

## Chapter 18

\*Seth\*

I take a deep breath, looking around at our home full of people. It's not that I don't like our families, or that I'm not thankful they all came here instead of Molly dragging us to Lunar Falls, but it's just so... loud. And crowded. The good news is that neither of us will have to lift a nger for the twins today, everyone else so excited to be here to celebrate their birthday.

Molly has been up since before the sun, xing cakes and food and hanging an obscene amount of streamers and balloons. I hadn't realized she would be doing THIS much, but I should have. Birthdays are such a sore subject for my girl and while she's never once said a word about it, I can feel through the bond the pain she carried from being a little girl and not knowing her actual birthday. Her parents did what they could to celebrate her, but she never knew and that left a deeper scar than I think anyone else realizes.

So I'll smile, and open the door to let people in and do whatever the hell else she asks me to, because while this party is to celebrate the pups, I know that it's helping heal that part of her that she won't admit aloud was ever hurting, and still is.

Randall came without his cane today, a trend I've started to realize, but we've never spoken about. It seems that the closer to the moon, the less likely he is to need his cane. To my knowledge, he's not shifted very often since the incident, but perhaps he has and we just don't know. It's not like I've asked him, something I should probably be better about.

"Dada!" Cora exclaims after being sat down in an attempt to get her to walk. She stands and wobbles towards me, much less unsure of her footing than her brother. After a few steps she stumbles and falls back, but she pops right back up, a giant smile on her face. "Dada!" She makes her way to me and I immediately scoop her up, realizing that Molly IS right- Andrew walked rst because I'm always holding her, but she's my special girl.

"Hey Baby Girl," I say softly to her, knowing everyone in the damn room is watching us. "You did it. Did your mama see?"

"I saw!" Molly calls out, putting her phone in her pocket with a huge smile across her face. She must have caught it on video, too.

Oliver enters the room, switching an empty tray for a full one of... something. I don't even know. He looks around at everyone here, and meets my eyes, an apologetic look on his face. He must hate crowds, too. Perhaps I can follow him and just disappear into the kitchen.

My mom walks up, the happiest look on her face, and places her hand on my arm. She reaches up and gently runs her nger down Cora's cheek. "Look at you," she says to me, tugging on my sleeve to pull me down and kisses my cheek. "I'm so proud of you," she whispers in my ear before releasing me and holding her arms out to Cora, who happily goes to her.

"She really is the happiest baby," I say to Randall as I take a seat next to him on the couch.

He nods. "Andrew is so much like Molly was when we rst got her."

"Really? I'd have put money on Cora being like her," I say surprised at his words.

"Not at all," he tells me. "She was quiet and calm at rst, always watching and taking things in, but so timid to reach out. We thought then that it was because of everything she had been through, but seeing Andrew now, I think it was just her personality. When she got older though, whew! She was just as curious, but she wasn't afraid to go nd the answers she wanted."

I nod at that, knowing that's the absolute truth. I look up and nd her standing next to her brother, laughing, clearly at his expense, as he makes a face at her and his mate joins in on the laughter.

"Will I ever get used to her need to have everyone around?" I ask with a chuckle and he just laughs.

"Not at all," he tells me. "I almost brought the cane just so people would just leave me alone. Everyone feels bad and no one knows what to say."

I chuckle at that. Perhaps we're more alike than I've realized. "So now I know the secret. You don't need it at all. Just using it to get everyone to leave you alone. Seriously, though, you doing alright?"

He nods, but his face still looks sad. "It comes and goes, but it will never be 100%. It hurts the most when I shift, though. The way the hip goes," he pauses and sighs. "I miss shifting and going for a run, but there's been a few times when I shifted back that the hip didn't go back into place right. I'm just glad Rob is around to help protect his mother and Molly has you."

I didn't realize it was this bad, but I can't even imagine how he feels. The thought of not being able to protect Molly is absolutely horrifying, and Cora... my poor little girl. I don't know if I'll ever trust another wolf to protect her, even if he's her mate.

"I worry about Cora," I say to him quietly and he nods.

"We all do," he says. "I appreciate the fact that Lucas was NOT invited today. I know Molly has the need to include everyone but Cora, well... what if she accidentally does some magic?"

I feel panic rise up. Molly had promised me she wouldn't tell anyone. "She was supposed to keep that to herself. Do you know who else she told?"

He looks at me confused, but realization dawns. "She didn't tell us anything, I just assumed it could happen. Benjamin told me before that Molly was moving things before her rst birthday, not really knowing what she was doing."

"S\*\*t," I say, rubbing my face with my hand. "I just... I want to keep her safe."

"You will," he tells me, patting me on the back as Molly calls everyone together for cake. "I couldn't have asked for a better man to keep my girls safe."

"Lucas wouldn't have come even if he had been invited," I tell him. "While she tried her best, his mate is terried of me."

He just nods, no doubt knowing all about the situation with her from before. I'd been out of control, so worried about protecting Molly. Mistakes were made and as Molly likes to remind me, I learned from them.

Molly places the kids in their highchairs that she decorated, because, of course she did. I walk over and she hands me a cake for Andrew as she takes Cora's over and places it down. She takes a lighter and lights the candle on the one I'm holding before turning to the other and lighting it. I sit the cake down and when I look up, Cora's is out.

Molly lights it but before we can sing, the candle goes out again. And again. And again. I look and Andrew's is now out, Molly going back and forth lighting the candles. I catch Cora's eyes and there's nothing but pure mischief there. SHE is doing it, as she giggles in her chair.

"Love, maybe we just bought bad candles," I say to my mate, placing my hand on her lower back and turning so no one can see my eyes glass.

It's Cora. I tell her and I can feel the fear rise up in her as she looks at our girl, realizing I'm right.

Fuck.