see that." She was quiet for a moment as she assembled a centerpiece. "It's nice she cares so much about your girls."

I snorted. "Sometimes, I think they like her more than they like me."

Mom was quiet for a long time, and when I looked back, she was softly tracing the edges of the banner she was holding. “Kids have a way of seein’ right through a person, don’t they?” she asked as she set that aside and picked up another centerpiece. “It’s like they can tell the good sort from the bad sort well before we can.”

I swallowed hard as I tried to concentrate on what I was doing. “The girls have loved Evey since they met her.”

I could hear the smile in her voice when she said, “That’s because she’s one of the good ones.”

My heart slammed against my ribcage as another piece of the puzzle fell into place. My girls loved her. My family loved her. *I* loved her.

There was *nothing* standing in my way of being with her, and the thought made my hands shake.

After that, we fell into easy conversation, catching up on the past two plus years of our lives. It was almost like we were getting to know each other again. The son who’d left her house that day with his pregnant girlfriend was not the man I was now. Thankfully, she seemed to like both of them.

“You guys!” Evey’s squeal came from behind us, and I spun around to see her looking much better than she did last time I saw her. “Everything is *perfect*! The girls are gonna love it!”

My heart warmed at her sentiment before I frowned at the bags in her hands. “What are those?” I asked with a nod toward them.

Evey gave me an even wider smile, and I already knew she was up to something. “Just presents for the girls.”

“I thought you agreed to not spend any money.”

“You said I couldn’t spend money on the party! These are birthday gifts!”

I rolled my eyes but had no real objections. It would make the girls happy, and I knew how happy it would make

Evey. It was a no-brainer.

But, still. “You didn’t have to do that.”

She waved my words away. “I wanted to. I’ve been dying to get those girls some princess dresses.”

I laughed. “Princess dresses?”

“That’s what I’m telling them they are.”

“They’re gonna be so excited.”

Evey’s grin got wider. “I know. I can’t wait to blow their little minds.”

Another laugh burst out of me, and I couldn’t help closing the distance between us. She smelled clean, and her hair and make-up were perfect, like usual. The only difference in her appearance was that she didn’t have her typical high heels on. I was sure as soon as the boot was off, she’d be reverting.

“We should go get the girls,” Evey said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I pulled away and held out my arm for her, my heart thumping harder when she didn’t hesitate to wrap her hand around me. Did she realize how much that small gesture meant? Could she hear the way my pulse raced just from touching her?

With a shake of my head, I pushed the questions away and smiled at her. “Let’s go get ‘em.”

Chapter 20

Evey

She must have seen me the second I stepped into Ms. Nora's house.

“EE?”

Maggie's question was first, but Mari wasn't far behind.

“EE?” she yelled before she was on the move.

Her little feet slapped furiously against the floor as she ran toward me. My heart swelled and tears pricked the back of my eyelids. Mari collided with my good knee, and Maggie wasn't far behind.

“Hey, ladies. Did you miss me?” I asked as I ran my fingers through their silky blonde hair and tried not to cry like a baby.

“Des,” Maggie said, her big brown eyes so serious as she looked up at me.

A watery chuckle fell from my lips as I bent down to pick her up. But I only made it halfway before an excruciating bolt of pain raced through my spine. I gasped and froze, doing my best to breathe through it and not let the girls see there was something wrong.

Luke was there in an instant. “Are you okay?” he murmured, his hand rubbing circles on my back.

I nodded slowly as I continued to take deep breaths. “I can't bend down.”

He sighed. “You promised to take it easy,” he reminded me as he picked up Maggie in one arm and Mari in the other.

I held out my hands and Maggie reached for me immediately. “I just wanted to give them a hug.”

Luke turned away from me, pulling Maggie out of my reach and sending my heart falling into the pit of my stomach. I opened my mouth to speak, to ask him why, but no sound would come out, and I was afraid if I tried too hard, all I’d get was a sob.

“Evey,” he said, and my eyes jumped to his. “You’re still injured.”

I shook my head and looked away before he could see the tears gathering. “Luke, last night was one of the darkest for me. I was scared, I was hurt, I was tired, I was cold...” I trailed off when I caught his gaze and saw how each word made his face a little harder. “The *only* thing that kept me goin’ was you three,” I said with a wave at them. “Every time things got hard or I didn’t think I could move another inch, I’d think of your faces and take that next step.”

“Evey,” Luke breathed, but I shook my head.

If I didn’t get this all out, I knew I never would.

“Now, all I wanna do is give them both a big hug and tell them how much I missed them and how grateful I am for them.” A tear finally fell, and I tried to wipe it away before he could see, but, of course, he didn’t miss anything. “Y’all saved my life,” I whispered before I had to look away.

Luke stood still for a single second that seemed to last hours before he finally crossed the distance between us and carefully pulled me against his chest. I was sandwiched between Mari and Maggie, who cheered and wrapped their little arms around me.

“*You saved our lives,*” Luke said, his voice fierce despite how soft it was. “Evey, you save me every goddamn day.”

His vehement words finally broke the dam, and the tears ran unchecked down my face. Luckily, I was able to hide them from the girls, but I knew Luke could tell because he held me tighter.

When I finally had myself under control, I discreetly wiped my face and took a step back. “We really need to get goin’.”

Luke looked like he wanted to argue, but he nodded. “Okay, we can pick this back up later.”

My heart flipped inside my chest, and I had to look away again. “Hey, girls. Do you wanna see what EE got you for your birthday?”

They both yelled variations of the word *yes*, so I pulled out their dresses and held them up to each girl.

“Yellow and purple?” Luke asked from behind me.

“You don’t like them?”

He chuckled. “They’re adorable. I’m just wonderin’ why you chose those colors.”

“Those are their favorite colored pencils,” I said with a shrug as I watched the girls twirl around with their new dresses clutched in their arms.

He didn’t answer, but when I finally turned to him, his warm brown eyes said enough. I had to look away again before I could get lost in them.

There’d be time for that later.

“Okay, Mari, Maggie, let’s get your princess dresses on!” I called.

Ms. Nora showed up to help us since I wasn’t much use, and soon the girls were dressed and ready for their party. We all walked back up to the lodge together, and I finally got what I’d been waiting all this time for.

“Ooo,” Mari sang as she pointed to the lights strung above the patio.

“Dat!” Maggie yelled, and I knew the bounce house had been discovered.

“We can play with that as soon as we go say hi to Grandma and Grandpa,” Luke said, and both girls fell silent.

Luke’s parents, Linda and Leon, were standing at the bottom of the back stairs, his sister right behind them. Their expressions were full of wonder and fear, and I understood completely. One look was all you needed to know these girls were special.

Maggie’s grip around my hand tightened as we stopped in front of their grandparents, and Linda got down on one knee.

“Hello there. I like your princess dress,” she said to Maggie, who looked down and smiled.

“Dess,” she said with a nod, and Linda laughed.

“Yes, that’s your dress.”

“My dess,” Mari spoke up, and Linda turned to her, eyes huge with exaggerated wonder.

“You have a princess dress too?”

Mari smiled wide and nodded. “My dess.”

Linda laughed again, but when she looked up at Luke, there were tears in her eyes. “They look so much like you and Lena when y’all were little.”

Before he could answer, Mari broke away from him to grab Linda’s hand. “Dat,” she said and pointed her little finger at the bounce house.

Linda shot a glance at her son. “Is that all right with you?”

“Of course.”

The older werewolf smiled and held out a hand to Maggie. “Do you want to come play with us?” Linda asked, but Maggie just pressed herself harder against my knees.

I squeezed her hand. “Come on, Magnolia. Let’s go jump in the bounce house with Mari and Grandma.”

She was all too happy to walk with me as we joined the other two.

“You’re not jumping in anything, Evey,” Luke called as he caught up to us.

I shot him a look. “I didn’t mean that *literally*.”

“Just checking.”

It took some convincing, but finally, Maggie agreed to get in the bounce house, but only after Luke crawled his giant frame in there first. The girls’ laughter was contagious, and soon the rest of the party guests were watching on with us as Mari and Maggie ran circles around him and their grandmother.

“Food’s ready when y’all are,” Ms. Elsie called from the patio above us, and the crowd slowly dispersed.

Luke somehow convinced the girls to get out of the bounce house, but that didn’t mean they stopped bouncing. We all laughed as the two jumped and danced their way across the lawn to the back steps.

“Wait for Dada,” Luke called, but Mari didn’t listen.

I was only a few feet away when she ran full-speed toward the stairs and disaster struck. She knew how to walk up with assistance, but had never done it on her own, so she didn’t anticipate how high she’d have to lift that little leg to get up the step.

So, of course, she misjudged it, and her knee collided with the edge of the wooden plank. My heart plummeted to my stomach as she fell backward and let out a cry I’d never heard from her before.

Without a second thought, I sprinted over and bent to pick her up. That sharp pain in my spine was back, but I ignored it as I pulled Mari into my arms and held her tight.

“Oh, sweet girl,” I cooed in her ear as she sobbed in mine.

Luke made it to our side and held out his arms for her, but she shook her head and buried her face in my neck. Guilt dripped through me, but he just smiled and placed his hand on her back.

“Okay, baby. You let EE hold you and I’ll take a look at your boo boo, okay?”

Mari just continued to cry, and another crack raced through my heart. I wished I could take the pain from her. I wished there was something I could do to make it better.

I felt helpless and heartbroken, and all I had to offer was holding her tight and promising everything was going to be okay.

“It’s bleeding pretty good, but I don’t think it needs stitches,” Luke murmured.

“Stitches?” I squeaked. “Who said anything about stitches? Should we take her to the doctor? Should she get an x-ray just to be safe?”

Luke laughed and kissed the side of my head, shocking me silent. “It’s only a scraped knee, Ev. She doesn’t need a doctor. She just needs a bandage.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat that was a thick mixture of fear and surprise. “I’m sure the doctor’s not busy,” I tried again, but Luke chuckled and shook his head.

“Just a bandage and a couple magic boo boo kisses and she’ll be good as new,” he said as he put his hand on my back and led me up the stairs.

“What’s a *magic boo boo kiss*?”

He turned wide eyes toward me as Lena snorted behind us. “You do *not* do the magic boo boo kiss with them.”

Luke shook his head. “A magic boo boo kiss gets rid of the pain *and* makes it heal faster. Why wouldn’t I introduce

my daughters to them?” he asked like the answer was obvious.

I giggled, and he turned to wink at me, making my heart trip over itself. “Why don’t you two go find a seat and I’ll be right back with the first aid kit?” he said as he led me over to a bench.

I sat down and Mari snuggled further into my arms. Her loud cries were now just soft sniffles, but they still made my heart ache. I rubbed her back and rocked her side to side as I watched Maggie show off her princess dress to her grandparents.

Linda and Leon seemed like amazing people, and I knew exactly how excited they were to meet their granddaughters. It was a shame they’d missed so much of their lives, but now, hopefully, they could make up for lost time.

“Here we go,” Luke said as he sat down next to us.

I turned a little, so he had better access to the injured leg, and with practiced movements, he had the bandage on her before she knew what happened. He placed his hand on her knee and said, “Are you ready for the magic boo boo kisses?”

Mari shook her head and burrowed deeper into my hold.

“No?” Luke said, a smile in his voice. “Then how are you gonna get better?”

“EE.”

I turned cautious eyes to Luke, worried about his reaction, but that was for nothing. He was still smiling, his brown eyes warm. “You want EE to give you magic boo boo kisses?”

“Des.”

My chest warmed, and I squeezed my eyes closed, content to just breathe her in for a moment. When I opened them again, I found Luke still staring at me, a knowing look on his face. “You think Dada should show EE how to do magic boo boo kisses?”

“Des,” she said, her answer more firm than last time. Almost like she was getting sick of the questions altogether.

“Okay, EE, here’s what you gotta do,” he began as he placed his hand over her bandaged knee. “You put your hand on the boo boo and then decide how many kisses it needs to get better.”

“Hmm,” I hummed as I continued to rock her. “What do you think?”

Luke looked down at the bandage and then back at Mari, his brows furrowed in concentration. “This looks like a three-kiss boo boo to me.”

I giggled at his serious tone. “You think three is gonna be enough?”

Luke checked one more time and nodded. “Yeah. Three should do ya’.”

I laughed harder this time, and he smiled back. “Okay, got it. Mari, can you let Dada hold you so I can give you magic boo boo kisses?” I asked softly in her ear.

Mari nodded, and I transferred her to Luke without issue before I carefully leaned over her knee. “Okay, ready?” I asked her.

Marigold’s red-rimmed eyes were bright with joy as I held my breath and leaned over. The pain was back, but I ignored it as I got even closer, kissing just above her bandage once, twice, three times. I sat back up, doing my best to hide how much that motion hurt, and found Mari inspecting her leg.

“Looks all better,” Luke said. “What do you think, EE?”

I cupped her face and kissed her sweet cheek. “You look perfect to me.”

Luke slid her to her feet, and she took off running to find her sister. His arm wound around my shoulders so effortlessly it almost made me believe we’d done this before. “Thank you.”

His voice was full of so much emotion, my heart leapt to the back of my throat. When I turned toward him, I saw his eyes were as serious as his words, and it made my hands tremble. “For what?” I whispered, afraid to speak any louder.

He laughed and shook his head. “For this party. For the princess dresses. For crawling through the damn woods to get here for us.” He looked away and swallowed hard before meeting my eyes again. “For loving my girls so much.”

It felt like he was trying to say more than that.

Which was good because I loved more than just his girls.

“I do,” I said with a firm nod.

Luke continued to stare at me for a long time, and I left nothing hidden. I let him see the depth of my feelings and how much I cared about him, Mari, and Maggie. In those silent moments, I told him everything I was too scared to say out loud.

“Luke, you want me to make them some plates?” Linda called, and the spell between us was broken.

With his gaze still locked on mine, he called, “I’ll be right there, Ma.” Then he leaned closer and lowered his voice. “We can talk about this later,” he muttered before he got up and walked away.

I sat there with my heart on my lap, wondering if the poor thing would make it through the night.

Chapter 21

Evey

“Who’s ready for cake?”

The crowd cheered and moved to hover around Ms. Elsie as I struggled to stand from my seat. “Oof,” I breathed as quietly as I could, but of course, I hadn’t gotten anything past Luke.

“You need to rest,” he said as he rushed to my side and wrapped his arm around my waist.

I tried to ignore the way that small touch made my heart pound. “I need some cake,” I muttered as I struggled to stand.

“Evey,” he started, but I ignored him and leaned heavily on his shoulder as I climbed to my feet. “You should really be upstairs taking it easy.”

“I’ll go upstairs after we have cake.”

He sighed loudly, but I ignored him. Now that I was upright, it was much easier to move. I knew he was right and that I needed a serious night of recuperation, but I needed to sing *Happy Birthday* to Maggie and Mari first.

The girls ran over to Luke, which gave me an opportunity to hobble away from him and go talk to Ms. Elsie.

She had a three-tier cake in her hands and I could smell the chocolate from here. “It looks amazing, Ms. Elsie,” I whispered. “Thanks for doing this for me.”

The elderly werewolf turned to me with a smile. “You know I would have done it for those girls for free.”

She was referring to the fact that I'd paid her a couple overtime hours out of my own check to cook and bake for the party. With a glance over my shoulder, I was glad to see Luke still too far away to hear her.

"Don't mention it," I said, really, really hoping she listened.

Ms. Elsie shook her head like she knew exactly what I was up to before she whipped out a lighter and lit the candles on top of the cake.

"Ooh."

"Aah."

The girls had found their way to us, and their little faces were lit with joy. On instinct, I tried to bend down to gather Mari, but my still-healing spine prevented that.

"Evey," Luke warned between gritted teeth as he picked up his daughter and handed her to me. He leaned in close, his words so quiet even I could barely hear them. "If you don't start takin' it easy, I'm gonna throw you over my shoulder and carry you upstairs myself."

I *knew* his words weren't meant to be sexual, just like I knew even if I begged, he probably wouldn't touch me while I was injured, but *still*. My heart didn't care, and it took off at a gallop as soon as he got close enough for me to inhale his warm scent.

"You hear me?" he asked, louder this time as he pulled away.

I took a cautious glance at his face and found the same desire I was feeling reflected there. My tongue darted out to lick my dry lips, and that only served to fan the flames.

"Evey," he growled, and my whole body trembled.

"Are we ready to sing?" Ms. Elsie asked as she turned around and broke the spell between us.

I shook my head and readjusted Mari in my arms.
“Ready to sing *Happy Birthday*?” I asked her.

“Ya!”

Luke and I took seats in front of the lit-up cake, and the rest of the guests formed a circle around us. Someone started singing, and the whole group joined in. Thankfully, Linda had the foresight to start snapping pictures.

The two girls, like always, were polar opposites.

Mari clapped and tried to sing along, while Maggie cried and dug her face into Luke’s neck. I turned to him to share a laugh over her dramatics, but the sound died in my throat.

His eyes were lit up almost amber in the candlelight and reflected in them was something I was terrified to name. Something that echoed inside me just as loud, despite how scared it made me.

The song ended, and the crowd clapped, breaking the bubble around us once more. Things moved quickly after that as the girls were given slices of cake and they decided it was more fun to wear the frosting like face masks. They ran around the party, ‘scaring’ the guests for the next half hour until Luke finally called it.

“Okay, ladies. I think it’s time for bed.”

“Des.”

“No!”

I didn’t need to look to know who said what.

Armed with a package of wipes, Luke and I cornered them and cleaned off as much of the sticky sugar as we could. This turned into a giant meltdown, making it perfectly clear it was indeed bedtime.

“We got them a couple small things, but maybe they should open them tomorrow,” Linda said as she approached.

Luke gave her a grim smile. “That’s probably for the best.” He turned to the wiggly toddler in his arms. “Girls, say bye bye to Grandma, Grandpa, and Auntie Lena.”

Luke’s family gave them tentative waves, but I could feel their hesitation. I watched them stare at Luke and his girls like this was the last time they’d ever see them, and it compelled me to act.

“Do y’all want to stay here for a few days?” I asked over their screams.

Linda turned wide eyes to me. “What?”

“We’ve got plenty of room, and I’m sure y’all have more catchin’ up to do. Why don’t you stay in the lodge for the rest of the week and visit some?”

She turned to her husband, who nodded. “We’d love to,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “If that’s okay with Luke,” she added.

All eyes swung to the man standing next to me, a smile spread across his face. “We’d love that.”

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll get y’all set up in a couple rooms.”

“I got it,” Callie said as she joined our group. “You two deal with the birthday girls, and I’ll get Luke’s family squared away for the night.”

I shot my sister a grateful smile before turning back to the Adams’. “That sound okay to you?”

They all nodded. “Thank you so much,” Linda added.

I waved their thanks away as I dodged one of Mari’s flailing limbs. “We’re happy to have you. Sorry I can’t stay and get you settled,” I muttered as I tried not to drop her.

“We understand,” Linda said, her shining eyes on her granddaughters. “Go and take care of them. We’ll see you all in the morning.”

“Breakfast is in the kitchen as soon as you’re awake,” I called over my shoulder as Luke and I headed inside with the girls.

Once the door was closed behind us and the party was out of sight, they settled a little and I breathed a sigh of relief. Luke shot me a worried glance. “This is too much for you,” he said as he tried to take Mari from me.

“I’m fine,” I insisted, but he wasn’t appeased.

Finally, with a huff, he handed me Maggie and picked all three of us up. “Fine. We’ll do it this way,” he muttered.

With a smile on my face, I squeezed both girls tight and closed my eyes. “I’ll take it.”

He chuckled, but it sounded forced, and I had a good hunch why. Luke had been giving me sidelong glances all night, and I was surprised he’d let me stay at the party as long as he had.

It felt... good to be cared about like that. To have someone so concerned with my well-being. To be looked after instead of having to look after everyone else.

Luke stopped outside my bedroom door and set us all down. “Okay, let’s say goodnight to EE.”

“No!” they both yelled as their little arms held on to me even tighter.

Luke shook his head and tried to pull Mari off me, but her grip was surprisingly strong. “Come on, girls. EE needs to get some rest.”

“No. EE, no!” Mari screamed as he finally tore her away from me.

Her cries were almost enough to bring me to my knees.

“Come on, Maggie,” he muttered as he tried to control a wild Mari in his arms. Magnolia wasn’t as difficult, but together, he could barely juggle them both as he walked down the hall to his room.

“EE!”

“EE!”

I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to remind myself that they were okay. That they didn't really need me, they were just overtired.

But I couldn't

“Wait,” I called before I hurried to catch up with them. “I'll come and help.”

“Evey, you don't—”

“I want to,” I cut in. When he didn't look convinced, I laid my vulnerable heart on my sleeve and said, “Please.”

“EE, EE, EE,” Mari chanted, and without waiting for his answer, I reached for her.

Marigold practically jumped into my arms and I held her close as she slowly started to settle.

Luke sighed as he opened his bedroom door and ushered me inside. “If you insist,” he muttered.

His words dug up a whole world of insecurities I still hadn't dealt with. I tried to ignore them, but they were just growing louder in my head. Reminding me that I couldn't force my way into this family. Reminding me he might not *want* me here.

I turned to him, but kept my eyes on the floor as I spoke. “I can go if you want,” I whispered before I cleared my throat and tried again. “I didn't want them to be upset over me. I just wanted to help you get them to bed.”

Luke's brown eyes were wide as he shook his head. “Hell, I'm not kickin' you out. I'm just tryin' to do what's best for everyone. You need to be takin' care of yourself, not puttin' these two to sleep.”

Empowered by his words, I hugged Mari a little tighter and told him the truth. “This is where I wanna be.”

His gaze softened as a million different emotions sped through them. It was dizzying and my heart raced as I stood there staring. Finally, he coughed and looked away. “Jammie’s are on the dresser,” he said with a nod. “I think it’s too late for a bath.”

“Yeah, they’ll keep for another night,” I said as I kissed the top of Mari’s head.

Together, we worked in near-silence to get the girls dressed and ready for bed. I held them both on my lap as Luke read them a couple books, and I tried not to laugh at the different voices he made up.

It was so simple and mundane. I’m sure Luke had been through the same routine hundreds of times before, but to me, it was everything.

It was my chance to see behind this door. To be a part of their lives. To feel like I belonged with them. It made me think that maybe one day I could find a spot for myself in their world.

But Holly’s nasty words were there to remind me of my place.

“You’ll never be Mari and Maggie’s mom!”

“They’ll never love you like they love me!”

“You’ll never be anything to them!”

It was that last one that hurt the most. I didn’t want to replace their mom. I didn’t expect them to ever bless me with that title. But I *did* want to be *something* to them.

Was Holly right?

Would I never stack up?

Would I always live in her terrible shadow?

The questions were so loud, I almost missed Luke asking the girls to say goodnight to me. Mari was fastest, of course, and she ran into me with such force she almost knocked me over.

“Mari!” Luke reprimanded, but I waved him off.

“It’s okay. She didn’t mean it,” I said as I ignored the way my entire body ached and picked her up. “Night night, Marigold,” I whispered as I squeezed her tight. “I hope you had a good birthday.”

Her little hands patted my back gently. “Nuh-night. Lah you.”

My whole body froze as my eyes darted to Luke. He had a big smile spread across his face. “That means—”

“I know what it means!” I whispered back. With another wave of tears threatening to spill, I pulled Mari even closer and kissed the side of her head. “I love you too, sweet girl,” I breathed into her curly hair.

I could feel Mari’s heart beating against my chest and almost laughed when I realized mine was thumping the same tune. Luke walked over with Maggie, and I reluctantly gave Mari up.

Maggie cuddled into my arms just as easily as her sister had, but this time I didn’t wait for her to say anything. I held her close and kissed the side of her head as I whispered, “I love you too, Magnolia.”

She sighed as she relaxed in my arms, and I swore I could have died happily like that. I’d never have to eat or drink again. All I’d ever need was this little girl on my chest, holding me like this.

But I had to let her go.

She needed her sleep, and despite my protests, I really did need to heal.

With one last kiss on her soft cheek, I handed her to Luke, who laid her down in bed. Maggie immediately rolled onto her belly and got comfy as I watched her in awe.

“Night girls. Dada and EE love you,” Luke said as he grabbed my hand and led me across the room.

Mari kicked up a bit of a fuss, but Luke ignored her as he ushered me into the hall and closed the door behind us. He didn't stop walking until we were in front of my bedroom.

When he finally turned to me, the look in his eyes took my breath away. "Can I come in?" he asked, his voice so deep it sent a shiver racing through my body.

Afraid my voice would crack, I just nodded and reached for the knob. Luke pulled on my hand again and led me into my dark room. He didn't bother with lights and I almost liked it better that way. Now maybe I had a chance of hiding how nervous he made me.

"Evey," he finally said when we'd made it to the center of my room. He let go of me and ran both hands through his dark hair. "I don't even know where to begin."

I swallowed hard past the lump in my throat. "With what?" I whispered, afraid to speak any louder than that in the dark, quiet room.

He blew out a deep breath and looked away. "I want to find the perfect way to tell you how much you mean to me, but I'm not good with stuff like this. I've been tryin' to find the words all night, but nothing sounds right."

My heart was thumping so loud in my chest I almost couldn't hear over it.

Luke finally turned to me again, and the look in his eyes knocked the wind right out of my lungs. "All I can give you are the facts, but they're not gonna be pretty."

My lips twitched with a smile, but I kept quiet.

He let out another loud exhale. "The first fact is you're the most incredible woman I've ever met."

My heart skipped one whole beat, but he just kept talking.

"You're sweet, and kind, and caring, and so smart, you constantly keep me on my toes. I don't know where me and

my girls would be without you right now, but I don't wanna know," he said as he took a couple steps toward me.

"The second fact," he continued, "is I don't want to hide what we have from the girls anymore."

My heart beat even harder. "Are you sure?" I breathed.

He took another few steps until his spicy scent filled my senses and made me dizzy. "I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life." Luke closed the remaining distance between us and wrapped his big hands around my hips. "When you left for Charlotte, it was like you took the sun with you. Every day was dark again without you in it. I couldn't eat without you. I couldn't sleep without you—"

"That's the withdrawals," I cut him off, my voice still no louder than a whisper. "I felt it too."

Luke pulled back with a frown. "Withdrawals?"

I nodded slowly, the lump in my throat threatening to choke me. "We've seen it with all my siblings and their fated mates. They can't be apart or they get sick."

His lips parted as he huffed out a disbelieving breath. "Fated mates?"

I nodded again, too afraid to read his expressions but unable to look away. "Yes. I think we're fated."

"You *think*?"

With a deep breath, I shook my head. "No. I *know* we're fated."

Luke chuckled and pulled me against his chest. "Fact three: I don't care what fate says. I'm in love with you and I'm never letting you go again."

Chapter 22

Luke

“Evey,” I whispered, my eyes fastened on her face still slack with sleep. “Evey,” I tried again.

Her long, dark lashes fluttered before she opened one beautiful blue eye. “What?” she croaked.

I chuckled and pulled her warm body against mine. Evey froze beneath me and I knew she could already feel how hard I was.

We’d been sleeping in her room every night for the last two weeks since her accident. Somehow, I’d managed to keep my hands to myself all that time, but just barely.

It had been torturous to lie beside her every night and do nothing but kiss. It was agony waking up with her head on my chest knowing all I could do was hold her.

But, hopefully, it was time for all that to end.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her like I did every morning.

Evey narrowed her one open eye at me. “I feel perfectly fine. I’ve been tellin’ you that for a week.”

It was true.

She’d even been given a clean bill of health by the doctor yesterday, but I’d still waited. I needed to be sure she was really healed. I needed to know I wouldn’t hurt her if I touched her.

I brushed some hair off her face and cupped her jaw so she had to look at me. “I just wanted to keep you safe.”

Her eyes flashed with heat as she pinned me with a glare. “I’m more likely to combust from sexual frustration than I am to hurt my back again.”

I laughed even as my dick grew harder in my pants. “Am I frustrating you, love?”

She narrowed her eyes even further. “You know you are.”

My hands slid off her jaw and down her neck. I watched her eyes widen as I traced my fingers down her arm, over her hip, and wrapped them around her thigh. With a quick jerk, I hitched her leg over my waist and asked, “What can I do to help?”

Her heart was fluttering in her chest almost as hard as mine as she looked up at me again. I stared into her ocean blue eyes, and it felt like I could see straight down into her soul.

She had this way of opening herself up and letting you inside that I’d never experienced before. I’d never *known* someone like I already knew Evey, despite the fact we hadn’t had much time together yet.

“Touch me,” she whispered.

My eyes darted to her lips, afraid I’d only imagined those words from her mouth. “What?” I breathed.

She cleared her throat. “Touch me. Please,” she said, louder this time.

My breath caught in my throat as I slid my hand from her thigh to her ass. She gasped softly as I squeezed her tight and dragged her even closer. “Like this?” I asked, my voice rumbling through my chest.

Evey arched her back, pushing her ass harder into my hand, and I had to hold back a groan. “Yes,” she whispered. “Please.”

Fuck.

There was *nothing* I wouldn’t give her.

In one swift move, I pulled her underneath me and sat up so I could rip my shirt over my head. Evey's eyes widened as they inspected my chest and I stayed still so she could look. "You have your fill yet?" I asked after a while.

She raised a brow, her smile twisted to the side. "Not even close."

I laughed and covered her body with mine, lining my hips up between hers and getting as close as I possibly could. "You can look all you want tonight. Right now, I need to make you come at least twice before the girls wake up."

Her plump lips fell open with a gasp, and I took that opportunity to kiss her. Evey moaned softly in my mouth, and the sound ran right through my veins. It invigorated me, made me feel ten fucking feet tall.

My hands found her thighs again, and I ran them up her smooth skin until I found the edge of her panties. She'd been sleeping in nothing but underwear and an oversized t-shirt for days, trying to get me to cave, but *nothing* could have made me put her at risk. Not even her half-dressed and wrapped around me all night.

I finally wrenched my lips away from her, which left us both panting in the quiet room. "I wanna take my time with you. *Fuck*, there's a million things I wanna do with you, but we don't have much time."

Evey nodded and sat up to rip her shirt over her head. "I can get down with a quickie," she said as she shimmied her panties over her hips.

I laughed, but it dried up in my throat the moment I had Evey naked beneath me. My eyes ate up every inch of the skin she'd revealed, and I knew I could sit there all day staring. Her nipple ring glinted in the soft light coming through the blinds, and now I knew where to start.

Evey gasped again as I pulled her piercing into my mouth and sucked hard. My hands found her bare hips and

then her ass as I dragged her closer. Her skin tasted like fucking vanilla, and it just made me want more.

With a growl, I ripped off my sweatpants, and my engorged cock sprang free. Evey's eyes rounded as she stared at me.

I cleared my throat, and her gaze jumped to mine. "I'm not gonna last long with you starin' at me like that."

Her smile turned lazy as she leaned back on the bed and spread her knees apart for me. "Then give me somethin' else to focus on."

I laughed again and wrapped my hands around her calves. "Challenge accepted." My fingers traced their way up her legs so I could widen her thighs some more. I could already tell how wet she was, and it made my dick leak.

Knowing that wasn't going to make me last any longer, I focused on her hard, pink nipples and let my hands keep working between her legs. Evey gasped as I bit down on her piercing and then cried out loud when I followed that up by sliding two fingers inside her.

She was tight and just as wet as I knew she'd be. I had to grit my teeth to keep from coming right then and there.

"Luke," she breathed, and the whole fucking world faded away.

I stared at her writhing beneath me and knew without a doubt I'd never want for anything if I just got to keep her.

My fingers moved faster, and I added a third, stretching her further and making her moan beneath me. I could tell she was getting close, but she wasn't coming anywhere but on my cock today.

I pulled my fingers out of her and lined myself up before sliding deep inside. Evey's eyes squeezed closed with another gasp, and I gave her a moment to adjust. When she rocked her hips against me, I knew she was ready, so I pulled

out and slammed back into her, catching her clit between my fingers and squeezing.

Evey came hard, her body thrashing beneath mine as I kept up a punishing pace and tried to hold my own orgasm back. When she finally stopped shaking, I leaned down to kiss her again. Evey moaned into my mouth, and I somehow got harder.

“You’re not done?” she breathed as I pulled away from her lips.

I laughed and pushed some more hair off her face. “With you? Never.”

Her eyes seemed to almost glow with happiness as she smiled, and my whole fucking world aligned. How had I lived so long without her? How had I done a goddamn thing right in my life without Evey by my side?

I leaned back down to kiss her, because I couldn’t help myself. She was so beautiful and sweet, and now she was *mine*. Now I got to kiss her anytime I wanted.

I’d taken full advantage of that the past two weeks and, unsurprisingly, the girls had hardly noticed the change. They were just happy to have Evey around more, and I couldn’t blame them. I didn’t think anyone was happier than I was.

I continued to steadily pump in and out of her as I pulled away from her lips and rested my head on hers. “Have I told you today how much I love you?” I whispered.

That was another change that happened so seamlessly no one seemed to notice.

Although I’d held back from most physical affection, I’d made sure to shower her in all other ways. I couldn’t begin to count the number of times I’d said I loved her. Just like neither of us could say how many times the girls had told her the same.

We’d effortlessly become this little tribe, and I knew me and my girls had never been happier. In some ways, it felt

too soon. Like there should have been a mourning period for my relationship with their mother, but there wasn't. And they didn't seem to mind, so I tried not to worry about it.

Evey reached up to cup my face, breaking me out of my thoughts and bringing me back to this perfect moment with her. "Not yet today, but you told me so many times yesterday, I haven't forgotten."

I laughed and kissed her again. "Then I'll make sure I tell you enough times today so you'll have some left over for tomorrow."

She giggled, and the sound went straight to the pit of my stomach, lighting me up and making me feel like I could do anything. "I love you too," she said, and I'd never seen her eyes so blue.

My hands shook as I reached for her hips and thrust into her harder. "Say it again," I grit out.

Evey smiled wide. "I love you."

A growl rumbled out of my chest as I moved faster and both our orgasms raced forward. "Again," I grunted.

"I love you."

I was almost there, but I could tell she wasn't as close, and I wanted us to come at the same time. My hands reached for her tits, and I pinched her pierced nipple as I said, "Again."

Evey was squirming and panting so hard she could barely speak. "I... I-love you," she stuttered, as she squeezed her eyes closed. With a roar, I slammed into her again and again until the dam finally broke and she came with a scream. "I love you!"

My heart was so fucking full it felt like it would burst. I pulled her into my arms as she shook with the remnants of her orgasm. Her body fit perfectly against mine, but it wasn't like I needed more proof she was meant to be with me.

We were fated, like she said, and *nothing* in my life had ever made more sense than Evey.

My thoughts were hazy and filled with visions of our future, but all that went away when she froze in my arms. “Evey?” I asked as I pulled away to catch her gaze.

Her eyes were wide with fear as she swallowed harshly. “You didn’t use a condom.”

I studied her terrified face as I waited for the fear from last time to settle in.

But it never came.

Instead, there was the bone-deep regret that I’d done this twice now without any regard for her.

“Fuck,” I spat as my heart picked up its pace. “I’m so sorry, Evey. I got caught up. I wasn’t thinking.”

She seemed to struggle with another harsh swallow. “Are you okay?” she asked softly.

I jerked back and frowned at her. “Huh?”

Her tongue darted out to lick her pink lips, and I had to control the urge to kiss her again. “Last time you said you weren’t ready for more kids. You kinda freaked out.”

“Evey.” I sighed as I pulled her close and squeezed her against me. “Why are you worried about me when I’m the one who might have just knocked you up?”

She shrugged in my arms. “Because that doesn’t scare me.”

I froze for a moment as my brain tried to process her words. When I pulled away, her bright blue eyes already told me what I wanted to know. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

She nodded slowly, almost like she was afraid to admit it. “More Marigolds and Magnolias? Why wouldn’t I want that?”

I shook my head, honestly wondering how I’d gotten so lucky. “You’re incredible.”

Evey ignored me, her brows bunching with concern. “But what about you? Aren’t you worried? I’m kinda in a bad place in my cycle for trying to avoid a pregnancy.”

My stomach flipped deep inside me, but still I wasn’t afraid. “I’m sorry, Evey. I should have been more careful. I should have been more responsible.”

“You’re not scared like last time,” she said slowly, her eyes studying my face.

I shrugged. “Last time I didn’t even know which way was up.” I pulled her close and dug my face into her neck so I could pull her vanilla scent deep into my lungs. “Now, I know we’ve got a safe place to live. I know I can make money and support my family. And this time,” I said as I backed away so I could meet her eyes, “I have you.”

Her smile was so big and so beautiful I almost couldn’t look directly at her. “You had me last time too. You just didn’t know it yet.”

I laughed, and this time I didn’t stop myself. My lips met hers and we kissed for a long time until a tiny, distorted voice sounded from the nightstand.

“Dada? EE?”

“Hear that?” I murmured against her mouth. “Your biggest fans are awake.”

Evey pulled away with another gorgeous smile that made my heart beat erratically. “Time to get the girls.”

I pulled away with a sigh and watched her crawl out of bed. The view was amazing. I only wished she wasn’t walking away from me.

“Hey, did you wanna do somethin’ today?”

Evey shrugged on another baggy t-shirt before spinning to face me. “Like what?”

I grabbed my pants and the monitor as I climbed out of bed too. “I dunno. My family just left and it’s almost

Halloween. Maybe we can do some fall shit.”

Evey gasped. “Like a pumpkin patch?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Let’s find a place with hayrides too! And maybe a petting zoo!”

I laughed. “Sounds good to me. The girls will love that.”

Her eyes grew even wider, lit up in a way I was all too familiar with. “I’ve got the perfect outfits for them to wear!”

I rolled my eyes and headed to the bathroom to clean up as she scurried off into her closet. “I’m sure you do,” I muttered. “Hope you didn’t spend too much!” I called after her but didn’t get a reply.

That meant she *had* spent too much, but I wasn’t going to fight it. Evey loved those girls, and she was going to buy them things whether I protested or not.

So, I’d just sit back and keep wondering how I’d gotten so lucky and hope it didn’t run out any time soon.

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Chapter 23

Evey

“Hey, Luke, how are the pack house repairs comin’ along?” my brother asked as he struggled to juggle two rowdy toddlers.

“It’s comin’. Should be done by the end of the week.”

Abey smiled wide as he set Gracelyn and Hadley down. “Perfect. I’ve got a new project for you.”

Luke nodded and grabbed a napkin to wipe his face. “Sure. What is it?”

“You’re building a new pack house.”

Luke paused for a moment before he crumpled the paper in his hands. “That’ll take months all by myself.”

Abraham waved a hand. “I’ll have a crew for you, but you’ll be the foreman on the project. You good with that?”

My lips spread into a wide grin as I glanced between Luke and my brother. They’d had a rocky time after Abraham found out Luke’s ex tried to have me killed. I couldn’t even blame him, because I’d have felt the same in his shoes.

But once everyone found out we were fated, Abey’s mood began to change. He knew what it was like to find your mate and he’d never stand in the way of that.

However, Abraham was still my older brother, and I was still his baby sister. He was going to be protective no matter who I chose to be with.

I recognized this job as an olive branch, and I loved my brother even more for it.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” Luke said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Do you have a design already? Do you know how big it’s gonna be?”

“It’s for a family of four with some room to grow, so maybe three or four bedrooms?”

Luke nodded, and I could see the wheels already turning in his head. He enjoyed working with his hands, but he’d told me recently he really loved creating something from nothing. Those planters for Ms. Nora had been fun for him. The gate for the top of the stairs was an interesting challenge.

Now he had the opportunity to build a home from scratch? He had to be elated.

“Who’s the house for?” I spoke up, trying to remember if we had any new families joining the pack.

Abraham’s smile got even wider, like he’d just been waiting for this question. “It’s for you guys.”

Luke froze next to me while my jaw fell open. “Abey,” I whispered, but he just waved again.

“Y’all need a place of your own and the lodge is getting crowded. It just makes sense.” He turned to Luke. “Are you up for it?”

Luke shot me a grin that curled my toes before he turned back to Abey. “Hell yeah, I’m up for it.”

“Bell yah!” Mari echoed.

I tried to smother a laugh, but she caught on, making her erupt in giggles. “Okay, Ms. Marigold, let’s get cleaned up so we can get goin’.”

“Where are y’all goin’?” Abraham asked.

Luke fidgeted next to me for a moment before he answered. “I was gonna come make sure it was okay with you that I took the afternoon off. I wanted to take Evey and the girls to a pumpkin patch.”

“Go on,” he said with another wave. “Y’all deserve a fun afternoon.”

“Thanks, Abraham,” Luke said.

My brother shook his head. “You’ve been working hard since you got here, but family comes first. Don’t ever be worried about doing what’s right for them.” Luke nodded as I walked over to my brother and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “What was that for?”

I shrugged and bent down to pick up Maggie. “Just for being the best brother in the world.”

His cheeks turned pink, and I had to control the urge to make fun of him for it. Instead, Luke wrangled Mari into his arms, and we headed out to his truck. The North Carolina heat had finally relented some, giving us a perfect fall day.

Luke held my hand as he drove us the twenty minutes to the farm I’d found online. We parked in the empty gravel lot and he turned to me with a frown. “Are you sure they’re open?”

I shrugged as I scanned our surroundings. “It said they were online. Maybe they’re just slow during the week?”

Luke narrowed his eyes as he turned the engine off. “I’ll go make sure.”

He slid out of the truck and I watched him walk up to the small cabin that seemed like a main office of sorts. Within a couple minutes, he was heading back toward us, little baggies of carrot sticks clutched in his hands. He held them up with a smile. “We get to feed goats.”

I giggled and slid out of the truck. Before I could say anything, he leaned down to kiss me and all rational thought was gone. When he pulled away, I was breathless. “What was that for?” I whispered, my voice still shaking.

Luke shrugged as turned to get the girls out of the back. “You just looked too pretty not to kiss.”

The butterflies in my stomach were vicious as they beat at my insides. I stood there wondering how I'd found the man of my dreams and a family of my own all at the same time.

“We ready to go find some pumpkins?” Luke asked the girls once they were out of their seats.

They both cheered and took off running toward the farm, with me and Luke trailing behind them. We found approximately thirty pumpkins that they absolutely needed to have, but eventually, Luke was able to haggle them down to just two each.

We munched on caramel popcorn as the girls climbed on hay bales and chased the mini goats around the farm. Thankfully, the goats were faster.

“Hey, do you girls wanna try the corn maze?” I asked when there was a lull in their activity level.

“May! May!” Mari cheered, and Maggie joined in.

“How about we take a walk through the maze and then get headed home? Ms. Elsie should have dinner ready soon.”

I wrapped my arm around his elbow as we followed behind the girls. Their giggles were relentless as they ran through the maze. Even dead ends weren't enough to tamp down their fun.

So, when they turned a corner and the laughter stopped, Luke and I took off running. “Girls?” he called.

No one answered.

We sprinted around the same corner they had and then we both skidded to a halt.

We'd reached the middle of the maze, and in it stood Holly, her hands wrapped around Mari and Maggie's arms. My body was already trembling with the need to get them away from her when Luke took a step forward.

“Holly, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to collect what’s mine.”

I could feel his anger through our bond and it stoked the flames of my own. My wolf begged to be let out, but I kept ahold of her. For now.

“Those girls are *not* yours,” he growled, his hands curling into fists.

“Aren’t they?” she sneered back. “Wasn’t I the one who carried them for nine months? Wasn’t I the one who gave birth to them?”

“Yes,” he yelled as he took a step toward them. “You’re also the one who’s treated them like shit their whole lives anytime you weren’t too busy ignoring them. They are *not* yours and you’re not going *anywhere* with them.”

Holly smirked, and just that tiny curl of her lips made my blood run cold. “You’re not in control here, Lukey. *I* am.”

Before he could say another word, we both heard the crunching of approaching footsteps, and soon we were surrounded by giant werewolves. Three of them hovered around Luke, while the fourth stood just behind me.

The men near Luke reached for him, but he shrugged them off. “What the hell is going on, Holly?” he yelled as they finally caught his arms and yanked them behind his back.

Another man appeared from the other side of the clearing and the atmosphere changed instantly. “What is this?” he asked as he approached her and the girls.

Every part of me screamed to protect them. To put myself between them and this man because I knew he was no good. I could feel it in my bones.

“The girls I promised you,” she answered.

My stomach churned so hard I thought I’d be sick as Luke kicked up another struggle with the men holding him. “What the fuck are you doing?” he screamed.

Holly ignored him, her anxious gaze on the latest man to join us.

“You said they were old enough to be useful,” he sneered.

Holly wilted in front of him while I fought to keep the bile from climbing up my throat. What the *hell* was going on right now?

And what the *hell* was he talking about?

“They *are* useful!” Holly squeaked as she jerked the girls forward.

Luke and I both yelled out, but we were ignored, and now the guy behind me had an arm around my shoulders.

“They’re babies,” the man said, his voice rising. “You owe me a lot of fucking money, and you promised these girls would be worth something!”

Every word from his mouth was like something out of my worst nightmares. I was having trouble believing this was even real. Maybe I was still asleep. Maybe Luke hadn’t woken me up with the kind of affection I’d been begging him for. Maybe we hadn’t just had the most amazing family afternoon together.

But the arm around my chest was dipping lower now, his thick fingers grazing the top of my breast, and I knew this wasn’t a dream.

It was a goddamn nightmare.

I jerked away from his repulsive touch, but all he did was chuckle. “Don’t worry, darlin’. You’ll be beggin’ for it soon.”

Now I knew I was going to be sick.

“What the hell am I gonna do with a pair of *babies*, Holly? Do they even know how to piss in the toilet yet?”

Holly’s face turned red as she shook her head slowly. “Not yet, but I can teach them. It shouldn’t take long, they’re

fast learners.”

“I don’t have time for this *bullshit*,” he spat. “You think crystal bane grows on trees? That you could just get high on my dime and not owe me shit?”

The more he talked, the worse it got.

Holly was trying to *sell* her daughters to a drug dealer to repay her debt.

How could a mother stoop so low?

How could someone sell their children?

My stomach rolled violently as the sweat ran down my hairline. We were clearly outnumbered, but the odds weren’t astronomical. Luke was a pretty big guy, and I was confident in my skills. If we timed it right, we might be able to make it out of this.

“Let’s go,” the man sneered before storming back toward where he’d come from.

“Kent! Wait! Do you still want the girls?”

“Bring them,” he called over his shoulder. “I’m sure I can find *someone* who’ll buy them.”

Luke roared from beside me before the sound was muffled. I didn’t spare him a glance though, because I wasn’t willing to take my eyes off those girls for a second.

“What are we doin’ with these two?” the man behind me called, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up straight.

Kent turned around to shoot him a bored look. “Kill them.”

I barely registered his words, my eyes still locked on the girls as Holly dragged them farther away from us.

They’d been scared silent up until now, but as they realized their father and I weren’t coming with them, they

started to panic. “Dada?” Mari called. “EE!” she said even louder.

A sob tore from Maggie’s throat, and the sound pierced me right in the chest. I tried to pull away from the man holding me, but it was clear I wasn’t strong enough.

Not like this.

With a move I’d practiced with Bea at least a hundred times, I crouched down as low as I could get and flung myself into the air, willing my body into a wolf’s. The shift was over in the blink of an eye, and I slipped through my captor’s arms with ease.

He yelled something unintelligible, but I’d already spun around and raked my sharp nails across his throat. Blood spurted from his open neck as his eyes went wide and he fell to the ground.

I didn’t bother waiting to see if he’d get back up.

The men next to me holding Luke had just realized I’d shifted and were in the process of their own transformation.

Which left them vulnerable to my claws and teeth.

I ripped one man’s throat out while he was still human and broke the back leg of a second. I’d have stayed around to do more damage, but Mari’s scream broke through the blood haze and I turned to watch her disappear around a corner.

My stomach twisted violently inside me as I jumped to my feet and took off at a sprint. I careened around the corner too fast and slammed through a wall of corn stalks.

Holly was just up ahead, dragging both girls behind her, and I promised myself I wouldn’t let them out of my sight again. With a burst of speed, I caught up, only to get tackled from the side by another large wolf.

We rolled to a stop, and I slipped out from underneath them quicker than they could react. Back on my feet, I lunged away and took off running toward Holly and the girls again. She threw a glance over her shoulder and screamed, “Kent!”

I didn't get much farther before his jaws snapped down hard on my hind leg and dragged me backward.

I spun around in another practiced move and dug my good foot into his eye. Kent yelped and let me go so I could scramble to my feet. My leg hurt like hell, but I didn't think it was broken, so I pushed the pain aside.

With a glance over my shoulder, I saw Holly getting farther away from me, but I wasn't sure I could outrun the wolf climbing to his feet with my injured leg.

Thankfully, Luke showed up and made my decision for me.

"I got him, Evey! Go!"

I didn't need to be told twice.

My paws dug deep into the soft ground as I followed the girls' familiar scent. I cursed myself for losing sight of them already, but I knew their individual smells as well as I knew my own.

I made it to the end of the corn maze just in time to see Holly and the girls disappear around the other side of the main office. Being sighted by a human as a wolf wasn't ideal, but I wasn't stopping for anything.

With a burst of energy, I sprinted across the field, whipping around the corner and almost barreling them all over. With a grunt, I pushed myself off course just a bit and slammed into Holly instead of the girls.

We went tumbling across the gravel parking lot in a mess of limbs before coming to a stop. Holly was a wolf by now, and her hackles were raised.

"You couldn't just mind your fucking business, could you?" she snarled.

"You're mad because I wouldn't let you sell your daughters?" I fired back.

She launched into a ridiculous tirade about Mari and Maggie belonging to her, and I took that opportunity to glance around us. The girls were huddled together a few feet away, which was a little too close for comfort.

With slow, calculated movements, I placed my body in between her and the girls while she blathered on.

“I never wanted to be a mom. This was all Luke’s idea and now my body is ruined forever. Don’t I deserve something out of this?”

Her words finally penetrated my concentration, and I stopped moving to glare at her. *“You got two sweet little girls out of this, you asshole.”*

Holly rolled her eyes and took a menacing step closer. *“You have no idea what it means to be a mom. You have no idea what kind of sacrifice it takes. I earned these girls, and no one is taking them from me.”*

My heart fell to the pit of my stomach as I realized I’d have to kill this woman. She was deranged. She was a monster. She’d never stop coming for these girls. She’d never give them up.

I took a moment to glance at Mari and Maggie, hoping they’d be able to look at me the same way. Hoping they wouldn’t hate me for the rest of their lives for what I had to do.

With a shake of my head, I gritted my teeth and dug my claws into the ground, ready to attack, when I heard the sound of approaching feet. I turned in time to see Luke sprinting straight toward us.

“Move,” he yelled, and I jumped out of his way just in time.

I raced over to the girls and covered them as best I could as Luke barreled into Holly, their bodies rolling away in a pile of snarls and snapping bones. When they came to a stop, Luke was standing over her lifeless body, his muzzle covered in blood and his eyes on Holly.

My heart stopped beating for one whole second as I watched her take her last breath and shift back into a woman. Luke stood there staring at her, and I couldn't imagine what was going through his head.

A soft cry from beneath me brought my attention back to Mari and Maggie. Now that the danger had passed, I realized they were both trembling beneath me. My heart ached for them as I took a moment to shift back.

“EE!” they both yelled as they wrapped their arms around me.

The girls cried softly against my chest as I carried them toward Luke's truck. I didn't bother with their car seats and sat us all on the front bench instead. The driver's door opened a few minutes later and Luke slid onto the seat next to us.

He wrapped his arms around all of our shoulders and sighed. “It's over now.”

I just hoped he was right.

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Epilogue

Luke

“Toe toes!”

“You heard the girl!” Ms. Elsie yelled from the other end of the table. “Someone get her some more potatoes!”

“I’m on it, I’m on it,” Evey sang as she stood up and grabbed the glass bowl of mashed spuds. I’d have told her to sit and let me take care of it, but I knew she wouldn’t listen.

Some days I thought she took care of my girls better than I did.

“Toes!” Maggie yelled next, and Evey turned to her with a smile.

“More toes for Maggie-girl,” she crowed, and I couldn’t help but smile.

She was always so patient with them. She answered every question and demand with a smile. Evey was the perfect mother for my girls, and today, I was hoping to make that official.

It had been about a month since the scene with Holly at the pumpkin patch, and thankfully, that was the last we’d heard of it. All the people who’d attacked us that day were dead, and the owner told the police he’d seen a wolf on the property. They were blaming a rogue animal, and we were in the clear.

In a lot of ways, we were past the worst of it. And in some ways, it was like it was just yesterday.

I still had trouble letting them out of my sight. Even leaving them for a few hours with Ms. Nora sent me into a

panic. It had taken me weeks just to let them sleep in a room without me. Things were getting better, but it was slow going.

Maggie and Mari though, were way stronger than me. They'd spent a couple rough nights in bed with us, but thankfully, their porous little brains let that particular day leak out and they'd acted unaffected ever since.

Apparently, that afternoon hadn't scarred them like it had us.

To this day, I wasn't sure I'd done the right thing.

Maybe I should have let Holly live. Maybe there'd been another option I just hadn't seen at the time. Maybe I'd killed my daughter's mother for no reason and they'd hate me for the rest of my life.

Whenever those bleak thoughts crept in, I'd turn to Evey. Her light was bright enough to illuminate all the darkness inside me.

"Do you girls need some more milk?" she asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I cleared my throat and jumped from my seat. "I can fill their cups."

Evey turned to me with a smile as she sat back down. "I didn't mind doin' it."

I chuckled and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Just relax. It's Thanksgivin' and you spent all day cookin' with Ms. Elsie."

Evey tried to smother a yawn, but wasn't quite successful. "Listen, I had a blast waking up at four A.M. to start that big ass turkey."

I laughed harder and kissed her again. "Well, thank you for your sacrifice. It was delicious."

She rolled her eyes, but I didn't miss the pink tint to her cheeks. "It better taste good. That thing is the star of the show."

I shook my head. “No, you are.”

She rolled her eyes harder and shooed me away. “Go get the milk, Romeo.”

I did as she asked but couldn’t help glancing back over my shoulder. I loved watching Evey with the girls. She was such a natural, and Mari and Maggie absolutely adored her.

Which made me just a little less nervous about what I was going to do.

“Hey, Luke?”

I turned just in time to stop myself from running my sister down. “Hey, Lena. What’s up?”

Thankfully, she and my parents had been able to come back up for the holiday. I’d been working on getting them to move here permanently, but so far, hadn’t had any luck.

“Do you think Abraham would mind if I stayed here for a little while?”

I frowned at her tone, instantly knowing something was wrong. “Why?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can’t I just want to stay and visit with my brother and nieces?”

Her words hit their intended target, and I winced. “Of course you can stay and visit. I just wanna make sure everything is okay with you.”

“I’m fine,” she said before I’d even finished talking. “I just need to get away from Texas for a little while. I brought some extra clothes so Mom and Dad can just leave me here if that’s okay.”

“I’ll talk to Abraham, but I’m sure it is.”

She breathed out a soft sigh, and I knew there was something more to this. Just like I knew I hadn’t earned the right to know these things yet. But I was working on it. Now with her staying, it seemed like I’d have even more time and opportunity.

I walked back over to Evey with an even wider grin and a jewelry box burning a hole in my pocket. Everything in my life had been slowly falling into place since the moment I met her, and now I was ready for that final piece to complete the puzzle.

I distributed full milk cups to the girls and took a seat next to Evey. My heart was pounding so hard I knew everyone had to hear it, but there was nothing I could do about that. “Hey, Evey, me and the girls got you a present.”

She turned wide, surprised eyes to me. “A present?”

I nodded. “Well, actually, two presents. But there’s a catch.”

Her lips twitched with a grin as she turned to Maggie and Mari. “Are you two behind this?”

They both nodded. “Des,” Maggie added.

Evey giggled and cupped their cheeks. “I should have known this had Marigold and Magnolia written all over it.” She sighed dramatically and let her hands drop from their faces. “Okay,” she said, folding one tan leg over the other. “What’s this catch you’re talkin’ about?”

I tried to not let the sight of all that smooth skin distract me, but I wasn’t that strong.

“Luke,” she said with a snap of her fingers. “Eyes up here.”

I looked up into her beautiful, smirking face. “You don’t fight fair,” I said as I reached out to wrap my fingers around her thigh. I kept my hand at an appropriate level right above her knee, but it still made both of us breathless.

“You were saying something about a gift?” Evey whispered, her cheeks now flushed with color.

“Yes. Two gifts and one catch.”

“What’s the catch, Luke?” she said between gritted teeth as she squirmed beneath me.

I chuckled and sat back, removing my hand and giving us some space to think clearer. “The catch is, if you want one of the presents, you have to take the other too.”

Her smile was a little confused as she cocked her head to the side. “So, I get two presents, or I get no presents?”

“Exactly.”

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Where are they?”

I swallowed hard past the lump in my throat and pulled out the jewelry box. The room got quiet, and I knew all eyes were on us now. I slid the gift toward Evey and sat back in my chair.

Her hands shook as she pulled the lid off and lifted the necklace from inside. It was a simple gold chain, but on it, there were two little opal stones made to look like twin girls. *My twin girls.*

“That’s their birthstone,” I said, pointing to the necklace she was still staring at.

She nodded. “I know.”

I swallowed again. “Now, they’re your girls too.”

Evey sniffed loud and looked up at me with blue eyes full of tears. “What’s the other gift?” she whispered.

I reached into my other pocket and pulled out a rope of mulberry silk. “Unfortunately for you, Mari and Maggie and I are a package deal. So, if you want them, you need to take me too,” I said as I slid the binding used for mating ceremonies toward her.

Evey laughed as the tears finally started to fall. “You mean I get to keep all three of you?”

My heart swelled in my chest, threatening to drown me in the overpowering feeling of love. I pulled her onto my lap and cupped her beautiful face between my hands. “If you want us.”

She was still crying, but also smiling wider than I'd ever seen. "I do. I want all of you."

I leaned down and kissed her wet cheek. "Then we're yours."

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About the Author

Heather MacKinnon is a USA Today Best-selling romance author living in North Carolina with her husband, adorable son, and three trouble making dogs. She grew up on Long Island and spent her young adult years in various states in New England. This led to her subsequent addiction to Dunkin' Donuts lattes and her gratuitous use of the word "wicked". After a lifetime of enjoying other people's words, she decided to write down some of her own. You can get up-to-date information about Heather MacKinnon's books at www.heathermackinnonauthor.com.

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