

HIS
STUBBORN
MATE

SIX PACK SHIFTERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIE TRETTEL

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Six Pack Shifters

By

Julie Trettel

His Stubborn Mate

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Thanks and Acknowledgments

This book is going to be a little different. I've already written Wyatt and Kate's mating story in a short story called His Destined Mate. So why write this one?

His Stubborn Mate is for all of you out there stuck in good relationships. Life is hard even with your true mate by your side. Things happen, life goes stale at times. So this book is for you. It's also for those of you that have suffered loss and are scared to try again. It's for all you mothers who maybe didn't start out wanting to be mothers. And it's for all of you hard working women out there supporting your families. And a personal shout out to any stay-at-home dads reading this too.

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Kate

Chapter 1

“Wyatt!” Where are my keys?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?”

I growled. He always knew where I put my keys.

“I’m late!” I yelled through the house as I dug around in the junk bin by the door once more.

He stepped out in just his boxers looking smug as my eyes drifted over his body in appreciation. We’d been together twelve years now, and I never tired of looking at my mate.

As my eyes drifted back up, I saw them. My keys were dangling from his finger as he smirked at me.

“Ugh. You had them this whole time?”

“No, babe, you left them on the bathroom counter.”

“Why the hell would I do that?”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in for a kiss. I still got a thrill every time his lips touched mine.

Mine, my wolf reminded me.

This one was definitely a keeper.

I smiled against his lips, but no matter how much I’d love to cave and let him rip my clothes off and spend the whole day in bed, I had things to do. So, I pulled back with a sigh.

“I’m late.”

He frowned but knew this wasn't something I was going to shirk responsibility on.

"I know. But I'm pretty sure your boss can approve a bit of tardiness," he said hopefully.

"Not today. I have a delivery coming in and since Ollie is showing a new piece of furniture to a potential buyer, Peyton has to drop the kids off at school. And since you are the only other person I trust to accept and verify a delivery for the diner, we're kind of screwed."

"I'd rather be screwing," he mumbled.

"I heard that. Later."

I gave him a quick kiss on the lips and ran out the door. I was late.

There was a time I would have dropped everything for a little alone time with my mate, but lately it felt like everything else took priority. I knew he was frustrated, so was I, but running my own business was exhausting and time consuming.

I loved it and wouldn't trade it for anything, though some days it was tempting to say "screw it" and blow the day off to just be alone with my mate, or even take a spa day for myself.

Work has consumed every aspect of my life lately. I barely have time for myself, let alone Wyatt. For the briefest moment I considered how I would have handled all of this and parenthood. I thought about the baby I'd lost.

When Wyatt and I first mated, all I had thought about was having kids. My desire to have a family didn't diminish even when starting up Kate's Diner and dealing with all the insanity that came with owning a restaurant. Having a family had been my dream. And then I couldn't get pregnant no matter how hard we tried. After three years of trying, we were just about to give up and accept our fate when we found out I was pregnant.

I'd never been happier. I thought everything was going to work out exactly the way I envisioned it. I was going to have it all.

But almost as quickly as we saw that plus sign on the stick, it was gone. I had only been eight weeks along when I miscarried, but it had shattered all my hopes and dreams of being a mom.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head to clear it. I couldn't allow myself to go there.

Wyatt had desperately wanted to try again, but I knew I couldn't go through that again. Years of tears over not being able to conceive only to have it ripped away from me so quickly ... Nope. Never again. Motherhood was simply not in the cards for me, and I was okay with that now.

Besides, I didn't have time for another person in my life, let alone a small child dependent on me for everything. It wouldn't be fair to a kid or to me.

Some people might not consider owning a restaurant as important work, but there were only a few options in Pack territory and many people counted on me now that Kate's Diner was established and a staple of life within Collier Pack.

I was proud of it, and I'd worked damn hard to get to this point of comfort in my life.

Kate's Diner didn't just afford us a good lifestyle, but it gave me a purpose in life.

Wyatt had always respected that and stood by my side through thick and thin. I loved him with a desperation I'd never known possible. Gone were my jaded days of mating. That was all thanks to him showing me what unconditional love meant every single day.

Sure, we still had our occasional arguments. No one in a long-term relationship has sunny days every day. But even when we disagreed over things, we also faced those storms together, head on, and found our way through them.

Thinking about it all just made me love him even more.

When I finally arrived at the diner, the truck was already there, and the driver was looking impatient as he scowled at me.

“Sorry. I couldn’t find my keys.”

“You’re not the only delivery I have this morning, Kate.”

“Sorry, Rich. Just drop everything in the back, and I’ll sort through it quickly.”

I unlocked the back door with him already waiting with my first stack of deliveries.

There wouldn’t even be time for coffee today, as I got to work verifying my order.

It took us only twenty minutes to confirm things and for Rich to be on his way. Shortly after his departure, Austin and Eddie arrived.

I wanted to groan. Dealing with Eddie first thing in the morning was never a good start to the day. The only reason I even kept him around was because he’d been fired from every other job he’d ever held. That sort of rejection weighed on a guy, and Eddie had a good heart and just wanted to contribute in some way. So no matter how many spills he caused, or plates he broke, I just smiled and told him it was okay. I couldn’t help it. I felt sorry for him and couldn’t bring myself to fire him. And for that, he was a loyal employee if nothing else.

Austin leaned in and kissed my cheek. “Rough morning, Kitty Kate?”

“You have no idea. Eddie, can you start putting the groceries away from this morning’s delivery? Austin, you can fire up the kitchen and get prepped for customers. I just need a minute and then will open the doors.”

“Yes ma’am,” Eddie said as he shuffled off to start unboxing my order.

“Just sit down and take a breath, Kate. You work too hard,” Austin insisted. “When was the last time you took a day off?”

I groaned. “Now you sound like Wyatt.”

“Well, he’s not wrong.”

“I can have Angel come in this morning if you want,” he said hopefully.

I snorted. “As if you need that distraction.”

“Hey, she’s never a distraction for me.”

“You’re a lying bastard, Austin.”

“And you love me anyway, cuz.”

“If Angel’s free, I’d love the help today,” I finally conceded, hoping I wouldn’t regret it.

I loved Angel and she had certainly tamed my playboy of a cousin, but they were still in that newly-mated phase of life and rarely saw anyone or anything else when they were with each other. It was nice to see, but not in my restaurant.

“Thank you,” Austin yelled as I walked away to make sure the dining room was ready for the day.

Fortunately, I’d gotten in a habit of cleaning up and prepping for the next day before leaving each night. It sure made my mornings run smoother.

Finding everything was satisfactory, I sat down at a booth and just took a moment to breathe.

Angel arrived just before our doors opened, and I barely got to thank her before we were running at lightning speed with the start of the morning rush

People came and went. Orders were shouted out. And I was lost in the smells and sounds of my diner.

By the time the morning crowd fizzled, Peyton had arrived.

“You look exhausted. Why don’t you take the afternoon off and come back for the dinner rush?”

I sighed. I really did feel exhausted.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Okay?” Austin asked as he stuck his hand on my forehead. “Are you feeling okay? You’ve never consented to leave here that quickly.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed him away.

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“That’s what big cousins are for.”

I groaned. It wasn’t an uncommon conversation for us. I was eighteen when I had left home and moved to Collier Pack. Austin and I had lived together for a little over six months before Wyatt and I officially mated. It was unheard of to wait that long, especially for true mates, but we were so young that we both really just needed that time to really get to know each other even though we were pretty much together every second of it.

When Wyatt and I first met, he was coming off a fresh breakup with his childhood sweetheart whom he thought had been the love of his life. How very wrong he’d been. I didn’t fault him that though. It had all happened before we even met, so I didn’t see the point. Besides, I was dealing with my own shit.

My parents were going through a tough time. They were separated and trying to break their bond. It had disillusioned me to the idea of a forever mate. In the end they made it through and did get back together, but for a long time, I didn’t really believe in true mates or happily ever afters. It had really screwed with my head.

In hindsight, if they hadn’t have gone through that terrible time in their relationship, I probably would never have left home to come and stay with Austin and his parents after

high school. And if I hadn't, would I have ever crossed paths with Wyatt?

It was a lot to think about and made my head swim if I gave it too much thought.

I guess if there is one good thing—aside from Austin—that came out of my parents' situation, I guess it would be that they showed me that no matter how bleak things seem, there's still light at the end of the tunnel—or hope at least.

“You guys are sure you've got this?”

“Positive,” they both said in unison.

“I'll stick around and help too,” Angel said.

I gave her a quick hug.

“Thanks.”

Before I could change my mind, I left, but not before wishing Peyton luck with those two lovebirds.

In my frazzled state, I hadn't even asked Wyatt what he was up to today. Maybe I'd luck out and catch him at home. Lord knew we could use a bit of alone time.

Wyatt

Chapter 2

Once Kate left, I'd helped myself to a very cold shower. For a happily mated man, I sure did seem to need those a lot lately.

It wasn't that life was bad or anything, just sort of status quo. We were comfortable ... too comfortable. I didn't know how to spice things up anymore. I missed the days of sneaking out of work for a break just to surprise Kate and be rewarded with sex in the storage room at the diner or naked dinners together at home. We rarely ever eat dinner at home anymore, and Thomas would be up my ass after the complaints that would ensue if we shared a naked dinner at the diner.

Thomas Collier was Alpha of our Pack and one of my very best friends in the entire world. He would do almost anything for me and support me in whatever endeavors I chose. But I wasn't going to test or risk our friendship by doing that. Though it would be hysterical to see how he reacted.

Unfortunately, there was also the fact that I wasn't too thrilled at the idea of others seeing my mate so intimately. Sure, we'd christened every inch of the diner when we first bought it, but that had been behind boarded up windows and was our little secret.

The fact that Thomas was rather partial to a particular booth that I couldn't even look at without grinning even all these years later was just priceless. If only he knew what had

gone down on that table he ate his breakfast at nearly every morning.

Boy did I miss those days. Just thinking about them made me hard despite the cold water. I closed my eyes and gave in to the memories as I fisted myself trying to relive specific moments in time until my body tensed and exploded onto the shower floor.

Damn. I didn't realize just how badly I needed that. Though if I were being honest with myself, it wasn't nearly enough. Some way, somehow, I needed to make time for us a priority, not my job, not the diner, just us.

As I cleaned up and got out, dressing in fresh clothes, and then heading for the kitchen for a hot cup of coffee, I started to think of how best to present this to Kate. She was a practical woman and surely she missed spending time with me too.

The chemistry between us had never been the issue. Time and responsibilities were always the problem. She worked herself to exhaustion at the diner. And when I wasn't holding down my own obligations out at the ranch, I was spending as much time as possible helping out at the diner. It wasn't that I loved working all the time, it was just a guaranteed way for me to actually spend time with my mate. There was no scheduling or compromises to be made that way. But lately, it wasn't enough.

This robotic life stuck on repeat day in and day out was weighing heavily on me. I needed a change. Maybe I could talk to Thomas about taking a vacation. Kate might just murder me for it, but it wasn't like she was needed 24/7 at the diner anymore. She had an entire trusted staff to keep things moving smoothly and maybe a trip out of territory would help her to see that.

For a second, I imagined how different things would be if we'd been able to conceive a pup. Would her focus still be this intense on the diner? I couldn't believe so.

A part of me still wanted a child. It was a selfish dream because I knew how Kate felt about that subject. I could respect it, but it didn't mean my desire for a family of my own just disappeared either.

I thought I'd have a whole litter of pups like Thomas and his mate Lily have. Strong, strapping boys that would work the ranch just as my father and his father had. Someone to carry on the traditions of our family. Daughters would have been fine with me too. I could imagine them as beautiful as their mother. But I certainly never expected to be childless. I always assumed we'd have at least a pup or two. It was a natural assumption. And we'd never been happier than when Kate finally conceived. It had felt like we were on top of the world, and then it was all ripped away from us just as quickly. Gone in the blink of an eye.

Even though it had been years now, practically a lifetime ago, I still thought about that baby and just how different our lives would have been.

In my heart, I knew that I couldn't go through that kind of loss again either, so it wasn't fair to blame not wanting to try again all on Kate. Still, watching my childhood best friends conceive so easily was hard. We'd always done everything in life together, and now it felt like they were moving on into this thing called fatherhood that I would never experience.

We were the Six Pack: Thomas, James, Clay, Emmett, Austin, and me. We were inseparable and walked through life together head on and fearlessly. That's who we were, but somehow welcoming James's son into this world and then finding out that Clay and Winnie were trying to have a baby was lot to take in.

It probably wouldn't be long before Austin got Angel pregnant. He couldn't keep his hands off the girl. Once a playboy, we never thought he'd actually settle down, but he fell hard and fast. Now all his playboy ways are focused on just one woman, and I'd never seen him happier.

So, I have found myself feeling more and more stuck on the outside. I knew Emmett was the only one in our group that could understand how I feel. He is the last single man amongst us, having watched each of us fall to our true mates over the years. I was the first to find mine so I didn't really understand how it felt to be him, until now.

When James had placed little Carter Thomas Blakely into my arms and told his son I was Uncle Wyatt, it had hit me hard. All my life I was only going to be an uncle to a child.

I hated to admit it, but I was jealous of him. He had something I couldn't have.

As melancholy set in, I tried to brush it off and headed out to the ranch. I had work to do. It was the same work that needed to be done that I did yesterday and the day before. Nothing around here ever really seemed to change. Get up, and either go to the diner to help with the breakfast shift or head straight for the ranch to knock out the daily chores. If I went to the diner in the morning, I worked at the ranch in the afternoon and evening. Otherwise, I worked at the ranch into the afternoon, and then at the diner until close. We'd both be so tired by the time we got home that a quick shower was about all we could muster before crashing into bed for the night only to repeat it again in the morning.

One night every other week—if we were lucky—my friends get together for a poker night. Sadly, that is the highlight of my weeks, and lately, we haven't even managed to have them on a regular basis.

I was stuck, and something had to give, and soon.

The sun was baring down as sweat ran off my forehead. I wiped it with one gloved hand before grabbing the next bale of hay. My muscles burned from the work, but it was a good feeling. I'd gotten a text from Kate letting me know

that there had been a flour incident in the pantry while Eddie was unloading the stock that had arrived this morning and she would be working late cleaning up the mess and to be there receive the emergency restock she ordered.

Eddie was a nuisance, but there was no telling Kate that. She was determined to keep him on no matter how many times he screwed up. I knew it wasn't worth the breath to argue it with her. My mate was one stubborn woman.

I already knew she'd scheduled herself to close tonight, but this meant she'd be working far later than that.

Picking up the pace, I finished my chores around the barn and then went to find Emmett to give him a heads up that I wasn't going to be in until the afternoon tomorrow.

"I know that look," he said. "What happened?"

"Freaking Eddie."

"Again?"

"Always."

"She still won't fire him?"

"Nope. He nearly set the kitchen on fire and she still didn't let him go, I knew there was nothing that man could do to force her hand."

"What was it this time?"

"Flour explosion or something like that."

"Late night?"

"Yup."

"Why don't you just take the day off tomorrow then and go help your mate tonight?"

I sighed. "And what am I going to do then?"

"I don't know. Sit around the diner making swoony eyes at your mate?"

I gave him a playful shove.

“Seriously, man. You really need to get a life.”

“Tell me about it. I was thinking about talking to Thomas about a vacation.”

“Sounds fun. Guys trip? I could go with you.”

“No, you asshole. A vacation for me and Kate.”

He stared at me for a moment and then burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“She’s not going to leave the diner to go on vacation, like ever. And you know it. She’s like mated to that place just as strongly as she’s mated to you.”

I groaned because I knew it was true.

“Can you just let me hope for a bit?”

“Sure, and then remember, I called first dibs. I’ll spoon ya if I have to, but I’d sure love to get away from this place for a bit. A vacation sounds fun.”

I shoved him again. “Then take your own vacation. And I’ll be damned if you’re going to spoon me.”

“You act like it’d be the first time. Admit it, you rather enjoy it.”

“You are a sick sonofabitch,” I muttered, shaking my head as I walked away.

I could still hear the sound of his laughter when I reached my truck and drove home with a scowl on my face.

Another quick shower to wash off the barn smells permeating my skin and a fresh change of clothes, and I was off to Kate’s Diner before I even realized what I was doing.

I sat in the car trying not to roll my eyes. My life was so predictable these days. It was pathetic.

But then the back door opened, and Kate stepped outside. My heart flipped over in my chest and a smile tipped the corners of my lips.

She tossed a bag of trash into the dumpster and then froze. Slowly she looked around the parking lot until her eyes fell upon me.

Mine, my wolf howled.

The look of sheer happiness and love that lit Kate's face had me grinning from ear to ear.

Maybe we didn't have all the alone time I'd like, or what felt like any at all lately, but our love was still strong. I could truly say I loved her more now than the day I marked her as mine, sealing myself to her for all eternity.

Now to find a bit of alone time for us and things would be back on track once more.

Kate

Chapter 3

Taking the afternoon off had been exactly what I had needed. I was a bit disappointed to find Wyatt wasn't home when I'd arrived back at the house, but I knew that meant he was already busy at work. I didn't bother him. Instead, I took a hot bath and watched a movie. At some point I fell asleep during the movie, but the nap was just as wonderful.

Feeling rejuvenated after several hours all to myself, I'd returned to work to try and get a bit of clean up done after Eddie managed to explode a bag of flour in the pantry. The dinner rush would be starting soon, and I was taking out my third bag of trash when I felt him.

I looked around until my eyes fell on our car as Wyatt sat there watching me with a grin on his face that melted my heart. I gave him a little wave and watched as he got out and walked over to me.

Pulling me into his arms, he kissed me until I could feel the tips of my ears burning, and I playfully pushed him away.

He looked around and I could see the mischief in his eyes.

“No.”

“Babe.”

I held up my hand, trying not to laugh. “Don't you babe me.”

He looked around again and this time the mischief was gone, replaced by a look of sheer determination.

“Wyatt, we can’t. Not here.”

“Right here,” he said.

“Where anyone can see?”

He faltered and considered that for a moment. “I’m desperate, babe,” he whispered.

“Me too,” I assured him. I had to stop and think about the last time we’d actually had sex. This was getting ridiculous.

“Is Peyton using the back room tonight? It’s private.”

“Yes. She has one couple coming in and is in there prepping now.”

He groaned and then looked at his watch. “Can you get away for an hour before the madness starts?”

“I just got back after taking the afternoon off.”

“What? You took the afternoon off and didn’t tell me?”

“You were already at work. I didn’t want to bother you.”

He pouted. “You are never a bother to me. I would have gladly blown off the afternoon for some alone time with you.”

Before I even tried to respond, his lips were back on me, making it hard to think straight.

“Greenhouse,” I moaned.

He smiled triumphantly as he lifted me into his strong arms. My legs wrapped around his waist, and he practically ran the short distance to the greenhouse behind my diner.

I was already moaning and so turned on it was physically painful by the time he kicked the door open while never letting me go. His fingers dug into my ass, holding me against him. His bulge told me he needed me just as much as I

wanted him. I ground myself against him while starting to rip his clothes off, needing to get closer to him.

He groaned as his head dropped back for a second before looking around for a place to set me down. I giggled when he settled on a potting table and aggressively pushed empty planters to the side.

“Condom?” I asked.

He pulled one from his pocket and ripped it open with his teeth as I fumbled to undo the button and zipper of his pants.

“I need you so bad, babe,” he declared, making quick work of my clothes with steady, sure fingers.

As he pulled me closer, one of the pots crashed to the floor.

“Who’s in here?” a male voice surprised us.

I yelped and my eyes widened.

Wyatt growled, looking around to see who interrupted us.

“Get out of here. If you’re hungry see Kate up at the diner.”

Kenneth. I sighed in frustration.

“It’s just me, Kenneth. What are you doing here? I thought you picked up a shift helping with the new gardens.”

“Kate?” the kid asked as he stepped out from the office.

It wasn’t really fair to call him a kid anymore. He may have been one when Peyton first took him in and got him started establishing the greenhouse, but that had been years prior. He was a fully grown young man now, but it was still hard not to see him as the kid who thought Peyton hung the stars and saved his family.

He froze when he saw us, and Wyatt growled again causing Kenneth to retreat into the back office quickly.

“I’m sorry,” he yelled back. “I finished all my work at the garden today and wanted to stop by and check on the tomatoes after that pipe burst overwatered them. I swear I didn’t think anyone would be here.”

I laughed and shook my head at the defeated look on my mate’s face as I reached for my shirt. I was disappointed too, but reality started weighing back down on me.

“It’s okay. I have a lot to do still before the dinner rush.”

“No,” Wyatt started to protest, pulling me closer to him again and trying to kiss the sensitive skin just behind my right ear that he knew always affected me.

I scowled and shook my head. “We can’t now,” I whispered.

“I can leave,” Kenneth yelled back.

Feeling my cheeks warm, I knew the moment was over for me.

“Not necessary,” I assured him.

Sometimes living around a bunch of wolf shifters absolutely sucked. There was no privacy. They heard everything, even when we were trying to be discreet. If I hadn’t been so caught up in the moment to begin with, I would have known we weren’t alone.

“Please?” Wyatt practically begged.

I hugged him closely. “Soon, but not now. I really should get back to work anyway.”

The dinner shift flew by. I was acutely aware of Wyatt's presence. The tension between us was hot and heavy. It made me blush every time I caught his eye, and I was convinced everyone there somehow knew exactly what we'd almost done in the greenhouse before the dinner rush.

Of course that was absurd. There was no way anyone but Kenneth could possibly know that, and I trusted that he wouldn't mention it to anyone. And when Peyton hadn't said anything about it, I was certain he had kept his mouth shut. Yet every time I still blushed.

"Kate?" Peyton asked from behind me.

I screamed, jumped, and whipped around so fast that I knocked over a mug on the table I was clearing. Wyatt snatched it out of thin air and placed it back down.

"Thanks," I muttered.

"Why are you so jumpy today?" Peyton asked.

"I don't know. I didn't hear you sneak up behind me."

"Probably because you were ogling your sexy mate all night," she teased. "When Oliver camps out in here all evening, he distracts me too."

"Oliver never camps out in here anymore."

"Well, with three kids at home, he has his hands full."

"Those kids are growing up much too quickly. They need to slow down."

"Tell me about it. Parker is in full-time daycare now. They call it preschool, but he's two. I'm not ready to think of my baby being in school. It's bad enough that Meg started Kindergarten this year."

"Why don't you head on home and be with your family. Wyatt's here and can help me finish things up here."

"What about the pantry?"

I groaned.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Wyatt assured her. “It’s okay. We’ve got this.”

Peyton begrudgingly agreed but hugged me and told me to call her if it was too much for the two of us.

I wouldn’t call her, and she knew it. My stubbornness to take care of things myself held true even when three hours later we only had the pantry items removed from the shelves and wiped off.

Wyatt and I stood there looking at the white powder mess still on the floor and shelves.

“I don’t understand. Why is it everywhere?”

I laughed. “It was a lot of flour.”

“I know, but I thought an hour, maybe two. It’s already after midnight and feels like we’re just getting started.”

“Come on. This is the easier part at least. Wiping down and salvaging the other items was far more time-consuming.”

I grabbed a bucket of bleach water and a mop while he wiped down the shelves and swept up as much as possible. Then I got to work cleaning everything down.

“This job, or life, really is all-consuming, isn’t it?” he asked.

“It certainly can be.”

“I don’t know about you, but I was thinking that maybe we could use a break. We’re certainly due for one.”

“A break? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about a vacation, babe. I real vacation away from the Pack like normal people have.”

“We’re shifters, not normal people.”

“Even shifters take vacations, Kate.”

“I can’t. There’s too much to do around here.”

“Would you please just stop and think about it? I can’t even remember the last time we had even a second to ourselves.”

“Earlier today in the greenhouse,” I blurted out.

He glared at me with a frown on his face. “And I clearly remember how that ended.”

I laughed.

“Kate, I’m serious. I need more than just the monotony of our daily life today. Would you just consider it?”

“I can’t take a vacation right now, Wyatt. There’s too much to manage here without me.”

“Peyton can handle it.”

“Peyton has a mate and three young pups, plus Kenneth and Brady to deal with.”

He stared back at me with a haunted look in his eyes. I was well aware of how badly he had wanted pups, and I wasn’t blinded to the fact that he overly spoiled all of Thomas’s girls and now James’s son too. That simply wasn’t something I could give him. It wasn’t going to be our life, but I did understand what he was saying. I’d been stuck in a rut myself lately.

“Okay, I’ll think about it. Maybe not a vacation, but I get it. I know we’ve been just sort of stuck lately. I’ll check my schedule and see if I can carve out a bit of time off. I don’t know that I’m okay with leaving territory, just in case something comes up, but I’ll try for at least some time off. Okay?”

He wasn’t satisfied with my response, but it was the best he was going to get for now. Baby steps. If I take a day or two off and there’s no exploding bags of flour or fires in the kitchen, then maybe we could ease up to an actual vacation.

It was late and we were both hot, sweaty, and exhausted when the last item went back on the shelf.

“Be honest, when you said owning a restaurant was your life’s dream, is this what you imagined?”

I laughed, then shrugged. “Comes with the territory I suppose. I’ll take the bad for all the good and joy of doing something I love every day.”

“Fair enough. Can we go home now?”

He hadn’t tried to touch me again despite being alone for hours as we worked, not once. I was so overwhelmed by the sheer amount of clean up needed from this latest Eddie debacle, that I doubted I could’ve have gotten in the mood, but I was still a little disappointed that he hadn’t even tried or hinted about it even once.

At home we jumped into the shower together for efficiency and again, nothing.

I knew I was exhausted and imagined he was just as tired, but much like life lately, it felt like we were just moving around each other and never really coming together. It was frustrating.

As we climbed into bed, he gave me a chaste kiss and then rolled over to his side. The second his head hit the pillow, he was snoring. Meanwhile, I laid wide awake staring at the ceiling wondering how the hell we’d gotten to this stage in our lives.

I really thought about what he’d said and came to conclusion that he needed something more in his life, more than me and work. I brainstormed several ideas, falling asleep with a plan in place and a grin on my face.

Wyatt

Chapter 4

After the night we'd had, waking up to sloppy wet kisses and cuddles was the last thing I expected.

"Hmm. Let me go to the bathroom and grab a condom first," I cooed.

The responding yappy bark was not at all what I expected.

With a yelp, I fell out of the bed, tangled up in the sheets. I landed hard onto the floor with a loud thud.

"What the hell is that?" I screamed, but the only answer that was returned was another obnoxious high-pitched bark from the fluffy beast that had been inappropriately attacking me in my sleep.

He started to bark even more as he excitedly bounced around the bed.

What was some idiot little fluff beast doing in my bed?

"Where did you come from?" I asked the stupid thing.

Of course he did nothing but bark back in response.

"Kate!" I yelled out.

When she didn't respond, I checked the time and realized she must have been at work for hours already. It was rare that I slept in, but waking up to hallucinations of an ugly ass dog, was not normal for me.

I snorted. Dog? That thing was no dog. I was a wolf, a real dog. This thing was like a duster on four legs. He was a

disgrace to dogs everywhere.

As if he could read my thoughts, he started barking again.

My head was starting to pound, so I scooped the creature up and carried it to the back door. Upon opening it, I tossed the hideous thing outside.

“Go on. Get out of here.”

He ran off the porch and then hiked his leg and peed right there on my house.

I growled, and I could have sworn I saw a smirk cross his face.

“Get out of here!” I yelled, slamming the door behind me.

I went to the bathroom, showered, and got ready for the day, trying to forget the ridiculous wakeup call I’d received this morning.

As I was reaching for my watch on the nightstand, I noticed a note penned in Kate’s handwriting.

Wyatt,

You were sound asleep this morning and I didn’t want to disturb you. Just know that I heard you last night and I understand. This is Chewy, a rescue dog they had outside of Powell’s when I stopped in for extra flour this morning. Anyway, he needed a home and people to love him. I know you and I know that James becoming a father has been hitting you hard. You don’t talk about it, but I know and I suspect that’s the real reason why you suddenly want to drop everything and go on vacation or whatever. You said you needed a change, something more to life. Well, here you go. I fell in love with him the second I saw him and I know you will too. I named him Chewy because he looks like a tiny Chewbacca. I didn’t have time to pick up everything he needs yet, but there’s food in the kitchen

and a leash by the back door. We'll figure the rest out later.

Love,

Kate

My heart sunk in my chest. She got me a damn dog? And she surmised all of this because I wanted to take her on a real vacation? What the actual hell? How did we get ourselves so out of sync that she would ever assume I would want a little piss-ant of a dog?

It made me question whether my mate even knew me at all.

“Shit!”

I ran to the back door and swung it open as my head whipped around looking for the little shit.

A telling bark rang out as I looked down at my feet to find Chewy staring up at me.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with you now? I have to work this afternoon.”

Completely ignoring me, he marched past me and right into the house.

“This cannot be happening.”

I grabbed my phone and quickly called Kate. It rolled straight to voicemail. I tried again, but no answer.

I growled, eliciting another side eye glare from Chewy.

“Stop looking at me like that. Great. I've officially lost it and I'm talking to a dog. How has this become my life?” I looked at the dog as he wagged his tail at me. “Don't answer that.”

This time I called the diner knowing she wouldn't ignore that.

“Kate's Diner,” Eddie answered.

He never answered the phone or took orders.

“Hey Eddie, it’s Wyatt. I need to talk to Kate.”

“Sorry. Boss is busy right now. Can I take a message?”

“No, you can put my mate on the phone.”

“But she’s given orders not to be disturbed.”

“Since when do you follow orders?” I blurted out.

“I’m going to hang up now. I’ll let her know you called.”

I stared at the phone in frustration unable to believe he had just hung up on me.

“What am I supposed to do with you all day? I have to work. Can you behave if I just leave you here?”

His huge bat like ears raised comically and I shook my head.

“I’m going to go get ready, call it a trial period.”

“What the hell is that thing?” Emmett asked when I pulled up and got out of my truck with Chewy in tow.

“She got me a damn dog.”

“What?”

“Kate got me a damn dog. I asked her for a vacation and some time alone, and she decided I needed this thing in my life instead.”

“That is not a dog.”

“Pretty sure it’s a dog.”

“It looks like it has wings for ears. It could take flight at any second.”

“It’s called a Papillon or something like that.”

“Is it going to get any bigger?”

“I don’t think so. It’s full grown, a rescue I think.”

He looked at it with the same disgust I felt.

“She could have at least gotten you a real dog.”

“It is a real dog, Emmett. Fine, I’m pretty sure it’s a real dog.”

“What are you supposed to do with it?”

“How the hell do I know? I’ve never had a dog. I am a dog!”

“Why would she think a wolf would want a dog? Is it a snack maybe?”

I snorted. “I’m not going to eat it. Though when I turned my back on him for two minutes to get ready, I busted him eating the top of my boot this morning. I was certainly tempted to eat him then.”

Emmett started laughing until he was holding his side and causing a scene.

“What in the blazes are you boys cutting up about?” Mr. Draper demanded. The old man should have retired years ago, but he insisted on sticking around. While he had slowed down over the last few years, he still showed up every day and we all gave him the respect he’d long since earned. To all of us, he was the highest authority on the ranch. Only man that trumped him in my book was the Alpha.

“Sorry, Mr. Draper. Emmett was just being an ass.”

He shook his head, but his bright eyes smiled back surrounded by years of laugh lines.

“Emmett’s always an ass.”

He chuckled which set the damn dog off on a barking fit.

Mr. Draper yelped and jumped back. “What in damnation is that?”

Emmett had tears in his eyes, laughing harder.

“That’s Wyatt’s dog,” he managed to say.

“That ain’t no damn dog.”

“That’s what I said,” Emmett agreed.

“Sure, laugh it up all you want, but I’m getting to work. Come on Chewy.”

“Chewy?”

“Kate named him. I didn’t have a choice. She said he looks like a tiny Chewbacca.”

“That thing doesn’t look like Chewbacca, more like a gremlin. Just don’t feed it after dark,” Emmett said, causing the two of them to laugh even more.

I frowned. “What’s a gremlin?”

They both froze and stared at me with slack jaws.

“We’ll fix this soon. I promise. How in the world have you never seen Gremlins? I’m seriously disappointed and questioning our friendship.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I vowed to look it up the first chance I got.

Kate

Chapter 5

“What’s so funny?” Lily asked.

“Kate bought Wyatt a dog,” Peyton informed her. “And not just any dog, but a small yappy dog.”

“He doesn’t yap,” I insisted.

“Why would you buy him a dog?” Katherine asked.

“Well, I blame you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. You just had to go have the cutest little boy in the world and don’t think I don’t see that look in Wyatt’s eyes every time he holds little Carter or one of your girls,” I added, pointing to Lily. “Plus, he was talking about taking time off for a vacation and has just been acting weird lately.”

“So you thought a dog was the answer?” Winnie blurted out.

I shrugged. “Chewy will keep him busy for a while. He might not be happy about it at first, but who doesn’t love a pet dog?”

“Um, Kate,” Eddie interrupted. “Wyatt just called demanding to speak to you. I told him you weren’t available just like you told me to do. But he didn’t sound too happy about it.”

I grimaced, but the ladies just laughed.

“Are you hiding from him?” Angel challenged.

“Hell yes I am.”

That made them laugh even harder.

“Well, not exactly hiding. I just want to give him time to adjust to the idea.”

“Can you not have children?” Angel asked seriously.

I sighed. “I don’t know, to be honest. We tried for years and struggled to conceive. When we finally did, I miscarried pretty early on. I swore I wouldn’t go through that again and I haven’t changed my mind on that, so a dog is going to have to suffice.”

Lily hugged me. “I’ve been there. I know how awful it is, but look at my girls. I can’t imagine not having pushed past that to have them. They’re my world.”

“But I’m not you. I can’t get pregnant just from my mate looking at me.”

I grinned and rolled my eyes at her.

“Oh, honey, it takes a lot more than just a look, and I love to practice every chance I get, but I’m done after this one.” She rubbed her protruding stomach lovingly.

“You always say that. I swear you just love being pregnant.”

“Maybe, but it’s getting a bit old. I’m ready to have my body back and actually enjoy it again without a parasite or leech.”

“Or both,” I reminded her knowing she had continued to breastfeed even while pregnant again.

“Or both,” she agreed.

“Austin got the baby bug too after Carter was born. He’s convinced Lily’s having a boy this time and that all of us will have boys close in age to form the next generation of the Six Pack,” Angel informed us.

“I mean, it’s possible,” Winnie said, blushing furiously.

My jaw dropped. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

She slowly nodded her head.

Lily squealed and hugged her.

I gave myself a moment to let that sink in. For many years it hurt hearing the news of a new pregnancy, but it hadn’t for a long time. I felt nothing but happiness for my friend and knew that meant I was never going to change my mind.

I hugged Winnie. “I’m so happy for you guys.”

I meant it too.

Carter yawned and stretched in his infant carrier as we all fawned over him. He really was the cutest.

“It’s going to be so fun having these babies so close together,” Winnie said with a sigh, then she looked at me and her eyes grew wide.

“It’s okay, Winnie. I really am happy for you. I don’t want kids, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love spoiling all of yours.”

“So what kind of dog is Chewy anyway?” Lily asked, clearly changing the subject.

I grinned. “A Papillon.”

“A what-a-lon?” Winnie asked.

“A Papillon.” I pulled up a picture of the breed and showed the girls. “Isn’t it the cutest?”

“Uh ...” Katherine started trying to find the right words.

“Are you sure that’s a dog?” Lily blurted out.

“Yes, it’s a dog.”

Angel burst out laughing. “You bought him an ankle biter?”

“It’s one of those yappy things, isn’t it?” Winnie asked.

I shrugged. “His bark is super cute, and he’s so cuddly.”

Lily’s head whipped towards me. “Wait. He? You brought a male dog into your house? Are you insane?”

I smirked and shrugged. “Like I said, he’ll keep Wyatt preoccupied long enough for you all to continue having your sweet babies. And I guarantee he won’t think twice about fatherhood again.”

“You are pure evil,” Katherine informed me.

I grinned. “I really do love this dog though.”

“Just don’t let your dog hear you saying that too loudly,” she advised. “Consider that free counseling. I may not be a divorce lawyer but working in Child Protective Services certainly makes me an expert on it.”

“Bonded mates can’t divorce,” I reminded her.

“No, but you might wish you could by the time this all plays out.”

That made us all laugh. I was willing to take that risk. I’d already convinced myself that Chewy was exactly what we needed in our little family and there was no changing my mind. What was done was done.

The morning passed by too quickly and soon everyone was off and running in their own directions. The guys seemed to always make time for each other, but it was a rare treat for us ladies to get together as an entire group, especially sans kids. Carter didn’t count since he’d quietly slept through the entire ordeal.

“Did I hear that right?” Peyton finally asked.

“What?”

“You really got Wyatt some little male yappy dog?”

“I did.”

“He’s going to murder you in your sleep.”

I laughed. “Then he risks following me into the afterlife.”

“Wait, you’re fully bonded?”

“Nearly. It’s hard to tell for sure.”

“That’s so cool. I can’t wait to hit that stage with Oliver.”

“So if that’s the case, can you hear him right now? Like his thoughts and stuff?”

“Loud and clear. He’s definitely not happy with me right now. I’m just hoping Chewy grows on him quickly.”

“When did this start?”

I shrugged. “A few weeks ago, but we haven’t talked about it, so I don’t know if it’s just one-sided or what. Wyatt hasn’t mentioned it. At first I wasn’t really sure what was happening, but the past few days I’ve been paying closer attention and hearing things more clearly. It wasn’t like a switch was turned on the way I expected it to be. We haven’t exactly been in sync lately so maybe that has something to do with it? I don’t know. I don’t really have anyone to ask or talk to about it.”

“Then talk to your mate. Or what about Austin’s parents? Or yours?”

“That would just be too weird. I don’t want to involve them, especially if he really isn’t hearing me and what I am experiencing is not normal.” I shook my head. “I don’t want to think about it right now. It just makes me worry too much, and with lunch shift coming in, I don’t have time for that.”

She shook her head. “Girl, you’re crazy. Take the day off and go talk to him.”

I laughed. “He’s bonding with Chewy. I’m not going to interrupt that.”

“Bonding. Sure.”

She didn't argue with me about it though as we got back to work.

In truth, the sheer number of curse words that infiltrated my mate's thoughts whenever he thought of the dog, or me, was a bit nerve-racking. It would be best if I just avoided him until things settle some.

Instead, I dove into work and tried to avoid the situation as much as possible.

"Kate, Wyatt called again. I told him you were busy. He sounded really mad."

"It's fine. Thanks, Eddie. It's pretty slow tonight, and you've been here all day. Why don't you go ahead and wrap things up and head home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. And thanks for everything today."

His whole face lit up from my praise.

"Anything for you, Kate, but Jen will be happy to have me home this evening."

"Well go on and get out of here."

As I watched him leave, I couldn't help but feel a little sad realizing my own mate would not be happy to see me right about now.

Much to my surprise, Wyatt didn't come by to see me. Like a chicken, I stayed out working until late and then crept into the house to find him sleeping soundly with Chewy locked in the crate. I let him out for the night and then put him back in before crawling into bed and crashing fast.

The next morning, I was up early. Wyatt was still sleeping. I quietly showered and got ready. I felt jumpy, worrying that he was going to confront me at any second, but he didn't even stir before I snuck out and headed back to the diner.

All day long I could vividly hear his frustrations. He was furious about the dog and there seemed to be a bit of a dominance battle going on between them. Maybe Lily was right. I shouldn't have chosen a male dog. To be honest, I hadn't much thought about that until she pointed it out. He was just the cutest pup I'd ever seen. But a part of me knew that would only infuriate him even more.

It was another relatively slow day around the diner. As Thanksgiving approached, the holiday season felt like it was in full swing. There always seemed to be a lull in things just before Thanksgiving and then complete madness after.

I knew I should be grateful for the bit of downtime, but it was easier to avoid the impending clash with my mate when things were genuinely busier.

By eight o'clock the place was dead and I had already sent my staff home. I should have closed up early and gone home to face the music myself, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. Not yet.

The bell over the door chimed and I smiled as I eagerly looked up only to find Austin standing there scowling at me.

"I never knew you to be such a chicken."

"I ..."

"Ba-cock!"

"Austin, just ..."

"Ba-cock!"

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him.

"Do you have any idea how furious your mate is? You bought him a damn dog when all he wanted was more time with you."

I cringed at his allegations even knowing there was more to it than that. I'd seen the look in his eyes when he held Carter. We'd been there before. I knew that look, and if I had

any doubts, they were laid to rest when I started hearing his thoughts about wanting to try for a baby again.

I hadn't made that up. He'd been thinking about our baby, the one I'd miscarried. I knew him well enough to know exactly where that would lead. I didn't even need to hear his thoughts to understand.

"Chewy is a valued part of our family," I stubbornly told him.

Austin snorted. "What are you even doing? You haven't spent two seconds with that dog, if you can even call it a dog, since you dropped it off on your mate and ran to hide like a big fat chicken."

I opened my mouth to speak and then shut it knowing he was going to crow at me again. When he didn't move to do so, I tried again.

"Austin that's not ..."

"Ba-cock!"

"Would you stop doing that?!?"

"I will when you stop being a big fat chicken."

"Did you just call me fat?"

"Do not turn this around on me. What is going on with you? Look around. This place is dead tonight. Close up, go home, and fix this."

My chin jutted out. "I have things to do. Important things," I lied.

He shook his head. "Ignoring him is only making everything fester. Eventually, it's going to explode in your face."

I sighed. I knew he was right.

"Tomorrow. I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'll see if Peyton can cover closing."

“Screw that. Tomorrow he’s mine. It’s poker night. You’re supposed to be making Buffalo chicken dip and stuff for us.”

I groaned. “That’s tomorrow?”

“Yes. And on second thought, get Pey to cover for you for closing, because after you make our food, your ass is going home to take care of that ridiculous mutt of yours. Chewy is not invited, and Wyatt sure as hell better be there.”

“Why don’t you want Chewy to tag along?” I knew I shouldn’t have asked, but I just couldn’t seem to stop the words from tumbling out.

“That beast is a menace. He pees on everything. He eats everything, Kate. Wyatt is a saint for not having barbecued him up by now.”

My jaw dropped. “He is not.”

Austin laughed and he walked out the door. “Just wait. That beast is all yours tomorrow night.”

I knew better than to try to keep Wyatt away from poker night or make him take Chewy. I wouldn’t just have one pissed-off wolf on my hands if I did that. So while I stayed late once more and snuck in after my mate was already asleep and was up and out of the house before he rose the next morning, I had also called Peyton and made arrangements to be home early that night.

It was crazy how nervous I was as we wrapped up lunch and Peyton kicked me out of my own kitchen the second I started to make excuses to stay.

It was time to face the music.

The thing was, I’d created this disaster. The division between us was all my fault, but I wasn’t ready to own up to that yet.

I was home and sitting in the living room watching a rerun of Grey’s Anatomy when Wyatt and Chewy came home.

He rubbed his eyes and stared at me like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

“Kate?”

“Hey. Crazy week, huh?” I asked trying to play it off like it was nothing. “I know you have poker night tonight and I didn't want Chewy to feel abandoned.”

At the sound of his name, the dog ran to me and jumped up in my lap.

“Hey boy,” I cooed as he nuzzled against me.

What the actual hell? We're just going to pretend like nothing happened now? I heard him think loudly.

“Yeah, great. Thanks. I'm going to go get cleaned up and get out of here.”

I cringed at his distant words. I hated this, but I was too proud to fix it, so I let him just walk away.

Chewy and I spent a quiet night at home. The house felt big and empty. Worse than that, I was lonely. Lonelier than I'd ever been in my entire life, even as a teen watching my parents relationship implode around me and thinking nothing in this world really mattered for much. It was all a lie.

This time, I was the creation of that lie and of my own misery.

Wyatt

Chapter 6

Life sucked. I couldn't even wrap my head around what was happening. I couldn't even relax in my own house because of that stupid dog. Every time I turned around he was there watching me. He ate my books, my sock, a bar of soap, and the corner of my recliner. Nothing was sacred anymore. He tried to hump my horse's leg today. And he was attempting to mark territory—MY territory!

I'd busted him a few times on the verge of hiking his leg up even in my bedroom. Sucked to be him though, because my accelerated hearing and keen sense of smell combined with my quick reflexes had him tossed outside every time.

That dog and I were at war and seeing him cuddled up and being loved on by MY mate just felt like salt being poured into an open wound.

I had missed Kate so much this week, but that was the final straw that broke me. I was crushed, hurt, and angry. I knew if I said anything at all that it would open a floodgate of words I couldn't take back, so I bit my tongue, told her goodbye, and left.

Driving to Austin's had me taking a detour down to the river. I needed time alone to think about everything that was happening. Sometimes it felt like I could hear Kate's thoughts, and I didn't like what I heard. I knew it had to just be my imagination, but sometimes it was hard to believe that as the thoughts came across so vividly.

In my mind, she had done this all on purpose. She didn't want kids. I knew that and I'd come to terms with it

long ago. It didn't stop me from occasionally wishing things were different, but I respected my mate and I loved her unconditionally. I would never purposefully say or do anything to make her feel otherwise.

But it felt like she was punishing me for that for some reason. "I see how he looks at Carter with longing in his eyes." She hadn't actually said the words, yet they were engrained in my mind as if she had. It was ridiculous, nothing more than a misunderstanding that desperately needed to be aired and cleared.

I should have waited up for her, but it was getting late into the season and there was still so much to do before the first snow fall. That led to long, grueling, and physically demanding days. I'd tried to stay up to talk to her at night, but I was so exhausted that I fell asleep before she even came home.

At first I wasn't even sure she was coming home, but there were subtle signs to let me know she had, and last night I'd awoken to her sleeping next to me. That gave me some relief, but I still didn't know how to get past all of this and get us back to normal again.

I snorted at the thought. Things hadn't been normal for a long time. Hell, I couldn't even remember the last time we'd had sex, and that was pissing me off too.

Sitting there, staring out into the water, I considered just calling the guys and blowing off the night, but no sooner than I thought it, my phone dinged with an incoming text.

AUSTIN: Get your ass over here now!

I sighed. Maybe some time with the boys would help me sort through my feelings and figure out a plan to fix things between me and Kate. So against my better judgement, I got back in my truck and drove to Austin's house, parked, and forced myself to walk inside.

Everyone was there with their bags of coins out and the table set to play.

The smells of Buffalo sauce and burgers wafted through the house.

“Kate?” I asked Austin.

“Yup. I sent Angel to the spa with Winnie for the day, so Kate hooked us up tonight.”

“It’s better than frozen pizza. Remember those days?” Thomas joked.

“Nothing but pizza every stinking week,” Clay complained.

James shrugged. “Could be worse.”

“But this is better,” Austin insisted.

“I’m just here for the food,” Emmett said as he popped another cheeseburger slider into his mouth.

I filled my plate trying not to think of the woman who lovingly made all the food I was now piling high upon it.

The second I sat down, Emmett attacked.

“Have y’all seen that mutt of Wyatt’s yet? He swears it’s a dog. I don’t believe it. Looks like a gremlin to me.”

Clay laughed. “Don’t feed it after dark then.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes.

“Wyatt’s never seen Gremlins before so he doesn’t even get what we’re talking about.”

“How in the hell have you never seen Gremlins?” James asked.

“Yeah, we went to the movies like a dozen times when it first came out,” Clay insisted.

Thomas shook his head. “I remember that. His mom wouldn’t let him see it with us. Too scary.”

My jaw dropped as the memory hit me hard. “That was Gremlins?”

“Yup. That was the one,” Thomas informed me. “After that we just told you we were going to see something G-rated so you didn’t have to lie to your Mom and dragged you to see whatever we wanted anyway.”

“And how would you feel about Cammie pulling that trick on you?” Austin asked, looking dead serious.

Thomas growled. “She’s smarter than to try that.”

We all burst out laughing.

“I don’t know. She’s pretty headstrong, just like her papa,” James insisted.

“Oh yeah, and what are you going to do when Carter grows up and tries to get away with the same shit we did as kids?” Emmett teased.

James just shrugged and grinned. “I already know exactly what I’ll do. I’ll scold him in front of his mother and as soon as she turns her back, I’ll advise him not to get caught next time.”

I had to admit that laughing with the guys felt normal. It was the most right thing in my life at the moment.

Emmett popped the cap off a bottle of beer and passed it to me.

“After the week you’ve had, you deserve it.”

He shoved it into my hand before I could protest. I didn’t drink much these days and they all knew it. But as they started banging on the table and yelling, “Chug, chug, chug!” I threw caution to the wind and downed it all at once.

“Are we playing poker or what?” I yelled as another beer was shoved into my hand.

After eight more beers I had no idea what was going on with the game. Was I winning? Was I losing? Did it really matter?

I’d only brought twenty dollars in small coins with me, so who cared if I lost it all. We didn’t play poker for the

money.

“So, what kind of dog did she get you?” Thomas asked. “Lily described it much like a gremlin too.”

I pulled out my phone.

“Aw, he has pictures on his phone,” Emmett teased.

“Shut up, you asshole. I’m looking up this Gremlins movie you keep talking about.”

Everyone burst out laughing once more. I was pretty sure by now I was slurring my words and my head was a bit fuzzy making the screen hard to see, but with a little help from Austin, we found it.

In my drunken state, they were right. Chewy really did look like a gremlin with his big fluffy ears and all.

I groaned, and they took it as my agreement making the room grow louder with laughter.

“Now show us the dog,” James insisted.

I really did have pics of Chewy on my phone. I wanted evidence of the destruction he caused, so they were not the cute proud dog owner kind of pictures. Begrudgingly, I pulled them up and showed the guys.

“Damn! That’s a dog?” Austin asked. “What the hell was she thinking?”

“Let me see,” Clay said, taking the phone from me. He looked at it, confused. “Are we sure that’s a dog?”

He showed James who shook his head. “That is not a dog.”

“Let me see that,” Thomas demanded as they handed him my phone. He stared at it for a while as the rest of us sat quietly waiting for him react. Finally he asked, “What the hell did you do to piss Kate off this bad?”

Emmett whooped. “I told you! That is not a real dog. She’s trying to emasculate you, dude.”

“She did get a male,” Clay agreed.

“And a little yappy thing at that,” Austin added.

“Katherine says it’s supposed to make you stop thinking of babies or some shit like that,” James said.

“What?” Thomas asked.

“Apparently you had the look while holding Carter.”

I groaned. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. The girls had breakfast at the diner the other day and it was the hot topic, especially when Winnie announced Clay got her knocked up.”

“You’re gonna be a dad?” I asked him, feeling hurt that it seemed like common knowledge to everyone in the room but me. Though, in my drunken state I could have just been imagining that.

“She didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

He frowned. “Sorry man. I assumed it was already public knowledge.”

“I haven’t even seen my mate for more than about five minutes in passing this week,” I blurted out.

“Is she avoiding you?” Thomas asked.

I shrugged. “Feels like it.”

“Well, you can’t let her get away with that,” Austin insisted.

“Yeah, you need to let her know who’s in charge here,” James added.

“Go home right now, and you remind her,” Emmett said. “Man, a whole week without sex?”

“Maybe that five minutes was sex,” Austin teased.

“Shut up,” I said, but even I heard the slur of my voice as I said it. “But you’re right. I have needs dammit.”

“You’re the man,” James added, motivating me even more.

I jumped up quickly and then fell to the floor when I tried to sit down again.

Emmett laughed but helped me to my feet.

“Oh boy. No good will come of this,” Clay muttered under his breath, being the only sober one amongst us.

Someone was always designated as our sober. Usually it was me, though Clay often didn’t drink either. If Thomas had something important to do the next day then he refrained too. Clearly this was not the night that for that.

Austin got up and stumbled to the fridge for another round, falling into the counter and using it to pull himself towards the fridge.

For some reason, it was the funniest thing I’d ever seen and I started laughing and couldn’t stop. It was contagious and soon Emmett was laughing too, and then James, and finally Thomas.

Clay scowled. “What is so funny?”

“I don’t know,” Thomas admitted making us all laugh even harder.

Suddenly it was like everything fell into place for me and I had perfect clarity.

“I’m going home.”

“What? No. It’s early,” Emmett whined.

I had no idea what time it was, all I knew was that I was filled with sudden need for Kate.

“I have things to do,” I confessed walking to the door, which seemed to take longer than expected to find.

“I’m driving,” Clay protested.

“Take me home, kind sir. My mate awaits in need.”

“Why are you talking in a British accent?” he asked with a chuckle.

“I do not know. Onwards, Clay. To my fair maiden.”

The others were still laughing and cheering me on as we left.

“Show her who’s boss!”

“Get some!”

“I want details tomorrow.”

“You da man!”

“I’m da man,” I told Clay.

He just shook his head and chuckled as he drove me home.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“I’m fine,” I managed to say.

I could feel my wolf surging to help overcome my inebriation. The blood pumped harder through my veins and it made me feel powerful.

Channeling my wolf vision, I stumbled my way up my front porch steps and into the house. My sight was set on *her*.

I was only vaguely aware of the dog barking in protest.

Kate’s breath hitched as I stalked towards her. Her eyes dilated in recognition as I leaned down. Her nose scrunched in disgust.

“You’re drunk?”

“Only on my love for you.”

At least I was pretty sure I managed something cool and sexy like that. Whatever it was, it made her giggle and then gasp as I threw her over my shoulder and confidently walked down the hall to the bedroom. And when Chewy followed, I kicked that little shithead out of the way and slammed the door in his face.

“Not tonight, you damn dog,” I muttered.

Carefully, I undressed my mate who gave no protest. My hands were calm and quick, though my own clothes posed a little more of an issue and I stumbled just a little taking off my pants.

My intent was clear as I stood before her naked, hard, and ready.

Kate

Chapter 7

Kicked back in the recliner watching a movie, Chewy alerted me to Wyatt's arrival, even though I didn't need the reminder. My wolf ears picked up the sound of his truck long before it pulled into the driveway. I could even tell he wasn't driving himself. As he stumbled up to the stairs, practically falling through the front door, I understood why.

Chewy barked in protest.

My breath hitched as he stalked towards me. My heart fluttering as my eyes dilated in recognition as he leaned down. But my nose scrunched in disgust.

"You're drunk?"

"Only love on my for you," he slurred with a smug look on his face.

I started to giggle. I couldn't help it. He was so damn cute that all the stress and tension I'd been feeling while trying to ignore him just faded away. I gasped when he leaned down and picked me up, throwing me over his shoulder and stumbling down the hall to the bedroom.

My head hit the wall in the hallway, but he didn't seem to notice as he kept walking.

I threw up my hands up to cover my head as we walked through the door. My elbow banged hard against the doorframe. But then he whipped around and smacked my head into the door while I was rubbing my arm. Wyatt seemed oblivious to it all as my head swam from the pain.

Slamming the door in Chewy's face, I clearly heard him mutter, "Not tonight, you damn dog."

He tripped and dropped me onto the bed unceremoniously. Before it even registered what he was doing, I was undressed. Shocked and impressed at how swiftly he'd managed that, I gave no protest. I wasn't even sure how he'd done it given his inebriated state.

But when he started taking off his own clothes, that finesse was gone. I watched in horror and humor trying not to laugh as he stumbled around and then fell to the ground trying to remove his pants. It had been a long time since I'd seen my mate drunk. Most of the time he didn't even drink anymore.

It was entertaining for sure. I fully expected him to just pass out right there on the floor with his pants still stuck around his ankles.

Instead, the second he was free, he jumped up and swayed a bit, then settled with his hands proudly on his hips and naked as the day he was born.

My eyes drifted down appreciating the view. I gasped when I saw how hard he was standing there at full attention. I licked my lips.

Looking back up, I met his gaze. There was desire there.

He sniffed the air, and a sly smirk tipped his lips.

I was turned on despite it all and he clearly knew it.

This time when he stalked towards me, there was no stuttering or swaying. He looked like a determined man on a mission, and I knew without a doubt that I was his primary mission.

I gulped hard. He was drunk, this wasn't right, but damn it, it had been so long since we'd last had sex and he was definitely a willing partner. So when he reached out to touch me, I didn't stop him. And when he kissed me with a mix of pent-up frustration and passion, my head swooned.

“Be dumb with me, Kate,” I clearly heard him say.

Memories struck a chord on my heart and made my eyes sting with unshed tears.

“I need you,” I whispered. “So much.”

There was a new clarity in his eyes and his movements became less sporadic, more sober.

“Mine,” he growled as he climbed on the bed like he was stalking his prey, and I was fully in his sight.

I moaned into his next kiss.

Life had been so stagnant for us lately, even in the bedroom. I hadn't been this excited or turned on in so long that I couldn't even think straight when he touched me.

Heady and throbbing with need, my body responded strongly to every kiss, every lick and nibble as he explored my body like it was our first time.

“Mine,” he growled again sucking one of my nipples into his mouth so hard that it made me buck off the bed in shock.

Wyatt had always been a generous lover, but he was gentle and kind. There was an edge to him tonight that I had never experienced before, and I loved it.

His usual soft caresses were hard, almost punishing.

He released me with a pop and lingered above me staring deeply into my eyes. I'd never felt so exposed before, like he was seeing into my soul, really seeing me, all my thoughts, my fears, and my desires.

I do see you. I've always seen you.

I heard him, but his lips weren't moving.

Tears pricked my eyes as I realized we were speaking through the bond.

Don't stop, I thought. Please don't stop.

I've got you.

His mouth and hands were back on me, everywhere at once. My senses were on full overload and I wasn't sure I could even think a conscious thought, but whatever I was thinking seemed to only spur him on further.

He lowered his head to my apex, and I gasped in surprise. It wasn't something we really did anymore, not in a long time.

I moaned as pressure immediately started to build from his ministrations.

Oh God! Yes! Yes! Yes!

I couldn't hide anything from him now. That new vulnerability excited me as he licked and sucked exactly where I needed him to as tension continued to build within me.

When I could no longer take it anymore, I fisted my hands in his hair and held him there as I rode out the strongest orgasm I'd ever had in my entire life.

“Wyatt!” I screamed aloud startling us both.

He looked up from between my legs and grinned.

Adrenaline was still pumping through my veins as he trailed kisses back up my body. I could taste myself on his lips, evidence of what he'd just done to me. Normally I'd be grateful and roll over to go to sleep after that.

Not tonight, I heard him clearly think.

More, I begged.

He smirked back at me, and I was positive he'd just heard my thoughts clearly. Tears pricked my eyes as I became overwhelmed by all the emotions. Feeling his mixed with my own was almost more than I could bear.

I'd hurt him. I had known it, but now I could feel it as clearly as if it had been me. Whatever I had thought just then made him growl.

You are mine, baby. It's about time you learn that. I cannot be replaced by a damn dog.

With no warning, he pushed into me with one thrust, all the way to the hilt. He didn't even pause to allow my body time to adjust before he began to move.

You are mine!

Mine!

Mine!

Mine!

He started chanting with each thrust. He was angry, hurt, and consumed with passion. I was lost in the moment. All I could do was hang on for dear life and enjoy the ride.

I could feel him swell within me and I knew he was close. I wasn't quite there yet.

"I've got you," he whispered as he reached down between us and started to stroke my most sensitive spot in a circular motion and I nearly bucked off the bed as an orgasm ripped through my body without warning.

"Wyatt!" I cried, digging my nails into his back as he continued to plunder my body seeking his own relief.

"Kate!" he groaned as he thrust harder.

Mine!

Mine!

Mine!

He growled as he came hard within me.

The sensation was so new and unexpected, that I gasped. Everything about this night had been new and unexpected, but one word flashed through my mind as he collapsed down onto my chest.

Condom.

Wyatt had passed out pretty quickly afterwards, but I had laid awake late into the night before finally falling asleep. And when my alarm went off early the next morning, I wanted to chuck it across the room. I probably would have gone back to sleep had it not been for Chewy whimpering at the door.

I got up, peed, and went to let him out.

When I opened the bedroom door still feeling groggy, I gasped. There was white fluffy stuffing littering the hallway.

“What did you do?” I asked aloud.

I could have sworn he gave me a smug look as he walked to the door and scratched.

Unable to believe what I was seeing, I looked around the living room. My throw pillows on the couch had been shredded which explained the stuffing down the hall. My chair was untouched, but Wyatt’s chair had been mauled too. There was a big chunk of one arm gone and the bottom had been chewed on, but worse than all of that was the stench and noticeable pee spot on the chair.

“Chewy, you’re an idiot. Probably a dead idiot after this stunt.”

I let him out unassisted. At this point, if he ran away, I didn’t give a shit. It would probably be for the best.

Picking up the stuffing wasn’t too bad, but there was no way to hide the damage to the chair, or get rid of the stench of urine.

“Chewy, why?” I whispered.

Walking into the kitchen I groaned again. As if the living room wasn’t bad enough, he’d gotten into the trash, ate one of Wyatt’s favorite boots, and marked the entrance to the mud room where his crate was.

This was our fault for not crating him last night. We’d been so caught up in each other that we hadn’t even given him a second thought. Some dog parents we made. I snorted at the

thought. Maybe there really was a reason we hadn't been able to have a child. We couldn't even take care of a stupid dog.

When I heard Wyatt start to stir, I went into fight or flight mode and got the hell out of there. I hadn't even dressed for the day but always kept a change of clothes at the diner.

Wyatt hadn't called and while I could clearly feel his irritation, I couldn't clearly hear his thoughts. That worried me more than anything. We'd just progressed to that point, had I somehow broke it being irrational?

He didn't call or come by that day. I don't know why I thought he would. But after the night we'd shared, I'd hoped he would.

But he was drunk, really drunk. Did he even remember anything?

I felt sick to my stomach over it. And there was still that issue of him not wearing a condom. He always took care of that. Why hadn't he last night?

Because he was drunk, you idiot.

I groaned. Even knowing it had taken us several years to get pregnant when we'd been trying, didn't stop me from unreasonably freaking out.

"Kate? Are you okay?" Eddie asked.

I knew it was bad if he had noticed something was wrong.

I smiled. "Just a late night. I'm tired, but okay. Don't worry about me."

"You're sure?"

I nodded, trying not to show the internal turmoil I was feeling.

It was one time. Nothing was going to happen.

Fortunately, the day was busy keeping my mind focused on work and not irrationality.

Peyton had the day off, and while I could have definitely used her, I was also grateful she wasn't there. If Eddie noticed I was off, she would have honed in on it quickly and wouldn't have dropped it until I caved and told her everything.

Everything passed in a blur as I threw myself into work. When I finally sat down after the lunch crowd, I checked my phone and found a text I'd missed.

WYATT: Not coming home tonight.

I gulped hard and my pulse spiked as the room swam around me. I'd finally done it. I pushed my mate away just as my mother had done to my father.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I quickly swiped them away. This was all my fault. I couldn't even blame Wyatt. I was a coward and had been purposefully pushing him away lately. So many mistakes. Chewy was just the tip of that iceberg. But everything had been so great last night.

And he didn't even remember any of it.

Another message came in while my hand was shaking, and I nearly dropped the phone.

WYATT: Last minute fill in out on the range. Will make it up to you later.

WYATT: Chewy's an asshole.

WYATT: But after last night, I can't even be mad about it.

WYATT: Love you, baby. Think of me tonight. I know I'll be thinking of you.

My cheeks burned but my heart soared. He remembered. He's being affectionate, and he wasn't even mad about Chewy. I felt like I had just fallen into some sort of alternate universe and my whole world was righted again.

We're going to be okay.

Damn right we will, I heard Wyatt say.

You know I can hear you, right?

Really? I thought maybe I'd just been imagining it.

No. It's really happening.

About damn time. I love you, Kate.

Love you, too. Be safe out there tonight.

“What are you smiling at?”

Lily startled me. I hadn't even heard anyone come in.

“Nothing.”

“Liar. Spill it. Cora has the girls for only another hour. Entertain me.”

“Wyatt and I bonded a little closer to forever,” I blurted out.

“You did? What? When?”

“Telepathy,” I told her. I was almost giddy about it. Despite all of our issues, this was new and exciting and after last night I'd sampled some of the very real benefits of such a connection.

My cheeks brightened at the memory.

“No way! That's awesome. Was it like immediate?”

“No. Actually it was sort of slow to realize, like waking up from a dream where you know you're dreaming but can't quite accept it yet. I thought I was sort of imagining it at first, and then I was certain, but he didn't seem to notice at all.”

“But now he does?”

“Yup. Confirmed. I just talked to him. Thought to him?” I laughed. “I don't even know what to call it.”

She hugged me. “That's so cool, Kate. I'm happy for you. Does that mean things are okay between you two?”

I shrugged. “We'll be okay. This telepathy thing definitely has it's benefits.”

“Girl! You got some last night, didn’t you?”

I couldn’t stop grinning. “Got some” was an understatement. Wyatt had rocked my world last night. It had been the best sex of my life. I’d never had any complaints about our time in the bedroom, or the living room, or the car, or down by the river, or ... Sex had always been good, even when things had gotten stagnant and uninspiring, it was still good. But last night was great.

“You are practically glowing. Are you dirty talking with him right now?”

“What? No.” I considered that for a moment. “I don’t think so.”

Oh yeah you are. Keep it up and I’m going to ditch Emmett’s ass and leave right now.

“Oops. Maybe.”

“It was really that good? Man, I can’t wait to evict this latest parasite. I’m so jealous right now.”

I shrugged like it was no big deal. “It was definitely intense.”

She looked at me and we both laughed.

“You know, I can’t wait until I can read Thomas’s mind and know what he’s thinking about all the time.”

“Really? So far it’s been okay, but also, when I had to endure him being not so happy with me over the dog situation, it kind of sucked.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. But we’ve been together for nearly ten years now and he still won’t tell me why he calls me Slugger. I want to know, dammit. I swear he only doesn’t tell me because he knows it drives me crazy.”

Slugger? I thought.

I could hear laughing in my head. *That’s what Thomas calls Lily because he said her rejection during their mating felt like a Louisville Slugger straight to the chest.*

My jaw dropped.

Shit! Don't you dare tell her that. That was shared in confidence.

Lily eyeballed me suspiciously. "You know, don't you?"

I shook my head a little too quickly. "I know nothing."

Just then there was a clatter in the back kitchen.

"Shit," I muttered, quickly excusing myself.

"We will be talking about this!" Lily yelled after me.

I gave her a little wave as I disappeared to the safety of my kitchen only to find Eddie standing there covered in pudding.

"I'm so sorry, Kate. I slipped."

"I told you to buy some restaurant grade non-slip shoes, Eddie."

"I know, but I was rushing out the door this morning and forgot to grab them. Are you mad?"

I sighed and shook my head. "Honestly, I should probably be thanking you."

He looked confused, but I just shrugged and grabbed stuff to clean up his mess.

"Why don't you go ahead and make another big batch for tonight while I get this cleaned up."

"Seriously? You want me to make the pudding?"

"Yes, Eddie. You can handle that, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

"Great. Get on it."

I knew he was surprised by my reaction, but hey, he saved me from Lily's interrogation. I didn't let him work with the food very often after enduring several incidents that could have led to major disasters, but I did know he was capable of

cooking. It was why I had hired him to begin with. Besides, it was only instant pudding with no threat of burning my restaurant down.

Wyatt

Chapter 8

“So you can really read Kate’s mind now?” Emmett asked me as we settled in for the night around the campfire.

I’d always loved sleeping out on the range under the stars, but tonight, I just wanted to be home with my mate.

“Yes. I told you that already.”

“But it’s weird, right? Like she knows everything you’re thinking?”

“Yeah, I guess so. We’re still figuring it out.”

“Like everything? So if a hot chick walks down the street and you take notice, she’ll hear those thoughts?”

“I don’t look at other women like that, dude. It’s only Kate for me.”

“That’s pathetic. You’re still a male, with eyes.”

“It’s not like that. When you find your mate, you’ll understand.”

Travis snorted. “That’s what mated men always says.”

“And someday you will,” I argued.

“What if we don’t want a mate?” Ridge asked.

“Yeah, life is pretty freaking great single,” Brady chimed in. “I mean, I guess it would be nice to settle down someday, but I’m okay on my own too.” He shook his head. “Never thought I’d be saying that. Seeing my brother so happy, stable, and just normal has changed my ideas about mating. We didn’t exactly have the best examples growing up

in Larken Pack and I barely even remember my mother. But Ollie's okay, great even, and he's showed me and the boys that our past doesn't have to define us, that we can be okay too. So I'm still a little jaded but if it happens, it happens."

Brady had just gone deep and it resonated for others too. I didn't know all the history there, but I knew it wasn't good. Cruz had been through it too, coming from Larken as well. The two packs had merged back together but it still made people uncomfortable to talk about those days, which was made evident by the way we'd all fallen silent.

"Nah, I can't wait to find my mate," Cruz surprised us by saying, and effectively putting a halt to any potential awkwardness. "How about you, Emmett?"

He shrugged. "I could take it or leave it to be honest."

That was a lie. I knew Emmett wanted to find a mate and bond with her. We'd had a few conversations about it, but I also got why he was playing it cool like it didn't bother him that he was the last of the Six Pack to find his true mate. I worried a bit that he would try and settle for just any mate. He'd been dating a human girl in town for a while now. I didn't think it was serious or anything, but then again none of us truly expected James to take a human mate. Sure, she was his true mate, but even when they'd dated years prior, none of us had taken it all that serious just because she was human. I knew better than to assume now.

Still, I would never call Emmett out in front of these guys like that.

Sending six men out at once seemed excessive to me, but Emmett insisted it was necessary. I wasn't even sure what the job entailed. It wasn't a normal perimeter run, and he'd loaded us down with tools, not additional ropes or anything we would need to find a few strays or new calf or colt born in the fields. I supposed it didn't much matter. I'd do whatever he told me to do.

That's what I liked about my job. I was rarely in charge of anything or anyone. Occasionally Thomas would assign me a job to head up, but it was rare, especially since he knew I often divided my time between the ranch and the diner.

The guys were staring at me now, waiting for me to respond to Emmett.

I smirked and shrugged. "Single guys always say that. But trust me, you'll change your mind when the time comes."

Laying back on the hard ground, I stared up into the night sky. Life was simple out here, basic. We carried whatever we needed with us and left no trace when we left. As boys we'd set up campsites within a day's ride in various directions so nowadays, the fire pits were established and stocked with wood we no longer had to find or bring along. It was nice, and I always loved my time out here.

But tonight, all I wanted was to be home with my mate.

I miss you too, I heard Kate's voice as clearly as if it were my own.

I grinned up to the stars.

So this mind reading thing really does have its perks, huh?

"What the hell are you grinning about? You look ridiculous. Get up. We voted you to cook."

"No need. Kate made chili, well, not today. She didn't even know I was going out today since you sprung it on me last minute, but it was in the freezer so I grabbed it when I ran home to pack. Should be thawed by now so just warm it up," I told Emmett.

"I'll do it," Travis offered.

"We voted Wyatt."

"But you heard him, no cooking involved, just heat it through. I can handle that," he insisted.

“Yeah, whatever,” Emmett told him as Travis set to work.

“Why did you bring a farrier along anyway?” Ridge asked. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I got no beef with Travis. I was just curious.”

“And I’m just grateful for the opportunity,” Travis said, completely unoffended. “Life gets monotonous sometimes at the barn shoeing horses day in and day out. It’s a nice change of scenery out here.”

“He used to help us out here all the time, before he went off to college and got some fancy degree and all. He knows what he’s doing,” Emmett said, confidently.

The kid perked up and his chest puffed out with pride.

Emmett was kind of a big deal out here on the range. All of us Six Pack were well known and respected in the territory, but amongst the cowboys and farmhands, Emmett was ranked almost as high as Thomas. He was the man in charge now, and I couldn’t be prouder of him. Sure, it could have been me, but my life plans had changed quickly having met the love of my life at such a young age.

A part of me felt sorry for my friend though. Living life on the range wasn’t an easy one. It was exhausting and hard work, though Emmett thrived doing it. But it was a lonely life too. Not too many women were cut out for it, which made it one of the worst jobs to have to actually find a mate, and that worried me a lot.

“Dinner’s ready,” Travis hollered.

The guys eagerly gathered around. Knowing my mate had cooked ahead of time left no doubt that we were in for a great meal.

I held back and scooped up a big bowl full at the end. Ridge had already scarfed back half his meal when I pulled a Ziploc bag full of freshly made cornbread. His eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

“Kate made cornbread?”

I chuckled. “No. Lily did. Thomas dropped it off just before we left. She’s apparently going through a baking phase.”

He stared at the piece in my hand trying to pass it to him, and then shrugged and took it. That cornbread was gone before I finished handing them out.

“So why are we out here? We’re cutting through the property and not around the border so I know it’s not a territory run.”

Emmett shook his head. “Northeast fence was reported down. At least two cows missing, so we’re riding out, repairing, and making sure they are secured.”

I gulped and then scowled. “The Northeast fence? But that’s a two-day ride just to get to it.”

Emmett grimaced. “Yeah. We’re gonna be out here a while.”

I groaned. “You could have at least let me give fair warning to Kate.”

“That sucks,” Cruz said. “No cell reception out here.”

“Whatever. He has that mind-reading thing going on now. Or does it not work from this far away?” Emmett asked.

“It works,” I admitted.

And I already heard you. At least a week?

At least. Sorry babe.

It’s fine. Just be safe out there.

In some ways it felt like Kate and I were back on the mend. I wanted to foster that and get things back on track between us, and now this.

It’s okay. We’ll be fine.

“Hello? Earth to Wyatt.” Emmett snapped his fingers in front of my face and I smacked his hand out of the way.

“Dude, you had this weird look on your face like you were here but not really here.”

“I was talking to Kate.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“So that connection works from all the way out here?”

“Doesn’t seem to matter the distance,” I said with a shrug.

“Huh. That’s so weird. I thought you were about to have a seizure of something.”

“Don’t be an ass, Emmett.”

“I’m not. I swear. It was really creeping me out.”

“Well, get used to it, I guess.”

“Can’t you like block her or something?”

“I don’t know. Why would I want to?”

“Seriously?” Travis asked. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t want anyone up in my head like that, especially not a chick,” Travis said with a snort.

“She’s not a chick, she’s my mate.”

“Whatever. I still wouldn’t want some woman in my head like that.”

“When you find your true mate, you’ll understand.”

They all groaned.

The days flew by as we rode, worked hard doing fence repairs, and then searched for the lost cows. On our fourth day out in the field Clay radioed in that five more cows were unaccounted for and tracking services showed them outside

our borders. That led to a few more days of actively searching for them and getting them back through the fence.

Our territory backed up to a large plot of BLM (Bureau of Land Management) property. It wasn't uncommon to find stray domesticated animals wandering through. The trick was to ensure the cows we wrangled and brought home actually belonged to us.

It was long hot days, and the nights were getting colder. The work kinked my muscles, but each night after dinner we all shifted into our fur to help combat the dropping temps. The fact that my wolf healed any aches and pains while I slept was just a bonus.

The tough part was getting up the next morning. It was still cold and I had to shift back to my skin while I could still see my breath in the air. That sucked, but was also an immediate wakeup call as I scrambled to get into my clothes as quickly as possible. And I wasn't the only one.

"I'll put on coffee," Ridge informed us.

"Cruz, it's your turn to make breakfast," Emmett reminded him.

"We're out of breakfast foods. It's been seven days out here already," Cruz complained. "All I have to offer is beans."

There was a universal groan piercing the serene morning.

"We should be able to wrap this up today and start making our way back. So, let's get to it," Emmett told him, though I knew he was speaking to all of us.

I rose and stretched before heading to the large boulder we'd all deemed the pisser to relieve myself.

Looking out across the range and seeing no signs of humanity for as far as my eyes could see provided a certain level of peace to my soul. There was really nothing like it in the whole wide world. Of course, if I turned around and saw the team sprawled out across our camp, it was a different story.

But with my back to them, it was almost as if I were the last man on Earth.

I frowned and shook my head.

It would be pretty damn perfect if Kate were here with me, I thought.

I'm here.

Her voice sounded groggy in my head like she was just waking up too.

It's cold, I huffed.

You wouldn't be complaining about that if I were physically there.

Oh yeah? Why not?

Hmmm, because I'd ... before she finished speaking, images of the two of us making love in the open field flashed through my head. They were vivid and new, not some former memory I had stored in my head.

I watched in shock as Kate rode me hard, completely uninhibited, wearing nothing but my cowboy hat.

Holy shit! Babe, I think you're projecting your thoughts in pictures.

What?

I could almost feel her embarrassment.

That's not possible, right?

I growled. *Stupid dog chewed up that hat. I'm gonna have to buy an exact replacement now.*

Wyatt!

What? Aw, don't be embarrassed. I've never been more turned on as I am right now.

Stop thinking it. Oh my God, Wyatt! I can see it now too. Wait, that's not exactly how I remember it. Where did that rope come from?

I grinned to myself.

Oh, I have plans for that rope, just wait and see.

I let the scene continue to play out in my head hoping beyond hope that she could really see it too.

Kate gasped in my mind.

Oh yeah, you like that, don't you?

I was so turned on that I was about to unzip my pants and take care of things while we battled this unspoken sex scene going on between us when I was jolted back to reality with a slap on the back.

“Don't even think about it. I said I would try to get us heading back home today. Just help me find these last damn cows. And wipe that stupid look off your face,” Emmett said.

I just grinned from ear to ear and shrugged.

“You're seriously like mental sexting your mate right now?”

I started laughing and he smacked me across the back of my head. With a growl, I tackled him to the ground. As a rule, the Six Pack didn't really fight with fists. It would have to be something really big for me to actually punch him, but I could wrestle and torment him with a clean conscience.

So I did.

The sneak attack worked as I pinned him to the ground showing my full dominance. That didn't last long though as he shook off the shock and fought back against me while I lightly smacked his cheeks with my hands.

Somehow, his leg snaked around and knocked me off balance sending me crashing to the ground as he made a quick move to take full advantage of the moment.

Before I knew it, I was the one pinned to the ground and he was sitting on my gut looking triumphantly down on me.

At just that moment, Kate flashed another image of me on my back looking up at her.

I closed my eyes and then snarled as I shook it out of my head and looked up into Emmett's eyes instead.

"No!" I yelled throwing him off of me harder than I had meant to.

"What the hell was that for?"

I looked at him with disgust. "You don't want to know."

"Was Kate still sending you dirty thoughts?"

He wasn't mad. He was grinning like a loon and I knew I wasn't going to live this one down anytime soon.

"Let's just say you aren't the one I want straddling me like that right now."

"Ew! Dammit Wyatt. I did not need that image in my head right now, you sick sonofabitch."

I started laughing and couldn't stop.

All of our commotion drew the attention of the others.

"Are they always like this?" Travis asked.

"Worse. You should see when all six of them are together," Brady told him.

"Probably never gonna grow up, Thomas included. Hard to imagine him as Alpha sometimes when he's with his boys. They're all insane," Cruz added.

"Shut up, and get back to work," Emmett said with a laugh.

"Coffee's ready," Ridge yelled.

"Great. Now let's get to work. Wyatt desperately needs to get home to his mate," Emmett teased.

I just shrugged and grinned. No sense in denying it. I was more than ready to go.

Kate

Chapter 9

The days had started to weigh on me. Even though I'd barely seen Wyatt for the last few weeks, I missed him. I wanted him home with me. My anxiety over him being away had gotten so bad that it was screwing with my system. I was pretty certain I had a stomach ulcer and constantly felt nauseous from it. I just needed my mate.

Things had been uncertain, and then we'd had that drunken night of bliss and poof! He was gone. I'd been so lonely this week that I'd even allowed Chewy to sleep in bed with me.

I grimaced.

Wyatt was not going to be happy about that.

I tried not to think about it, hoping he wouldn't read my mind. Our new bonding connection was a strange one. It didn't quite feel natural, but it also did.

It bothered me a bit that our bond had chosen now to further seal. Now! When we were struggling to connect. When it felt like we were drifting apart. Why now?

Maybe because this is when we needed it the most.

It took me a second to realize those were my own thoughts and not Wyatt's. He wasn't listening in at the moment. I don't know how I knew it, but I did. Concentrating just a little, I could practically hear him and Emmett arguing over something. His mind was distracted, busy.

Being inside my mate's head was a whole new level of intimacy that I could never have imagined. I'd come so hard this morning during our little virtual sexcapade. When Emmett had interrupted our moment, I'd already been too far gone and just tuned them out to finish things off myself.

Damn. It had been almost as good as having him there with me. And I couldn't even begin to imagine how much hotter sex would be now. Sure, we'd had sex since all the craziness began, but Wyatt had barely known it was happening, and now I could project actual images to him.

My body buzzed at the thought. He would know exactly what I wanted and what I needed next time we were together.

Hot damn! This could be a very good thing ... as soon as I learned how to tune him out better, because seriously, I did not need to hear about some of the things a bunch of single cowboys talked about sitting around the fire at night. No thank you. There had to be a way to shut it off sometimes.

"Good morning, Kate. Any word from Wyatt?" Thomas asked as he came in and took a seat at his usual booth.

I bit back a grin. I was already turned on, so it wasn't hard to conjure up memories of how Wyatt and I had christened that very booth once upon a time.

"I'm going to guess by that look that you have?"

"What?"

"Kate, have you heard from Wyatt or not?"

"You know there's no cell phone service or anything, right? They would only radio back to the barn."

"Yes, and I also know from my mate that you have a new telepathic connection to your mate." He smirked.

I rolled my eyes. "I swear, you and Lily are some of the biggest gossips around here."

“Only when it comes to the Six Pack,” he confessed without even a little sign of remorse.

“Yes, I talked with him this morning.” My cheeks involuntarily heated.

Thomas’s jaw dropped as he watched me and then he abruptly shut his mouth. “I don’t want to know.”

“Good. The usual?”

“Yup.”

“Okay.”

I turned and practically ran back to the kitchen.

“Watch out,” Peyton yelled as I stopped short from nearly colliding with Eddie.

“Sorry boss,” he said.

“No, it wasn’t you. It was my fault, or almost my fault.”

“Are you okay?” Peyton asked.

“I’m fine. Thomas would like his usual.”

“Thomas can wait.”

“He’s the Alpha.”

“He’s my baby brother.”

“Not around here he’s not.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “What’s wrong?”

I snorted. “Nothing. I just nearly embarrassed myself in front of him and had to get away quickly.”

“Nearly embarrassed?”

“Probably embarrassed.”

“How does one probably embarrass themselves?”

“He just said something, and I blushed, dammit. I couldn’t help it. I know he knew or at least suspected why, hence probably embarrassed myself.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Peyton barked some orders out and the rest of the staff straightened up quickly as they set about preparing breakfast for the Alpha.

“Any word from Wyatt?”

I blushed again.

“Oh. I see,” she teased.

“Shut up.”

“Careful. You really are almost embarrassing yourself.”

“I told you.”

We both laughed.

“The mind-connection thing?” she asked.

“Yes. I talked to him this morning.”

I was fully aware my cheeks were burning brightly once more, but she was kind enough to ignore it. They both knew damn well I’d been dirty talking with my mate this morning.

“Any idea when he’ll be returning?”

I shrugged. “Sounded like soon.”

“Good. You should take a day off when he gets home. I know things have been rough for you guys lately.”

She shot me a knowing look when I started to protest.

“Don’t. The dog, the late work nights ... you’re avoiding him.”

I sighed. “I’m not. Okay, not anymore. We’re good.”

“The blush on your cheeks tells me you are way more than just good right now.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t deny it.

We still had a lot to work through but knowing exactly what he's thinking let me know exactly where we stood. I'd still have my freakouts from time to time, but we were going to be okay. I had to believe that with every ounce of my being.

My parents had royally screwed me up when it came to commitments and intimacy, but Wyatt had known that since the beginning of our relationship. Some would say he had no choice but to mate me. I knew better. We'd held out for six months getting to know each other and deciding for ourselves that this is what we wanted. I'd told him then that for better or worse he was stuck with me, and he still chose me. Still, when push came to shove, I either locked up or avoided the tough stuff. It sometimes made me feel like a coward, but mostly, it just reaffirmed to me that I was more like my parents than I cared to admit. And that scared the shit out of me.

I'd been in high school when it all began. My mom would yell. My dad would hide.

My stomach churned, and I thought I was going to be sick. I was just like my dad. But Wyatt was nothing like my mother. He was strong, compassionate, and when I went into lockdown mode, he gave me the space I needed to work through it, or he held me through it depending on what I needed most. He was everything to me, my ride or die, the love of my life, my one true mate.

Despite all their issues, my parents had made it through everything together. They were stronger than ever and a bit sickening to be around now, if I were being honest. I didn't care to think about it.

My cheeks warmed once more at the thought. It felt a lot like Wyatt and I were back in that sickening to be around stage again. It wasn't the first time. I wasn't exactly the easiest person to be with so life for us had always been a bit of a rollercoaster, but mostly, until recently, it had been a smooth ride. It made me question whether I had been irrational about it all.

Wyatt probably couldn't help the way he looked at a baby in his arms. And maybe I'd overexaggerated it all, projecting the way I expected him to be feeling onto him. In truth, I had no idea what Wyatt thought about everything. And even if he did have a moment of longing, so what? This was our life and we'd decided together that it was in our best interest not to have kids. Right?

I closed my eyes and tried to block out those thoughts. I didn't want him to hear my insecurities or know the pain it caused me worrying that I had somehow ruined his life and destroyed his dreams.

Our strengthened bond threatened to expose my deepest thoughts and fears and that was more than a little terrifying. So far everything had been going so well, but there was so much more inside my head for him to find if he wanted to and I had no clue how to shield him from it all.

Peyton had gone to check on something in the oven which had given me time to spiral in a dark way. I was still thinking about it when she returned.

“So tell me, what's it like having Wyatt in your head?”

I shrugged. “So far it hasn't been bad. Fun even. It's just like talking on the phone to him or something.”

“You don't sound so certain of that.”

“It just makes me wonder how much he can see there. You know? I mean we don't exactly have major secrets from each other or anything, but my private thoughts are just that ... private. And some things I'd like to remain that way. Do you think he can see everything in my head?”

“I really don't know anything about it. You could try talking to my mom maybe. I know my parents are fully bonded, but it's just not something we talk about, like ever. She might talk to you about it if you ask her though.”

“No. I mean, thanks. I can understand why they don't talk about it. I mean, seriously, it's just a lot and way too personal.”

She rolled her eyes. “I figured. Still, it’s one of those taboo things we should talk about more.”

I sighed. “Maybe.”

It already felt like I’d said too much. Almost like in some weird way I was belittling my bond by even mentioning it.

“Um, well, how’s Chewy doing?” Peyton asked as if she suddenly sensed that I was regretting talking about it and needed to change the subject.

I perked up at the mention of my crazy dog. “Chewy’s doing great. He hasn’t had any accidents and hasn’t destroyed anything since Wyatt left. I think all of that’s behind us, and he’s figuring out this new life and loving it.”

She snorted. “I still can’t believe you bought him a dog. Oliver would probably murder me in my sleep if I pulled something like that.”

“Oliver worships the ground you walk on, Pey. He might snarl and complain a bit, but he’d get over it if it was something you really wanted.”

It would be nice to have a friend for Chewy to play with.

“Wipe that look off your face. It’s not happening,” Wyatt said.

I pouted but was suddenly struck with another bout of nausea.

“You don’t look so good.”

“All the worrying about Wyatt and Chewy and stuff gave me an ulcer. I haven’t had even a second to shift and heal it. I’ll be okay. It’s not the first time it’s happened. I was prone to them as a teenager when my mom and dad were fighting all the time.”

She hugged me. “Are things that bad with you and Wyatt?”

“No, but I was building it up to be. It was stupid. We’re okay now, I swear. It just dredged up a lot of past shit I was repressing.”

“Why don’t you head home and take care of that? Eddie’s been remarkably helpful today and we’re fully staffed. Austin’s already scheduled to come in and help with the dinner shift. So go.”

I scowled. “You have tonight off. Can Austin handle the dinner rush on his own?”

“No, but Eddie can. Don’t look at me like that, Kate. I’m telling you, he’s ready.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Plus, you and I are both only a phone call away. Even if Oliver’s busy, Kenneth said he’d be home this evening for dinner so it’s fine. Go. You look miserable.”

I sighed. “Fine. Go ahead and wrap up your shift and get out of here. I’ll leave when Austin gets here.”

“Did someone mention my name?”

I checked my watch. “You’re early.”

He shrugged as he snagged a French fry off a plate. I smacked him and shot Peyton a look.

She laughed. “Behave. She’s actually going to leave you and Eddie in charge tonight.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I need to take care of something. Please tell me my diner will still be here when I return.”

I was only partially exaggerating. The last time I’d left the place alone with Eddie here, he’d nearly burnt my kitchen down.

“Don’t make me regret it.”

Before I could change my mind, I packed up and left without doing any of my normal routine or prepping for the

dinner crowd. Peyton said everything would be fine. I had to believe that, or I was never going to leave this place.

Once upon a time I'd had a life away from the diner. I'd had friends to hang out with, too. Now, life felt incredibly lonely. Sure, I could call up the girls. We were well overdue for some Six Pack ladies' time. The last few times we'd gotten together they'd come to the restaurant because I couldn't drag myself away. I'd even continued working. They didn't seem to mind, and it didn't stress me out as much as taking an evening off does. At the time it had felt like a good balance, but now, I wasn't so sure.

I'd pulled away from everyone so much that I didn't even feel comfortable picking up the phone and calling them to go out for a drink or just a chat. I knew I could, I just felt too removed from everything to make myself even try.

Feeling sorry for myself I went straight home. I knew Peyton was right and I should take the time to shift and go for a run to let my wolf heal the ulcer, but first I just wanted to relax. I had stressed to the point of misery and a nice hot soak in the tub would be helpful too.

I drew a hot bath and stripped out of my clothes. Maybe I could rekindle a bit of the telepathic foreplay Wyatt and I had experienced this morning. Another great orgasm would certainly help relax me faster.

Don't even think about it, I heard Wyatt's thoughts just as I stepped into the steaming tub and slipped beneath the water. I mean it, Kate. I'm on a stupid horse right now and you start thinking those thoughts and draw me back in and I'll be lucky if I don't fall off and kill myself.

I sighed. *We wouldn't want that, would we? I mean what good are you to me dead? I'll never have another great orgasm then.*

Stop thinking about orgasms, woman! he screamed in my head making me giggle. *We've started to head back and*

should be home tomorrow evening or the next morning at the latest. I'll give you all the orgasms you want then.

Promise?

Promise. But find a way to block me from those visions or just stop thinking. You're distracting me.

Block him? Could I do that? How would I even know if it worked? I tried concentrating really hard, but since there was zero way to be certain, I thought it best not to distract him while riding.

I didn't touch myself, although I wanted to, and just laid back and let my muscles relax in the heated water. Soon I drifted off into a state of semi-consciousness.

When I fully awoke sometime later, the water was cold, and the room was dark.

"Guess I actually fell asleep. But I probably needed it. And why am I talking to myself?"

I laughed into the darkness, channeled my wolf vision, and got out of the chilled water. Goose bumps broke out across my skin as I ran for a towel and wrapped myself in it.

Knowing what I needed to do, I didn't bother getting dressed, just walked to the back porch and shifted, or at least I tried to shift.

Nothing.

"Shift dammit."

Nothing.

"Stop playing games. It's cold out here."

Still, nothing.

Frustrated, I ran back into the house as Chewy ran around my feet barking. It only added to my frustrations until I kicked him out of the house.

I had never had trouble shifting on demand, not even when I was just a pup with no experience.

What was happening?

I tried again. And again. And again. I could not force my wolf to shift.

Taking a moment of self-evaluation, I could feel her.

“Stop being stubborn and shift!” I yelled.

But she still refused.

Starting to panic, I knew something must be very wrong. I ran to the bedroom and threw on some clothes, grabbed my keys, and drove to the clinic. Doc would know what to do.

I drove like a hellion, and when I arrived, I threw the car in park and jumped out. I was halfway to the door when I realized the car was still running. I turned and went back to turn it off and retrieve my keys.

This time I took a deep breath and calmed down a little before walking inside.

No one was there.

My heart dropped.

“Hello?” I heard a man yell out.

“Doc?”

It didn't sound like him.

“Sort of,” a handsome man said, stepping out from the hallway. “I'm Sam. Doc's going to be stepping down soon, and I'm here on trial.”

“Oh, well, do you know when Doc will be back?”

He shrugged. “Next Tuesday, I think.”

“Next week?”

“Yeah.”

“But I need to talk to him now.”

“I’m sorry. But I’m here. I’m happy to help with whatever you need.”

“It’s a personal question.”

“Oh. Sorry. Well, if you have any medical issues, then I’m here to help.”

I groaned. I didn’t know this guy, and if I called Thomas to confirm his story then he would want to know what was wrong and he’d tell Wyatt I was here. That wasn’t happening.

“Fine, I guess I’ll talk to you. Do you, um, know where you are?”

“I’m a wolf shifter too. What’s going on?”

I looked around uneasily.

“No one’s here, but we can go back to an exam room if you’d rather.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I just have a quick problem and I was hoping Doc could tell me how to fix it.”

“Okay, well I’ll give it my best shot. What is it?”

“My wolf is being stubborn.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she’s there. I can feel her. I can even channel her vision and hearing, but I can’t shift. This has never happened to me before.”

He smiled knowingly, and I started to relax.

“It’s not a big deal, right? I mean I’ve been so stressed out lately, I’m just freaking out for nothing, right?”

“It is very common ...” he hesitated.

“Kate.”

“Kate. It’s very common. You have nothing to worry about.”

I could feel the tension rolling off of me at his words.

“So, I’m good then? It’ll just come back?”

“Sure, after the baby is born, you’ll be able to shift as normal.”

I wasn’t sure I heard him clearly. “Excuse me?”

“Kate, this is perfectly normal. When a female becomes pregnant, her wolf protects her and the child. Developmental issues could occur if you were to shift. Your wolf is just doing her job protecting you.”

“But I’m not pregnant!”

“Oh. Well, I can run a few tests to confirm it, but that’s the only reason I know of why a person wouldn’t be able to shift all of a sudden. You said you can still communicate with her, so that rules out any trauma to your wolf. Unless you’ve personally suffered something so extreme that it caused a disconnect between you and your wolf, but you still shouldn’t be able to communicate with her or channel your enhanced traits in human form like sight and sound.”

I started to hyperventilate.

“Kate, why don’t you take a seat and breathe deeply for me. In and out. In and out. That’s it. In and out.”

“I can’t be pregnant,” I whispered. “It’s not even possible. My mate and I were on opposite schedules for a while so there have been few and far between instances, and we’re very careful to use protection.”

“Well, it only takes one time, and protection isn’t one hundred percent. What are you using?”

“Condoms. I was getting shots too, just in case, but I was due last month and had to postpone it.”

“No issues with the condom breaking or anything?”

“I told you, we really haven’t been having sex,” I blurted out. “Really just once in the last month and that was just over a week ago, far too soon to know if I were pregnant. So, it’s really not possible.”

He sighed. “Did you use protection then?”

“Of course. Wait, maybe not. I don’t know. It was a late night, and he was pretty drunk.”

Sam’s face changed quickly. “Did he take advantage of you, Kate? Hurt you in any way? Should I call the Alpha in for this?”

“What? No!” I screeched.

“Okay, maybe the Alpha is a bit extreme. I can call the Sheriff in to talk with you.”

I snorted. “As if that would be any better.”

He frowned. “I’ve heard nothing but good things about Thomas and Sheriff James. Is there something I should know about them?”

I laughed and it sounded half hysterical. “They’re great. It’s not that.”

“What is it then? If this man hurt you, even if he is your mate, you need to report it.”

“Sam, Wyatt would never hurt me. Not in a million years. And he was drunk because of the Alpha and the Sheriff.”

“Excuse me?”

“Poker night. He’s best friends with them. He got drunk at poker night, came stumbling in late, we had sex. It was entirely consensual, yes even in his drunken state. I didn’t take advantage of him, but I did take advantage of the moment. But it was one time. Just once. And it was last week. So that’s not it.”

“I’m glad to hear it wasn’t anything like that.”

“Thanks.”

“No, I meant that there wasn’t any abuse. I can run a test, but I assure you Kate, you are pregnant.”

“Did you not hear a word I said? It was a week ago.”

“And if you were human, that might matter, but a week is plenty long enough for a sperm to find an egg and take hold. A pregnancy test won’t show it just yet, not for another few weeks to a month, but your wolf, she knows. It’s been documented that a wolf can sense a viable pregnancy almost from the moment of conception and will protect the female, you. She’s protecting you, Kate.”

“This is all insane. It was one time. There’s no way I got pregnant off of one drunken night, Sam. Sorry, but I think it would be best if I just wait to talk to Doc about this. Clearly you don’t know anything about shifters.”

He smiled, but there was something condescending to it.

“If that’s what you’d prefer.”

“You can’t tell anyone about this, right? Not even Thomas?”

“It falls under HIPAA compliancy, so no. Without your consent, I’m bound to patient doctor confidentiality. Not even Thomas.”

“Good. Not a word of this to anyone.”

I got up to leave, but he cut me off.

“Kate, can I ask why you think you can’t get pregnant?”

I sighed feeling a bit defeated. “We tried for years. I physically couldn’t conceive.”

“Never?”

“Once. It ended quickly. A miscarriage. I will never go through that again. So see, we’re super cautious to ensure I don’t.”

Except that one time.

“Except that one time. A week ago. Right?” he said as if he could somehow read my mind.

“Right,” I replied through gritted teeth, suddenly regretting having mentioned that part to him.

“If curiosity gets the best of you, I can run a blood test. It would be better to wait at least another week, but I’m pretty sure my suspicions are correct.”

“Say what you want, but they can’t be. And if you won’t help me come up with any other valid reason for why my wolf is being so stubborn then you’re of no help to me.”

I stormed out of the clinic and sped home to find Chewy barking at the back door, probably feeling abandoned.

Shaking my head, I let him inside.

“I can’t even take care of a dog. There’s no way I’m having a baby. That guy is delusional.”

Wyatt

Chapter 10

Coming home hadn't been the big open-armed reception I'd expected. Instead, I returned to find Kate sullen and withdrawn. She was shutting me out even through our bond. I had no idea how she was doing it, but the disconnect was unsettling. I was just beginning to get used to having her in my head, and now it was gone.

"Kate? What's wrong?" I asked for the millionth time.

It had been over a week, and she was scaring me. Every time I mentioned taking her to see Doc, she simply said, "Not yet."

I thought we were okay now. I thought the late nights hiding in the diner were finally behind us. I hadn't even complained about the stupid dog or anything, even though he had pissed in my boot the day I came home. Actually in the boot. That little shithead cocked up his leg and with perfect aim pissed inside my boot. I could smell it, but there were no signs, that is until I stuck my foot in an ankle-deep piss-filled boot. It had taken a lot not to kill him right then and there.

But I had behaved. I'd smiled with my jaw clenched and I'd thrown away my favorite boots knowing there was no way that smell was ever coming out of them. I was still mad about it, but I tried hard to keep that from Kate. Whatever she was going through, she didn't need my Chewy drama compounding it.

Still, I didn't know what to do or say to help her because she wouldn't tell me what was wrong. With each passing day, I just grew more and more angry about it, and I

feared it was causing her to withdraw even more, which meant she was coming home later and later at night.

I supposed I was following her lead, working longer hours and harder than ever too.

“Stop!” Emmett yelled.

“What?” I yelled back.

“What are you doing?”

“Working. These bales of hay aren’t going to move themselves.”

“You’ve moved them at least five times this week. All you’re doing is rearranging the barn.”

I growled. “I’m fixing it.”

We both knew I wasn’t. All I was doing was taking out my personal shit by moving things around simply because it was hard manual labor that burned my muscles and exhausted me mentally and physically to the point of real life hurting a little less.

The barn door opened, and I growled as Thomas walked in with James, Clay, and Austin in tow.

“What the hell are they doing here?”

“Calm down,” Thomas said as a jolt of Alpha powers hit me hard.

“Are you trying to piss me off?” I challenged even while my body began to relax.

“Seems to me you’re already pissed-off. The question is why?” James countered.

“Mind your own damn business,” I snapped, but I didn’t miss the worried look he gave Emmett, who shrugged helplessly.

With a sigh and feeling defeated, I started to deflate as I sat down hard on one of the bales.

“Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay,” Clay said optimistically.

“It doesn’t feel okay.”

“What’s going on, man?” Thomas asked in a much less authoritative voice.

“I don’t know. Dammit, I just don’t know.”

“Is Kate okay?” Austin asked.

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. Something’s going on with her, but she won’t talk to me. You all know we bonded telepathically, right? Well, she’s shut me out, turned it off or something.”

“You can do that?” James asked.

I shrugged again. “Apparently, because I can’t get through to her, and I can’t hear a thing from her. I thought we were fine, better than fine.”

“They were mind sexting out on the range,” Emmett told them.

“I know, but when I got home, it’s like I’m being punished for something. And she refuses to talk to me.”

“She’s been acting a little weird at work too,” Austin admitted.

“Hold up. Mind sexting? We’re just going to forget we heard that part?” Thomas asked.

I rolled my eyes.

James laughed. “What exactly is mind sexting?”

“He sort of gets this faraway look on his face sometimes when he’s talking to her. Busted him while we were out. It was going on for a while, and there was evidence of super dirty stuff going on.”

“Shut up. You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you were seconds away from jacking off when I stopped you.”

“He was masturbating and you stopped him?” Clay challenged.

“Kicked his ass for it, too.”

“You wish,” Emmett teased.

“Dude, there are lines that need to be respected,” Austin told Emmett before turning towards me. “But gross. You asshole. That’s my cousin.”

“That’s my mate,” I reminded him.

“Then man up and take care of your shit.”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried? She’s shutting me out.”

“You’re bonded with her. Dig through her head and find out why.”

“I’ve tried. I don’t know how she’s doing it, but I can’t get through. Or I just don’t know what the hell I’m doing. This is all new to me. How do I know how to go fishing through her brain?”

“Well, have you talked to her about it?” Thomas asked.

I growled and his Alpha powers slammed into me once more.

“She is hiding from me. How much clearer can I be? She is purposefully avoiding me. If I push, she’ll only get worse.”

“Well at least try,” Austin blurted out.

I scowled.

“I can put Lily on it, if you want,” Thomas offered.

“Not yet. She’s really skittish right now. Maybe if she calms down in the next day or two.”

“Alright. Well, keep me posted, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Clay and Emmett nodded in silent support.

“Is there anything we can do at all?” James asked.

I shrugged. “Not really. I mean the last time I got drunk and went home things went very, very well, but that’s a slippery slope. I don’t want to go there.”

“Yeah, you’re only a fun drunk up to a point,” James teased. “After that you turn into a whiny little bitch. No one wants to deal with that.”

I jumped up and shoved him back into the hay. The others started laughing.

I should have seen it coming, but they actually blindsided me as the remaining four jumped me all at once. I went flying, landing right next to James. The string on the bale snapped and hay flew everywhere. We were all covered in it and laughing.

“What in the blazes is going on in here?” Dalton Draper’s voice boomed, startling us all.

Thomas grinned and rose. “Sorry Dalton. We’ll clean this up.”

“Damn right the whole lot of you will. You six have been a pain in my ass since you were in diapers. Now fix this mess.”

He turned on his heels and stomped off.

We all looked up to Thomas. The second his face broke into a smile we started hooting with laughter once more.

It had felt really good to goof off and laugh with the guys. I knew they always had my back through the good times and the bad. But I also knew I had to take care of things myself. So each night I came home and I sat and waited for Kate. Since I was still working harder than necessary each day, I would doze off in the chair.

For two more nights I fell asleep waiting for her as she tiptoed quietly into the house, or so I assumed. There were

signs she came home at least. And then when I awoke in the morning, she would be gone.

I hated to admit it, but I'd even started making peace with Chewy, seeing as he was the only one there to listen to me vent each night.

But this time I awoke determined to fix my relationship with my mate and get to the bottom of just why she was shutting me out again. So, when I got up and found her already gone, instead of sitting out sulking about it or just going to work and taking my frustrations out in the form of manual labor, I went to Kate's Diner ... and she wasn't there.

"What do you mean she's not here, Peyton? She already left for work."

"I don't know what to tell you, Wyatt. She isn't here. She called in this morning and just said she had some errands to run."

"Kate rarely runs errands herself. But you know that. So where the hell is my mate?"

"I'm really sorry. I don't know. I don't question my boss. Yes, it seemed a bit abnormal, but she hasn't been herself lately, Wyatt. You already know that, or you wouldn't be here looking for her."

"She's been off with you too?"

"Yes. And snapping at everyone for days. What happened?"

"I don't know, Pey. I honest to God don't have a clue. We were going through a rough patch, but then our telepathy bond came in and we were good, like really, really good, or so I thought. She seemed so excited about me returning from the range, but when I got back, it was clear something was very wrong."

"Can't you just like scan her mind and figure it out?"

"It doesn't work that way. Besides, I'm beginning to think I just imagined it all. I can't reach her at all. It's like

she's shutting me out, and I don't even know how she's doing it. I've tried to connect, but there's nothing there. It's scaring me, Peyton. What is wrong with my mate?"

"I don't know. I've tried talking to her, but I feel like she's avoiding me now because of it."

"Where the hell is my mate?" I yelled, kicking the metal cabinet in the kitchen. The clatter startled the others.

"Sorry," I muttered.

Without another word, I turned and stomped out of restaurant, letting the door slam behind me. And then I got into my car and drove. I didn't have any destination in mind. I just drove, and then I drove some more.

At some point I rode past the clinic, and that's when I saw it ... Kate's car. Why was she at the clinic? Was something seriously wrong with her? She never got sick. Was she injured? Suddenly all my frustrations instantly morphed into fear.

My wolf roared in my head as I came to screeching halt.

Kate

Chapter 11

I still couldn't shift. I tried throughout the day, every day, but I couldn't do it. I knew the odds of me being pregnant were very low, but I still couldn't get Sam's words out of my head. It had been eating at me all week. I couldn't think of anything else.

I was well aware that Wyatt was angry with me for shutting him out. In truth, I have no clue how I was doing that and feared it might be part of an even bigger problem. I had convinced myself that I was losing connection with my wolf and that was why Wyatt could no longer hear my thoughts.

I was terrified. And I couldn't talk to Wyatt about this or even face him because stupid Sam had planted a single thought in my head ... What if I really am pregnant?

That question was on repeat in my mind. I could not be pregnant. I wasn't even convinced I could get pregnant. Just the idea sent me to the edge of a cliff I was precariously close to falling over. I wasn't strong enough to go through it all again.

As if that wasn't bad enough, it also brought up all these memories I'd kept repressed as much as possible. The overwhelming sadness. The crippling loss. The look of disappointment on Wyatt's face the day I sat him down and told him I would never go through it again.

Why hadn't I just demanded a hysterectomy? Done something to permanently ensure I never had to worry about it again?

Instead, I'd drowned myself in work and buried the emotions of it all deep inside me. And now they were boiling out and making me question everything I'd ever done with my life.

I was going crazy. That had to be it. Just the thought of being pregnant was sending me into a delusional mess. It was just a psychotic break, nothing more.

Why did the idea of that make me feel better than even the thought of maybe being pregnant?

Sam never should have mentioned that as a possibility. Just because I couldn't shift didn't automatically make me pregnant. It was far too soon to even know that. I'd done my research and even at four weeks it would be hard to know for sure, and I would have only been one week pregnant at most. Sometimes it took a few days to a week just to implant. His assumption meant that Wyatt's sperm had swam at warp speed and dove right in. What were the odds of that? Especially after years and years of trying to conceive unsuccessfully.

Besides, he hadn't even considered any other possibilities. And now things were worsening. Wyatt couldn't hear me anymore. I knew this because I could still hear him. He had been stressing about it for days now. He was hurt and angry, and I was too absorbed in my own living nightmare to console him. The truth was, I didn't want to face him until I actually knew what was happening to me. Maybe that made me a chicken, but for the moment, I needed to focus on me first. Wyatt would understand later. I had to believe that.

Doc was due back today and I had gotten up early and gone to the clinic to wait. I hadn't talked to anyone else about what was happening to me. And so I'd lied to Peyton and told her I was running errands this morning. Well, it wasn't really a lie, they were just personal errands, and she didn't need to know that. I wasn't required to tell my employees everything about my personal life. Sure, she was more than an employee. And yeah, normally I would have confided in her. But not this time. This was something I had to face all by myself.

That made me feel lonely as I sat in my car staring at the clinic entrance, unable to force myself to get out and walk inside.

I suddenly had this overwhelming feeling that Wyatt was with me, and everything was going to be okay. Maybe I should have called him and included him in this. He had a right to know his mate was defective in some way. But when I wasn't ready to face it myself, it didn't seem fair to drag him into it too.

With a deep breath, I made myself get out of the car and walk inside one minute after the clinic officially opened.

Doc was waiting for me in the lobby.

"I had a feeling you'd be in today."

"He told you? He swore he wouldn't tell anyone."

"You're my patient, Kate. That's a different set of rules than sharing with others. Come on back."

I held my tongue until I got into the examination room and he closed the door behind him.

"No offense, but your new doctor is a quack."

"Actually, he comes highly recommended and we're very lucky to have him."

"He thinks I'm pregnant. I'm having trouble connecting with my wolf and just because I'm a female he goes straight to me being pregnant. It's absurd and impossible."

"Impossible, eh? You and Wyatt aren't having sex?"

"Not unprotected."

"Except that one time?"

I blushed. "He told you about that too?"

"Afraid so. And you're old enough to know that it only takes once, Kate."

“Not for me. You know that. It took us years to get pregnant. I’m not pregnant after one drunken night of sex. Besides, it was far too soon to even know that. He’s just making stuff up and ignoring the bigger problem.”

“And what’s that?”

“I cannot connect with my wolf.”

Doc frowned as he looked over some notes in my chart. “Sam said you could still channel your accelerated wolf hearing and sight.”

“Well, yeah, but is that really a wolf thing or a shifter thing?”

He considered that for a moment. “It is true I’ve seen exceptional hearing and eyesight from shifters before their wolves ever surfaced.”

“See, so that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Have there been any other changes since your last visit?”

“Yes. Wyatt and I had bonded telepathically. Now I can still hear him sometimes, but he can’t seem to hear me at all.”

“I see. And do you want him to hear you?”

“What? Why would you even ask that?”

“Because if Sam is right and you are pregnant, then your wolf is in protection mode and will respond to your innermost deepest problems and sometimes act like a shield around you.”

“And you think she thinks I want to lock out my mate?”

“Yes.”

“Doc.”

“Kate, have you told Wyatt about the baby?”

“No! Because there is no baby.”

“And you don’t want him to know that there might be a baby, do you?”

“Hell no. Do you have any idea what that would do to him? I know he still hopes it’ll happen someday.”

“And you don’t?”

“No. I don’t ever want to go through that again.”

“I know the miscarriage was hard on you but the majority of women who experience one do go on to have very healthy, successful pregnancies.”

“Well, I’m not willing to risk that. Motherhood is not for me anyway. I’m far too busy with the diner. And stop talking about it. I am not pregnant.”

“Perhaps. A simple blood test will let us know for sure.”

“It’s too soon for that. It would only be two weeks from conception.”

“That is very early for detection ... in a human. You are not entirely human, Kate.”

“Biologically it works the same.”

“Yes, and no. Shifters will emit a specific enzyme almost immediately. It’s virtually undetectable, unless you know exactly what you’re looking for.”

“An enzyme?”

“Yes. It comes from your wolf.”

“Another form of protection?”

“Exactly. It’s thought that this enzyme is there as sort of a backup protection. As long as it’s there, you cannot shift. Once the baby is born, the enzyme disappears almost immediately and shifting abilities are restored.”

“Sounds like a bunch of hocus pocus to me.”

“Call it what you want, it’s very real. And to date has only ever been found in pregnant women. So if you have the

enzyme ...”

“I’m pregnant?”

“Exactly.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll apologize profusely, and we’ll start looking for other causes.”

“Okay then.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “You’re really that convinced you aren’t pregnant?”

“I am one hundred percent positive I’m not pregnant, so test me.”

He shook his head, but pulled out a needle and swiftly collected a blood sample. Just as he put a drop onto the microscope slide, the door burst opened.

“You can’t go in there!” one of the nurses yelled.

Wyatt’s large and sudden presence shook me to my core. His hair was disheveled and there were dark circles under his eyes. There was also something just a little wild in his eyes as he frantically looked around the room.

“Wyatt,” Doc calmly said with a nod.

My sharpened avoidance skills of late meant that I hadn’t seen my mate in days. As always, just the sight of him sent desire straight to my core hitting me hard.

Doc sniffed the air, then smirked, and got back to checking my blood sample. He seemed unfazed and maybe even happy to see Wyatt there. I, however, was not.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“Seriously?” He looked from Doc back to me. “You ghost me for days, and then are surprised when I show up to find out what the hell is going on with you?”

I cringed. He was even madder than I suspected.

“I’m just dealing with some stuff. It’s personal.”

“Personal? Personal! Kate, I’m your mate. We aren’t supposed to have any secrets from each other.”

Doc shot me a knowing look as he rose from his microscope.

“Is he staying or going?”

“Going,” I replied.

“Staying,” he stubbornly said at the same time.

My eyes begged for him to leave, but he wouldn’t listen.

“Kate, whatever this is about, I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. We’ll get through this together. You don’t have to shut me out.”

My shoulders sagged, feeling suddenly defeated, and I nodded to Doc that it was okay to go ahead and say it. I knew there was no way I was pregnant.

“You’re pregnant. Very early on, but still very pregnant.”

Wyatt

Chapter 12

My jaw nearly hit the floor as I stood there in shock.

Pregnant?

Kate was pregnant?

“How certain are you?” she asked through clenched teeth like she was angry and didn’t believe it.

“A hundred percent. The enzyme I told you about is actually much stronger than it should be for only two weeks. Are you certain of the dates?”

Two weeks? I counted back in my head trying to remember what the hell we’d done two weeks ago. It hit me like a ton of bricks. Drunken poker night with the boys. I’d come home and made love to Kate that night. Had I used a condom? I always used a condom. I knew she didn’t want children and I tried to respect that. Had I really been that careless?

“There’s no question about the dates, Doc.”

“Okay then.”

“What aren’t you saying?” she asked him. “What does it mean that the enzyme is stronger than expected?”

“We can discuss that later.”

“We can discuss it now.”

“Kate, look at your mate? He’s white a sheet and about to faint.”

He wasn’t wrong. The room really was starting to spin.

“He’s fine. What does it mean?”

Doc sighed. “We won’t know for several weeks or even months still, but from my experience, it’s a strong indicator of multiples.”

“Twins? You think I’m having twins?”

“Not twins,” he said with a shrug and her eyes nearly bugged out of her head.

“More than twins?”

“More?” I asked with a gulp.

“Like I said, we can’t be sure yet, so there’s no reason to freak out about it all.”

Pregnant?

I was going to be a father?

There could be more than one baby?

This time my body heated and broke out into a cold sweat at the same time.

“How many? In your professional opinion, Doc.”

“Kate, I can’t be certain ...”

“How many?”

“At least three or four,” he blurted out.

“Three or four?” I muttered to myself as the room spun out of control and everything around me turned black.

“Wake up, Wyatt.”

“Kate?” I groaned. “I just had the oddest dream.”

The smell of ammonia hit my nose suddenly and my eyes flew open. I looked up into the faces of Kate and Doc.

“Shit.”

“Yeah, well you insisted on being here.”

Doc flashed a pin light into my eyes as I squinted and pulled away from him. But when I moved to get up, he stopped me.

“You went down pretty hard. I think you need to stay put and let me check you over.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Just let him check on you, Wyatt,” Kate said, sounding a little irritated.

I shook him off again and stood up this time.

“We’re not here about me.”

My head hurt like a sonofabitch. But I tried my best to ignore it. My wolf could fix it later.

“What’s this all about, Kate?”

She glared at me with pursed lips and hands on her hips.

“You didn’t use a condom.”

I cringed at the venom of her words. She was pissed.

“You’re pissed about this? At me? How long have you known you might be pregnant?”

“She came in a week ago and talked with my colleague. Understandably, she had questions. It is very early to detect a baby, but her wolf was quite telling.”

“What is he talking about Kate?”

“I can’t shift, okay? I came in because I can’t shift.”

“Are you certain it’s not just something wrong with her wolf? I mean our bond was sealing. I could clearly hear her thoughts and the last few days it’s been complete silence. It’s a little disturbing even. So maybe there’s something actually wrong with her.”

Doc shook his head. "I'm as sure as I am that you're standing here next to me. Kate is pregnant."

Waves of guilt began rolling off my mate and slammed into me.

My jaw clenched and I had to force myself to calm down.

"So basically you've been purposefully keeping me in the dark, shutting me out, and avoiding me? Kate, I thought we were past this bullshit."

"Stop looking at me like that. I didn't want you to know it was even a possibility that I could be pregnant. I knew you'd get your hopes up and be all excited. You know how I feel about this. I will not go through it again."

"What are you talking about? You're already pregnant."

"Not for long. Doc, I'd like you to schedule an abortion immediately."

"What?" I yelled.

"Excuse me. I'm going to let the two of you talk."

Doc left us alone in the room as I stared at my mate in utter disbelief.

"What is this all about, Kate?"

She shook her head. "I told you, I cannot go through this again, Wyatt. Did you think I was joking about that?"

"I get that you're scared. I'm scared too. But Kate, you're pregnant. We were as careful as possible, but it still happened. You're pregnant, baby. My baby's having a baby, or babies if Doc is right."

Her arms crossed over her chest as I stepped up to embrace her. I could feel her defenses go up and it physically hurt me to know she didn't want my kid. I had always thought it was just that she was afraid of losing another baby, but that

wasn't it at all because she was willing to abort this pregnancy. Why? It didn't make any sense.

I looked up into her eyes and they were rimmed red from unshed tears.

"It's not like that," she insisted. "Right now, it's just a fetus. It isn't real. We don't have to worry about losing it."

"No, because you want to kill it."

She gasped and her eyes widened in shock at my harsh words.

Before I said anything else I may regret later, I turned and walked away. I couldn't sit there and hold her hand if she was going to abort our child without a damn good reason.

My chest felt tight and my vision was blurred from a mix of tears and anger. The second I stepped outside the clinic, I shifted, leaving my clothes in a shredded mess on the ground. Stopping to look back once, my wolf howled a hauntingly sad sound of mourning begging to Kate not to do it.

I took control and got him running as quickly away from there as possible. If this was truly what she was going to do then I wish I'd just stayed home and never known about it.

Unable to deal with all the emotions and memories flooding me, I gave in to my wolf and let him take control as we ran towards the river, splashed our way across it, and took off into the fields of the open range.

I allowed my wolf to be in control as long as he didn't try to turn back. I wasn't ready to deal with any of it.

Day passed into night and night into morning. I ran until my wolf was too exhausted to continue, and then we curled up and slept until he was ready to run some more.

I wasn't even sure how long I was out there or how many days had gone by. I was numb and unable to face my reality. Kate had put me through hell this last week, and now I knew why. She was keeping this secret from me, and I knew in

my heart that if I hadn't followed her, she likely would never have told me about the pregnancy.

At some point my anger began to subside and transitioned to worrying about my mate. I was still mad at her and would be for a long time, but I was also wracked with guilt for running out on her the way I had. She was still my mate, for better or worse. This was certainly worse. I couldn't imagine anything worse than this.

Questions began welling up within me.

She'd desperately wanted kids at one point, so why would she just throw away this opportunity?

Yes, the miscarriage had been hard on her. It was hard on me too, so how could she be so callous with the little life of our baby now?

Babies, I reminded myself. Doc seemed pretty convinced there was more than one.

My chest hurt just thinking about it all. And now they were gone. I didn't know how to forgive her for this.

What if something went wrong?

Was Kate okay?

I tried reaching out through our bond, but I could feel her blocking me. She was still alive. Of that much I was certain.

Please come home, I heard her small voice inside my head and was suddenly stricken with grief and pain.

My wolf sat back and lifted his head towards the sky. This time the howl was so painful it pierced me right through the heart.

Kate had reached out, and despite it all, I knew I needed to support her.

I took control back and ran home. The closer I got, the stronger I could feel Kate. Fear and turmoil were rolling off her in waves.

The second I reached the porch, I shifted and let myself in.

When I walked into the house, Kate was in a fetal position on the couch looking completely miserable.

I shoved aside my personal feelings and went to soothe my mate. She relaxed at my touch even if she didn't move towards the comfort of my open arms.

“Are you okay?”

“No. This is not me okay. You've been gone for days. Where were you? Everyone's worried about you.”

“Were you worried?”

“What? Of course I was.”

“Kate, I don't know if I can forgive you for this.”

She sighed. “I'm the pregnant one. You got me pregnant, Wyatt. You were careless, and I trusted you.”

“You're pregnant?”

“Don't tell me you forgot about that part. I mean, you did hit your head pretty hard when you passed out.”

“Don't play games with me, Kate. You're still pregnant?”

She groaned. “Yes. Doc refused my abortion request without counseling and said I'd have to go into town to get that and that means waiting until I'm viable by human standards which is a minimum of four more weeks.”

“You're still pregnant?”

“Would you stop saying that. Yes, I'm still pregnant.”

“Oh thank God.”

I fought back tears of relief. I didn't want her to know how badly I needed to hear those words. Though the look in her eyes told me she was probably listening to my thoughts. I just wish I knew how to shut her out the way she was shutting me out.

“I promised Doc we’d talk about this, Wyatt, but I haven’t changed my mind about any of it.”

I considered that for a moment and suddenly knew what I needed to do.

“Fine, but I have a month to change your mind. No more running off from either of us. No more hiding. You’ll be home at a reasonable hour each night or I will come and find you. I’m not letting you slip away from me again. No matter what happens, we face it together. Agreed.”

“I can try.”

She was hurt. I could tell. I didn’t need to read her mind to know she was mad at me for putting her in this situation. I could deal with that. Someway, somehow, we would get through this, and with any luck we’ll have a baby or two or more at the end of it all.

Kate

Chapter 13

Wyatt was getting attached. It didn't seem to matter what I said or did, he was coming to terms with the idea of being a father. And while he was trying not to show it, I knew he was getting excited about it.

Another two weeks had passed, and I was still struggling with my new reality. It just didn't seem real at all, so it was easy for me to push it out of my mind and not think about it.

I hadn't told anyone aside from Doc, Sam, and Wyatt, and I wanted to keep it that way. No one could possibly understand what I was going through.

I'd lost my baby at eight weeks, and they wanted me to wait until six weeks to even start the abortion process. My fear was that by then it would be too late. I could not allow myself to become emotionally attached this time.

We'd tried for so long, and then we were so excited when it finally happened. It had been a devastating loss that I wasn't sure I'd ever fully recovered from. And now I was expected to just do it all over again? I wasn't strong enough for that.

How could Wyatt have done this to me? He knew how I felt. I was so angry with him, and I didn't know how to let it go.

I'd heard his thoughts loud and clear, and he didn't understand the difference between facing a miscarriage and getting an abortion. But there was a big difference to me. I had

no control over a miscarriage, but I could control an abortion. If the end result was going to be the same either way, I'd rather have the control than face the terrifying reality of being unable to do anything to stop it from happening anyway.

I had long since convinced myself that I could not have a baby. God simply didn't want me to. And I had been mad at him about it for a long time. I was well aware of the science behind it all, and I could even recognize that my rational thinking may be skewed by life experience, but it was still how I felt.

So I kept my head down. I worked hard during the day and came home at a normal time each night. Wyatt had said he'd track me down if I didn't, and I believed him, especially when he started showing up every evening when he got off work to just sit there and watch me or pitch in from time to time as needed.

It very much felt like the old days when we first opened the restaurant. And even for a long time after those first days it was normal to find him here. Lately, as I'd started pulling away from him, he'd just let me go. He hadn't even tried to chase me down—granted I hadn't made it easy on him and he had every right to be mad—but still, he hadn't even tried.

“Are you okay?” Wyatt asked as I walked by the booth he was occupying.

“I'm fine.”

“Well, you don't feel fine. Just let down the barrier and let me in.”

“I can't.”

“Why the hell not?”

I sighed. “Because I have no idea why I can still hear your thoughts but you can't seem to hear mine.”

Oh no. Something really is wrong between us. But she can hear me? It's not both ways? What the hell is wrong with

me then?

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you,” I confessed before leaving him to attend to my actual paying customers.

I knew he had been trying desperately to guard his thoughts from me. But it wasn’t working. He would never forgive me if I actually went through with the abortion, but I would never forgive myself if I didn’t and something went wrong again.

“Hey, you look exhausted. Why don’t you head home and take that sexy mate of yours with you?” Angel said. “Austin and I can handle closing up.”

Since Angel was starting to hang around anytime Austin was on the clock anyway, I hired her to help out. She was picking up more and more shifts. Surprisingly, she’d become a huge help around here, and I was thrilled to have her onboard.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’s no problem. We’re closing anyway, and you just look like you could use a quiet evening with your mate.”

I didn’t know if that was such a great idea, but I smiled and nodded.

“Thanks. I think I’ll take you up on that.”

Before I could change my mind, I hung up my apron and left.

“Well, come on,” I said to Wyatt.

He looked up in confusion from a book he was reading to bide his time.

“Where are we going?”

“Out.”

*Oh no. It's too soon. I have at least two more weeks.
I'm not ready for this.*

“Home, Wyatt. We’re going home. Austin and Angel are closing tonight,” I explained, feeling guilty.

His jaw dropped in surprise.

“Oh. Okay.”

He grabbed his jacket and rushed me out the door before I could change my mind.

After driving home, it was weird to realize we had the entire evening alone. With so much tension brewing between us I was bracing for things to be a little bit awkward.

Chewy barked from his crate to be let out the second he heard us pull up.

I hated to admit it, but I didn’t want to deal with the dog tonight. As if he could read my mind again, Wyatt took care of Chewy, letting him out and setting out fresh water and food for him.

I plopped down on the couch and kicked my shoes off. What I needed was a good foot massage and made a mental note to book a massage at the spa in the next town over soon. That sounded like heaven.

Again, like he was back in my head, Wyatt sat down at the opposite end of the couch and pulled my feet into his lap and started to rub them.

I moaned in pleasure. I could get used to this.

“Feel up to a movie?” he asked.

I was up for something, but a movie wasn’t really it. I had been surprised by how easily turned on I seemed to be lately. Was that a normal pregnancy symptom? I should have put it on my list of things to investigate, but when Wyatt’s hands moved up to my calf, my mind started to blank out.

“Kate?”

“Yeah?” I asked, forgetting he’d already asked me something. Hell if I could remember what.

He chuckled. “A movie. Do you feel like watching a movie tonight?”

“Movie? Yeah, sure.”

He scrolled through and settled on *Pretty Woman*. I grinned and my heart fluttered. Wyatt hated this movie, but he knew it was one of my all-time favorites.

“What are you up to?”

“Huh?” he asked, innocently.

“You hate this movie. So, what are you up to?”

“You’ve had a rough few weeks, and I just want you to relax and enjoy tonight.”

He was humming in his head so I couldn’t make out what he was actually thinking. I wondered if he knew how much that drove me crazy, or that it successfully worked to keep me out of his mind.

“Just sit back and enjoy your movie, babe.”

His words might have been all innocent, but his hands were very wicked, and my overheated body was extremely responsive.

When he reached my thighs, my breath hitched. I wanted more. So much more.

“Hmm. Perhaps you’d be more comfortable out of these jeans.”

Before I could respond, he had already found the button before slowly unzipping them.

I was aware I was staring down at him, feeling seduced whether that was his intention or not.

“Kate, watch your movie,” he instructed.

I tried. I really, really tried, but the way he took his sweet time sliding my jeans down and off me seemed to

heighten every nerve ending within my body.

After removing my jeans and discarding them onto the floor, his hard calloused hands moved ever so slowly back up my legs to dig into the flesh of my soft thighs. It shot desire straight to my core. But he didn't linger there for long before reaching up to grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head before joining my jeans on the floor.

I laid back against the arm of the couch pretending to watch my movie, but his occasional soft touches were sending shivers of awareness down my spine.

“Touch me,” I whispered.

“Mmm. Here?” he asked as his fingers gently ran down the column of my neck.

“No.”

“Perhaps here?” he asked, letting them brush so lightly against my nipples still covered by my satin bra. They immediately pebbled.

My breasts had been tender the last few days, causing me to be far more aware of his caresses than usual.

“So responsive tonight,” he crooned as his lips found my neck and trailed a similar path as his fingers had just moments before.

And when his mouth found my breasts and sucked my nipple into his mouth, I nearly screamed out in a mix of pleasure and pain. They were swollen and tender, but his mouth on me felt so good.

My hands fisted into his hair as I held him there to feast on my breasts.

Sure, Wyatt and I had done this thousands of times over the years, but it felt like my first time, like my body didn't know what was happening. And as he licked and nibbled, a familiar pressure began to build within me.

I gasped at the realization and suddenly needed something just a little bit more. I pulled him close to me and started to rub against him. He bit down and it sent a shockwave through my apex as I cried out in shock.

“Oh my God! Oh my God, Wyatt!”

My body shuddered as I held onto him for dear life and then collapsed back against the couch.

He didn't even wait for me to recover before his hands were back on my thighs teasing me.

His lips moved up to find mine, and I was instantly lost in my mate. He didn't even remove my panties as he pushed them to the side and entered me in one quick thrust, giving no time for my body to adjust to his intrusion.

I gasped and held on to his muscled arms. They felt bigger and stronger than I remembered them.

Suddenly I froze. “Wyatt! You didn't use a condom.”

He pulled back and frowned. “I can't get you anymore pregnant than you already are, Kate.”

My eyes widened as the realization hit me hard. I was pregnant. He thought the words often, but I hadn't heard him actually say it since that first day he'd barged into the clinic and demanded to know what was going on.

I nodded but didn't think I could really get back into the moment now. How very wrong I was. This time I was acutely aware he was bare within me as he started to move. Maybe it had always been like this pre-miscarriage or maybe it was the fact that my entire body seemed overly sensitive lately, but he quickly drew me back in as we moved together as one.

When my body started to tighten, feeling the telltale signs of the edge of an orgasm, Wyatt's passion grew. I could hear his thoughts and desires in my head which was like the strongest aphrodisiac on the planet. It made my head swim as

he turned all alpha on me consuming every inch of my body for our mutual pleasure.

“Mine,” he growled, and I couldn’t tell if he was saying it or thinking it.

I cried out when my release hit me, making my toes curl. But Wyatt didn’t stop as he pounded into me seeking his own release.

“Mine! Mine! Mine!” he started to chant with each thrust, triggering a secondary orgasm in me that had my eyes rolling back into my head and my body going limp as he came hard shaking in my arms before collapsing his weight on top of me.

We both laid there quietly, each lost in our own thoughts.

Sex had always been great with Wyatt, but there was something even better now. If this was what pregnancy sex felt like, I almost considered staying pregnant as long as I could just to enjoy it ... almost.

Wyatt

Chapter 14

Kate was still mentally shutting me out and it was driving me nuts. Because of that I had this primal need to claim her every chance I got. And she didn't seem to have any protest to it.

The last two weeks we'd been closer than we had in a long time, maybe ever. I supposed I had Austin to thank for it since it all began that night he and Angel volunteered to close and I took her home and made love to her right there on the couch in the living room.

Since then, I couldn't seem to get enough of her, and she was very receptive to it. I'd cut my work hours back, holding myself to a strict seven-to-two schedule. I had this obsessive need to be near Kate and feared I may drive her nuts before this pregnancy was over.

We still hadn't told anyone, and that made it hard for me to spend too much time around any of the Six Pack. Working with Emmett and not unloading it all on him was especially hard.

Kate hadn't mentioned anything about an abortion in days, and while I was trying not to get my hopes up, I couldn't help it. I was thrilled about the possibility of being a father at last. I'd always wanted a large family so hearing she might even have multiples was more exciting than scary for me.

Any time I tried to discuss it with her she shut me out, and since I was still blocked from her thoughts, I had no way of knowing what was really going on in that head of hers.

I thought I knew everything there was to know about my mate, but I'd been wrong, very wrong. Because the Kate I knew would never take a pregnancy for granted, not after all we'd been through trying to have a baby. It just didn't make sense to me. And a part of me was terrified she'd stubbornly go through with it.

What then?

How would we move past something like that? How could I ever look at her again without resentment? That was an awful thought to have about my mate, but it was an honest one.

"Hey man, you okay?" Emmett asked.

No. I was definitely not okay.

"Yep," I lied.

"You're a terrible liar. Just say, 'butt out. I don't want to talk about it,' but don't lie to my face when I can clearly see you are not okay."

I had no response to that, so I wandered away from him while trying to make it seem casual and not like a calculated move to avoid him.

I turned down every ride I'd been assigned for the last month. But maybe that was just what I needed. Tomorrow Kate would be six weeks pregnant. It didn't seem like much. Most pregnant women were just finding out they had conceived at this stage, but thanks to her overprotective inner wolf, we'd known for a month already. I couldn't just un-know something like that.

Walking into the stables I went to Rusty's stall. He was old and long since retired now, but he was still my biggest confidante. I didn't have to say the words aloud for him to understand.

"Hey old man," I said as I stroked his head. "How the hell am I supposed to just standby and do nothing?"

He whinnied and shook his head.

“I agree, but I can’t force her to do things the way I want. It’s her body, her decision.”

He shook his head and snorted.

“I know. Total bullshit.”

He stomped his foot on the ground.

“Of course I’ve tried to talk to her about it. She doesn’t want to hear it. Settle down. I know you’re only trying to help.”

I kissed his nose and then pulled out an apple to give him.

“Thanks for always being there for me, boy. I wish I could take you out for a ride too, but Dalton’s made it painfully clear that you are retired and just living out your best life. I know, I know. Riding for fun would be your best life, but for now you’re just going to have to settle for wandering through the corrals and getting fat off all the treats I bring you.”

He laid his head on my shoulder, and I wrapped my arms around his thick neck.

“Love you too, Rusty.”

As I was leaving, Mr. Draper pulled me aside.

“I have some bad news, son. Rusty’s not doing well. Ridge believes it’s congenital heart failure. The humane thing to do is put him down.”

“No,” I said, turning to walk away.

There was no way I could handle losing my favorite horse and all my future hopes and dreams all in one week. I wasn’t strong enough for that.

“Wyatt!” he yelled. “I need you to talk to him. Rusty’s not been well for a while now.”

“I just saw him. He’s fine.”

“He’s not fine,” Ridge said, walking over to me. “I know that’s not what you want to hear, but he’s struggling, Wyatt. He collapsed twice yesterday. He’s hurting, and I know you don’t want him to suffer.”

“You’re not even a real vet. What the hell do you know?”

Ridge didn’t look affected by my harsh words at all.

“I know enough,” he said softly.

In truth he was studying to be a vet tech at the local community college, and we all knew it. I was proud of him for stepping up to fill a need at the ranch, but I didn’t like what he was saying, so I lashed back.

“How long does he have?”

“If it wasn’t for you, I would have put him down yesterday,” he admitted. “Dalton insisted you have time to say goodbye.”

“I’m not ready to say goodbye,” I confessed. “Rusty and I have been riding together since we were kids. He’s always been there for me.” *And I desperately needed him now more than ever*, I thought, but didn’t say aloud.

“I’ll keep an eye on him for another twenty-four hours but if things don’t change, the best thing you can do is let me end his suffering.”

My jaw locked, but I nodded.

Ridge wasn’t a bad guy, but with everything going on he was now the worst. I didn’t want to deal with this when I was already close to my breaking point.

I left and drove straight to the diner. I couldn’t handle this a second longer. I had to know what Kate was thinking and if she was seriously going to go through with the abortion.

When I walked in, the first thing I heard was Peyton talking to Kate.

“I can’t believe you’re actually taking a few days off. I’m so happy for you. You deserve a break. And don’t worry about a thing, Austin and I can handle everything.”

“But if there’s any problems, you’ll call me right away, right?”

“Of course. Just relax. Nothing is going to happen.”

Kate was taking time off. This was really going to happen. I glared at her and then turned and stomped out unable to face it all, unable to face her.

There had been moments of my life when I’d been in a dark place. Just before meeting Kate, I’d thought it was the end of the world when my high school girlfriend went off to college and found her true mate then dumped me in a letter. At the time that had been horrible, but it was nothing compared to this day.

I didn’t wait around. I couldn’t face her. So I drove back to the stables instead.

“Hey boy,” I said, grabbing a brush and stroking Rusty’s coat. “I hear you’re not doing so well. Why didn’t you say something?”

Sad, tired eyes stared back at me, and I knew Ridge was right. I didn’t want to believe it, but I could see it. His face had changed. He was thinner now, whiter around his features. How had I missed that? To me he was still the vibrant young colt I remembered from my youth.

“Not this week, buddy. Please,” I begged. “Not this week. I need you right now.”

He whinnied like he understood what I was saying. And I knew without a doubt he would try to hang on for me.

I stayed with him late into the night. Kate had called several times, but I couldn’t bring myself to answer it.

Around nine, Rusty stumbled and struggled to get back up. I laid down with him and tried to encourage him to keep going, but I knew I was just being selfish. A little after ten

when he hadn't improved any and his breathing was starting to be labored, I called Ridge in.

He came right over and didn't say a word as he looked at the two of us on the ground.

"It's time," I told him. "Don't let him suffer anymore."

He nodded and knelt down to talk to the horse in a soothing voice. Rusty started to calm down. He trusted Ridge as much as he trusted me. I didn't know when or how it had happened, but I was certain of it.

Technically, with exception to the Alpha's horse, all the animals were community property. We all had our favorites, but they weren't our horses, except Rusty. Everyone knew he was mine. Always had been and always would be.

Ridge checked him over and nodded sadly. I focused on Rusty as he got everything prepared.

"It's going to be okay. You won't feel any more pain. I'm going to miss you so much."

I threw my arms around his neck, and I cried. I didn't care that Ridge was watching me. And Rusty knew it was about more than just him. I was mourning the loss of my horse, my best friend, my confidante, but also my children, the dream of being a father, and so much more. It was simply too much.

"Are you ready?" Ridge asked.

I nodded.

"Bye boy. Sleep well," I said as Ridge injected something into him.

Rusty's big body relaxed, and he laid his head in my lap as his eyes closed. It looked as though he peacefully drifted off to sleep.

A few minutes later Ridge checked on him again and nodded sadly.

"He's gone."

“I know.”

“I’m so sorry, Wyatt.”

“I know. Thanks.”

I stayed for a while longer, but I didn’t want to be there when they took him away. It was just too much. Instead, I went home, completely spent emotionally with no fight left in me.

Kate took one look at me and ran to my side.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.”

“What happened?”

“We had to put Rusty down tonight.”

“Oh, Wyatt, I’m so sorry.”

I nodded.

“I can’t be there to hold your hand when you put our babies down too. I just can’t. I’ll be here and I’ll support you as best as I can, and I’ll take care of you as I swore to do the day we mated. But I can’t be there when it happens. I just can’t.”

I started to cry again and wiped the tears away quickly.

“It’s too much,” I admitted, and I meant it.

My heart was broken, and I was consumed with grief on too many fronts.

Kate

Chapter 15

Wyatt slept on the couch last night and I was struggling to comfort him. I knew how much he loved Rusty, and I was fully aware of how torn he was between supporting me and accepting my decision. I worried he'd never forgive me for this.

I was numb as I got up and drove to the clinic to meet Doc, but when I arrived, Doc wasn't there, Sam was.

"Where's Doc?"

"Out. There was an accident just outside our borders."

"Okay, so that's the human's problem. Why did he go?"

"Because Thomas called him in for it. It's too close to territory lines and he wants him there to monitor things and make sure there's no issues."

"Great."

"Relax, Kate. I know why you're here."

"You do?"

"Yeah, he warned me ahead of time. Today's your six-week mark."

"Yup."

"And you're still set on an abortion?"

"Yup."

But was I? I should have talked through everything with Wyatt—really talked to him. I should have made him understand just how scared I was that something would go wrong. Maybe I wasn't handling it well, but I hated feeling out of control. It was why I rarely ever drank and only when I knew for certain he was sober to watch over me.

I wouldn't have gotten this far and done so well in business if I wasn't such a control freak.

“He asked me to run a check, you know, just to be absolutely sure.”

I nodded.

“Are you experiencing any symptoms?”

I shrugged. “I'm tired a lot. My boobs are swollen and tender. Oh, and I'm constantly nauseous.”

He smiled. “I'm not surprised to hear it if Doc's suspicions are right.” He handed me a container with a lid. “Go pee in this and leave it on the shelf in the bathroom.”

I stared down at it and slowly nodded.

Despite everything they were saying to me, it still wasn't real to me. I could go through with it as long as it wasn't real. I didn't want to pee on a stick or in a cup. I didn't want to see that definitive positive.

I took a deep breath and made myself move forward to lock myself in the bathroom and pee in the damn cup.

It all happened quickly, but as Sam gave me a sad smile and confirmed I was most definitely pregnant, the shell I'd placed around my heart cracked just a little.

“Okay, take off your pants and lie down on the table.”

“What? Why?”

“Relax, we're just going to take a look inside there and see what we're dealing with. Since it's still so early, it requires a vaginal ultrasound.”

“Is that normal? I don’t want to see them.”

“The ‘them’ is the concerning part. We have to know what exactly an abortion would entail to ensure we get them all. Have you ever had an ultrasound like this before?”

I nodded. “Once.”

I sighed and did as instructed. But when he slid the wand inside of me, I closed my eyes and turned my head. I’d been here before and I didn’t want to see a still little lifeless blob within me ever again.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. Just get it over with.”

“I’ll be as quick as possible.”

Sam was kind. I didn’t want to like him, but I did. Something about him was comforting through all of this. I just had to remind myself that it would all be over quickly.

He laughed and my eyes shot open to stare up at him.

“So cool,” he whispered to himself.

“What?”

“There are four of them, Kate. Four intact sacs. Four wiggling little alien like blobs. It never gets old seeing it.”

I started breathing hard and fast as the room started spinning out of control.

“They’re alive?”

“Huh? Of course they’re alive.”

The edges of my vision started to go dark as I hovered on the brink of passing out.

Tears streaked down my cheeks.

“I need Wyatt. Please. Call my mate. I can’t do this alone. They’re really alive?”

He didn’t stop to ask if I was certain, he just grabbed my file, picked up his phone and called Wyatt. I vaguely heard

him talking, but it sounded very far away as I stared at the screen to see all four little dots on the screen moving.

One. Two. Three. Four.

I counted them over and over again. Four babies and they were all alive. For how long? There was no way to know.

Wyatt arrived in record time. I was nearing hysterics, and Sam had removed the wand from me even though I wanted to beg him to leave it there so I could keep watching them.

“Kate!”

Wyatt ran to my side and leaned down to hug me as I cried in his arms.

“It’s going to be okay, baby. We’ll get through this, somehow.”

He was distraught, upset.

I can’t believe she actually did it, he thought sadly.

I was so emotional I couldn’t even explain to him why.

“Show him,” I managed to say as Wyatt handed me a tissue to wipe the snot from my face. I was ugly crying, a complete mess.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded and let my knees fall to the sides so he could resume the ultrasound.

The second my babies were back on the screen, I knew that no matter what happened, no matter how hard it got, I had to protect my babies.

Mine, my wolf growled in my head.

“I’ll always be yours,” he told me. “Always.”

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

Fresh tears sprang to my eyes.

“You heard that?”

“What?”

“I didn’t say it out loud.”

But I was thinking it.

He stared down at me and then smiled.

I hear you, he thought.

I started to laugh, but it came out sounding even more hysterical.

“I wasn’t talking about you,” I blurted out.

He growled, but I grinned.

“Look.”

I looked up at the screen.

“What is it?”

“Baby A,” Sam said, pointing to a dark blob on the screen. “B,” he said pointing to the next. “C and D. While they each have their own sac, it would appear these three just might be identical.” He was pointing to babies A, B, and C. “But Baby D definitely looks separate from the others. A genetic test can tell us for sure, but to me it looks like she’s carrying identical triplets plus a bonus baby.”

“Carrying? You didn’t?”

I shook my head.

“An ultrasound is required before we proceed with the abortion,” Sam explained, sounding like he had a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Mine,” I argued. “Wyatt, I’m terrified. I’ve never been so scared in my entire life but watch what happens when he zooms in on each of them.”

I nodded to Sam who did as asked. In each sac was a tiny little wiggly dot inside.

“They’re alive,” I whispered. “All four of them are alive.”

Wyatt stared at the screen in wonder and with longing.

“What are you saying, Kate?”

“My wolf has been protecting them since day one, but I honestly expected them to be gone already. My first appointment the last time ...” my voice drifted off, haunted by past memories.

He squeezed my hand. “I know.”

“I really didn’t believe this was possible, and I can’t get too attached, not yet, but what if they make it?”

“While you’re discussing this, I should warn you that four pups won’t be easy. You’re in for an exhausting pregnancy, and premature births are not uncommon, which could lead to possible health issues long term. I’m just stating the facts of your situation here. If you choose not to abort, no one can assure you healthy, happy pups in this situation. But we’ll do our absolute best to keep them baking in there as long as possible. My specialty was actually obstetrics, and I have human friends in the area that could help and have the resources we need to ensure a successful pregnancy here.”

Wyatt looked down at me hopefully.

“But I also have to give you all your options before you make a decision. You could proceed with a full abortion of all four fetuses. You could decide to carry them understanding the potential complications that could arise. You would be a high-risk pregnancy, but that also means we would watch you and the babies as closely as possible. And you do have the option of a selective abortion.”

“What does that mean?” Wyatt asked.

“It means, you could choose to abort one to three of the fetuses and give the remaining a strong chance of survival.”

Wyatt shook his head.

“Wyatt ...”

“No,” he told me. “No. All or nothing. I couldn’t possibly choose. Look at them, Kate. Which one don’t you want? A and C or maybe just D since it’s the oddball of the group. Or get rid of the triplets and just leave the bonus kid in there? How do you expect me to decide something like that?”

“You don’t have to,” I told him.

His jaw clenched, but I reached up and rubbed his cheek.

We’re going to give them the best chance possible.

“No. All or nothing.”

Listen to me. We’re going to give them all the best chance possible.

He stared down at me and his mouth dropped open to speak and then closed.

You mean it?

I nodded.

“No one told me you two were fully bonded,” Sam blurted out.

“Not quite fully, but we’re getting close,” Wyatt confessed.

“So you can’t feel her pain yet?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

“Good why?” I asked.

“Well, there has been documented cases that show the female’s wolf blocks the bond connection during labor and childbirth to protect her male from the pain, but there’s no absolute guarantee of that, especially if your bond is newly sealed around the same time. Does that make sense?”

“So basically, you’re telling me I could go through the whole labor and delivery feeling everything she experiences?”

“I’m afraid that’s right.”

I laughed. “Good. He should feel it all too.”

“Woman, I swear you are positively evil.”

Wyatt

Chapter 16

Sam sent us home with information to go over and discuss. I was just elated that the whole talk of abortion was out in the open and leaning towards not happening. The relief that gave me was insane. The only thing he mentioned that I really did not like was the possible complications that could injure or kill my mate. That wasn't something I could live with.

"Maybe I was too rash. Maybe we should consider selective abortion."

"No."

"You are so stubborn, woman."

"Would you have me any other way?" she asked.

"No, I wouldn't," I confessed. "I'm just worried about you and the babies."

"We're going to be fine. If we can just get past the eight-week mark and everyone's still okay, then we're going to be fine."

I knew that was when we'd lost the last baby. And I was worried about what that milestone would do to her.

"Relax. I'm fine. I am not allowing myself to get emotionally attached, because I know the risks involved, but there is a part of me that's hopeful and willing to try to bring all four of these little lives into this world. Can you live with that?"

"Yes ma'am," I said.

I'd seen the look on her face watching that screen and seeing four babies alive and moving. It would destroy her if even one of them died now, despite her bravado. But I was going to have to worry about that if the time came.

One thing I knew about my mate was that when she made her mind up to do something, there was no changing it. It was why I had silently mourned our children and had no doubt she would go through the abortion.

Now I wasn't sure what to do or expect. There were a lot of 'what ifs' and possible complications involved in a quadruple pregnancy. The more I read, the more I stressed.

"Look at me, Wyatt. I'm fine. I can do this."

"I know you can, babe."

"No, I can really do this. I just have to keep telling myself that the babies will be fine."

I hugged her and kissed the top of her head.

"How many days did you take off work anyway?"

"Five."

"Five days? You took off five days of work?"

She shrugged. "I wasn't sure what to expect and knew I'd need a few days to grieve them despite trying my damndest not to get emotionally connected. It still wouldn't have been easy."

I felt some comfort in hearing her say that. She wasn't a callous person, but she certainly had me concerned for a bit there.

"You've been so focused on the babies, but did you even read about the possible complications to you?"

She shook her head. "It's fine."

"It's not fine."

"Honestly Wyatt, it'll be okay. I'll be okay. I promise."

"That's not something you can just promise, Kate."

“I’ll try my best to survive it. I mean raising four babies at once will be even harder to survive.”

She was trying to be cute, and I appreciated that, but I still couldn’t ignore the risks.

“You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you?”

“Yup. We’re going to proceed with caution.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“I can admit I’m pregnant. But I’m also still waiting for the other shoe to drop. I’ll accept whatever risks may come if it means giving these kids a chance at life. But also know that no matter the outcome, this is it. The baby factory will officially be shut down. No more condom mishaps or drunk nights of passionate sex.”

“Wait, does that mean I never have to wear a condom again? Because I’m all for that,” I teased.

“I suppose you don’t. Because you’ll never knock me up again.”

My brow furrowed. There had been something weighing heavily on my mind for weeks.

“Kate, can I ask you something?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“I know you blame me for all of this, but did you go off the pill and not tell me? Because we’ve always been super careful not to let this happen. That meant doubling up on protection just in case one method failed. Those were your rules. So I’ve been struggling to carry all the blame here. Yes, I was drunk. No, I didn’t wear a condom ...”

“But I was sober and should have known better. Is that what you’re saying?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest in an act of defiance.

“Yes. I mean, no. I honestly hadn’t thought about it like that. I was just curious about what happened to the backup plan.”

She stared at me and then started to cry as she slumped down onto the couch.

“It was all my fault. I want to blame you, but it was all my fault. I knew how drunk you were. You were stumbling around everywhere and slurring your words.”

I frowned. That wasn't how I remembered that night at all. I'd felt powerful, invincible even.

She continued, “I was so caught up in the moment. It had been so long, and it felt so good that I hadn't even stopped to think about a stupid condom until the next day. And as for birth control, I was due for a prescription renewal, but I'd been so busy and we were going through everything that I just put it off. We weren't even having sex so what difference did it make? I never dreamed that one time could lead to all of this.” She sniffed. “It took us years the first time, Wyatt. Years.”

I hugged her. “I know. But maybe it just wasn't the right timing then. Maybe these pups were always part of our bigger plan, and we just didn't know it.”

She shrugged in my arms. “Maybe.”

Seeing her upset, Chewy started to growl at me.

I growled back.

“Chewy, knock it off,” Kate said, and the dog whimpered then jumped up into her lap.

“I thought we agreed he couldn't be on the furniture.”

“He's not,” she insisted. “He's on me.”

I groaned, and I could have sworn that damn dog smirked at me.

“Since you have a few days off, would you like to get away? A babymoon or whatever they call it? I could make that happen.”

“You'd do that for me?”

“Of course I would.”

“Lots of sex before I get huge and ugly.”

“You’ll always be gorgeous to me, but yes to the sex. Twenty-four seven if you’d like.”

She giggled. “I probably should just get back to work.”

“Not gonna happen. I’ve been begging you to take time off for years. Now you have. It’ll been arranged. The diner is covered, and you are all mine.”

“But you still have to work.”

“I have favors to call in. So are you up for this?”

“A babymoon or whatever you call it?”

“Yup. It’s a real thing, look it up. It’s something new parents do before giving birth as a sort of last-minute honeymoon.”

“We’re a long way away from that, Wyatt.”

“Yes, but with the high risk that comes with multiples coupled with the fact that you never take even a day off of work, what better time would there be?”

“Okay,” she surprised me by saying.

“Okay? You mean it?”

“Yeah, okay. Whatever you want. I’ve tortured you enough for a lifetime this past month, and don’t think I didn’t know it. You may not have been hearing my thoughts, but I was hearing yours loud and clear.”

I grimaced. That wasn’t good. I’d thought some pretty harsh things these last few weeks.

But before she could change her mind, I grabbed my phone and dialed Thomas’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hey man. I need to put in a request. A formal request.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

I'm not ready for anyone to know, I heard Kate thinking, but she didn't say it out loud. She just bit her lower lip and stared back at me.

I winked at her.

"I want to take Kate away for a few days."

He laughed. "Good luck convincing her of that."

"Already have. She's already made arrangements for the next five days off."

"Four she corrected. Today is day one of those five."

"You're serious? Dude, that's awesome. Yes, go. Enjoy some much-needed time alone with your mate. Are you leaving territory?"

"Yeah, I think so. We never go anywhere, so I think now would be a good time for that."

"Longhorn," she blurted out. "Let's go home."

I shot her a look of confusion and decided it best to send her a silent message.

You want to spend our babymoon with your parents?

She laughed. "No, but it would be nice to see them, and you've never been there before. I'd like to show you around. Call it a moment of nostalgia. We can venture over to the Gulf Coast for a night or two as well. Have you ever been to the beach?"

"Honey, I've never been outside Collier territory more than a county or two, at most."

"Okay then. Longhorn and the beach."

"You're sure about that?"

"Positive."

"Are you hearing this, Thomas?"

"Already on it. Let me hang up with you and call Sawyer. As soon as I have the approvals necessary, I'll get

back to you.”

“Thanks Thomas. I owe you one.”

He snorted. “You always owe me for something or another.”

Before I could refute, he disconnected our call.

I stared down at the phone with a frown.

“He hung up on me.”

Kate laughed and it sounded carefree, like all the stress and tension we’d faced had just melted away.

“We’re really, honest to God, doing this?”

“We’re doing this.”

Within the hour, Thomas called back.

“Well?” I asked.

“You’re all set. Sawyer has granted his approval.”

“Great. I’ll make some reservations and figure out how to get us there and all that shit.”

“Do you have any clue what you’re doing?”

“Hell no. I’ve never taken a true vacation before, and you know it.”

Kate was already down the hall packing her things.

“Good thing you have me for a friend then. I just emailed you your itinerary.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The Collier plane will be gassed and waiting for you at the airstrip in two hours. They’ll fly you down to Longhorn. I know her parents are there, but I think you need some alone time instead. Sawyer has a fully furnished house just up the road from them that he’s allowing you two to use.”

“We get our own house?”

“Yup. It’s good to have me for a friend. You can make it up to me later. Sawyer has you set for two nights at the house. He also helped me arrange a car rental, which will be waiting for you when you arrive, and a night at the beach. Oceanfront, my friend. Then another day back in Longhorn and my pilot will pick you up and fly you back home. Four nights, five days. Start packing.”

“Thanks man. I really do owe you for this.”

“I’ll collect ... someday. Just promise me you’ll relax and have some fun. And lots and lots of sex. Because let’s face it, you desperately need that more than anything.”

I snorted, and then said goodbye.

“Was that Thomas?” Kate asked.

“Yes. And he’s got all the arrangements made. We have to be at the airstrip in two hours.”

She frowned. “He made all the arrangements?”

“Yup.” I recalled everything he told me, and she seemed pleased by it.

“And what about Chewy? We can’t just leave him here all alone.”

“Shit. I completely forgot about the stupid dog.”

She gasped and picked up the pint-sized devil, holding her hands over his big fluffy ears.

“Daddy didn’t mean to call you stupid. Don’t even listen to that nonsense. Wyatt, this is our baby boy you’re talking about. Be nice. You’ll hurt his feelings.”

I scoffed. “Seriously?”

The stern look on her face told me she wasn’t kidding.

“I’ll call Emmett and see if he’ll watch him.”

“Perfect.”

She put the dog down and practically skipped down the hall to finish packing.

I dialed Emmett's number.

"Yo, where the hell are you?"

"Sorry. Had some personal things to handle today."

"Yesterday and today? What's going on with you?"

"Finally convinced Kate to go away with me. Thomas approved it and made all the arrangements. So I'll be out of territory the next five days."

I knew it was only four, but if I could talk Kate into one more when we got back, I would.

"Well damn. I was hoping you'd agree to an overnight this week."

"Sorry man, but I do have a huge favor to ask you."

"Anything."

"Um, can you keep Chewy while we're gone?"

"Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Not even a little. I completely forgot about the stupid dog."

"I don't want to keep your gremlin," he said honestly. Before I could protest, he started talking again. "But I will because I know how badly you need this trip. And you're going to owe me big time for this one."

I laughed. "I think I'm going to owe everyone big time for this one. Thanks. We'll drop him off with his things on our way out in a bit."

"Don't bother. I'm not even home. Just leave him there. I have a key. I'll pick him up after work, or I'll crash there."

"Fine by me. Just clean up your mess."

Kate

Chapter 17

Even as the plane touched down in Texas, I couldn't believe it. We'd actually done it. Wyatt and I had talked for years about making this trip, but never set aside the time to do it. Now, here we were.

I hadn't called my parents to even warn them we were coming, but Sawyer must have, as my former Alpha and my parents were all standing there waiting for our arrival.

Mom squealed and waved as I rushed to hug her.

"Let me look you over."

"Mom, I'm fine. Hi Dad," I said, giving him a quick hug while Mom attacked Wyatt and fussed over him instead.

"Alpha Sawyer, thanks for letting us come on such short notice," Wyatt said formally.

"You two are always welcome in my territory. Welcome home, Kate."

I hugged him and despite years of being mated, not to mention the fact he was an Alpha, Wyatt growled.

Sawyer raised an eye towards him.

Are you crazy. He's an Alpha and you're in his territory.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I've never been in another wolf's territory before, so my wolf is just a bit on edge."

Despite his words I knew it had more to do with me being pregnant than anything.

Well that and being mauled by an unmated wolf, that was the bigger problem.

I laughed in my head, and he started to relax.

He wasn't mauling me.

I rolled my eyes and went to stand my mate, wrapping an arm around his waist. My touch seemed to calm his wolf and soothed me, too.

Sawyer smiled at us. "It's nice to see how protective you are of her even after all these years."

I bit my tongue and grinned.

Are we telling them? He silently asked me.

I hadn't thought about it. It's still so soon and things could go bad.

We aren't focusing on that right now.

I don't know if I can keep it from them.

So we're telling them?

Yes. Wait, no. Yes.

Well, which is it?

Yes. We should tell them.

I wasn't sure I was ready to tell anyone. Somehow that felt like one more giant step towards making it even more real.

"She's pregnant," Wyatt blurted out. "It's still very early and there are four of them, so we're being cautious, and my wolf is just a little overprotective because of it."

They all stared back at him in shock and then all eyes turned to me.

"Kate?" Mom asked.

"I know, we're both in a bit of shock over it, too."

"My baby's having a baby?" Dad asked, his eyes misting over.

“Four babies,” Wyatt corrected. “We’re having quadruplets. A whole litter of pups.”

“Wow. Congratulations to the both of you. Thomas hadn’t mentioned it. It certainly justifies your aggression towards me. I’ll warn my wolves to stay clear of her.”

“Please don’t,” I begged. “It’s still very early in the pregnancy so we aren’t telling anyone. Thomas doesn’t even know yet. We haven’t had the best history in this department, but so far everything looks good.”

“Is that why you suddenly chose to get away?” he guessed.

I shrugged. “I think we just need time to let it sink in a bit. So a little vacation seemed like just the right thing to do, and I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather visit.”

He smiled warmly. “Well, I won’t say I’m sorry about that. Chances of fatherhood for me are pretty low. I’m a bit jealous of you right now, Wyatt. From everything I’ve heard, I have no doubt you’ll be an excellent father to these pups. And four? Just wow.”

“You’re still young, Sawyer,” I argued. I mean he wasn’t that young, somewhere in his forties if I remember correctly. “It could still happen.”

“Well, that would require a mate for me, and I’m a bit sentimental and unwilling to take just any mate.”

“Only a true mate?” Wyatt guessed.

“Exactly. And so far, not even a whiff of her, though I’ll confess I don’t leave my territory often, so the odds aren’t exactly in my favor.”

“But it could still happen,” I insisted.

Sawyer was a great man and the best Alpha. He was fair and honest and treated every one of his wolves with respect. People didn’t follow him just because he was the Alpha, but because they respected him and supported him fully, much like Thomas in Collier Pack.

I was blessed with two great Alphas in my lifetime. It was more than some could say. I'd heard horror stories of terrible Alphas, but that had never been my personal experience.

Life wasn't always fair, but Sawyer deserved his own happily ever after.

I looked over at Wyatt and smiled.

I'm lucky you were meant for me.

Don't kid yourself, babe. I am the lucky one.

He leaned down and kissed me even as my former Alpha and my parents looked on. My cheeks warmed, but I couldn't stop grinning up at him.

"We'd appreciate it if we kept the baby news just between us," Wyatt told them. "I was caught off guard a bit and apologize for growling at you, but I'm okay and won't be starting any shit while I'm here."

I yawned. It was still early, but the emotional rollercoaster of the day was weighing heavily on me.

"I will say goodbye for now as I have some work to do. Carol, I'm sure you can show them to the house."

Dad scoffed. "She hasn't been gone that long. Kate knows her way home."

"They aren't staying with us," Mom informed him.

"What? Why not?"

"Because they are on vacation, not visiting us."

I smiled and kissed his cheek. "You two are just a bonus."

He scowled back at me but didn't say another word about it.

Mom handed Wyatt the keys to our rental and instructed him to follow her. She and Dad were bickering about it as we got into the vehicles.

I sighed.

“It’s going to be okay.”

“Oh, I know. I made my peace with them a long time ago, but it’s not easy being back. Sort of pulls up all the ghosts of the past when they were nothing and all they ever did was fight, yell, and throw me into the middle of things.”

He reached over and squeezed my hand.

“Couples fight and yell at times, Kate, but I promise to never leverage our children against you like that or throw them into the middle of our disagreements. We aren’t your parents. We’ll cherish and protect our kids knowing what true miracles they are.”

“You always know exactly what I need to hear.”

Dad tried to follow us inside when we arrived at our temporary home for the week, but Mom stopped him.

“Give them some space,” she insisted.

“I haven’t seen my daughter in nearly a year. I want to spend time with her while she’s here.”

“We will, Dad, I promise. I’m just tired from traveling and need to call it an early night.”

“But you have to eat, don’t you? I mean, you’re eating for five now, right?”

I laughed. “You know I do.”

“How about Mert’s at seven? That’ll give you a few hours still to rest and settle in,” he said hopefully.

Are you okay with that? Wyatt asked.

Yeah, sure.

“That sounds great. We’ll meet you there,” he answered for the both of us.

I smiled and nodded. I even stuck around long enough to wave goodbye as they got in the car and drove home. Then I walked inside ready to crash.

“Why am I so exhausted?”

“It’s been a crazy, emotional day. It was bound to catchup with you sooner or later.”

I nodded. This morning I’d been ready to have an abortion, but seeing those little squiggles moving around the screen, I’d quickly changed my mind. I just couldn’t do it. And before I could even fully wrap my head around it all, I’d been whisked off on a new adventure with the man I love. Wyatt was right. It had been a very emotional day.

“I got pretty lucky in the mate department,” I told him.

“Nah, I’m the lucky one.”

He pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

“Thomas gave me some pretty good advice today.”

“Thomas? Now this I’ve got to hear,” I teased.

He pushed some images into my head, some very sexy images that immediately turned me on.

“Oh,” I squeaked. “He does give very good advice.”

“I need you, right now,” he told me as he turned me around and placed my hands on the back of the couch. “I need to claim you and make you mine.”

“You’ve already done that in the forever kind of way,” I teased, looking back at him over my shoulder.

“True, but I mean in the right now kind of way.”

With lightning speed, he reached around and undid my jeans before pushing them to the floor along with my underwear. I didn’t even notice he’d discarded his own jeans until he was pushing into me from behind.

“You’re so wet for me,” he whispered in my ear before kissing a path toward the mark he left on my shoulder all those years ago. And when he sucked hard on that spot, it nearly did me in right there.

Visions of the day he claimed me ran through my mind. He smiled against my skin as he grabbed my hips and took me hard in the most primal way possible. I loved it. I loved him.

I love you too, he told me. So much more than I know how to say.

Instead of poetic words, he used our telepathic bond to paint me a picture of just how much he loved me along with some naughty scenes on all the ways he wanted to love me.

“Wyatt!”

It was dirty and intimate in a new way I’d never experienced with him, not even when we were mind sexting, as his friends liked to call it. This was different as he took my body and flooded my mind, stimulating me in every possible way until I felt like I was going to internally combust from it.

“Kate,” he moaned as he came hard and pulled me right along with him.

Then he removed the remainder of my clothes, picked me up, and carried me to the bedroom. I curled up against him feeling sated and exhausted as I drifted off to sleep.

Wyatt

Chapter 18

Kate was sleeping like the dead. I checked the time, and it was already six. I had no idea how far the restaurant was, and as much as I wanted to let her sleep, knowing she needed it, I also didn't want to disappoint her parents. Plus, we needed to eat.

“Kate. Babe. You need to wake up now. It's time for dinner.”

She moaned and stretched against me. I was instantly hard again. It hadn't been like this in a very long time, but I suddenly couldn't get enough of her. I knew I had to have her again, and soon.

“Kate. Wake up.”

She just groaned once more.

I rolled her over, but her eyes didn't even flutter. I thought about something Thomas had once shared with me. The secret of waking Lily up each morning.

With a grin, I crawled between her legs and lowered my mouth to her. With one lick she sprang to life, suddenly wide awake.

“Wyatt!” she gasped.

I grinned and then hummed against her. “Hmm?”

“Oh, oh! Wow. Wyatt!”

We were going to be late, but a taste wasn't going to satisfy either of us through the evening.

I licked and sucked, drawing out her desire. It was making me hard, but I knew there wasn't time to take care of myself. I'd make time to take care of her needs though.

As I sensed her pleasure rising and heard loud and clear what she wanted—no, what she needed—I used my fingers to push her towards the cliff. It didn't take long before she was bucking against my face and begging for more.

She screamed my name as she shuddered and then fell limp back against the mattress.

I grinned, savoring the taste of her as she rode out her orgasm.

He's a God in the bedroom, she thought.

My chest puffed up in pride as I nuzzled the soft skin of her belly. My babies were in there, safe and sound. I kissed her there four times then lifted my head to give her a sheepish grin.

“We're late for dinner and you wouldn't wake up.”

“So that's how you chose to wake me?”

He shrugged. *Works for Thomas.*

“Ew. You did not just say that. TMI, Wyatt.”

“Lily really never mentioned it?”

“Yes, she did. It's common knowledge. But you don't have to mention it right now. I don't want to think of Thomas and Lily like that, especially not right now.”

I laughed. “Fair enough. But come on, get dressed, and let's go.”

Begrudgingly she did, and we were soon out the door and driving into town.

“So what do they have at Mert's?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Barbecue with a bit of country cooking and Tex-Mex thrown in.”

“Interesting assortment.”

“It’s Texan really.”

“Got it. But it’s good? See, we have this amazing place back home that I eat out at all the time. The owner is super hot and spoils me.”

She laughed. “You’ll like it, I’m sure.”

“Like? Not love?”

“Well it’s no Kate’s Place,” she teased with a wink my way.

It was good joking around with her and just enjoying ourselves. We never did this sort of thing anymore. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I ate out with my mate that wasn’t at Kate’s. Maybe I needed to remember to do it more often, especially with the babies coming.

I grinned at the thought.

“What are you grinning at?”

“Oh, are you not sifting around my head anymore?”

She rolled her eyes. “Not all the time. Besides, you’re just exuding happiness.”

“Can’t help it.”

“Because ...”

“Because I’m happy and madly in love with my mate.”

She groaned. “Are you going to act like this the whole time I’m pregnant?”

“Highly likely.”

“And once they arrive?”

“Probably will be too tired to think straight so I better get all of it I can now.”

“Get what?”

I flashed some dirty pictures of us together in places and positions I knew would make her blush.

“Oh,” she said as I pulled into the parking lot.

I parked, but before we got out, she smacked me.

“Ow. What was that for?”

“We’re having dinner with my parents. No dirty thoughts or play-by-play pictures. Am I clear?”

“Crystal.”

I leaned over and kissed her, then turned the engine off, took out the keys, jumped out, and ran around to open the door for her. I even offered her my hand and was even happier when she accepted it. She didn’t let go either as we walked inside.

Her parents were already there waiting for us at a table. Her dad looked down at his watch with a frown.

“Sorry sir. She fell asleep and she’s a bear to wake up these days.”

Kate elbowed me, but she blushed, and I knew exactly what she was thinking.

Ever since our bond had restored itself, I’d been in a much better mood. Guessing Kate was scared and knowing it as fact made a difference. Having been stripped from such an intimate connection with her had been a lot harder on me than I’d realized. Of course, the additional stress of her considering termination of the pregnancy had added to it as well. Now, I couldn’t be happier about, well, everything. In this moment, my life was as close to perfect as I’d ever wanted, and I wasn’t going to over think it or wonder when the sky would fall next. I was simply going to live in the moment and enjoy it.

Dinner with her parents was nice. The food was good and the company was great. Overall, it had been a great evening.

“Are you tired?” Kate asked after we watched her parents drive away.

“It’s been a really long day. But no, I’m fine.”

I couldn't let myself think back through everything that had happened in what I would always remember as the longest day of my life. It was too much to wrap my head around.

“How about I show you around some? We could walk over to The General.”

“What's The General?”

“It's kind of hard to explain. It's like the hub of life here in Longhorn. Need a hat? A new pair of boots? There's quick grab food, a saloon, the feed store, you name it, it's probably at The General.”

“Cool. This I gotta see.”

We left the car at the restaurant and walked. She pointed out a few things along the way. Everything was so different from what I was used to. It smelled different. The landscape was different. I'd learned that even ranching was different here too.

Back home, we had one large Pack ranch and the majority of the pack contributed to it in some way. But here, individuals owned ranches and farmed their own land. Well, it wasn't exactly their land, Sawyer and the Pack still owned it all, but people sort of leased it from him to do their own thing from what I understood.

Oh, and that reminded me, the people were even somehow different here. They spoke with a weird accent.

Kate occasionally did too, but not like this. At this point she'd been living in Wyoming for so long that it only really came out when she was tired or angry.

“I like this,” I told her. “It really is like the hub of Longhorn.”

“Yup. Everyone comes here for nearly everything.”

“Kate? Is that you?” a woman asked.

I bit back at smile at the twang of country in her voice and Kate discreetly elbowed me in the gut.

“Scarlett? Hey.”

“Hey yourself. What in the world are you doing here?”

“Just taking a little vacation and visiting my parents.”

“I saw your mama in Mert’s earlier tonight.”

“We just had dinner there with them. Guess I just missed you.”

“I heard you got run out of town on account of your folks fighting all the time. It was tragic but thank God they’re back together now. Everyone was so worried about you. It was like we graduated and poof! You were gone. Not a word about you since. I didn’t know if you were dead or alive.”

Kate snorted. “All you had to do was ask. I’m sure my parents would have gladly filled you in.”

“So where’d you really run off to?”

“Oh, I just went to spend the summer with my aunt, uncle, and cousin in Collier.”

“And fell in love with the place? Or perhaps just in love? I’m just assuming based on this handsome hottie hovering around you and all.”

“Oh,” she rolled her eyes. “Wyatt, this is Scarlett. We went to high school together.”

She was captain of the cheer squad. Sometimes friend, sometimes foe. Her knife is sharp and will stab you in the back at every opportunity, and she’s eyeing you like a piece of meat. I’m about to slap a bitch.

I coughed to cover up my laughter and shot Kate a look warning her to behave.

“It’s, um, nice to meet you, Scarlett.”

She took a step closer coming inappropriately close to me.

“Please tell me you’re the cousin.”

I wasn't sure if Kate's growl was just in my head or out loud. Though Scarlett seemed entirely unaffected if so. And when her finger snaked out to touch me, I took a step back and pulled Kate to my side.

"Definitely not her cousin."

Kate suddenly laughed. "Definitely not my cousin," she agreed.

"Oh. So you two are like together then?"

"Scarlett, we've been mated for over twelve years."

"Seriously?"

She actually looked shocked by it, but I just smiled down at Kate and stole a quick kiss.

"Seriously. I am the luckiest man alive."

"Aw, that's sweet. How'd you two meet?"

"I am best friends with her cousin. We grew up together. He wasn't exactly thrilled at first. She was supposed to be off-limits, but those rules are void when it comes to true mates."

"He's your actual one true mate?" she asked Kate.

"Yes, he is."

"Get out of here. You're pulling my leg, right?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't know. He just seems way out of your league."

"Excuse me?" I said with anger in my voice.

Kate tried to stop me, but there was no way I was going to stand there and let someone demean my mate like that right in front of me.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Well look at her, and then look at you," she said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I actually did look at my mate and I grinned.

“I think you meant to say that she’s way out of my league. And to that, I would agree. I see the boot place over there. Would you excuse us? I still need to replace the pair Chewy peed in.”

Leaving the woman standing there gapping like a fish out of water, I guided my mate over to the boots.

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she looked up at me.

“Thank you. She was always a wretched cow. I suppose some things never change.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Kate helped me pick out a new pair of boots.

“I swear if that dog pees in these or tries to eat them, I just might eat him.”

“Be nice. Chewy is a sweetie. You aren’t eating our dog, Wyatt.”

“One more time,” I warned.

Other townspeople came and went. Many stopped and said hello to Kate. She introduced me to each of them, but none were quite as impressionable as Scarlett.

“She’s not worth,” Kate whispered. “Trust me, just let it go.”

“She insulted you.”

“She tried, but my handsome hottie put her in her place.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me for all to see.

“What was that for? Not that I’m complaining.”

She shrugged. “Just staking my claim in case there is any further confusion about who you are to me.”

Kate

Chapter 19

Our babymoon had been amazing. We'd spent time with my parents, caught up with old friends, some of whom I liked and others, like Scarlett, that I didn't. We'd driven over to the beach for a night, and I would never forget the look of wonder on Wyatt's face as he looked out across the beach and into the Gulf for the first time. He was captivated by it all. Not that I could blame him.

Saying goodbye hadn't been difficult though. While I cherished our time there, and hoped to visit again soon, I was ready to be home.

It was a bit surreal. Having never returned home after going to Collier and finding my true mate, Collier had become home to me. It wasn't Longhorn anymore. If I had any doubts at all about that, they were laid to rest after this trip. The smells, the connections, all of it was so strange now.

A part of me feared that coming back would leave me homesick, and by the end of the trip it had, but not for Longhorn. I was homesick for Collier. I missed the diner and my friends. Collier truly was my home now.

The plane landed and I stepped out while Wyatt gathered our things. I took a deep breath and breathed in the scents around me, smiling to myself.

"Welcome home," Wyatt said.

"It's great to be home."

He frowned. "You didn't enjoy our trip?"

“I did, but there’s really nothing like home. It showed me that Longhorn may be the Pack I was born into, but it is no longer my Pack. I’m a Collier wolf through and through. This is exactly where I belong.”

I sniffed the air once more.

“It was so weird being in a different Pack. I mean, I’ve been around plenty of wolves from other Packs before, but it was always here in Collier, so I guess it wasn’t so overwhelmingly different to me than to be surrounded by other wolves in their territory like that. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. It really does. They even smelled weird to me, too.”

We both laughed.

“Same. Come on. Let’s get home. You look exhausted.”

I sighed. I was tired, but also happy.

“Why didn’t we take the time to do this before?” I asked him.

“Hell if I know. I’ve been trying for a while. Maybe we should make it a priority to do stuff like that more often.”

“With four babies?”

He chuckled. “How about once they’re old enough to leave with someone, and only for like a night or two, not a whole week.”

“I like the sound of that, but I’m not sure I’m going to be very good at letting go and handing my babies off to someone else to care for.”

“I know,” he surprised me by saying.

“But then there’s also the diner, and I can’t just leave it in the care of someone else.”

“I know.”

I took a deep breath not quite ready to let reality sink back in yet.

“There’s going to be a lot of changes in our future, isn’t there?”

“Most definitely.”

“What are we thinking, Wyatt? I can’t have a kid and juggle the demands of Kate’s Place, let alone a whole litter of kids.”

“We’ve worked hard to establish the diner, Kate. I don’t want you giving up on that dream.”

“There are four of them, Wyatt.”

“I know. And they’re going to need you, so taking a little bit of a step back and delegating more work to others is going to be a necessary change.”

“And what? We just drop them off at daycare every day and let someone else raise our kids?”

“No,” he said.

My heart dropped and I nodded. “I’m going to have walk away from Kate’s Place to raise our pups. I know it. I’m just not quite ready to accept it.”

“No, you’re not going to do that.”

I stared at him like he was insane.

“Kate, I want to stay home with our pups. It just makes more sense. You can cut back on your hours some to have a more reasonable schedule, and I’ll stop working out at the ranch except for emergencies and stay home.”

I snorted. “You’re going to raise our children? Be a stay-at-home dad?”

“I am. What do you think?”

“I think we’re still on a high from our trip and need to let this topic simmer for a while.”

“You’re probably right. Plus, you look tired and should rest.”

“Can we stop by the diner and check on things on the way home?”

He groaned but honored my request.

When I walked into my restaurant, it felt like truly coming home. This was my place. I’d worked hard to build it and grow a solid business that I was proud of.

“Hey, you’re back. How was the trip?” Angel asked as she flitted around the room topping off drinks. She looked like a natural.

“It was great. How are things here?”

“Wonderful. Thanks for letting me step up and work more. I really enjoy this. And if you’d like me to stick around or take on extra shifts, I’d be okay with that. Please say yes, because I really love working and need something to do more regularly that isn’t just following Austin around every day.”

I looked over to Wyatt for his opinion. I knew we could easily afford to bring her on full-time even. The place hadn’t burnt down while I was away, though there was a part of me that had expected it too.

“Let me think about it. We haven’t even made it home yet and I’m too tired to make any permanent decisions like that.”

It was the truth, but also a copout. I hadn’t really paid much attention to Angel’s work in my place. She just seemed to hang out whenever Austin was working, and I didn’t mind that. It was cute.

But if it were to work out, it would free you up some. You’d have plenty of time to fully train her to cover while you’re out on maternity leave. This could work, Kate. The pieces are all starting to fall into place.

I heard Wyatt loud and clear, but I also didn’t trust easily when it came to my business.

“I’d be happy to do a trial period. I’m sure there’s still lots to learn.”

“Do you cook?” I blurted out.

She sighed. “I can do whatever you need me to do, but what I love the most is actually working out here and talking to your customers.”

“Oh.” I considered that for a moment. While I had a regular staff rotation, I always handled the front myself. If I wasn’t here, Austin was really the only one I trusted to cover. I had begrudgingly trained a few of the waitresses to cover if needed, but I’d never once considered hiring someone for that.

“I don’t mind waitressing or bussing tables too. Heck, I’ll even wash dishes if it gets me out of the house and doing something every day. I just need a purpose, a job, Kate.”

“But I thought you and Austin were trying to get pregnant.”

Angel rolled her eyes. “We aren’t using protection or anything, so yeah, it could happen, and maybe if I had a baby then I’d want to stay home. I don’t know. What I do know is that even if I turned up pregnant today, I would go insane over the next nine months without something to do. Besides, lots of women work and have kids. I don’t know if I would even want to be a stay-at-home mom. I like staying busy and having a purpose. If you give me a chance, I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Do it! Angel’s family, and you can groom her however you need. This is perfect. Why are you hesitating? Wyatt asked.

I scowled at him.

Get out of my head. This isn’t as easy as all that.

But it could be. A trial, Kate. Just agree to a trial.

And what if it doesn’t work out? Like you said, Angel’s family.

And you put up with Eddie without complaining. I doubt she's as bad as all that, but if she is, we'll find something for her to do.

I sighed.

“Um, Kate, are you okay? You have this weird look in your eyes.”

Austin made a face and shook his head at me.

“She’s talking to Wyatt telepathically. I’ve seen that look on Mom’s face when she does it too. By the way, welcome home Kitty-Kate. Did you guys have a good trip?”

Please don't pass up this opportunity, Wyatt whispered into my mind.

“Yes!” I blurted out.

He laughed. “That good of a trip?”

“Not you. You,” I said turning to Angel. “Yes, on a trial basis with no guarantees. Okay?”

She squealed and hugged me. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. You won’t regret this.”

I relaxed a little, actually believing her.

“What just happened?” Austin said.

“We just hired your mate to work here,” Wyatt told him.

He looked at Angel and then me and his forehead scrunched up in confusion.

“Wasn’t she already working here?”

Angel and I laughed.

“No,” she told him. “I just pitch in every now and then when you’re working.”

“Oh. How’s that any different?”

I shook my head. “I know you just show up when you want half the time, but the difference is, I’ll actually be

scheduling her now and paying her to be here.”

Austin grabbed his chest dramatically.

“People actually get paid to work here?”

“You’re an ass,” Wyatt said with a chuckle. “And we’re not actually back yet, so I’m going to drag my mate out of here and take her home now.”

“Well damn. I thought I was going to get to drag my girl out of here for the rest of the day.”

He wagged his eyebrows making Angel blush from his insinuations.

“Not this time,” Wyatt said. “I have plans of my own.”

Without delay, he grabbed my hand and gently pulled me from the restaurant. I tried to protest. I hadn’t even made it back into the kitchen, but he wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“You’re getting really bossy lately,” I challenged on the drive home.

“Get used to it because my wolf and I are still freaking out and going to continue worrying until all four of our pups are here safe and sound.”

I sucked in a tight breath. It still wasn’t entirely real to me yet.

When we pulled up to the house I instantly relaxed though.

“Home,” I whispered.

“Home. It was nice to get away for a few days, but this is still my favorite place on Earth.”

I bit my lip not wanting to confess that it was a toss-up between here and my restaurant for me.

He chuckled. “As if that’s some big revelation.”

I groaned. “This whole mind reading thing is going to take some getting used to.”

“I’m just happy you stopped shutting me out.”

“I wasn’t doing it on purpose. I don’t even know how I was doing it or what was happening.”

“We weren’t in a great place, Kate. And your wolf is being overly protective of you. Maybe she was doing it?”

I shrugged. A lot of people thought of their wolves as separate beings, but I never had. She was still me, just in a different form and with more primitive instincts, though I supposed maybe that side of me was just trying to protect me and give me the space I needed to work things out on my own. If Wyatt had been privy to my thoughts before that ultrasound changed my life, he wouldn’t have been very happy or supportive through it all.

Happy, no. Supportive, always. Don’t hide the hard stuff from me, babe.

Wyatt

Chapter 20

8 weeks pregnant.

Kate had been moodier than ever these last few days. And ever since we got back from Texas, Chewy has been a nightmare. He's suddenly very protective of Kate, especially when she's anxious or upset.

Growling at me two nights ago forced me to ban him from the bedroom despite Kate's protests. I was the man of the house, damn it. And that stupid dog was just going to have to learn his place.

So far, my new boots were safe, but only because I made sure not to leave them down at Chewy's level.

"Stop taking out your frustrations on Chewy," Kate argued when I left the dog to bark at the back door while I got ready for the day.

"I'm not frustrated with him."

"He's been barking for fifteen minutes. You banished him from the house again."

"I just let him out to go to the bathroom while I got ready. It's not my fault he's an asshole."

She frowned and I could hear her counting backwards from ten. I cringed.

"Babe, I promise. I'm not punishing him for anything."

I leaned down and kissed her.

Kate leaned on Chewy and treated him like he was our child or something. Maybe it had been like that from the beginning. I hadn't seen her interacting with him much while she was shutting me out, so I couldn't be sure. Since our return it seemed to be getting worse though.

Chewy could do no wrong in her eyes. It drove me nuts, but I tried not to complain.

The past few days had been even harder to get through, but I tried to smile through it all. I was happy she was working more normal hours and the trial with Angel was going better than any of us could have expected. She seemed to love the diner as much as Kate, and our customers adored her too. She was a natural, and that took a lot of stress off Kate. She didn't feel the need to have stay from open to close every single day.

So on one hand we were adjusting to a new and better schedule. But that also meant we were spending more time together. Morning sickness had set in, and my mate was a bit of an emotional mess. I knew a lot of that was the stress leading up to our eight-week appointment today.

She had miscarried our first child at eight weeks. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about it too.

"Hurry up. We're going to be late," she yelled from the kitchen.

Chewy had stopped barking, so I knew she must have let him back in.

"Almost ready," I hollered back.

I dressed quickly and put on my new boots. They were fully broken-in and felt great.

I walked out to meet Kate in the kitchen. She had breakfast waiting for me as she stood there holding Chewy and loving on him. Somehow I refrained from rolling my eyes.

She set him down.

"Eat fast. We need to go."

“Yes ma’am,” I said, but not before pulling her into my arms and kissing her.

I heard the growl and looked down just in time to see that damn dog cock his leg up aiming for my boots.

“Like hell you will!”

I scooped him up, walked over to open the door and chucked him outside.

Kate gasped. “Wyatt! You could hurt him throwing him like that. Are you insane?”

“That dog is a nuisance, Kate. He was about to pee on my boots.”

She scowled, but there was no way she hadn’t seen it happen this time.

“I’ll just put him in his crate,” she said sadly.

Kate hated that I insisted on having him crated anytime we weren’t home to watch him. That was not negotiable for me. He’s already destroyed so many of my things it was ridiculous. A sane person would have turned him out by now. I threatened to do that all the time, but unfortunately, I feared Kate would never forgive me if I did. She was my mate, and she was carrying my pups. There was absolutely nothing I wouldn’t do for her, but this was starting to cross the line.

“He hiked his leg up on me, Kate. If he were a shifter, I’d have challenged him to death by now.”

Instead of really hearing me, she just giggled.

“Wyatt, he’s just a dog. He’s still learning. It wasn’t personal.”

I bit back a growl.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

I stuffed the last bite of bacon in my mouth and escorted her out of the house.

Chewy was a problem for another day.

My hands were sweaty as I rubbed them on my pants.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Wyatt. I think I’m going to throw up.”

I jumped up and looked through the cabinets until I found a plastic bucket she could puke in. It was good for me to have a mission, something to do. Sitting around waiting on Doc in a windowless sterile room was driving me mad.

“Here you go. Just let it out.”

Sad eyes looked up at me, but her nerves got the better of her and she emptied the contents of breakfast out of her system while I stood there rubbing her back and trying to reassure her that everything was going to be okay.

In truth, I wanted to throw up too. There was so much pressure on this appointment that I couldn’t wait to get it over with.

Without a word, I left her side long enough to empty and rinse out the bucket. Then, I took my seat next to the exam table and wiped my hands down my legs again.

“I should have just gone through with the abortion, Wyatt. I can’t handle this. It’s too much.”

I snorted. “This is just the beginning, babe. You’re strong enough.”

“I don’t think I am.”

I stood up and put my hands on her shoulders as I looked into her eyes. “You can do this.”

There were moments I could see glimmers of hope in her eyes, but I knew she was still an emotional wreck just at the thought of being pregnant. It made me feel selfish at times. She was trying to keep a disconnect between her and the

babies. I knew she was just protecting her heart, but I couldn't do that. I was all in. Those were my kids in there, and I couldn't wait to meet them.

But there was also that nagging voice in the back of my head fearing something would go wrong. I'd survived that nightmare before, and I would again. The end far outweighed the risks for me. But I understood now more than ever that my strong superhero of a mate was much more vulnerable than she let on. I couldn't help but worry what would happen to her if something happened to even one of our pups.

And I knew that currently we were both reliving our last eight-week appointment. Doc had been late then too, but we'd laughed and joked passing the time. We didn't have the fears we have now. At that time there were no thoughts of miscarriage. We were naïve to it all and so happy.

I'd never forget the exact moment Doc's face morphed into concern. Or the horrifying silence as he reached up and tried to discreetly move the screen out of our view. The memories made me sick.

When the door opened, I jumped. Kate reached down and gripped my hand. It was then that I realized that I had been lost in a mix of my and her thoughts.

Sam walked in followed by Doc.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "I expected you two to be excited. You get to see your babies today."

Doc gave us both a sad smile and nodded. "How about we get this over quickly? Go ahead and take off your pants and lay down, Kate."

Sam looked at him like he was crazy before focusing on Kate.

"How have you been feeling? Any morning sickness?"

She just stared at him, frozen, and trying not to freak out.

I squeezed her hand.

“It’s not always in the morning, more like constant nausea and occasional vomiting,” I answered for her.

“That’s good. Are you eating okay? Taking vitamins or anything? Any tenderness or concerns?”

“She’s eating fine and taking the vitamins, but she’s tired a lot of the time. And her breasts have been sore off and on.”

I wasn’t about to admit that it wasn’t entirely a bad thing as they were also hypersensitive and easily stimulated.

Not realizing I’d just projected that thought, Kate let go of my hand and smacked my arm while shooting me a look that said to knock it off.

I grinned back at her hoping it would help her relax some.

“That’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Kate. It’s a great sign, actually. Sounds like things are progressing as expected,” Sam said, completely missing our quiet exchange and mistaking it for embarrassment since I’d mentioned her boobs.

Meanwhile, Doc had her prepped for another vaginal ultrasound. He closed his eyes, and I was pretty sure he was saying a quick prayer before he held his breath and began.

Within seconds, his face broke out into a huge grin, and this time when he reached up to move the screen, he turned it towards us.

He looked at my mate and nodded.

Sam filled us in on what we were seeing, but even without that, it was easy to make out all four babies before Doc zoomed in to check some measurements on each of them individually.

I was so focused on that screen watching the babies that I didn’t hear what was said that had Sam looking back through Kate’s records.

“Eight weeks. I’m so sorry. I knew there was a previous miscarriage, and we have you down as high risk because of the multiples, but I didn’t realize your miscarriage was found at the eight-week appointment last time. No wonder Doc was acting weird. I’m sure this was a major milestone for you both, but we can assure you, the babies are all thriving.”

“He’s right. Measurements are spot on for eight weeks. Everything looks great, Kate.”

Silent tears ran down her cheeks before full sobs racked her body.

I rose and hugged her.

“They’re okay, babe. You’re doing great.”

Doc finished up the ultrasound, and I was sad to see the screen go dark. I could have sat there watching them all day long.

Sam asked some more questions and then gave us a bottle of prenatal pills for her to continue taking. Then he handed me a box.

“I picked this up but wasn’t going to give it to you this soon. My sister struggled a lot on her subsequent pregnancy after a miscarriage. This is a fetal heart monitor. It mostly gave her some peace. Anytime you start to worry, you can hear your babies’ heartbeats.”

He gave me a quick tutorial on how to use it. Soon the steady rhythm of Baby A was like music to my ears.

“I begged him not to,” Doc admitted.

“Why?” Kate asked. “Will it hurt the babies or something?”

“No.” Doc chuckled. “But it might not always be easy to find all four of them in there and I can tell by the look on Wyatt’s face right now that he’s going to become a bit addicted to this thing.”

Sam laughed. “Don’t worry. We’re here for you. This is the on-call number. So when you inevitably start to freak out unable to find what you’re looking for, just call.”

“But not after ten at night or before six in the morning unless spotting, cramps, contractions, or impending harm to Kate is accompanying it,” Doc added.

I grinned. “I’ll try to remember that.”

Kate

Chapter 21

12 weeks pregnant.

I made Wyatt agree that we wouldn't tell anyone we were expecting until after the first trimester. It certainly hadn't been easy keeping it a secret, especially since I'd started to balloon up over the last few weeks.

My hand rubbed over my protruding stomach. It certainly wasn't flat any longer, making it harder to convince myself this wasn't really happening.

Much of the first trimester flew by in a blur of denial.

With the evidence right there every time I looked in the mirror, it was hard. I could feel my heart softening some, but I knew not to get my hopes up. We'd been told of a dozen negative outcomes that could still occur, and the internet was filled with hundreds of things that could go wrong with a high-risk quadruplet pregnancy.

At times, when I got scared again, it made me regret not having gone through with the abortion. If I had, my life would be back to normal by now. Wyatt would have been angry for a while, but I was secure in the knowledge that he loved me unconditionally and would have forgiven me for it by now.

Instead, I was stuck in a lonely place. I couldn't talk to him about it, not really. I didn't think my wolf or I were really hiding any of my emotions from him, so it wasn't like he didn't know, but we never talked about it.

“Kate, Austin’s birthday is next month, and I would like to surprise him with a party or something. You know, just the Six Pack family. It doesn’t have to be fancy or anything. Could you help me with this?” Angel asked one night as we sat rolling silverware after closing for the day.

I was really impressed by how well Angel had adapted. I had already begun relying on her more and more. If I ended up on bedrest, it was a relief to know that between her and Peyton, Kate’s Place would be okay without me. I hadn’t expected to trust her so quickly or feel okay with time off. But I was only twelve weeks into a forty-week sentence – I wouldn’t let anyone tell me to expect less – and I was already exhausted, tired of feeling nauseous all the time, and struggling to make it through a full day of work.

Peyton had been asking me almost daily if I was okay. It made it hard not to tell her. And Lily had started hanging around the diner more often. Normally she’d be in full nesting right now ready to pop out her fourth child. They were waiting to find out if this one was a boy or a girl, but we were all pretty convinced it would be another girl. She was ready to pop any day now.

“Kate, did you hear me?”

“Um, what? Sorry.”

“Austin’s birthday. Will you help?”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

“Thanks. Are you okay? You sort of spaced out on me.”

“Sorry. Just tired. Did Lily come in today?”

“I don’t think so, unless she was in for breakfast. I didn’t come in until the lunch shift today.”

Have you heard from Thomas or Lily today? She’s been coming in every day for the last two weeks, but I don’t remember seeing her today.

No, I haven't. It's pretty late but I'll call him in the morning. How are you?

Tired.

“Now that is a different kind of spaced out. I'm getting used to seeing it. What's it like?”

“What do you mean?”

“The telepathy thing with your mate. You get a pretty telling look in your eyes when you're talking to him. You were just now, right?”

“Yeah. Was just asking him if he'd heard from Thomas today.”

“Is Lily okay?”

I shrugged. “He said he'd call him tomorrow and check in.”

“Do you think it's another girl?”

I laughed. “Of course, it is. I'm not convinced he can produce a son.”

She smiled. “With all these babies and pregnancy announcements, Austin is so excited. But with each one I feel a little more pressured. Like I should be pregnant by now or something.”

“It'll happen when it's time. I don't think there's really anything you can do to speed that process up. It took me three years to get pregnant the first time.”

Her eyes widened. It wasn't like she didn't know I'd had a miscarriage.

“The first time? As in there was more than one pregnancy?” She gasped. “Kate, are you pregnant?”

Well shit.

What's wrong?

Angel knows, or suspects. I can't lie to her Wyatt.

So don't. We agreed to keep it to ourselves until the second trimester. We made it.

“Yes, I’m pregnant! Please don’t tell anyone yet.”

She looked down at my stomach and grinned.

“You know you’re already showing, right? Austin and I have been talking about it for weeks. He’s convinced there’s no way and you just gained a bit of weight, but asked me not to mention it to you.”

I groaned. “I have my twelve-week appointment in the morning. We’ll consider sharing it after that.”

“I thought you didn’t want kids.”

“I don’t. I didn’t.” I sighed. “I don’t know. I’m still not convinced they’re actually going to make it.”

“They? You’re having twins?”

My jaw dropped and then I closed it. “Angel, I’m really tired. Do you have to be so freaking observant right now?”

She laughed. “So it’s twins?”

I shook my head which caused her brow to furrow.

“I’m having quadruplets. A whole freaking litter of pups.”

“What?” she shrieked. “Are you serious?”

“I would never joke about something like this.”

“Kate, that’s so cool. Wyatt must be ecstatic.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“But you aren’t?”

I shrugged. “There’s a lot of possible complications. I don’t want to get too attached. It’s not easy to keep a distance, but I’m trying.”

“I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. But it’s so exciting. Is that why you agreed to let me work here?”

“Yeah. I know I’m going to need help soon. I’m already exhausted all the time, and they’re only going to get bigger and drain me more in the coming months. Plus, there’s a strong possibility of me going on bedrest at some point. You asking to come on board was the best gift ever. Between you and Peyton, I’m not so scared about not being here twenty-four seven.”

We talked for a while longer before I headed home.

Chewy greeted me at the door, jumping and barking when he saw me.

“Hi sweet boy. Did you miss me today?”

I held out my arms and he jumped right in as I snuggled him close.

Wyatt walked over and kissed me.

“Did you tell her?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It felt good to say it out loud. Still doesn’t feel real though.”

We had a quiet evening in and then called it a night.

I didn’t sleep well, tossing and turning all night long. I knew I was just anxious for my next doctor’s appointment.

By the time morning arrived, bright and sunny, all I wanted to do was sleep. Instead, Wyatt got me up and fixed breakfast while I moved in slow motion. And when we got to the clinic at last, the place was dead.

“Hello?” Wyatt called out. “Is anyone here?”

“I didn’t get my days mixed up, did I?”

He checked the calendar on his phone. “No. Today’s the day. I’ll call the emergency line and see if I can get one of them.”

I wandered back to the exam room and still nothing. It was almost creepy being there. There was always someone here.

“Are we early?”

“Late actually,” Wyatt said. “Sam. Hey, is everything okay? Kate is scheduled for an appointment this morning and there’s literally no one here.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I’m on my way back now. We had an emergency call last night. Diane was here with us and just ran home to take a quick shower. Doc’s staying, and I’m two minutes out to cover the clinic this morning. Please tell me there aren’t any walk-ins this morning.”

“No, just us.”

“Perfect. Thanks. See you in a bit.”

“Did you hear any of that?”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh please. Of course I did. I swear my hearing is even more sensitive than ever lately.”

He frowned. “What on Earth could have happened to have needed the whole medical team all night?”

I gasped. “Lily! I told you I didn’t see her yesterday. She must have gone into labor.”

He quickly called Thomas.

“Hey, man. Can’t talk right now. I’m a little busy. Ow. Don’t squeeze so hard, Slugger. I’m going to be permanently maimed at this rate.”

“Lily’s in labor?”

“Yup and getting close. How’d you know? We were trying to keep a wrap on this one for once.”

“Congratulations. Kate had a feeling yesterday when Lily didn’t come in. Plus, she’s got a doctor appointment this morning and no one’s here.”

“Sorry about that. Sam should be on his way. Are you ever going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Uh, maybe that you’re going to be a dad.”

“Dammit. How do you know that?”

“Oh please, I’ve known for a while. Just figured you’d tell me yourself.”

“I promised Kate we’d wait until she was safely in the second trimester. And Doc wasn’t supposed to say anything. What happened to patient-doctor confidentiality and such shit?”

“Doc didn’t tell me, Sawyer did.”

“Sawyer?”

“Yeah. Apparently you told him and her parents when you were down there visiting. Is that why you were so hellbent on getting out of here?”

He sighed. “Yeah.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Good.”

“Just think, you’ll be sitting by her side getting your hand crushed with every contraction soon. Shit! Here comes another one.”

“Hang up the phone Thomas and focus on your mate. We’ll check in later,” I yelled out just as Sam walked in.

He stopped and shook his head. “You let him know that I didn’t say a word.”

Wyatt laughed. “Sam said to make sure you know he blabbed about this.”

I could hear Thomas laughing in the background as Wyatt hung up.

Sam stood there looking pale and laughing.

“Relax and breathe. Thomas knows you didn’t tell us.”

“Why were you on the phone with Thomas at a time like this? He wasn’t even taking calls from his family.”

“That’ll be a big mistake,” I muttered. I was certain Peyton would have plenty to say on that topic later. Louder I said, “Wyatt and Thomas are like brothers. Have you heard of the Six Pack yet?”

“Of course. The Six Pack are legendary around here.”

I laughed. Wyatt groaned.

“You’re a part of the Six Pack?” Sam asked.

“He is,” I confirmed.

It was easier to talk about my mate than focus on the appointment. That worked right up until Sam handed me a cup to pee in.

After all the basic stuff was done, he had me lay down for another ultrasound.

“Is it normal to get one at every appointment?”

“For a normal pregnancy, no. For you, yes.” Sam said, winking at me.

“Stop flirting with my mate, dude,” Wyatt said with a chuckle.

This time he motioned for me to stretch my legs out as he put cold goo on my stomach.

“What? She doesn’t have to spread her legs for you anymore?” Wyatt teased.

Sam shook his head. “You’re sick, you know.”

Wyatt shrugged, completely unaffected.

“The babies should be big enough to see this way now.” He nodded towards the screen triumphantly.

“Wow! They grew,” I said in amazement.

“And they’ll keep getting bigger until you start doubting there’s room for them to grow anymore. And then they’ll get even bigger than that.”

I groaned. “Sounds fun.”

We stayed quiet while he checked on each baby and took the necessary measurements.

“They look great.”

He punched a couple of buttons and then pulled out an envelope from my file and handed it to Wyatt.

“Doc forgot to give these to you at the last checkup. I pulled a few from your first visit too, and here’s a few more from today.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Wyatt grinned from ear-to-ear. “Our babies’ first pictures.”

I had an odd flutter in my chest, but I pushed it aside. I had to stay strong and not get too sucked into this pregnancy.

Just as we were finishing up, Wyatt’s phone rang.

It’s Thomas.

“Hey.”

“It’s a girl! Lilah Grace Collier is here, safe and sound. Since we just talked and you already knew she was in labor, I figured you could be the first to know.”

Wyatt had that gooey baby look again. I didn’t feel the punch to the gut this time and said a silent prayer that in a few months he’d finally get his chance at being a dad. No matter what he said, I now knew without a doubt that I’d been right all these years. Wyatt wanted nothing more than to be a father with a house full of kids.

He hung up the phone grinning.

“It’s a girl. We heard,” I told him. “As if that’s some shocking revelation.”

Wyatt and I stood by as Thomas's family exited the house. Everyone was there, all the Six Pack.

Winnie was really showing now. She was only about two months ahead of me and I couldn't even imagine just how much bigger I'd be at that stage.

"Are you waiting to find out the sex of your kid like Thomas?" Wyatt asked Clay.

"No way," Winnie said. "We've just been waiting for a time when we could all be together to announce it."

"Wait, you know already?" I asked.

"We found out about a month ago."

Wyatt shot me a look.

Are we going to find out? he asked me.

Hell yes we are!

He chuckled.

"Stop doing that," Angel teased.

Thomas stepped outside with his dad.

"You did good, son. She's beautiful."

The two men embraced and said goodbye.

Thomas looked around. He was tired, but happy.

"It's been a crazy day. I can't wait for you all to meet her. Come on in."

Lily perked up when she saw us, and I went to her side and hugged her.

"This is Lilah," she said as I stared down at the tiniest little person I'd ever seen in my life. "Do you want to hold her?"

I shook my head, and then nodded. There were tears in my eyes as I held her, and she wrapped her tiny hand around my finger.

I sniffed. “Sorry. Stupid pregnancy hormones.”

The whole room went silent.

“What did she say?” James asked as all heads turned toward Wyatt.

He beamed proudly. “We’re pregnant.”

“I knew it!” Lily yelled, startling the baby. “I told Peyton you were. I just knew it.”

“Technically, I didn’t blurt that out. You did,” Wyatt said.

I rolled my eyes. “I told you when I was safely in the second trimester you could tell them. It’s fine.”

I passed the baby to Winnie’s waiting arms.

Lily stared down at my stomach. “But you’re well into the second trimester and already showing.”

I shook my head. “Twelve weeks today.”

“There’s no way. On a first baby? You’re as big as Winnie and she just started showing a few weeks ago.”

“Well, I guess that’s just what happens when you’re baking four babies at once in there,” Angel said.

They went dead silent this time as jaws dropped all around me.

“Quadruplets?” Lily squealed. “Did you know this?” she asked Thomas.

“No. I mean, Sawyer mentioned she was pregnant, but not that there were four of them.”

Austin stared at his mate with a frown. “You knew?”

“Oops. Sorry. I guessed. She confirmed it last night. I swore I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Everyone is not me.”

“Everyone is you,” I reminded him. “Because you have the biggest mouth of all. If she had told you, everyone would already know by now.”

“Whatever. I can’t believe you told her first. I’m family.”

“You’re all our family,” Wyatt corrected him. “And it’s been really hard keeping this to myself so I’m glad it’s out in the open now.”

“I’m so jealous,” Lily said. “It’s taken me years to get to four and you’re just going to pop them all out at once.” She smacked Thomas in the gut. “Why couldn’t we have done that?”

We all laughed.

“Well, if we’re sharing big news today, then I can say, we’re having a boy,” Clay announced.

“Congratulations, man. We’re going to have a whole little Pack of kids soon at this rate,” Thomas told him.

Clay kissed his mate as Winnie passed the baby to Katherine.

“Oh my gosh. She’s so tiny.” Carter lunged for his mama, but James managed to keep control of him. “My baby looks so big now.”

“It’s always like that for me. Look at his hands next to hers. It’s crazy. Their hands look huge next to a newborn,” Lily told her.

“Step away,” Emmett whispered to James. “She’s getting the look, and this room is overly filled with hormonal women as it is.” He shuddered.

Austin laughed. “You’re an idiot.”

I placed my hand on my belly for the first time and looked down at Lilah in wonder. How the hell would four babies that size fit inside me?

Wyatt

Chapter 22

16 weeks pregnant.

Kate's cravings were insane. She was eating everything in sight. I wasn't sure it was safe for the restaurant's bottom line to send her to work anymore. Her energy levels had picked back up too. And she was more beautiful than ever getting fat and round with my children.

While we hadn't made any official announcements, word had circled around the Pack, and everyone was dotting over her at the diner. It was bad enough that she agreed to cut her hours back just to stay out of the spotlight. I was secretly thrilled about it, or maybe not so secretly, thanks to our bond.

If it wasn't for Chewy, life would be pretty close to perfect. He and I were still having some territorial issues. He only chewed on my things ... my chair, my shoes, my bag. He'd eaten my deodorant, my wallet, and my watch. Nothing was safe around him. But it was only ever my things. He never messed with Kate's stuff.

She tried to tell me it was just dumb luck, but I knew that wasn't true. That evil little bastard was doing it on purpose. Just like he'd purposefully pissed on my pillow and my side of the bed to the point I had to replace both.

Currently, he was banned from the bedroom, but Kate whined about it and let him get away with shit when I wasn't around.

I was ready to go to war with this dog.

I walked out of the bathroom after my shower to find him back on my bed hiking his leg and staring right at me. I didn't think, only reacted as my wolf escaped and I shifted.

My wolf roared, making him jump back and fall off the bed. With his tail between his legs, Chewy ran from the room. I gave chase.

“Chewy are you okay? What's wrong?” Kate asked him when he ran into the living room and tried to cower at her feet before thinking twice and stepping in to protect her from me.

He barked and growled getting low to the floor. So I did the same and growled menacingly.

“Wyatt!” Kate yelled. “Knock it off.”

I couldn't obey. It was time to put an end to this nightmare. I was done.

Stalking towards him slowly, Chewy gave warnings that I ignored. When I got too close, he jumped out and went for my legs, but I was already on him. It took no time at all to pin him to the ground. His whole head fit into my mouth. For just a moment I considered taking Emmett's advice and making him a snack. Instead, I lightly bit his ear and he settled instantly.

Still in that position, I shifted back into my skin. The dog yelped and tried to get away, but I bit down on his ear that was still in my mouth. When he submitted, I pulled away and sat up. The dog climbed into my lap and laid his head down, finally submitting.

“You're insane,” Kate said. “We have an appointment in fifteen minutes. We're going to be late because of this, so I hope it was worth it.”

“Should have done it the second you brought him home.”

As I talked, I realized I had a mouthful of his fur. I spit it out, nudged Chewy off me, and went back to the bedroom to

get ready. But first, a stop in the bathroom to rinse my mouth out.

I had no idea what I was thinking at the time, but Kate was laughing hysterically.

“You’re insane,” she yelled.

Chewy went to his crate without complaint once I was dressed and ushering Kate out the door. We were late and I knew it was my fault.

Once we finally got the clinic, Doc rushed us back quickly.

“Sorry we’re late,” Kate said, shooting me a look.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

These appointments were already becoming pretty routine.

“Do we get to see the babies again today?” I asked.

“Yes. And if you want, and if they cooperate, we should be able to see the sex today. Do you want to know?”

“Yes!” Kate and I said at the same time.

I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“We can really tell this soon?”

“Possibly. I can’t guarantee it, but if they cooperate, we should be able to see.”

I was nervous and never let go of Kate’s hand. Her interest was piqued too the second she saw all four babies wiggling around.

“Have you started feeling them moving around in there?”

Kate bit her lip and looked up to me.

“Have you?” I asked.

“I think so. I don’t know for sure.”

On the screen Baby C kicked out and stretched. “Did you feel that?” I asked.

“Here?” she asked pointing to her stomach.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Her eyes widened. “It did it again.”

“You are definitely feeling your babies move, Kate. You can watch them on the screen and match the sensation. Those feelings will continue to get stronger.”

“I’ve been feeling that for a few weeks now. I just wasn’t sure what it was.”

“That’s good. Real good. Okay, let’s start with Baby A. Remember A, B, and C should be identical so if we can see the sex of one, that should be same for all three.”

Kate squeezed my hand, but her face told me she was more excited than anxious this time.

Doc ran his measurements and then tried to find out.

“This one is stubborn with its legs crossed. I can’t get a good view. Let’s try B.”

He did his thing and then looked around as his face scrunched up. B is just moving too much. I think I know but can’t get a clear picture because it’s too active. So, on to C.”

The second he moved the doppler to Baby C, Doc chuckled.

“That’s a boy,” I said.

“It is?” Kate asked.

“That is definitely a boy,” Doc confirmed.

“Three boys?” I asked.

“Yes. I was pretty sure on B that they were going to be boys. More importantly everyone’s looking great.”

“What about D?” Kate asked.

Doc beamed as he checked out our fourth baby. “Well, hello there,” he said, snapping a picture of the baby waving at us. “It’s a girl.”

A tear fell down Kate’s cheek. “Three boys and a little girl?”

“Yes ma’am,” Doc confirmed.

“It’s perfect.”

I leaned down and kissed my mate. “You’re perfect.”

Doc finished up the appointment and we left hand-in-hand. Out in the waiting room everyone was there.

“Well?” Lily asked passing their baby to Thomas.

“Well, what? What are you all doing here?” I asked.

“The babies. Did you find out the sex?”

“We didn’t even know we were going to find out, so how the hell did you know?” I challenged.

She snorted. “Please. As many times as we’ve been through this, and you don’t think I know exactly which appointment you can tell? Just because I didn’t want to know doesn’t mean I didn’t know when I could know.”

“So?” Thomas asked.

“What if we want to keep it to ourselves?”

Kate rolled her eyes at me. “We don’t, so tell them or I will.”

I chuckled. “Three identical boys and a little girl.”

“Aw,” the women said.

“Yes! Carter needs some boys to play with,” James said.

“Next Gen Six Pack in the making,” Austin insisted.

“Three boys? You get three sons?” Thomas complained.

“Well, someone had to pick up your slack in that department,” I teased.

His mouth opened to rebut me, but he promptly closed it.

“We are officially done. I’m having my tubes tied next month, so four girls is what he gets,” Lily informed us. “Four beautiful girls. And if Landon and Kaitlyn of the BC Pack can groom their daughter to be Alpha someday, then we can do the same with Cammie.”

Thomas sighed, but reluctantly nodded. “I’ve already started her training. I was so certain Lilah was going to be another girl that we didn’t even bother coming up with a boy’s name. I am just destined to be surrounded by beautiful women. What can I say?”

I knew he desperately wanted a male heir, but it was nice to see him moving on. Maybe Cammie would be just what this Pack needed to move us into the future, though I didn’t see Thomas stepping down as Alpha for a very long time, if ever.

Kate

Chapter 23

20 weeks pregnant.

I could no longer see my toes. While everyone told me there was no way I would carry these kids to forty weeks, I still counted things like a full-time pregnancy. Twenty weeks was only that halfway point, and I couldn't see my freaking feet anymore.

My stomach had grown so much. I was so much bigger than Winnie now. And when I went into town to pick up some things from Powell's Grocery, I had several people offer to get me a wheelchair to shop fearing I was going to go into labor any second. They couldn't believe it when I told them I was nineteen weeks at the time.

"I'm fat and have nothing left that fits," I whined to Peyton.

She immediately called Sydney who ran a boutique in town to come by and measure me for a new wardrobe. And then asked Lily if she had any bigger things or knew someone who might. With a few hours I had new clothes that actually fit and even more on the way.

I cried and hugged each of the ladies that had come to my rescue.

"Sorry. I'm a mess these days."

"I've been there. It's a crazy time in your life, but worth every second of it," Sydney assured me.

“Why didn’t you ever try for a second kid then?”

She laughed. “Hunter keeps us plenty busy. Plus, as Pack Beta, Luke’s always so busy. And we’ve had to sort of adopt several over the years, so in a way it feels like we have a big family as it is. Does that even make sense?”

We all nodded. Sydney’s mate Luke was Alpha of Larken Pack at one point. For mutual benefit, Thomas and Luke merged the Packs. Thomas maintained Alpha status with Luke submitting as his Beta. But the former Larken Pack still looked first to Luke in a lot of situations. It had been several years since the merger, so at this point it seemed like they were more like a big extended family with Luke as the patriarch they all respected and looked to for guidance. I couldn’t fathom the amount of pressure that put on him and Sydney.

“Besides, Luke is an only child and I only have one sister. Neither of us ever dreamed of having a big family like Lily and Thomas.”

“Thank you all. Seriously. This was all so wonderful.”

I started to cry and my best friends in the whole world surrounded me in one big hug.

“Just let it out,” Katherine told me.

Angel rubbed my back.

Winnie rubbed my belly. “Just think, our kids will grow up together and be as close as their fathers.”

“And their mamas,” Lily insisted. “There’s a best friend for Lilah in there too.”

“You guys are the best.”

Wyatt walked into the back room where we had congregated and froze looking like he was ready to bolt.

“Uh, is everything okay here?”

“Better than okay,” I told him.

“Good, good. But I’m afraid it’s time.”

“Time for what?” Peyton asked.

“We have a doctor’s appointment today. Did you forget?”

“What? Yes, I forgot. How could I forget that?”

“Pregnancy brain,” they all said at once.

“Go on, we’ll take care of this,” Sydney insisted.

“Thank you.”

I hugged each of them, one at a time, before letting Wyatt drag me out.

“Kate, can you ...” Eddie started before Wyatt cut him off.

“No.”

Once out in the restaurant, I saw Thomas and his dad, Zach, having lunch. I gave them a wave, but Wyatt nudged me to keep moving.

“Kate, how are you feeling?” someone asked.

Before I could even turn to see who it was, Wyatt pushed me a little harder.

“Can’t talk, we have an appointment with Doc to see the babies,” he announced to the entire restaurant.

I glared at him over my shoulder, but it didn’t stop him from rushing out of the building.

“I can’t believe you just blurted that out to everyone,” I told him once we were in the car and driving to the clinic. “Now everyone is going to be badgering me about how the appointment went.”

“As if the whole Pack isn’t stopping by to check on you at least once a week.”

“That’s not the point,” I grumbled.

“Ow.”

“What’s wrong?” he growled.

“B is kicking really hard in there. Give me your hand. It’s so strong, I bet you can feel it.”

I had never really let him feel my baby belly before. Sure, he talked to them and stroked it when snuggled up in bed, but this was different.

He kicked me again and Wyatt nearly wrecked the car as he pulled into the clinic parking lot.

“Was that?”

“B,” I told him just as D pushed back against her brother. I moved Wyatt’s hand towards her. “And this is your daughter. She’s a fighter, and doesn’t take any crap from the boys.”

He stared down at his hand in amazement.

“I can feel them moving around in there,” he whispered.

“It’s kind of cool, huh?”

“The coolest.”

“Hi, little D. It’s Daddy. I can’t wait to meet you, just not anytime soon. You guys stay put in there.”

A kicked hard and Wyatt gasped.

“Was that?”

“A. He stays quiet until he’s not, usually instigated by B.”

“I saw him kick you. Kate, I saw his little foot protrude inside you like a little alien or something.”

“Is it freaking you out yet?”

“No. I love it. I love you.”

I smiled happily. But when someone knocked on the glass on my side, I screamed and jumped.

Sam gave a little wave.

I opened the door to yell at him.

“Are you crazy? You don’t scare a pregnant woman like that!”

“Sorry. We were just wondering if you two were ever going to get out of this car and come inside.”

Wyatt chuckled.

“Don’t you dare laugh.”

“I felt the babies for the first time. Well, three of the four of them. They’re really moving in there.”

“Well if you come inside, you can actually see them.”

“But feeling them is so much better.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said. “I feel them all the time now. I want to see them.”

Sam chuckled and led the way back to the clinic as we got out and followed.

I could admit it, seeing my babies within me would never get old.

He checked each of them and gave us some pictures to take home.

“Is that it?”

“No, actually we need to discuss some things. You’re twenty weeks along. That’s roughly the halfway point for a singleton, but for multiples we’re coming into the gray area. Our goal is to keep them in until twenty-four weeks. Anything after that is a bonus, and the longer you carry them, the better chances of survival becomes. At twenty-four weeks they’ll be premies with possible complications, but we can prepare for that.”

“So what happens if we make it to forty weeks? I could just carry them to term.”

Sam laughed. “That sounds great, Kate, but at twenty weeks, you’re already bigger than most of my full-term mothers. There is no way you’ll make it that long because

these kids are going to grow quickly in the weeks to come. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"And they are going to bicker and fight for space as things get tighter in there."

I smiled. "I think that's already happening."

"We certainly saw some of that on the monitor today."

"So what are we talking here? What would be considered full-term for quadruplets?" Wyatt asked.

"We're going to consider them full-term at twenty-eight weeks."

"No, that's too soon," I protested.

"They will be preemies, Kate, and you and Wyatt are just going to have to prepare for that."

"No," I told him. "We need strong, healthy babies."

"Which is why we're going to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. Okay?"

"Twenty-eight weeks is too soon. That cannot be considered full-term."

"Hey, if we can hold them in there until thirty-one weeks, we'll all be relieved."

"So I'm hearing thirty-two weeks is my minimal goal."

Sam snorted. "I mean, sure, we can aim for that, but you both need to prepare for the worst."

"The worst would be that I went through all of this shit just to bury four children. Any other scenario I can live with."

"I know you say that now, and we've talked a bit about that before, but I'm sending you home with some information to read over before our next appointment in two weeks."

"Two weeks? Already?" Wyatt asked.

“Yes, and if things start to show signs of progressing by then, we’ll go to weekly visits. We’re going to be monitoring you and the babies very closely until you deliver.”

Wyatt and I shared a look of concern. This was why I was desperately trying not to let my guard down. I knew I needed to shield my heart if I was going to survive this. And his affirmation that we needed to prepare for the worst-case scenarios scared the shit out of me.

Wyatt

Chapter 24

24 weeks pregnant.

We were already doing weekly appointments now after a minor scare with some Braxton Hicks contractions last week. I was no longer working out at the ranch. Everyone understood, and even though Kate still hadn't agreed to me staying home with the kids at least for the early years, I'd already cleared it with Thomas just in case.

Our scare had been eye opening. Up until then the pregnancy had been fairly smooth with no complications, but it was too soon for the babies to come.

Even though Doc and Sam both agreed that we would be okay at twenty-four weeks, Kate and I were not.

I pulled up to the clinic and then jumped out and ran around to help Kate out. It was crazy how big she'd gotten this week. Like overnight the babies seemed to double in size. She was huge and uncomfortable. There wasn't much I could do for her aside from assuring her that she was beautiful, and I was here for her every step of the way.

She was still going into the diner every day despite my protests. It was only for a few hours, but to me it was still too much.

"Ow," she complained as we walked in.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

"Contractions again?"

“No. B just kicked me really hard.”

I chuckled. “He’s a feisty one.”

We both started noticing very different personality traits in each kid, or at least we liked to think of them like that. A was laid back unless provoked and then his temper seemed to spike quickly. B was always on the move, never content to just lay around or sleep. C was the chill one; nothing seemed to faze him. And little D ruled over her brothers with an iron fist. She was going to be a force to be reckoned with.

As usual, there was no waiting around. As soon as we walked in, Dianne ushered us straight back even though there were a few people in the waiting room this time. At least none of them protested, smiling and saying hello as we passed.

The whole Pack was excited about our impending family. Quads seemed to heighten the excitement and curiosity of everything.

“Hello. How’s everything going this week. Anymore contractions?”

“Nope. They seem to have settled down,” I told him.

“That’s great. And we’re officially at our goal. Kate, you’re doing wonderful. I know things are getting tougher by the day right now.”

“I’m out of clothes, again. Everyone pitched in to help me with a new wardrobe just last month and now everything’s tight again. I think the only thing left for me to wear are muumuus.”

“Well, now that you’re on bedrest ...”

I cleared my throat and she scowled at me.

“I thought Sam explained the importance of going on bedrest at last week’s appointment.”

“Oh, he did. She’s just not ready for that yet.”

“Kate, we need you off of those feet now. We hit our mark, and that’s great, but at this point, every week more we

can keep them baking will bring less possible complications. There's no reason to take the risks now. We're in the home stretch."

She frowned and started to cry. "But I'm not ready."

"Ready or not, we're here. It's time."

"I don't do well just laying around like that. I'll go crazy."

"And that's normal. We can deal with that," Doc argued.

"I can't deal with that," she countered.

"Wyatt, please. A little help here."

"Oh, I've tried."

She snorted. "Who do you think takes me to the diner? I can't even fit behind the wheel of the car now, not if I want my feet to touch the pedals."

"Great, so stop taking her places," Doc told me.

I hated telling Kate no. She was doing this for me. I just wanted to make her as happy as she was making me.

"Keep her at home, in bed."

"What if we get a wheelchair?" she surprised me by asking. "Can I get out and even go into the restaurant if he pushes me in a wheelchair?"

"It's still risky, but better if you're going to be stubborn about this."

"Oh, I am," she assured him.

I groaned. "See what I have to live with?"

Even Chewy was on my side when it came to her getting up and going out. Somewhere along the way, he stopped barking at me all the time, and started barking at her anytime she tried to leave the house. And when she was having contractions, even if they were just Braxton Hicks,

Chewy had been the one to alert me when she stubbornly tried to ignore them.

That stupid dog was currently in my good graces.

“You heard Doc. At home, in bed,” I told her.

“We’re so close now, Kate.”

“Close? I could go for another twelve weeks. That’s three more months.”

He chuckled. “At this point, we’ll be happy if you can give us three more days, Kate. Get in bed and stay there.”

“But if I use a wheelchair?” she tried again.

“Better, but not great, and only for short periods of time.”

“Okay. I have a large order arriving tomorrow afternoon and I need to walk Angel through what to do.”

“Peyton can do that.”

“But I’d feel better if I did it.”

“I can’t win these arguments,” I said, throwing my hands up.

“Dramatic much?” she muttered.

“I’m glad you’re doing well, and the babies all look great. D and C are measuring a little smaller than the other two today, so we’ll need to keep an eye on that and check them again next week. At some point soon you’ll have the option to come in twice a week, or Sam and I can come to you. It’s going to be very important that you stay rested and hydrated and keep your butt in bed.”

“In bed and hydrated. Isn’t that counterproductive, Doc?” she asked. “My bladder is like the size of a pea. A pea that the kids like to use as their personal punching bag. If I drink too much, I have to go to the bathroom. So, I’m constantly up and down to the point where I’m not actually staying in bed anyway.”

“I can put in a catheter,” he threatened.

“You know what? Nevermind. Rest and hydrate. I’ve got it.”

Kate

Chapter 25

28 weeks pregnant.

“I’m going to lose my mind if I have to spend another day in this bed,” I whined.

Winnie had come by to sit with me. Wyatt had arranged for all of my friends to come and sit with me on a rotation. Sometimes the guys filled in too. And when there was a lapse in the rotation, my aunt and uncle would sit with me.

Trudy and Don were so excited about the babies. It was cute.

Mom had volunteered to fly out and be here with me, but I’d begged her not to. Instead, she was going to come after the babies were born to help out.

“It’s really not so bad, Kate.”

“Says you. How would you like to be laid up like this?”

She rubbed her belly and sighed. “Honestly, I’d love to get bedrest orders right about now. I’m exhausted and so ready for this little boy to make his big appearance. You know the guys have a bet going on which of us delivers first.”

I groaned. “Why am I not surprised? I still blame them and their betting for putting me in this position to begin with.”

“Huh?”

“Drunken poker night is the cause behind this,” I said pointing to my stomach.

Winnie just stared at me for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

“I shouldn’t laugh, but are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“That is hysterical.”

“I wanted an abortion when I found out,” I admitted.

“What? Why?”

“I didn’t want to go through another miscarriage. The first one almost killed me.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t need to worry about that anymore.”

I shrugged. “I’m still terrified one or all of them won’t make it. I try not to get too attached.”

“Is that why you refused to have a baby shower?”

“I didn’t exactly refuse it.”

“Just continue to postpone it?”

“Something like that.”

“Kate, do you and Wyatt have anything for the babies?”

I bit my lip and shook my head.

“We haven’t bought a single thing yet. Every time I try, I go into a panic attack thinking I’m going to jinx it if we buy anything for them.”

She sniffed and hugged me.

“You can’t think like that. It’s not healthy. And you’re going to need so much. Please let us throw you a baby shower. Everyone will come to you. And you can set up a registry right online. I can help you.” When I hesitated, she pursed her lips and glared at me. “Kate, you don’t even have a nursery or a

pack of diapers. You're going to go through a pack of diapers a day with so many babies."

I groaned. "I'm not ready to think about it."

"Where are they going to sleep?"

I shrugged. "We'll figure it out."

Instead of arguing with me, she stole my laptop and then climbed into bed next to me. For the next three hours we looked through baby stuff and I added everything I wanted plus everything Winnie thought I might need to a registry, and then she called Lily.

Getting Lily involved in anything is a guaranteed production. She didn't waste any time either.

Sam stopped by for my weekly checkup. They wouldn't even let me go into the clinic any more. There was no real change to report, and he was thrilled that I had made it this far. When he checked my cervix, it was still closed up tight.

"You're doing great, Kate," he assured me as he left.

"Um, babe, you have guests."

I could hear Sam down the hall fussing. "Do not over stimulate her."

"She needs stuff for the babies," Lily argued. "She can stay in bed, but this is happening."

"Just try to stay calm, okay?" Wyatt said. "If it gets too overwhelming, just let me know and I'll be the bad guy for you."

"You'd do that for me?"

He leaned down and kissed me. "Always."

"And really, it's only been a few hours. How much damage can she do?"

Winnie had come in first with Clay in tow. He was carrying a comfortable looking rocking chair that Wyatt had

him put in the corner. It had a footstool to match it. Win took a seat and pulled out a notebook and pen.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep track of everything, you just sit back and relax. Lily knows how to rally people and quickly, so fair warning, this is going to be insane.”

I snorted. “You put Lily in charge. Do you really think I expected anything less?”

She laughed. “Good point.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to your baby shower last week.”

“I would have kicked you in the butt if you’d tried.”

I pouted. “I did try. Wyatt refused to take me, and I got stuck in the car when I tried to drive myself.”

She stared at me like I’m crazy and then shrugged. “I guess that serves you right. You have to listen to the doctors, Kate. You’re already beyond their expectations, but I need you to stay put and bake my little niece and nephews for as long as possible.”

“All this worry and my body is still shut tight.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“I guess.”

After that she’d sat quietly in the corner taking down names and gifts from every single person that came though.

Four hours later, I was beyond and exhausted and ready for a nap and the line of people entering my room was still coming. It felt like every female in the Pack showed up with something to offer up for the babies. I was in shock as the pile of baby gear, clothes, diapers, wipes, and so much more began piling up and taking over the room. It was more than a little overwhelming.

Every person came in one or two at a time. They didn’t stay long, but people steadily streamed through wishing me

luck, praying over me and that babies, and dropping off gift after gift.

I knew there were some big-ticket items we were going to need, but I hadn't been able to buy them yet. I had this ridiculous fear that if I did, if all this baby stuff came into the house, if we actually put a nursery together, that I would somehow jinx it all. Logically, I understood that was ridiculous, but it still made me worry. But I didn't have the heart to try and explain that to anyone.

The cribs didn't match, but there were four of them that four different people gifted us. Lily and Thomas had apparently bought us two double strollers with attachable infant car seats. The strollers could even be connected together to be used by just one person.

I started to cry when I saw it. "How? When?"

"Are you kidding me, I started shopping the second I heard it was quadruplets. I'm happy to pass down Lilah's clothes as she outgrows them for Baby D, but I may have gone a little crazy on boy clothes. I just love buying boy stuff and you're giving me three of them to spoil."

"She did the same thing with Carter. I've boxed up everything he's outgrown already for the boys," Katherine said. "I figured the Pack would pull together and get you the things you needed most, so aside from some hand-me-downs, I went a different route." She smiled and handed me a wrapped box. When I opened it there was an assortment of thank you notes, pens, and four baby books."

She shrugged. "After my shower I had to run out and buy cards to send. I knew there would be a big turnout because everyone has been talking about the quads, and I figured it would give you something to do over the next few weeks. And I loved this baby book. I track all of Carter's milestones with it so thought maybe you'd like it for the babies too. Unfortunately, they don't make one book for four kids."

I laughed. “Four kids. Wow. I’m not sure that’s hit me quite so hard as it has today. I mean look at this craziness.”

“A baby uses a lot of things, but multiply that by four and it is insane,” Winnie admitted.

“How many more are out there?”

“Wyatt and Lily decided you’ve had enough. It’s dwindled down to mostly just us,” Katherine said just as Angel and Peyton walked in to join me on the bed.

Soon I was surrounded by the most important women in my life.

Aunt Trudy came through last. “Sorry I’m late. Austin warned us how crazy it was here, so I wanted to let things quiet down some. Wow! Look at all this stuff.”

“Oh, there’s more in the future nursery already,” Lily said.

“There is?” I asked.

“Yeah, some people couldn’t stick around because the line was so long, so they just dropped off their gifts.”

“Don’t worry. I recorded them all for you,” Angel said.

“How are you holding up?” Aunt Trudy asked.

“A bit overwhelmed,” I said as tears slid down my cheeks. I was smiling through them. “But mainly because I can’t believe the Pack pulled together like this for us.”

“You may not realize this,” Peyton said, “but you are kind of a big deal around here.”

“She’s right. Everyone loves you and just wants to help in some way,” Angel added.

“You’re going to be turning help away when these babies arrive. There’s just something exciting about multiples. Liam and I are twins and always drew curiosity, but quads? Yeah, good luck with that.” Lily laughed.

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “Thanks,” I said sarcastically.

Aunt Trudy fussed with my hair, brushing it out of my face. “Your mom would have loved to be here, but I understand why you asked her to wait until after the delivery. You’ll need a lot of help with four infants.”

I looked around the room and smiled. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Peyton took my hand and squeezed it.

I had a support system like no other. All I had to do was sit back, try to relax, and keep the babies inside as long as possible. I really didn’t want to have them in a human hospital, but Doc and Sam had convinced Wyatt it was for the best. They’d even tried to move me there for bedrest, but I had refused. We had multiple birth plans in place for nearly every scenario possible, but I couldn’t fathom any of them that would require my babies to be stuck in a NICU for an extended period of time.

“Here,” Aunt Trudy said handing me four envelopes. “This is a joint gift from your parents, me, and Uncle Don.”

I opened the first envelope and my jaw dropped in surprise as my eyes flew up to her.

“No. This is far too much.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You and Austin are all we have. We’ll do the same for him and Angel someday. This is really important to your mom and I.”

I hugged her and sniffed back tears.

“What is it?” Angel asked.

“They started a trust fund for each of the babies.”

“Thank you. All of you.”

I felt like that luckiest woman in the world.

Wyatt

Chapter 26

32 weeks pregnant.

“This is ridiculous!” she complained as I helped her out of the bed and to the bathroom. “It feels like I’ve been pregnant forever and a day already.”

“Babe, you’re doing great.”

“I cannot stay in bed a second longer, Wyatt. I’m going crazy. Let me out of this room. At least let me sit in the living room today. I’m losing my mind here. I need to check on my diner. I need to talk to someone, anyone besides you and the dog.”

Chewy had taken it upon himself to stand watch over Kate. He rarely left her side. I hated to admit it, but the little asshole was growing on me.

Anytime Kate had a contraction, Chewy alerted me. She couldn’t hide them from me or try to be stubborn about it. He was quite protective of her, but ever since our battle for dominance, we’d had an understanding. I was okay with it, and it made me feel better knowing he was there to keep her company.

The guys and I had been diligently working on the nursery, baby proofing the house, and all the things necessary to prepare for my kids to come home.

I couldn’t wait for Kate to see everything we’d done. Soon. The guys were arriving any second to help me finish up

a few projects and then we would be done and ready.

“Doc is coming by today to check on you. Just stay put until then.”

“Fine,” she pouted.

There was a knock at the front door.

“Give me a minute,” I yelled out knowing that any wolf shifter would hear me clearly.

“Go on. I can pee by myself. I used to do it all the time.”

“Fine, but do not get up without me.”

“I know the drill, Wyatt. Just go.”

Begrudgingly I did.

Doc was at the door with Thomas, Austin, Emmett, and James behind him.

“Come on in. Kate will be just a moment.” I looked around at the group. “Where’s Clay? I thought you all were running together to get here.”

“We were, but Clay got a call just before we left,” James explained.

“Winnie’s in labor,” Austin told me.

“Like, for real? It’s time?”

“Appears so. Sam’s with her now. I’ll head over as soon as I check on Kate.”

Chewy ran out of the bedroom and down the hall barking.

“Knock it off, Chewy. Friends. We’ve been through this before.”

But he growled and grabbed my pants leg and started to pull.

“Something’s wrong.”

I took off running following him into the bedroom and then the bathroom. My heart stopped as I saw Kate on the floor down on her hands and knees.

“Kate. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. This floor was filthy. I just need to clean it.”

Doc peeked his head in behind me. “Is everything okay?”

I shrugged. “She’s cleaning.”

“Nesting,” James yelled from the other room. “She’s nesting, dude. Clay said Winnie’s been doing it for days and then this morning her water broke.”

“Thomas, help me get her up.”

“No, I’m not done yet,” she protested.

“Sweetheart, Doc’s here. He needs to check you and the babies.”

She sighed, and I thought for a second she was going to be belligerent and refuse to get up. Much to my relief, she conceded.

It took more than just me and Thomas to get her up from the floor. James and Emmett stepped up to assist too. Together we were able to get her back to her feet and help her to the bed.

I knew she was embarrassed and frustrated. Her belly was enormous, making it difficult for her to do anything by herself.

“So we’ve entered the nesting phase,” Doc said as he ran through the routine checkup. “When did that begin?”

“Just now,” I told him. “This is the first time that I know of, and I’ve been keeping a pretty close eye on her.”

The guys excused themselves from the room while Doc ran his more intimate tests.

“Hmm.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s starting, isn’t it?”

“What? You’re having contractions?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t really noticed anything, just a little cramping.”

“You’re about a centimeter and a half dilated.”

“What does that mean?” I demanded.

“Nothing too concerning right now. Continued bed rest and monitoring. If she starts having contractions, you’re going to need to get her to the hospital immediately. Sam or I will meet you there, but the high-risk staff is aware of your situation and prepared for delivery in an emergency. It’s important that you don’t wait too long, Wyatt. When she starts contractions, get her there.”

“She doesn’t want to have them in a human hospital.”

“She’s made it to thirty-two weeks. That’s practically unheard of. They will give her a drug to help mature the babies’ lungs to give them an easier start to life. Trust me when I tell you this is the best option for all of them. I would never send you to a human hospital if that wasn’t the case. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell her. When the time comes, she won’t be in a position to choose, you will. There are still so many things that could go wrong during delivery. They have everything we could possibly need on hand. I can’t offer that at the clinic.”

“You’re saying if we don’t do this, even though we’ve come this far and exceeded expectations, that we could still lose one or more of the babies?”

“Or Kate,” he told me.

I growled.

He patted me on the back. “Get her there.”

I nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

Kate was tired and upset after the appointment. She asked to be left alone for a nap, so I turned and walked back to the living room to find the guys standing around raiding my fridge.

“Any word from Clay?”

“Not yet,” Thomas said.

“What do we have left to do on the nursery?” Emmett asked.

“Not much. Touch up the paint and tighten one of the cribs. Lily said she’d come back and finish decorating for us.”

“Let’s get to work,” Thomas said.

With five of us it didn’t take long before we were done.

“That’s it,” I announced.

Thomas clapped me on the back. “Everything’s going to be okay and you’re going to be a great father.”

“I hope you’re right.”

His phone rang, and he held up a finger letting me know he had to take it.

“Hey ... What? ... Where are you? ... Okay ... We’re on our way.” He hung up and then looked at me. “That was Clay. The baby turned. He’s breech. They’re being taken to the hospital for a C-section. Sorry man but I have to get there for him.”

“Of course. Go. Tell him I’m sorry I can’t be there.”

“He understands.”

Thomas left while I filled the others in.

“I’ll call Katherine and see if she’s still at the office. She can stop by and check on them,” James said.

Chewy came running down the hall barking hysterically.

“What’s wrong?” I asked the damn dog.

Austin laughed.

Emmett said something. I'm sure it was at my expense, but I was too worried to listen.

When Chewy grabbed my pant leg and then turned and ran back to the bedroom, I followed. And when I opened the door and saw Kate lying there in a pool of blood my whole body froze.

"Help me!" I yelled as the guys ran down the hall.

"Holy shit. What happened to her?" Emmett asked.

"Kate!" Austin yelled as he ran to her side.

James took one look at her and grabbed for his radio. "I need an emergency alert sent out to Casen Medical. I'm inbound with high-risk pregnancy expecting quadruplets. She is currently unresponsive and covered in blood. Have a team waiting upon arrival. ETA fifteen minutes. Track down Doc and let him know to meet us there."

I started to shake all over.

"Kate?" Austin said. "Kitty-Kate, wake up."

"She's breathing heavy and losing blood fast," Emmett reported.

"Help me get into the car. Emmett, I need you to drive just in case she starts to crash," James said. He was cool and calm in the face of my biggest nightmare. "Austin, take care of Wyatt. Get his ass in the car, backseat."

When Austin grabbed my arm, I shook him off. My whole body was shaking all over, and I knew I was seconds away from shifting.

The sting on my cheek kept me from cascading any further.

"Pull yourself together, man. She needs you right now."

As Emmett and James carefully lifted Kate and carried her out to his cruiser, Austin shoved me out the door.

I was placed in the backseat and Kate's head was laid in my lap while James kneeled between the seats on the floorboard. He tossed Emmett the keys.

"Turn on the sirens and go as fast as you can. But safely," James ordered.

Kate's eyes flickered open and stared up at me.

"Just talk to her, Wyatt. Keep her calm," he instructed.

"Hi beautiful. Keep your eyes open and focus on me, okay?"

She screamed as I felt her whole body tighten.

"Do not push!" James yelled at her. "Whatever you do, don't push, Kate, no matter how badly you want to."

"Just breathe," I said in a what I hope was a soothing voice.

Keep her calm. That's all I had to do. But who was going to keep me calm?

I'm scared, I heard her tell me.

So am I.

When another contraction hit her hard, I screamed along with her.

It felt like forever getting to the hospital, but I vaguely heard James tell Emmett he did a great job making the trip in record time.

Things moved in a bigger blur after that as complete strangers pried Kate from my arms and onto a gurney. They asked a dozen questions I didn't have answers to, but James seemed to know exactly the right things to say.

"Are you the father?" someone finally asked me.

"Yes," James, Emmett, and Austin said at the same time shoving me along.

I had to run down the hall to keep up.

“You’re going to need to stay out here while we deliver the babies. Your wife has suffered from a placental abruption, and she’s lost a lot of blood,” some woman in scrubs explained.

“I’m not leaving her side.”

“Sir, I’m sorry but ...”

“I am not leaving her side.”

“I’m afraid ...”

“I’m afraid you aren’t hearing me. I am not leaving her side. I am not leaving my babies in the hands of complete strangers.”

“Wyatt, come with me, son,” Doc said, meeting us at the door where the woman tried to leave me behind.

“He’s the father, and she’s my patient. Take it up with your chief if you have any concerns, but he stays. Come on. It’s time to bring your babies into this world.”

I stopped and looked back at my friends.

“Go!” James yelled.

“You’ve got this,” Emmett cheered.

“She’s going to be okay, right?” Austin asked them.

“What’s going on?” I heard Thomas say just as the doors shut behind me.

I was entirely numb as someone helped me into scrubs and instructed me on how to wash up. Doc had disappeared with Kate and was prepping for surgery, or so the guy helping me said. I didn’t understand anything they were telling me, but soon, I was being pushed through a door that led into the OR.

Kate looked so pale laying there. A sheet was up blocking the view of her lower body, and I was told to stay up by her head.

Doc came over and smiled.

“Tell me she’s going to be okay.”

“I think she’ll be just fine as soon as we get the babies out and stop the bleeding.”

“How did this happen? She just laid down for a nap. If Chewy hadn’t come and gotten me, I wouldn’t have known anything was wrong. I wouldn’t have known, Doc.”

My chest felt tight, and my head was pounding.

“We’re doing everything we can. Dr. Michaels is the best obstetrical surgeon around and will be performing the surgery while I oversee things. I’ll be right here the whole time. If you have any questions, just ask. But once the incision is made, things will move very quickly. There’s no time to administer the drugs we talked about.”

“To strengthen their lungs?”

“Yes. So we have four teams ready to go. Each team will focus on just one baby. They’ll be taken to NICU immediately and checked thoroughly. We’ll know more on the babies after that.”

“Sir, we’re ready to begin.”

He nodded. “Deep breath, Wyatt. They’re in good hands. I promise.”

“Okay.”

“Just focus on Kate, talk to her.”

Her eyes were closed, and she looked so weak. It scared me.

I caressed her cheek and spoke to her through our bond.

Hang in there, babe. Our babies are on the way.

Another contraction wracked her body and I screamed from the pain of it all.

Woah, that was a bad one. Are you okay?

I'm okay, she finally responded, and I nearly cried with relief.

The doctors and nurses were all staring at me.

“Sorry. Please continue.”

“Anymore outbursts like that and he’s out of here,” the doctor told Doc. “Everyone ready? Okay, let’s have a baby, or I guess I should say babies.”

The room went quiet, and I stared into Kate’s eyes as the surgery began. I nodded to her and smiled, even though she probably couldn’t see it with the face mask they insisted I wear.

“Prepare to receive the first baby. It’s a girl.”

A strong cry came almost immediately.

Tears filled Kate’s eyes. I only looked away long enough to see our daughter pass from the one set of hands to another.

Next came baby B. He wasn’t quite as loud as his sister, but a little of the tension I was feeling eased as his tiny feet kicked the air as they transferred him and moved on to the next.

“You’re doing great, Kate.”

“Baby C is coming next,” the surgeon said.

But when they pulled him from Kate’s womb, he made no sound. There was a flurry of activity, and he was quickly whisked away without a sound. The glimpse I did get of him made me want to throw up as I fought back panic. He looked blue—dark purple would be more accurate.

He didn’t cry. He didn’t cry, Kate said.

He’ll be okay. He has to be. Stay calm, it’ll be okay.

But I didn’t really know if it was going to be okay. I didn’t know if he was okay. By the time our final son was delivered, I was just trying to hold it together for Kate. He

didn't make a sound either, though he was squirming just as bit as they moved him to the bed.

He didn't cry either. Wyatt! she wailed in my head. Go, be with the babies. They need you right now.

I can't leave you, Kate.

You have to. Go!

“She's lost a lot of blood. Someone get him out of here. Take him to NICU to be with the kids while I work on cleaning this mess up,” Dr. Michaels barked.

I helplessly looked to Doc for help.

“Go on, Wyatt. Check on the babies. I'll be here with her every step of the way.”

Before I could protest, or even say goodbye to Kate, I was pushed out of the room.

The last thing I heard was the increased beeping of the heart monitor.

“She's coding.”

My entire world stopped.

Wyatt

Chapter 27

They wouldn't let me in the NICU, and they wouldn't let me go back into the OR to be with Kate. I had no idea what was happening, and I couldn't seem to reach her through our bond. I started pacing the waiting room. That was never a good sign for a wolf shifter.

My wolf and I were both distressed.

"They're going to be okay. They have to be okay," Austin said.

James and Emmett were still there waiting with me too.

Every time the door opened, I jumped for any bit of news, but there was none.

"I can't reach her. I can't talk to her. I don't even know if she's dead or alive. I'd know if she died, right?"

"I have no idea. I'm still new to all this," James said.

"You'd have to know," Emmett agreed. "You'd have to."

The guys were as upset as I was. We just needed some answers.

The door opened again, and I jumped. Thomas and Lily walked in smiling.

"You guys didn't have to come. I thought you were staying with Wyatt," Lily said.

Thomas touched her chin and gently turned it towards me. Lily's face blanched.

"Kate?"

I nodded. "They delivered the babies almost an hour ago. No one will let me go back to see them. There were some complications." My voice cracked. I was reaching my break point and started to shake.

"Look at me," Thomas ordered. "You will not shift here. Am I clear?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Does Doc know?"

"He's in there with her."

"Okay. Let me see what I can find out. Sam's still here too. Winnie had the baby, and he was sticking around to make sure she and the baby are okay."

I thought I was going to throw up.

"Winnie?"

"She's fine," Lily said. "Winnie and the baby are fine. You can all go back and see them for yourself."

"Go on," I told the others. "I don't want to leave in case someone comes for me. Clay will understand. He'll understand."

I knew I was repeating myself, but I was so distraught I could barely think straight. What had gone wrong? She'd been fine. The babies had been fine. Until they weren't.

"I can't lose her, Thomas."

He hugged me, giving me just a bit of strength that I desperately needed to get through this.

While the others left, letting Lily take them back to check on Clay and Winnie, Thomas stayed by my side.

He pulled out his phone as he began pacing with me.

“Sam? Are you still in the hospital? ... Good. I need you to check on Kate ... Yeah, she had the babies, but there were some complications. Wyatt’s a mess and about to freak out on me. We just need to know what’s going on ... Great. Thanks.”

He put down his phone and turned his attention back to me.

“Sam’s going to get us an update on Kate and the babies. We should know something very soon.”

“C wasn’t breathing, Thomas. He was ...” I swallowed hard fighting back bile. “He was a sort of a blueish-purple color. It wasn’t right. He was so still. Oh God. I have to know if he’s okay. And A wasn’t much better, though he was at least moving when they took him away.”

“I know you’re scared right now, but I need you to keep it together.”

I nodded.

The doors opened and I jumped once more.

Sam.

He walked over and hugged me. I didn’t know what that meant as I tried to push my fears aside.

“What do we know?” Thomas asked.

Sam took a deep breath. “Babies D and B are doing great. They have them both on low oxygen just as a precaution, but really, they’re breathing on their own.”

I nodded. “Did C make it?”

Sam and Thomas shared a look that had my knees buckling as they both lunged to keep me from collapsing.

“C’s alive, Wyatt. I’m not going to lie to you, he’s not doing well, but he is alive. And A too. A should pull through just fine. The biggest concerns are with C right now. And Kate. She suffered a lot of blood loss. They almost lost her on the table. She coded twice. Doc and Dr. Michaels had to work

hard to stabilize her and stop the bleeding. I'm afraid extreme measures were necessary to save her life. Wyatt, she won't be able to have any more kids after this."

I was struggling to catch my breath and needed to sit for a minute to let everything sink in.

"She never even wanted kids. This is all my fault. One drunken night of unprotected sex and I'm going to lose her? This isn't fair."

"Life isn't always fair," Sam said as Thomas punched him in the arm. "Ow."

"You said she's stable now."

"Yeah, she'll be fine. She is weak and will need time to recover, which means more bedrest is likely. It's going to be a tough couple of weeks ahead for all of you, but she's going to be okay, Wyatt."

"I-I can't feel her. I can't talk to her."

"She's heavily sedated. They are settling her into her room right now, and you can go back soon. But first, would you like to meet your babies?"

"I can see them?"

"Yes, you can. Follow me."

I hesitated, suddenly nervous and looking to Thomas for help.

He smiled. "She's going to be okay and so are you pups. What are you waiting for? Go!"

But as I was leaving, Clay ran out to check on me.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Sam says Kate's going to be okay. How's Winnie?"

"Sore, but great. Really great. How are the kids?"

"I'm heading back to see them now."

“So they’re good?”

“C’s struggling, but he’s alive. And the others are okay. Yours?”

“He’s perfect. But he had a little trouble breathing at first. They said something about fluids and a fast delivery. He’ll be fine though. They have him in NICU for observation just as a precaution. I was just heading back there.”

“Him too,” Sam said. “Why don’t you join us, Clay. You can show Wyatt the ropes.”

I turned to Thomas again.

“Well, go on. You can do this, Wyatt,” he encouraged.

I smiled for the first time in hours and nodded. I could do this.

Following Sam and Clay, I walked down a hallway and through security. Since it was my first time and there had been so much confusion when we arrived, Sam got me set up with bands that matched each of the kids and allowed me access to them anytime I wanted.

Once all that was settled and I was allowed inside, I passed by Clay almost immediately and stopped to check out the tiny bundle wrapped in a blue blanket in his arms.

“This is Sean,” he said. “Sean, this is your Uncle Wyatt.”

“He’s perfect,” I told him, and I meant it.

“Yeah, and he shares a birthday with the quads. I guess that makes them quints, huh?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Sam said.

“Absolutely does,” I countered, agreeing with Clay. “Quints for life.”

“Come on,” Sam urged.

“I’ll stop by before I leave,” Clay told me.

I was so nervous. Sean seemed so tiny in his arms, and he was much further along in gestation than my kids.

My kids.

I was a dad.

So many emotions were swirling within me. My life had changed in an instant. They were real. They were here. And they were mine.

Sam picked up a tiny pink bundle from one of the incubators and put her in my arms.

“Baby D, your daughter.”

I held my breath as I stared down at her.

“She’s so little.”

“They all are and will need to stay for at least a few weeks here before going home.”

I growled, but he shook his head.

To calm myself I leaned down and kissed my daughter’s sweet head, and then I blew my scent all over her, marking her as mine.

Sam smiled, recognizing what I had done.

Next, I met Baby B. He was just as feisty as we’d imagined. It made me smile to see him so active. I marked him too.

Both babies seemed perfectly healthy to me, but when Sam laid Baby A in my arms, he was attached to several wires and hard to hold because of it.

“He’s going to be okay, right?”

“Yes. His lungs aren’t quite as developed yet, but his vitals are stable. He just requires more oxygen and monitoring for now.”

Carefully, Sam took the small bundle from me and directed me over to Baby C. He made no move to remove the

baby from the incubator. Instead, he showed me how to touch him while in the clear encasement.

“He’s a fighter, Wyatt. He’ll be okay in time. He’s not completely stable yet, though he’s doing remarkably well, all things considered. He wasn’t breathing on his own at birth. We don’t think there was any long-term brain damage from it, but only time will tell. He has an irregular heartbeat and underdeveloped lungs. Nothing too out of the ordinary for a preemie. This little guy has a long road ahead of him though. It’s been a big day for you. You don’t need to stress about any of that right now. We’ll go over all of it with you and Kate when she’s up and about. Just know we’re doing everything we possibly can for him.”

“Thanks, Sam. It’s all a bit overwhelming, but I trust you know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, and one last thing. The nurse keeps harassing me for names.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and Kate did pick out names for the kids, right?”

“What? No. We’ve just been calling them A, B, C, and D.”

He laughed. “They need real names, Wyatt. So figure it out already.”

“Okay. As soon as Kate’s up to it, we’ll figure it out.”

Names? How the hell did we overlook the need to have names?

Kate

Chapter 28

I squinted up at the bright light above me. My head was pounding, and my throat was dry.

Where am I? I wondered.

“Kate?”

“Wyatt?”

I tried to lift my head to find him, but it was too much. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back on the pillow.

Before I even realized what was happening, his lips were on mine, and my whole body warmed in a flood of emotions that weren't coming from me.

“You're okay. Oh thank God. You're okay.”

“What's going on?”

“Do you remember anything?”

I tried to think back as pieces started to fall into place. I gasped and reached out to my stomach. It had been incredibly large, and now it was flat again. I felt like a piece of me was missing.

“You did it, babe. I thought I'd lost you in the process, but you came back to me. You did it.”

“The babies?”

“They're fine. C's have a bit of trouble and A's not breathing on his own yet, but the doctors are already saying that D and B just might be able to go home with us when you're released.”

“And leave A and C here all alone?”

“We may have to, Kate. They’re taking great care of them, I promise. Wait until you see them.”

I frowned and started to cry. The entire pregnancy I refused to let myself get truly attached to them, never fully believing they’d survive. I had wanted to get rid of them just to eliminate the risk of losing even one of them. I tried to stay detached, but every time I saw their little hearts beating with each ultrasound, I struggled not to hope.

“We really did it?”

“You did it.”

“Where are they? I should be with them.”

I needed to see them, to know they were tangible and real.

“I’ll ask the nurses when you can visit them.”

“Now. I want to see my babies right now.”

“Kate, you’ve been through a lot. You need to rest.”

“I just woke up. I don’t even know how long I’ve been out.”

He bit his lip.

“Wyatt, how long was I out?”

“Two days.”

Tears started flowing as sobs racked my body. “I missed their first two days of life?”

“It’s okay. Because you’ll be here all the rest of them.”

He held me as I mourned the beautiful moment that childbirth should have been.

A nurse walked in, and it was clear she already knew Wyatt.

“Ann, Kate’s awake and would really love to see the babies now.”

“Let me get the doctor.”

“No need. I’m here,” Sam said, strolling into the room. “Well hello, sleepyhead. You were starting to worry us.”

“I’m sorry. Can I see the babies now?”

“Patience Kate. You’ve had a pretty traumatic experience.”

“But I feel fine.”

He chuckled. “Too bad Wyatt can’t say that. You really freaked him out.”

My eyes flew to him as I instantly worried about my mate.

“I’m fine. Better than fine now. I’m great.”

Sam sat down and we had a talk. I learned how close to death I’d been, how they’d had to perform an emergency hysterectomy post-delivery, and how I could never have any more children in the future.

I shelved that thought for another day. Right then, I didn’t care about having any other children, I just wanted my pups.

“All her vitals and her incision look great. Should I alert the NICU that she’ll be coming in?”

“Please do Ann. I’ll grab a wheelchair and we’ll get her up. If that goes well, I’ll take her down myself,” Sam told her.

I couldn’t believe he’d just agreed to that. I was beyond excited and completely terrified.

“Hey, while they are getting things ready, we need to talk,” Wyatt said.

“What?”

I was certain my blood pressure spiked. I didn’t think I could handle any more bad news at the moment. I was already worried enough about A and C.

“We never really discussed names. The nurses have been harassing me to give them real names, but I just couldn’t do it without you.”

I smiled through watery eyes. “I didn’t want to jinx it by naming them.”

“Have you at least thought about it?”

“Of course I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about it since I was a little girl.”

He nodded encouragingly. “So?”

“What do you think of Daphne for our daughter?”

He considered that for a moment. “I love it, but are you sure you don’t want to see them first?”

“If Sam would hurry up and take me to them.”

“Sorry, he had another delivery, actually the same day as the quads. They’re getting released today and he got called away to sign off on it,” Nurse Ann informed us before finishing her paperwork and leaving the room.

“Sean,” Wyatt said.

“I like that for one of the boys, but I was sort of thinking maybe we should stick to their letters. You know? Like Daphne for Baby D.”

“I think that’s a fantastic idea, but Sean is Clay and Winnie’s son. He was born the same day as the quads. They all get to go home today.”

I started to cry again. “I missed that too?”

“It’s okay. We’ll see them soon. I promise.”

“Why can’t I seem to stop crying?”

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

“Doc warned me it could happen. You had an excess of hormones these last several months, and it may take a bit for your body to readjust now.”

“Great, so I have a hormonal imbalance too?”

“Something like that. He said it was also common post-hysterectomies so you might be a bit more emotional than before. But so what? It’s an emotional time for all of us.”

We waited for a while brainstorming name ideas.

“How about Adam for A?” Wyatt suggested.

“I love that name. What about B? Bart?”

“No.”

“Bartholomew?”

“Hell no.”

“Brandon? No, I don’t like that one. Brent? Bennett?”

“Wait. Bennett? I kind of like that one.” Wyatt checked the time and frowned. “Sam’s taking longer than I thought.”

“I hope everything’s okay with Winnie and the baby.”

“I’m sure they’re fine. Hey, do you want to be dumb with me, Kate?”

“Don’t I always?”

He kissed me and then left the room only to return a few minutes later with a wheelchair. He helped me off the bed and into the chair and then rolled me down to the NICU.

I was holding my breath in anticipation.

“Breathe Kate.”

“What if they don’t like me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re their mother; they’re going to love you. It’s like built into their DNA or something.”

“This is really happening, right?”

He squatted down and kissed me. “It’s all real, Kate. And you’re going to be the best mother in the world.”

Wyatt rolled me right past the nurses and into the neonatal intensive care unit. There were only a few other

babies in there, and right there at the back of the room were my precious babies.

“Daphne,” I whispered as Wyatt reached in and took her out of her little plastic crib and laid her in my arms.

I cried and kissed her sweet head.

He pulled out a pen and changed the D to Daphne on the card labeling her bed.

“Adam’s a little trickier to hold because he’s still got a lot of wires attached, but you can still hold him.”

Carefully he got him out and handed him off to me.

“Adam,” I confirmed as Wyatt changed his name tag.

I only held him for a few minutes before he was back in his little bed.

“Bennett is just like you imagined he would be.”

“Strong and feisty.”

“Exactly.”

I held him for a longer time and as he started to cry, he nuzzled my breasts, and I could feel my nipples grow hard and begin to leak.

Wyatt just shrugged when I looked up to him for help.

Without further hesitation, I pulled my hospital gown to the side and brought him to my breast. He immediately latched on and began to suckle.

One of the nurses swung by and saw us.

“Is that Baby B?”

“Bennett,” I corrected.

“He’s a natural. Way to go B. You two took to nursing very quickly.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know what I’m doing, but he seems to.”

She smiled. “You’re doing great. Nursing really should always be this easy. If you’re planning to nurse, even if just for the first few days or weeks, we can provide you with a pump to help your supply come in faster. And I’d wager D is ready to try as well.”

“Daphne,” Wyatt informed her.

“So you named them?”

“Most of them,” I admitted. “A is for Adam. I haven’t met C yet.”

She strolled me over to the last bed.

“He did really well today. And if you’d like to pump some, I can make sure he gets it. Every bit will help him to grow and catch up to his siblings.”

“He’s going to be okay, right?” Wyatt asked her, and I suspected it wasn’t for the first time.

I leaned forward and touched him.

“He’s going to be just fine, my little runt. Christian,” I announced.

“Christian is a strong faithful name,” the nurse told us.

“It’s perfect. We just need a little faith.”

Wyatt eyed me suspiciously.

“Don’t ask me how I know, but I know. He’s perfect just the way he is. He’s a fighter, and he won’t be left behind for long. This one walks his own path, but he’s also the calm one that settles his siblings. Christian will be just fine. You’ll see.”

As I looked around the room at my pups and my mate, I knew in my heart it was true. I may have struggled and fought against my chances of motherhood, but those days were gone.

This is my family.

I am a mother.

And we will live happily ever after.

Kate

Epilogue

6 weeks later.

“Come on Wyatt, we’re going to be late.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to leave the kids home with me?” my mother asked.

“No Mom. We need to do this together—as a family. It’s important. Just the five of us.”

“Okay, I’ve got everyone ready. Grab the diaper bag and Bennett. I’ll take Daphne and Adam,” Wyatt said.

Six weeks ago, I’d woken up to a whole new world. It still felt a bit like a dream, and the sleepless nights with three newborns was no joke. Even with my mom and Aunt Trudy staying with us, along with round the clock additional help from others within the Pack, it was still exhausting.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” I said trying to rush Wyatt out the door.

That’s when I heard it. The horrifying sound of a blowout.

“No! Who did that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well smell them quickly. We don’t have time for this.”

He did as he was told. There were a lot of things about parenting that neither of us had ever expected, but slowly and

with a lot of trial and error, we were getting the hang of it.

One week after the babies were born, I was released from the hospital, and Bennett and Daphne came home with me.

Two weeks after that, it took every ounce of strength I had left to say goodbye to our sweet little Christian and bring Adam home.

Each night when I nursed them to sleep, one at a time, I stared at that empty fourth crib and cried. My heart ached, and I mourned for our little family every single day.

With three babies in tow, I didn't get a lot of free time and that too riddled me with guilt. But no more.

“Done! Let's go,” Wyatt exclaimed.

A lot had changed in such a short time. We bought a minivan for starters. Peyton had convinced me. Ours was more of a hybrid minivan SUV, but still a traditional mom-mobile, because that's what I was, a mom.

Wyatt climbed in and snapped Bennett and Daphne into their seats on the back bench while Adam sat behind the driver's seat. Keeping things like that consistent just seemed to help us, or at least our sanity. Adam was growing like a weed and had already caught up to Bennett in size. This meant it was starting to get very hard to tell the boys apart. They were identical after all. For now, we had little tricks like painted toenails and color-coded wardrobes. That seemed to be working, but sooner or later the inevitable time would come when we would have less control over such things, and then what? I tried really hard not to stress about that too much. I had enough on my plate as it was.

We pulled up to valet parking and got out of the van. Wyatt grabbed the strollers as I started retrieving one kid at a time.

When we were all ready, he handed the keys off to the driver and for just a second, we stopped and stared at each other. Tears pricked my eyes.

“It’s okay, babe. We can do this. It’s time.”

I nodded, and we walked inside and up the stairs to the NICU. The nurses there had become like family to us, making today harder than I expected.

“There’s my sweet boy,” I cooed the moment I saw Christian.

His little arms and legs flailed in the air at the sound of my voice.

“He’s definitely ready. Remember everything we went over? He’ll be going home on oxygen just as we discussed. Sam will swing by and check on him tonight, and if you have any questions or concerns feel free to address them with him or call us here. We’d love to hear from you, but truly hope we don’t have to see you back in here ever again.”

I laughed and hugged her along with several others.

“Are you ready for this?” Wyatt asked.

“No way, not even a little. Three of them is hard enough. Four is just insanity.”

He laughed. “Maybe the dumbest thing we’ve done yet.”

I beamed up at him. “Good thing there’s no one in this world I’d rather do dumb stuff with.”

With a deep breath and his hand in mine, we strolled out of that hospital ready to take on the biggest adventure of our lives ... Parenthood.

Thank you for reading His Stubborn Mate.

If you want more Wyatt and Kate, check out [His Destined Mate](#) for a short story about how they met and fell in love.

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And be sure to keep reading for a special announcement regarding [His Wild Mate](#), book 4 in the Six Pack Shifters series.

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Thanks for reading His Stubborn Mate. If you enjoyed Wyatt & Kate's story, please consider dropping a review. <https://mybook.to/SixPack4> It helps more than you know.

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With love and thanks,

Julie Trettel

Sneak Peek

His Wild Mate

Being a cowboy is hard work and it certainly doesn't leave much time for dating. Since taking a promotion at the ranch overseeing all the other cowboys, I haven't even been on a date. During my free time I spend it with my family and my boys, the Six Pack. We've been running together since we were kids, but lately, they've sort of grown up on me.

My friends are all mated. They're happy and have lives of their own. They either have children, are expecting children, or are trying to get pregnant. Sometimes it's hard to even relate to them now.

Because then there's me. I don't even know if it's really okay to call me a bachelor anymore. That sort of alludes to some sort of attempt at a relationship. I don't even have time to pretend to try.

At this point in life, I'm just a lone wolf with a good, but lonely life.

But when I cross paths with my true mate, everything changes.

She's wild, borderline feral. She lives a carefree life and has no desire to change that.

Can I really expect her to change for me?

Or can I abandon it all, leaving my family and friends behind,
for a chance at true happiness?

One thing's for certain, I'm in for the ride of my life, and it's
going to be a wild one.

A Six Pack novel coming March 14, 2024

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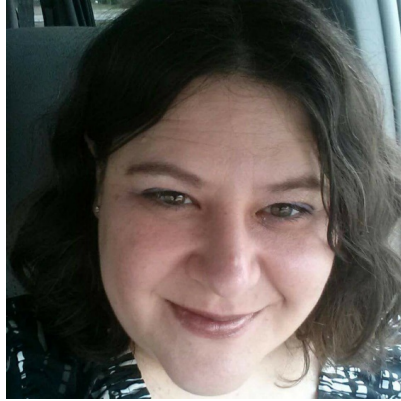
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About the Author



Julie Trettel is a USA Today Bestselling Author of Paranormal Romance. She comes from a long line of story tellers. Writing has always been a stress reliever and escape for her to manage the crazy demands of juggling time and schedules between work and an active family of six. In her “free time,” she enjoys traveling, reading, outdoor activities, and spending time with family and friends.

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