

Regrets

Greg swallowed nervously as Liam let him into the apartment. His sister's mate had insisted that Charlotte would want him there but he still wasn't sure about that. After what he'd said to her at the airport in Seattle, Greg wouldn't blame her for never wanting to see him again.

"I thought you'd always protect me," Charlotte said. "I didn't want to believe Erikson when he told me you'd chosen to save Lily instead of me."

"That's not fair! I raised you when mom died. I gave up everything to take care of you. Do you think I wanted to stay in Hood River and take care of my brat of a sister while all my friends went off to college and had fun? I was f****g miserable, Charlotte, but I did it because you needed me."

Greg grimaced as he remembered the way Charlotte's face had turned to stone at his words. He'd regretted them as soon as they'd come out of his mouth but there was nothing he could do to take them back. Hell, there was nothing he could do to x any of his past mistakes.

"Look who decided to show," Liam said as he led Greg further into the apartment

Greg looked up to nd his sister's wide eyes on him. "Hey Charlie," he said quietly, half-expecting her to yell at him to get out.

"You came," Charlotte replied with a smile instead, somehow looking genuinely pleased to see him.

Even more surprising, she ran up to Greg and ung her arms around him. He hesitated for a moment before wrapping his arms around her tightly, careful not to hit her with the gift he was holding. "I wasn't sure you'd want me to," he told her with a sigh. "But I couldn't exactly miss your nineteenth birthday, right?" he added with a strained laugh.

"It's not every day that a person turns nineteen for the second time," she replied with a grin.

"It's really cool that Liam organized all this," Greg admitted, noting the way Charlotte's eyebrows lifted in surprise. It was true he hadn't exactly taken a liking to his sister's mate but Greg was starting to think Liam wasn't the worst guy for her anymore.

"Are you doing okay?" Charlotte asked quietly, her eyes tracking over his tired face.

Greg hesitated before saying anything—he didn't want to admit that the past few weeks had been hard on him. It was bad enough that Lily and Finn were barely speaking to him because he'd betrayed them to try and save his sister, but knowing that he'd let Charlotte down as well had made his guilt almost unbearable.

"I'm so sorry for what I said in Seattle, Charlie," he settled on saying, not wanting to answer her original question.

"Me too," she replied sadly. "As much as it might have hurt, I know you made the right choice trying to warn Lily."

After Erikson had taken Charlotte, Greg would have done just about anything to get her back but when he'd found out Lily was pregnant, he just couldn't go through with it anymore. He knew Charlotte was as tough as nails, and in the end, he had chosen to warn Lily because he couldn't face the thought of that baby dying before it could even be born because of him. He'd called Lily to explain everything but by then it was too late and Erikson got to her before Greg could stop it. In warning Lily though, he'd put Charlotte's life on the line— Erikson had nearly killed her after he'd found out Greg had gone back on their deal.

"I didn't tell you in Seattle, but the way I saw it, if anybody could have survived Erikson, I knew it would be you," Greg explained to her quietly. "You're the strongest person I know, Charlie."

Charlotte opened her mouth to speak but a voice cut her off.

"Hey, birthday girl, your gifts aren't going to open themselves," a young black-haired man called out.

Greg looked over Charlotte's shoulder at the group of people gathered around the coffee table and his eyes found themselves xed on a young woman with long red-tinged hair. Her grey-blue eyes met his brie before looking away quickly like she'd been caught staring. Without his permission, Greg's eyes took in her long slim legs and the sultry curves of her waist, and with the way her shirt clung to her body, it was hard not to notice the swells of her breasts.

He had to marvel at how someone could show such little skin and still be the sexiast woman he'd ever seen. Greg became increasingly aware of how shabby and tired he looked—he hadn't been eating or sleeping much over the past two weeks and it showed in his appearance. She and everyone else there must have thought he looked a mess.

"Come and meet everyone," Charlotte said, breaking Greg's focus on the woman as she took his arm and led him to the living room area.

Greg's eyes landed on his father. The Council Master smiled at him uncertainly and Greg could see the hope in the man's blue eyes. Greg gave him an awkward smile in return. After learning from Charlotte that their father had been looking for them for years and hadn't just abandoned them like they had always thought he had, Greg had been skeptical at rst but he could see the man genuinely wanted to be in their lives. Based on the way the man's eyes lit up at Greg's small smile, it was pretty clear that he wasn't the heartless bastard Greg had imagined him to be.

His sister introduced him to everyone else, ending with the auburn-haired woman his eyes had kept icking back to, much as he tried not to let them.

"This is my friend Lara," Charlotte explained. "Lara, this is my brother Greg."

"Nice to meet you," Lara said in a slightly husky voice. Her small smile almost looked forced but her eyes held his as she said the words.

"Likewise," Greg said, his own smile feeling awkward. He knew he should look away or say something else but he couldn't seem to take his gaze off of her light blue-ecked eyes or nd any words to break the silence.

Ultimately, it was Greg's dad who broke their staring match. "I'm glad you're here, Greg," Master Kennedy said, sounding hesitant and unsure. "How long are you staying?"

Greg cleared his throat and looked over to his father while Lara took a seat next to one of the twins. "I'm not really sure," he explained quietly. "I was planning on ying out tonight but now..." He shrugged as he looked over at his smiling sister.

"Charlotte's bonding ceremony is next week," Master Kennedy pointed out. "Maybe you should stay until then."

"Yeah, maybe," Greg agreed in a murmur. He hadn't expected Charlie to greet him so warmly but since she had maybe he would stay.

"Come on, Charlotte," Thomas whined loudly, stealing everyone's attention again. "I didn't spend almost an hour wrapping your gift just so it could sit on your table."

"I doubt it took you an hour," Charlotte replied with a laugh but she dutifully took the large wrapped box he was holding out to her.

Greg silently placed the gift he'd brought on the coffee table next to all of the other unopened ones while Charlotte worked on unwrapping the one Thomas had given her. She got to Greg's last and her smile was slightly sad as she took in the large photo frame. While most of the gifts she'd gotten had to do with baking or cooking, Greg had found some old photos of the two of them with their mom and lled the frame, which could hold six photos, with three of those old pictures and three newer ones that just had him and Charlie in them.

"I love it," Charlotte said, the traces of sadhness leaving her smile as looked up at her brother. "Thanks, big brother."

"Glad you like it," he replied with an embarrassed chuckle.

"Oh my gosh, look at Charlotte in this photo," Lara said as she leaned over the coffee table and pointed to one of the old pictures. A young Greg was sitting on his mother's lap and in his arms was a baby Charlotte.

"You were so chubby, Char," Liam said through a light laugh.

"I was not," Charlotte replied in outrage.

"You kind of were," Greg told her, earning a slap to his shoulder.

"You were both so cute," Lara added with a grin, her cheeks growing slightly pink as her eyes met Greg's again.

"Can I see those?" Kennedy asked, clearing his throat as Greg and Charlotte's eyes swung towards him. His eyes weren't lit up with amusement like the rest of theirs were. Greg didn't think he'd ever seen someone look so broken.

"Of course," Charlotte replied gently, handing the frame over to him.

Kennedy smiled as he looked down at the old pictures but it didn't quite meet his eyes— if there was any doubt left in Greg's mind that Kennedy hadn't wanted to give up his children, it vanished as the man looked down at the pictures of the children he hadn't been able to see grow up, that he'd been forced to live without. Greg cursed himself for being such an asshole when they'd rst met because the man in front of him looked like he'd been aged by grief. Greg had always loved his mom but for the rst time, he now found himself furious at her for not giving Kennedy a chance to raise his kids as he'd clearly wanted to.

"They're lovely," Kennedy said as he handed the frame back to Charlotte, trying to seem happy but failing miserably at it.

"Why don't you open mine next," Liam's mom suggested into the silence, handing a small rectangular-shaped gift to Charlie before moving to stand next to Kennedy and squeezing his arm gently.

"Why am I not surprised that it's a book," Charlotte said with an amused grin after she'd torn the gift wrap off. "Murder on the Orient Express by Agatha Christie," she read aloud.

"It's my favorite book," Dorothy explained. "I think you'll enjoy it."

"I'm sure I will. Thanks, Dorothy," Charlie replied gratefully, placing the book on top of her opened pile of gifts.

"Jackson and I watched the movie a few weeks ago," Lara said. "It was really good. I did not see the ending coming."

"Where is Jackson by the way?" Charlotte asked.

Lara's smile faded. "Something came up this morning and he couldn't make it," she explained. "He asked me to tell you happy birthday though."

"That's okay," Charlotte replied easily.

"Who's Jackson?" The question slipped out of Greg's mouth before he could stop it. He didn't know why but he desperately wanted to know who Lara had watched that movie with.

"He's, uh— he's my mate," Lara told him, her eyes refusing to look directly at him.

"Oh, right," Greg replied awkwardly.

He couldn't understand why her words made his chest ache with disappointment or why they made his hands curl into sts. He'd just met the woman and he had no right to feel like he'd just lost a chance with her. Greg might have felt drawn to her and attracted to her but it wasn't like she was his mate. She already had one of those, which meant Greg needed to forget about whatever it was he was feeling and ignore the way his pulse sped up every time their eyes met.

He didn't know what he'd been thinking anyway; ever since he'd felt her go through her rst shift, he'd been waiting to nd his own mate, and Lara most definitely wasn't her. He'd been on a few dates over the years and once or twice he'd gotten close to sleeping with other women but it had never gone that far— it had just never felt right. He knew there was someone out there for him and when he did eventually nd his mate, he wanted her to be the only woman in his life— the only woman he'd ever sleep with and the only woman he'd ever love.