

## Chapter 416

Lily was surprised that she didn't feel any jealousy or animosity towards the long dead woman who had once held Mac's heart so completely and still resided in it from the expression on his face when he spoke of her. Her initial reaction had been to be jealous and her wolf had most certainly not been happy about another's claim on her mate.

But as Mac had told his story, she'd been transported back into another time, a world so different it was fascinating to listen to. Mac's happiness meant everything to her and she'd learned her lesson from the last time she'd learned about his more recent past and reacted without thinking.

Her mate had had a life before her and that was something she had to accept and could never change. And it was hard to think badly of anyone who had given her mate such happiness before they'd met, and her wolf seemed to feel the same way too as she'd settled down now and appeared less agitated.

"Maybe," Mac answered after a slight pause. He could see questions in Lily's eyes and was aware the time for procrastinating was long past.

"We didn't court for long," he continued. "Maria and I married that fall. She had no qualms about coming to live on my smallholding. It took her some time to come to grips with her new world, but she dove into the farming life enthusiastically. We saved up for a few years until we could afford to add on an extra room and then Maria became pregnant with our daughter Sophia. The day my little angel was born was the happiest day of my life."

Lily stiffened in shock, her gaze searching Mac's face as he stared off into space, adoration shining in the depths of his dark gaze. Her mate had been a father? All this was new to her, something kept so secret that she doubted very many people knew of Mac's history. To realise he'd had a daughter unsettled her wolf who began to prowl inside her again.

What had happened to Maria and Sophia? Why, even as Mac's eyes shone with adoration as he relived the birth of his child, did she sense such deep sadness down their mate bond? Lily wanted the story to stop now, feeling her heart start to pick up at beat. Something told her what came next was not something she wanted to hear.

But she knew she couldn't avoid it. Mac had changed yesterday at the compound and as he spoke, the pieces started falling into place. He'd been fine up until her mom had mentioned having children. Now he was telling her about a child he'd once fathered. Her heart raced a little harder and she sucked in a deep breath to await the ending of the story.

Mac turned his gaze back to his mate and saw realisation beginning to dawn on Lily's face. She was so intelligent, putting two and two together and getting the right result. In her eyes was a hint of fear and he could hear her heart beginning to race. Did she know what was coming or was she just guessing it was something bad?

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His grip of her hand tightened and he kept her gaze glued to his as he went where he never wanted to go ever again.

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"I was working the furthest away pasture one day when something told me I had to get home as quickly as I could." Mac's voice faltered as he struggled to keep control as the memory returned in an instant.

Running so fast, his heart beating wildly and in danger of bursting. 'Have to get home!'

The urgency of the thought was like nothing Mackenzie had ever experienced. One moment he was working away and the next the compulsion to go home was upon him and he was moving before he even realised what he was doing.

"Maria!" Mackenzie burst through the last pasture, seeing the overturned washing basket with the clean linen lying in the dirt.

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Maria would be annoyed at seeing her clean laundry getting dirty like that. Had Sophia overturned the basket? His two year old was rambunctious for her age, a little powerhouse of independence but with a sunny disposition. It was hard to be stern with his daughter when she smiled her pretty smile at him. She well and truly had him wrapped around her little finger and his wife was always telling him off for spoiling her.

Somehow, Mac knew that the spilled laundry was not due to his child. The sense of foreboding that had come over him earlier was stronger now, the image of the laundry increasing the unease he felt.

"Maria!"

His wife usually answered his call in an instant. This morning there was only silence. He'd barely been away from the holding, an hour, maybe just a little more. He'd left Maria tussled and replete in their bed, the afterglow of their loving shining in her eyes and her breathy words of love ringing in his ears as he'd dressed for work.

He'd kissed Sophia's sleeping head, gently stroking her black curls before leaving her room before he disturbed her awake. Maria liked half an hour to herself to get organised before taking on the whirlwind that was their daughter. He'd headed out to work with one final kiss for his wife, the routine which had become their daily life.

Now Mackenzie ran towards the open front door, a feeling of dread in his heart, as he heard no sounds from Maria or Sophia. He slipped entering the house, falling to his knees and putting out his hands to stop himself. He connected with warm, thick liquid, frowning as his eyes adjusted to the darker interior. Had Maria dropped the coffee pot?wŵŴŴ.NoVèl(w)@r.m.(c)Qm

Colour came to Mackenzie and his heart stuttered in his chest as he stared at his hands. Red...so crimson as he turned his hands it looked almost black. Still warm but cooling fast. Still warm...

"MARIA! SOPHIA!"

The anguished cries couldn't be coming from him lips. The animal sounds, the disbelief and utter agony couldn't be coming from his soul. Mackenzie tried to get up but slipped in the liquid again, an acrid scent invading his nostrils. He'd scented that smell before, when one of the horses passed.

"SOPHIA! MARIA!" Another anguished scream left him as he crawled across the floor following the crimson trail towards his daughter's bedroom. The door was closed and Mackenzie staggered to his feet and burst inside.

Blood, everywhere, coating the once pink walls in an ugly spatter of red. The stench in the room was overpowering, as was the sight before him.

Maria was lying on her back on the floor, her once emerald eyes coated with the white sheen of death. Her throat was missing, her no-nonsense workday dress saturated in blood instead of the usual plain dark grey. Her face was remarkably untouched, so white in pallor. Her right arm was stretched out towards a red and white bundle of rags lying half under Sophia's small bed.

"No," Mackenzie groaned, his heart shattering as he stared down at his wife. Bile rose in his throat and a ragged sob escaped him as he sank to his knees beside her. "Maria, please God no, not my Maria."