

Brother's Best Friends Are My Mates

Chapter 181 -190

Brother's Best Friends Are My Mates

The first sensation that broke through the darkness wasn't sight or sound-it was the antiseptic smell that burned my nostrils. Sharp. Chemical. Completely different from the gray nothingness I'd been floating in.

My eyelids felt like they weighed a thousand pounds, but I forced them open anyway. The world came into focus slowly, blurry edges gradually sharpening into something I could recognize.

White ceiling tiles. Beeping machines. The steady hum of fluorescent lights overhead.

Hospital.

I tried to move and immediately regretted it. Pain shot through my body like lightning, starting from my ribs and spreading outward until every nerve ending screamed in protest. My left ankle throbbed with each heartbeat, and my throat felt like I'd swallowed broken glass.

I was wrapped in so many bandages I looked like a mummy. White gauze covered my arms, my torso, probably my legs too though I couldn't see them under the thin hospital blanket. Even my hands were partially wrapped, leaving only my fingertips free.

But I was alive. Somehow, impossibly, I was alive.

"Ayla?"

The automatic reach for my wolf's presence hit nothing but empty silence. Cold, terrifying silence that made my chest tighten with panic.

Right. She was gone.

A soft snoring sound drew my attention to the chair beside my bed. Damien was slumped there, his head tilted at an uncomfortable angle, his powerful frame folded awkwardly in the too-small hospital chair. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and several days' worth of stubble covered his jaw. His clothes were wrinkled, like he'd been sleeping in them.

How long had I been unconscious?

I tried to speak, but only a hoarse croak emerged from my damaged throat. The sound was barely audible, but Damien's eyes snapped open instantly. Those silver-blue depths that I loved so much were bloodshot with exhaustion and rimmed red with-

Had he been crying?

"Sera?" His voice was a broken whisper, like he was afraid I might disappear if he spoke too loudly. He leaned forward in the chair, his hand reaching toward me before stopping just short of touching. Like he was terrified I might shatter under his fingers.

I managed a small nod, wincing as the movement sent fresh waves of pain through my neck. "Hi," I whispered, the single syllable scraping against my raw throat.

That's when I saw them. Tears. Actual tears sliding down Damien Nightshadow's cheeks.

"You're awake," he breathed, and his voice cracked completely on the words. "God, Sera, you're actually awake."

I tried to lift my hand to touch his face, but my arm felt like it was made of lead. The best I could manage was a slight twitch of my fingers.

Damien noticed immediately. His hand covered mine so gently it was like being touched by a feather, his thumb stroking over my knuckles with infinite care.

"Don't try to move too much," he said, his voice thick with unshed tears. "You're hurt. Badly hurt. But you're safe now. You're home."

"How long?" I managed to croak out.

"Four days. You've been unconscious for four days." His grip on my hand tightened slightly. "I thought... I thought I'd lost you."

Four days. No wonder he looked like he'd aged years since I last saw him.

"Adrian?"

"He's safe. He's with Ophelia. I didn't want him to see you like this." Damien's voice was gentle, but I could hear the pain underneath. "He's been asking for you every day. Crying for his mama."

"The baby?" I whispered, pressing my free hand to my stomach.

"Strong. Healthy. Dr. Morgan says the baby is perfectly fine." Relief flooded his voice. "Whatever they did to you, they didn't hurt our child."

Thank god. At least one thing had gone right in this nightmare.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to process everything. I was alive. The baby was okay. My family was safe. But-

The silence in my mind was deafening. Like a piece of my soul had been carved out and thrown away.

“I can’t feel her,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “Damien, I can’t feel Ayla anywhere. It’s like she’s just... gone.”

The change in Damien’s expression told me everything I needed to know. His face went pale, his jaw tightening with barely controlled emotion.

“The wolfsbane,” he said quietly. “They used a massive dose. More than anyone should be able to survive.”

“But she’ll come back, right?” Desperation crept into my voice. “When the poison wears off, she’ll come back?”

Damien’s silence stretched too long. Way too long.

“Damien?” My voice cracked with rising panic. “She’ll come back, won’t she?”

He looked down at our joined hands, his thumb still stroking over my knuckles like he was trying to memorize the feeling.

“Dr. Morgan says...” He stopped, swallowed hard, tried again. “The amount they gave you should have killed you. The fact that you survived is a miracle. But the neural pathways that connect you to your wolf... they’ve been severed.”

The tears came then, hot and relentless, streaming down my cheeks faster than I could stop them. I wasn’t just crying for Ayla. I was crying for everything I’d lost, everything they’d taken from me. My strength, my healing, my connection to the pack, I was human now. Weak and ordinary and broken.

“Shh,” Damien murmured, carefully moving from the chair to perch on the edge of the bed beside me. His hand stroked through my hair with infinite gentleness. “It’s okay. We’ll figure this out. We’ll find a way.”

“They killed her,” I sobbed against his chest. “They killed my wolf, Damien”

“No.” His voice was fierce, commanding. “This is not your fault.”

I cried until I had no tears left, until my chest ached from the force of my sobs. Damien held me through all of it, his presence steady and warm and safe. Eventually, the tears slowed to hiccups, then to shaky breathing. Newest update provided by Find1Novel.net

“It was Valerie.” I lifted my head to meet his eyes, seeing my own pain reflected back at me. “She’s working with the rogues. She’s their new Luna.”

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The soft beeping of machines had become the soundtrack to my new existence. Three weeks in this sterile white room, three weeks of watching the same patch of afternoon sunlight creep across the floor, marking time I couldn’t get back.

Three weeks of being utterly, completely alone in my own head.

I shifted carefully in the hospital bed, wincing as my ribs protested the movement. The doctors said I was healing remarkably well for a human. That phrase haunted me.

“For a human.”

Because that’s what I was now. Just human. Weak, fragile, ordinary.

The silence in my mind was deafening. No Ayla’s warm presence. No pack connection humming in the background like a constant heartbeat. No enhanced senses bringing me information about the world around just... nothing.

I pressed my palm against my stomach, feeling the slight curve where our baby was growing. At least you’re okay, little one. At least you survived what I couldn’t protect you from.

The baby was the only good thing to come out of this nightmare. Dr. Morgan checked daily, and every time she smiled and said the same thing: “Strong heartbeat. Growing perfectly. Your little miracle.”

My miracle. The one bright spot in this sea of loss.

“Knock knock!” Adrian’s voice preceded him through the door, followed by the sound of small sneakers squeaking against the linoleum floor. “Mama, I brought you something!”

My heart clenched with love and pain as my five-year-old son bounded into the room, clutching a slightly wilted dandelion in his tiny fist. His silver-blue eyes-so much like his father’s-sparkled with excitement.

“I picked it from the garden!” He climbed carefully onto the chair beside my bed. “It’s yellow like sunshine to make you feel better”

“It’s beautiful, sweetheart.” I reached out to stroke his soft brown hair, my movements still careful and deliberate. Everything hurt, but seeing Adrian’s smile was worth any amount of pain. “Thank you for thinking of Mama.”

“Are you gonna come home soon?” His bottom lip wobbled slightly. “I miss having bedtime stories. Daddy tries, but he does the voices all wrong.”

“Soon, baby,” I lied, forcing a smile. “Mama just needs to get a little stronger first.”

“You’re growing my baby brother or sister in your tummy.” His eyes went wide with wonder. “Is that why you’re so tired?”

“That’s part of it.” I smoothed his hair again, memorizing the silky texture. “The baby is growing nice and strong, just like you did.”

“Can I feel?” Adrian’s hand hovered over my stomach with the careful reverence only children possessed.

I guided his small palm to the slight curve, even though it was too early for movement. “Right there. That’s your little brother or sister.”

Tears threatened to spill as I watched him. How was I supposed to raise him without Ayla’s strength? How could I protect him when I couldn’t even protect myself?

“Adrian.” Damien’s voice from the doorway made me look up. He leaned against the frame, watching us. “Time to let Mama rest.”

“But I just got here!” Adrian protested.

“You can come back tomorrow,” Damien promised, moving into the room. He was dressed in one of his perfectly tailored business suits, looking every inch the powerful Alpha he was. It made the distance between us feel even wider. “Mama needs to sleep so she can get better.”

Adrian sighed dramatically but climbed down from the chair. He gave me a careful hug, mindful of my bandages, and whispered in my ear: “I love you, Mama, Come home soon, okay?”

“I love you too, sweetheart.”

Damien walked Adrian to the door, speaking quietly to whoever was waiting in the hallway—probably Ophelia or Lucas.

He looked tired. His usually perfect appearance was slightly rumpled, and there were new lines around his eyes that hadn’t been there a month ago. The guilt in his expression deepened every time he looked at me, and I knew why.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked, settling into the chair Adrian had vacated.

“Better,” I lied automatically. “Dr. Morgan says I might be able to go home next week.”

Something flickered across his face—relief mixed with what looked like panic. “That’s... that’s good news. But you shouldn’t rush it. Take all the time you need to heal properly.”

And then he was gone, leaving me alone with the beeping machines and the crushing weight of everything I’d lost.

I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but rest wouldn’t come. Instead, I listened to the sounds of the hospital around me. Nurses’ soft-soled shoes in the hallway. Muffled conversations at the nurses’ station. The distant ding of elevator doors.

And then, Damien’s voice, farther than it should have been.

“Claire? Yeah, I know it’s late.”

I opened my eyes, realizing he must be just outside my room, probably thinking I was asleep. His voice carried through the partially open door clearly enough for my merely-human hearing to catch. Fresh chapters posted on [find-novel-net](#)

“We need to start the hiring process for a new assistant,” he was saying. “Someone with experience in pack business management.”

My heart stopped.

A new assistant. To replace me.

“I know it seems premature,” Damien continued, “but we can’t keep operating short-staffed. And Seraphina... she needs to focus on her recovery right now. This stress isn’t good for her or the baby.”

Claire’s response was too quiet for me to hear, but Damien’s next words hit me like a slap.

“No, she can’t come back to that role. Even when she’s physically healed, she’s... different now. Vulnerable, I can’t put her in a position where she might be targeted again.”

“Because I’m human now. Because I’m weak.”

The words shattered something inside me that I hadn’t even realized was still intact. Whatever foolish hope I’d been clinging to—that maybe things could go back to normal, that maybe we could find a way through this together—crumbled to dust.

He was moving on. Moving past me. Finding a replacement.

“Email me the candidates’ resumes tomorrow,” Damien said. “Schedule interviews for next week. I want someone in place before... before she comes home.”

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Damien's POV

I rubbed my eyes, blinking at the stack of border patrol reports that seemed to mock me from across my desk. The words blurred together-rogue sightings, territory disputes, security recommendations-all demanding my immediate attention. All adding to the mountain of responsibilities that threatened to crush.

My phone buzzed. A text from Dr. Morgan about Sera's latest blood work. Good news about the baby, but her recovery was still slow.

I pushed back from my desk and stood, my joints protesting. When was the last time I'd gotten a full night's sleep?

"Daddy!" Adrian's voice echoed through the hallway before he burst through my office door, his small face bright with excitement. "Lucas says we can visit Mama today!"

My heart clenched. God, he missed her. Every day Adrian asked when she was coming home, and every day had to give him the same careful non-answer about her needing more time to get better.

"We'll go see her after lunch, buddy," I promised, kneeling down to his level. He immediately launched himself into my arms, and I held him tight, breathing in that familiar little-boy scent of soap and adventure.

"Is she sad?" Adrian asked quietly against my shoulder. "When I visited yesterday, she seemed sad."

"Christ."

Of course she was sad. She'd lost everything-her wolf, her strength, her independence.

"She's just tired from being sick," I said carefully. "But seeing you always makes her happy. You know that, right?"

He nodded solemnly, but those silver-blue eyes-so like my own.

A knock on the door interrupted us. Claire stepped in, her expression apologetic but determined.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said, though her weathered face softened when she saw Adrian. "But we need to discuss the staffing situation."

I set Adrian down with a gentle pat. “Go find Lucas. Tell him I said you could help with the patrol schedules.”

Adrian perked up. He loved feeling important, helping with “grown-up work.” He scampered off, already calling for Lucas at the top of his lungs.

“Close the door,” I told Claire once he was gone.

She did, then settled into the chair across from my desk. She’d been with my family since before I was born, had helped raise me after my parents died. If anyone could speak freely about uncomfortable truths, it was her.

“You look like hell, Damien.”

“Thanks for the pep talk.” I slumped back into my chair, suddenly feeling every one of my life. “What about staffing?”

Claire continued more gently, “you’re running yourself into the ground trying to do everything. Pack business, border security, taking care of Adrian, making sure Sera has everything she needs.”

Alex had been restless for weeks, pacing beneath my skin like a caged animal. But there was too much to do, too many people depending on me.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re barely holding it together.” She leaned forward, her pale blue eyes sharp with concern.

“And now I need to tell you something else. I’m leaving next week.”

My head snapped up. “What?”

“My son called yesterday. His wife is having complications with her pregnancy. They need me there.” Her voice was steady, but I could see the worry in her expression. “I’ll be gone for at least two months, maybe longer depending on how things go.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Claire handled half the administrative work that kept the pack running smoothly. Without her...

She pulled out her phone, scrolling through something. “I’ve already started looking for a temporary assistant.”

“Who?”

“Lucas suggested his cousin, Emma Rodriguez. She’s been working for the Pacific Northwest Alliance for three years. Excellent credentials, very professional.”

“Lucas’s cousin.” I tried to remember if he’d ever mentioned her. “Why haven’t I met her before?”

“She’s been living in Seattle.” Claire’s expression softened. “Look, I know this is difficult. I know it feels like we’re moving on without Seraphina. But this isn’t about permanently replacing her. This is about making sure everything doesn’t fall apart while she heals.”

I stared out the window at the gardens beyond. Sera used to walk there in the mornings, usually with her coffee and whatever reports she needed to review. She’d loved the quiet, the chance to organize her thoughts before the day’s chaos began. UPDATE FROM FINDNOVEL.NET

“Set up an interview,” I said finally. “This afternoon if possible. I want to get this handled quickly.”

“Already done. Two o’clock.”

“Good.” I checked my watch. Almost noon. “I need to take Adrian to see his mother first.”

“Of course. I’ll make sure everything’s ready for the interview when you get back.”

Claire stood to leave, then hesitated at the door. “Damien? This is the right decision. Seraphina would want you to do whatever’s necessary to keep the pack strong. You know that, right?”

I nodded, though the words felt hollow.

The drive to the hospital was quiet. Adrian chattered about his morning activities—helping Lucas organize patrol schedules, drawing pictures for Sera, practicing his numbers with the pack accountant who’d been patient enough to turn math into a game.

“Will Mama be happy today?” he asked as we walked through the hospital corridors.

“I think she’s always happy to see you,” I told him honestly. And that much was true.

She was awake when we entered her room, propped up against pillows and staring out the window. The afternoon sunlight caught the dark circles under her eyes, made her skin look almost translucent. She’d lost weight she couldn’t afford to lose, and the hospital gown made her look impossibly small.

But when she saw Adrian, everything about her expression softened.

“There’s my brave boy,” she murmured as he climbed carefully onto the bed beside her. “How was your morning?”

“I helped with pack stuff!” Adrian announced proudly. “Lucas said I’m getting really good at organizing files.”

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart.” Her fingers combed through his dark hair, and I saw her hands tremble slightly with the effort. “You’re such a big help.”

I settled into the chair beside the bed, watching them together. This-this was what mattered. This was what I was fighting so hard to protect and preserve.

We visited for an hour, Adrian filling the silence with stories and questions and the easy chatter of childhood.

When it was time to leave, he hugged her carefully, whispering something in her ear that made her smile-the first genuine smile I’d seen from her in days.

“I love you, Mama. Get better soon, okay?”

“I love you too, baby. So much.”

As we were leaving, I heard her voice behind me, soft and uncertain.

“Damien?”

I turned back. She was looking at me with those green eyes that used to hold such strength, such determination. Now they just looked tired.

“Take care of yourself,” she said. “You look exhausted.”

The interview with Emma Rodriguez was scheduled for two o’clock sharp. I spent the drive back to the estate trying to organize my thoughts.

Claire had set up the meeting in my office, and when I walked in at five minutes to two, I found a woman in her late twenties sitting calmly in the chair across from my desk. She stood as I entered, extending her hand with a professional smile.

“Mr. Nightshadow. Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice.”

“Ms. Rodriguez.” Her handshake was firm, confident. “Please, sit.”

She was attractive in an understated way-dark hair pulled back in a neat bun, sharp business attire.

“Lucas speaks very highly of you,” I began, settling behind my desk.

“He’s always been generous with his praise.” Her smile was genuine but brief.

“Tell me why you’re interested in this position.”

“Honestly? I’m looking for a challenge. The Alliance work was rewarding, but it’s become routine.”

“This wouldn’t be easy work,” I warned.

“I understand completely. Sometimes the most valuable work is temporary work.”

We talked for another twenty minutes. She answered every question thoughtfully, professionally, without trying to oversell herself or make promises she couldn’t keep.

“When could you start?” I asked finally.

“Tomorrow, if necessary. I’ve already given notice in Seattle, and I can arrange temporary housing locally while I look for something more permanent.”

“That won’t be necessary. We have guest quarters on the estate. Claire can show you around after we finish here.”

Something flickered across her expression—surprise, maybe, or appreciation for the practical arrangement.

“The salary we discussed is acceptable?”

“More than fair, yes.”

“Then welcome to Nightshadow Industries, Ms. Rodriguez. Claire will handle the paperwork and get you oriented.”

She stood, shaking my hand again with that same professional confidence. “Thank you, Mr. Nightshadow. I won’t let you down.”

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Damien’s POV

The medical equipment beeped steadily in the background, a metallic rhythm that matched the pounding of my heart. Dr. Morgan moved around Sera with practiced efficiency, but I could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her lips pressed into a thin line whenever she thought I wasn’t watching.

Six fucking months since Sera had woken up in this same hospital, broken and barely alive. And now she was about to give birth to our child without any of the supernatural healing or strength.

“Damien.” Sera’s voice was barely above a whisper, but it cut through my spiraling thoughts like a blade. Her hand reached for mine, fingers trembling. “I’m scared.”

I moved to her bedside immediately, threading our fingers together with infinite care. Even after all these months, seeing her like this—pale, fragile, purely human—still made my chest feel like it was being crushed in a vise.

“Hey,” I murmured, bringing her hand to my lips and pressing a gentle kiss to her knuckles. “I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Another contraction hit, and Sera’s back arched off the bed with a cry. Her grip on my hand became vice-like, her nails digging into my skin hard enough to draw blood.

“Breathe with me, baby,” I coached, just like we’d practiced in those childbirth classes that felt completely useless now. “In and out. That’s it.”

Dr. Morgan checked her watch, then moved to examine Sera again. The older woman’s expression was carefully neutral, but I’d known her long enough to read the worry lines around her eyes.

“How’s she doing?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“The contractions are getting stronger,” Dr. Morgan replied, her voice professional but gentle. “We’re still several hours away from delivery, but…” She paused, glancing between Sera and me. “Damien, I need to be honest with you both. This is going to be more difficult than a normal birth.”

“Without her wolf’s healing abilities, Sera’s body can’t handle the stress the way it should. The baby is healthy—strong heartbeat, good positioning—but carrying a mixed-blood child while purely human…” She shook her head. “The physical demands are enormous.”

“Fuck.”

I wanted to punch something. Wanted to tear apart whoever had done this to her all over again.

“We’re going to monitor everything very closely,” Dr. Morgan continued. “I’ve got the best team standing by, and we’re prepared for any scenario.”

Another contraction rolled through Sera, this one lasting nearly a full minute. She bit down on her lip so hard I could smell the copper tang of blood.

“Don’t do that,” I murmured, gently touching her chin. “Don’t hurt yourself. Squeeze my hand as hard as you need to. Scream if you want to. Just don’t hold it in.”

“It’s getting worse,” she gasped when the contraction finally released its grip. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the cool temperature of the room. Latest content published on Find★Novel.net

The next few hours passed in a blur of mounting intensity. Each contraction seemed to tear through Sera with increasing violence, and I watched helplessly as the woman I loved fought a battle I couldn’t fight for her.

“I can’t,” she sobbed during a particularly brutal wave of pain. “Damien, I can’t do this. It’s too much.”

“Yes, you can.” I leaned down so my face was level with hers, my voice fierce with conviction. “You’re the strongest person I know, Sera.”

Dr. Morgan appeared at the foot of the bed, and I could tell from her expression that something had changed.

“We’re at eight centimeters,” she announced. “It’s time to start thinking about pushing soon.”

The next contraction hit like a freight train, and this time Dr. Morgan moved into position with renewed urgency.

“Alright, Sera. This is it. On the next contraction, I need you to push with everything you’ve got.”

“I’m scared,” Sera admitted, her voice breaking.

“I know.” I positioned myself beside her, one arm supporting her shoulders, the other hand holding hers. “But I’m right here. We’re doing this together.”

Her face turned red with effort, every muscle in her body straining.

“Good!” Dr. Morgan encouraged. “I can see the head. One more like that.”

But as the contraction faded, something changed. The monitors started beeping faster, more urgently. Dr. Morgan’s expression shifted to one of controlled alarm.

“What’s happening?” I demanded.

“The baby’s heart rate is dropping,” she said curtly, her hands moving with practiced efficiency. “We need to get this baby out now.”

Terror unlike anything I’d ever experienced crashed over me. Not Sera. Not our baby. I couldn’t lose them.

Not after everything we’d been through.

“Sera, honey, I need the biggest push you can give me,” Dr. Morgan ordered. “Right now.”

The final contraction built like a tsunami, and Sera pushed with every ounce of strength left in her human body. The sound she made was part scream, part battle cry, and completely magnificent.

“The head’s out!” Dr. Morgan called. “One more, Sera. Just one more.”

With a sound that was pure triumph, Sera gave one final push, and suddenly the room filled with the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard.

The sharp, angry cry of our newborn baby.

“It’s a girl,” Dr. Morgan announced, holding up our daughter-tiny, perfect, and furious at being evicted from her warm home. “A beautiful, healthy girl.”

Sera collapsed back against the pillows, sobbing with relief and exhaustion. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, could only stare in wonder at the tiny miracle Dr. Morgan was cleaning up.

“Is she...?” Sera asked weakly.

“Perfect,” Dr. Morgan assured her. “Ten fingers, ten toes, good color, strong lungs. She’s absolutely perfect.”

When she placed our daughter on Sera’s chest, I felt something fundamental shift in my world. Living proof of the love that had survived everything the world had thrown at us.

“Hello, beautiful,” Sera whispered, her voice thick with tears. “I’m your mama.”

Our daughter’s crying stopped almost immediately at the sound of Sera’s voice, as if she recognized it from all those months in the womb. Tiny fingers stretched out, grasping at nothing.

“She’s so small,” I breathed, afraid to touch her at first.

“Seven pounds, two ounces,” Dr. Morgan reported with a smile. “Not small at all for a mixed-blood baby born to a human mother. She’s actually quite remarkable.”

I finally worked up the courage to reach out and touch our daughter’s tiny hand. Her fingers immediately wrapped around my index finger with surprising strength, and I was completely undone.

“She’s got a strong grip,” I managed to say through the emotion clogging my throat.

“Alpha blood,” Sera said with exhausted pride. “Just like her daddy.”

“And determination like her mama,” I added, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to Sera’s temple. “You did it, baby. You were incredible.”

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The soft morning light filtered through the hospital window as I adjusted our daughter in my arms, still marveling at how perfect she was. Her tiny fingers were curled into little fists, and her breathing was so peaceful it made my chest ache with love.

“Mama!” Adrian’s excited voice preceded him through the door as he burst into the room, practically vibrating with energy. “Is she awake? Can I see her again?”

“Shh, sweetheart,” I whispered, smiling at his enthusiasm. “She’s sleeping, but you can come look.” Get full chapters from Find~Novel.net

Adrian climbed onto the chair beside my bed with the careful precision of a child who’d been repeatedly reminded to be gentle. His silver-blue eyes—so much like Damien’s—went wide with wonder as he peered at his baby sister.

“She’s so tiny,” he breathed, reaching out one finger to gently touch her hand. “Look! She’s holding onto me!”

My heart melted as our daughter’s fingers instinctively wrapped around Adrian’s finger. The sight of my children together, this perfect moment of sibling connection, made tears spring to my eyes.

“She knows you’re her big brother,” I told him softly.

“What’s her name gonna be?” Adrian asked, his voice hushed with reverence. “Daddy said you haven’t picked one yet.”

“We’re still deciding,” I admitted. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Oh.” Adrian looked confused but suggested immediately. “How about… Lily? Or Rose? I like flower names.”

“Lily,” I repeated, looking down at our daughter’s peaceful face. “I like that. What do you think, little one? Do you like the name Lily?”

As if responding to my voice, the baby made a soft cooing sound that made both Adrian and me smile.

“She likes it!” Adrian declared triumphantly. “Hi, Lily. I’m your big brother Adrian.”

The door opened, and Damien entered carrying a cup of coffee and what looked like discharge papers. He

looked better than he had in months—there was actually color in his face, and the tension around his eyes had eased.

“How are my girls this morning?” he asked, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead before settling into the chair on the other side of the bed.

“Adrian thinks we should name her Lily,” I told him.

“Lily,” Damien repeated thoughtfully, reaching out to stroke our daughter’s dark hair. “Lily Nightshadow. I like it.”

“It’s decided then,” I said, smiling despite the ache in my chest. “Welcome to the world, Lily.”

For a few minutes, we existed in that perfect bubble of new family bliss. Adrian chattered about all the things he wanted to show Lily when she got bigger. Damien talked about setting up the nursery. I just held our daughter and tried to memorize every detail of her perfect little face.

But then Adrian said something that shattered the illusion completely.

“Mama,” he said, his small face scrunched up in confusion. “You smell different.”

My blood turned to ice. “What do you mean, sweetheart?”

“Before, you smelled like... like warm cookies and flowers and something else that made me feel safe.” His little brow furrowed as he tried to find the words. “But now you just smell like... like nothing special. And it feels empty when I’m near you.”

All I could focus on was the innocent confusion on my son’s face as he tried to understand why his mother felt wrong to him.

“I’m still your mama, Adrian,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “I’m still the same person.”

“I know,” he said quickly, scrambling closer to give me a careful hug. “I love you the same. It’s just... different.”

Different. That one word summed up everything I’d lost, everything I’d never get back. Even my own son could sense that something fundamental was missing from me.

Damien cleared his throat. “Adrian, why don’t you go find Uncle Lucas? Tell him we’ll be ready to go home soon.”

“Okay!” Adrian bounced off the chair, apparently unaware of the emotional devastation he’d just caused. “I’ll tell him about Lily’s name too!”

Once he was gone, the silence in the room became suffocating.

“Sera-” Damien started.

“Don’t,” I said quietly, not looking at him. “Just... don’t.”

I couldn’t handle sympathy right now. Couldn’t handle being reminded again of everything I’d lost. If a five- year-old could sense it, what did that mean for everyone else?

Three days later, I was finally settling into life outside the hospital walls. Lily was thriving, eating well and sleeping in manageable stretches. Adrian was over the moon about being a big brother, constantly wanting to help with everything from diaper changes to bath time.

“Come on,” Ophelia said, practically dragging me toward the front door. “You need to get out of this house.

Fresh air, sunshine, normal human interaction.”

“I’m fine staying in,” I protested, adjusting Lily in her carrier. “She’s still so little, and-”

“And you’re going stir-crazy,” Ophelia interrupted firmly. “We’re just going to the baby store in town. Nothing strenuous. Plus, Lily needs more clothes, and you know Damien has no idea what to buy.”

She was right, of course. Damien had tried his best, but his idea of baby clothes ran toward expensive designer outfits that were completely impractical. We needed simple, comfortable things that could handle the reality of infant life.

The drive into town was pleasant enough. Ophelia chattered about pack gossip. The baby store was busy, filled with the sounds of crying infants and frazzled parents trying to navigate the overwhelming array of choices. I found myself relaxing slightly as we browsed through the racks of tiny clothes.

“These are adorable,” Ophelia said, holding up a set of pink onesies covered in little moons and stars. “Very appropriate for an alpha’s daughter.”

I picked out several practical items-soft cotton sleepers, burp cloths, tiny socks that seemed impossibly small. Normal mom things. For a few minutes, I could almost pretend I was just like any other new mother shopping for her baby.

The young woman behind the register didn’t even bother looking up from her phone when we approached. She was maybe nineteen, with badly bleached hair and cheap makeup caked on thick. When she finally glanced at me, her face twisted into an expression of pure disgust.

“What do you want?” she snapped, like we were personally ruining her day just by existing.

“We’d like to check out, please,” I said politely, setting our items on the counter.

The girl—her name tag read “Brittany”—rolled her eyes dramatically and started scanning our items with the speed of molasses. She picked up each piece of clothing like it was contaminated, holding them at arm’s length.

“Seriously?” She held up one of the outfits and snorted. “You think you can afford this?”

“Excuse me?” Ophelia’s voice went dangerously low.

Brittany smirked. “I’m just saying, honey, this isn’t exactly the bargain bin. Maybe try the thrift store down the street?”

Heat flooded my cheeks. “I can pay for it.”

“Right.” She laughed, a harsh sound that made other customers turn to stare. “Let me guess—you’re one of those human groupies who thinks sleeping with a wolf makes you special?”

My mouth fell open. “I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“Oh, come on.” Brittany leaned across the counter, her voice loud enough for half the store to hear. “We all know what you are. Some desperate human slut who spread her legs for a wolf and thinks that makes her pack.”

“That’s enough!” Ophelia snarled, stepping forward.

Brother’s Best Friends Are My Mates

That little bitch!” Ophelia snarled, her hands clenched into fists as we stood outside the baby store. “I’m going back in there. Nobody talks to you like that!”

“No.” I grabbed her arm, pulling her toward the car. “Just leave it, Ophie. It’s not worth it.”

“Not worth it?” She spun around, her eyes blazing with fury. “Did you hear what she said about Lily? About you? I’m going to rip her throat out!”

“And then what?” I asked, adjusting Lily’s carrier with trembling hands. “You get arrested for assault? Make a scene that gets back to Damien? Give everyone more reason to talk about how his human mate can’t even handle shopping without causing drama?”

The fight went out of Ophelia’s posture, but her jaw remained tight with anger. “Sera, you can’t let people talk to you like that.”

“Why not?” The words came out more bitter than I intended. “She wasn’t exactly wrong, was she?” The rightful source is [Find\[N\]ovel.net](http://Find[N]ovel.net)

“Don’t you dare.” Ophelia’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “Don’t you dare let some ignorant little girl make you think less of yourself.”

But as we drove home in heavy silence, I couldn’t stop replaying Brittany’s words. “Human groupie who thinks sleeping with a wolf makes you special.” “Pathetic human who got knocked up.”

“Dirty little mixed-blood freak.”

The worst part? Deep down, I was starting to wonder if she was right.

I stared out the passenger window, watching the familiar landscape blur past. Six months ago, I would have put that girl in her place without breaking a sweat. Six months ago, I had Ayla's strength backing me up, pack authority in my voice, the confidence that came with knowing exactly who I was and where I belonged.

"Talk to me," Ophelia said quietly. "I can practically hear you beating yourself up over there."

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Bullshit." She glanced over at me, concern clear in her expression. "That girl was a piece of trash. Her opinion doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it, though?" I shifted in my seat to face her. "Ophie, Adrian can sense that something's wrong with a five-year-old knows I'm not what I used to be. So why wouldn't everyone else?"

"Because you're still you, Sera. Still the same person who-"

"Who what?" I interrupted. I laughed, but it sounded hollow even to my own ears. "That person is gone, Ophie. I'm just what's left."

The rest of the drive passed in uncomfortable silence. By the time we pulled into the estate's long driveway, I felt like I was drowning in my own thoughts.

Home looked the same as always-grand and beautiful and completely intimidating. The afternoon sun painted the stone walls golden, and I could see Adrian's toys scattered across the front lawn where he'd been playing earlier.

"Mama!" Adrian's voice carried across the yard as he spotted our car. He came running toward us, his face bright with excitement. "Did you get stuff for Lily? Can I see?"

"We got some clothes," I managed, forcing a smile as he threw his arms around my legs. "Want to help me carry the bags?"

"Yes!" He grabbed one of the smaller bags.

"How did shopping go?" Damien's voice came from the living room. He appeared in the doorway, taking in my expression with those perceptive silver-blue eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said automatically. "Just tired. Being out was more exhausting than I expected."

But Damien knew me too well. His gaze sharpened, and I saw him look from me to Ophelia, who was still radiating angry tension.

“What happened?” His voice carried that alpha authority that could command an entire pack.

“Some ignorant clerk at the baby store,” Ophelia said when I remained silent. “Said some truly vile things about Sera and Lily.”

Damien’s entire demeanor changed. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees, and I felt that familiar thrill of fear and attraction that came with being near an angry alpha—even though I could no longer sense his power the way I used to.

“What kind of things?” His voice was deadly quiet.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quickly. “She was just some stupid girl. It’s over.”

“It matters to me.” Damien stepped closer, his hands gentle as they touched my face. “What did she say?”

I looked into his eyes and saw genuine concern, protective fury, and something else that made my chest ache.

“She called me a human groupie,” I admitted quietly. “Said I was pathetic for thinking I belonged in the pack world. Called Lily a... a freak.”

The growl that rumbled through Damien’s chest was purely wolf, dangerous enough to make every instinct I no longer possessed scream warnings. “Give me a name. An address.”

“Damien, no.” I pressed my hand against his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart. “Please. Fighting my battles for me will just prove her point.”

But before either of us could say anything else, Adrian tugged on my sleeve.

“Mama, why are you sad?” His little face was scrunched up with worry. “Did someone say mean things to you?”

I knelt down to his level, smoothing his dark hair. “Sometimes people say things they don’t mean when they’re having a bad day. But it’s okay. I’m okay.”

“Want me to beat them up?” Adrian asked with such serious determination that I couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s very sweet, sweetheart, but violence isn’t the answer.”

“Daddy would beat them up,” Adrian said confidently. “Daddy beats up all the bad guys.”

“Daddy protects people,” I corrected gently.

Dinner was a quiet affair. Damien kept shooting concerned glances my way, while Adrian chattered about his day and all the things he wanted to teach Lily when she got bigger. I tried to participate, but my heart wasn’t in it.

I was still lost in my own thoughts when the doorbell rang around seven o’clock.

“I’ll get it,” I said, glad for an excuse to escape the dinner table tension.

I adjusted Lily in my arms and walked to the front door, expecting maybe a delivery.

Instead, I found myself face to face with a woman I’d never seen before. She was attractive in a polished, professional way—dark hair pulled back in a neat bun,

expensive business attire, confident posture. She carried a leather briefcase and wore the kind of smile that was perfectly pleasant but didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Hi," the woman said, looking me up and down with barely concealed assessment. "You must be Damien's... human nanny?"

Brother's Best Friends Are My Mates

I heard voices at the front door. Sera's voice, soft and uncertain. Another voice I didn't recognize. Female.

Professional.

Setting down my coffee, I walked toward the entrance.

Emma Rodriguez stood on my doorstep.. Perfect business attire. Leather briefcase.

"Mr. Nightshadow," she said when she spotted me. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"What can I do for you, Emma?" I kept my voice neutral. It was Saturday evening. Seven o'clock. This better be good.

"I brought those contract revisions. For tomorrow's conference call." She held up her briefcase. "I wanted to make sure you had time to review them."

I glanced at Sera. She was holding Lily, but something was wrong. Her shoulders were tense. Her face was too pale. She wouldn't meet my eyes.

"It's Saturday night," I pointed out.

"I know, I know. But I wanted everything to be perfect." Emma's smile brightened. "I take my responsibilities very seriously."

"I see." I stepped closer to Sera. My hand found the small of her back automatically. "Well, thank you for bringing them by."

"Right. Of course." Emma's cheeks flushed slightly. "Have a lovely evening."

I closed the door. Locked it. Turned to face Sera.

She was staring at the floor. Still holding Lily. Still avoiding my eyes.

“Sera.”

“She’s very professional,” Sera said quietly. “Very put-together.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” But her voice was too small. Too careful.

“Baby, look at me.”

She finally raised her eyes. The hurt I saw there made my chest ache.

“She thought I was the nanny,” Sera whispered.

Fuck.

“She what?”

“When I answered the door. She asked if I was Damien’s human nanny.” Sera’s laugh was hollow. “I guess I can’t blame her. Look at me.”

Sera was wearing yesterday’s clothes. Her hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. No makeup. Lily had spit up on her shoulder earlier.

She looked like a mother. My mate. The most beautiful woman in the world.

“What exactly do you see when you look in the mirror?” I asked.

“A mess.” Her voice cracked. “A human woman who doesn’t belong in your world anymore.”

“Sera-”

“She was so polished, Damien. So professional. So... wolf-like. Everything I used to be before...” She gestured helplessly at herself. “Before I became this.”

The pain in her voice hit me like a punch to the gut.

“Come here,” I said softly.

“I’m fine-”

“Come here”

She took a small step closer. I reached out, cupping her face in my hands. Her skin was warm. Soft. Real.

“Listen to me very carefully,” I said. “You are not a mess. You are not a nanny. You are the Luna of this pack.”

“I don’t feel like a Luna anymore.”

“Then let me remind you.” I brushed my thumb across her cheek. “You survived torture that would have killed most wolves. You protected our son when I failed to keep you safe. You gave birth to our daughter while dealing with trauma that would have broken anyone else.”

“But I can’t even answer the door without someone mistaking me for the help.”

“So what?”

She blinked. “So what?”

“So fucking what if some assistant doesn’t recognize you immediately? So what if you’re wearing comfortable clothes in your own home? So what if you look like exactly what you are—a mother taking care of her baby?”

“It’s not that simple—”

“It is that simple.” My voice was firm. Final. “You think I care what Emma Rodriguez thinks about anything?”

“You should. She’s helping run your business.”

“She’s temporary staff. You’re my mate. There’s a difference.”

Sera was quiet for a moment. Lily stirred in her arms, making soft baby noises.

She looked skeptical.

“Let me ask you something,” I continued. “Do you think I fell in love with your wolf?”

“I... what?”

“Do you think I mated with you because of Ayla? Because of your supernatural abilities?”

“No, but—”

“Then why would losing those things change how I feel about you?” Newest update provided by FundNovel.net

Sera was quiet. Thinking.

“I fell in love with your kindness,” I said. “With your intelligence. With the way you make me laugh. With how fiercely you protect the people you love. None of that has changed.”

Lily started fussing. Sera automatically began swaying, soothing her with practiced ease.

I pulled her closer. Careful of Lily. Breathing in Sera’s scent. She still smelled like home.

“The only mistake I ever made was not protecting you better,” I said against her hair. “Everything else- choosing you, mating with you, building a life with you-that was the smartest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Even now? Even like this?”

“Especially now. Especially like this.”

We stood there for a long moment. Holding each other. Holding our daughter. Being a family.

“Damien?”

“Yeah?”

“If you really don’t mind Emma being here...”

“I don’t mind her doing her job. But if she makes you uncomfortable, she’s gone.”

“No, that’s not fair to her. She was just... she was just doing what anyone would do. Making assumptions based on appearances.”

Brother’s Best Friends Are My Mates

We stood there for a long moment, holding each other and Lily, being a family. The weight of Emma’s words still stung, but Damien’s reassurance helped ease some of the ache in my chest.

“You know what?” Damien said suddenly, pulling back to look at me. “Tomorrow’s our anniversary!”

I blinked. “Our anniversary?” God, I’d completely forgotten.

“A year since you agreed to mate with me.” His thumb brushed across my cheek. “I thought we could go out.

Celebrate a little. Maybe help you remember who you really are.”

The flutter in my chest was immediate and stupid. Like my heart still believed in fairy tales.

“That sounds nice,” I managed.

“Come to the office tomorrow evening. Around six. We’ll go from there.”

The office. Where I used to work. Where Emma Rodriguez now sat at what used to be my desk, being everything I couldn’t be anymore.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Damien’s expression softened. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Because I didn’t belong there anymore. Because seeing Emma in my old role would hurt. Because the thought of walking through those halls where everyone knew what I used to be made my stomach clench with anxiety.

“No reason,” I lied. “Six is perfect.”

But as the day wore on, anxiety gnawed at me like a physical thing. I changed clothes three times, trying to find something that didn’t make me look like exactly what Emma had called me. A nanny.

By the time I kissed Lily goodbye and handed her to Ophelia, my hands were shaking.

“You look beautiful,” Ophelia said gently. “Try to have fun tonight.”

Beautiful. Right. I caught my reflection in the hallway mirror on my way out. Tired eyes. Pale skin. Hair that refused to cooperate no matter what I did to it.

The drive to Nightshadow Enterprises felt longer than it used to. Every red light gave me more time to think, more time to remember walking through those doors with purpose. With confidence. With a wolf’s enhanced senses that made me aware of everything around me.

The parking garage was the same. The elevator played the same soft jazz. But when the doors opened on the executive floor, everything felt different.

“Sera!”

I turned to see Michelle from accounting hurrying toward me, her face bright with surprise.

“Oh my God, we haven’t seen you in forever!” She pulled me into a hug that I wasn’t ready for. “How are you feeling? Everyone’s been so worried.”

“I’m... I’m doing better.” The lie came automatically. “Much better.”

“That’s so good to hear. When are you coming back to work? Emma’s nice and all, but she’s not you, you know?”

My chest tightened. “I don’t... I’m still recovering.”

“Of course, of course. Take all the time you need.” But her eyes were curious, searching. “Are you sick? You look different somehow. Thinner maybe?”

“Because I’m human now. Because I’m weak.”

“Just tired,” I managed.

“Sera?” Another voice. David from legal, approaching with that same mix of concern and curiosity. “Good to see you out and about. Feeling better?”

“Yes, much better.”

“Excellent. So when should we expect you back? Things have been crazy without you. Emma’s doing her best, but she doesn’t know the systems like you do.”

Each question felt like a small cut. A reminder of what I’d lost. What I’d never get back.

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “Still taking it one day at a time.”

More faces appeared. Janet from HR. Tom from operations. All asking the same questions. All expecting answers I didn’t have.

“When are you coming back?”

“Are you feeling better?”

“We miss you so much.”

By the time I escaped to the elevator that led to Damien’s office, my chest felt tight and my hands were trembling. I pressed the button for the top floor and leaned against the wall, trying to breathe.

You can do this. It’s just an office. Just people who used to know you.

But when the elevator doors opened, the first thing I saw was Emma Rodriguez.

She was sitting at the reception desk outside Damien’s office. My old desk. The one where I used to organize Damien’s schedule and handle pack business and feel like I belonged somewhere.

Emma looked up as I approached, her expression shifting from professional politeness to recognition.

“Oh!” she said, standing quickly. “You’re... ah, you’re Damien’s human nanny, right? I remember you from last night.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. Even after our encounter yesterday, even after I’d answered his door in his house, that’s still all she saw when she looked at me. The link to the origin of this information rests in find~novel~net

Not Luna. Not former assistant. Not his mate.

Human nanny.

“I’m Seraphina,” I said quietly, my voice barely steady. “I’m here to see Damien.”

“Right, Seraphina.” She nodded, but there was no real recognition in her eyes. No understanding of who I used to be. “He’s finishing up a conference call. Shouldn’t be much longer.”

She gestured vaguely toward the seating area, but then seemed to reconsider.

“Actually, you know what? Why don’t I set you up in the supply room? It’ll be quieter there. More private.”

“I could just wait here,” I suggested weakly.

“Oh no, that wouldn’t work. I have calls to make and reports to finish. The supply room will be much better.”

She was already moving, leading me down the hall like I was some random visitor who needed to be shuffled out of the way. Not the woman who used to run this entire floor.

The supply room was exactly what it sounded like. Shelves lined with office supplies. Boxes of copy paper stacked to the ceiling. A small, uncomfortable chair shoved in the corner next to a broken printer that no one had bothered to remove.

“Just make yourself comfortable,” Emma said brightly. “I’ll let Mr. Nightshadow know you’re here as soon as he’s free.”

And then she was gone, leaving me alone in a room that smelled like toner and disappointment.

I sat in the chair and stared at the shelves around me. Staplers. Pens. Post-it notes. All the mundane things that kept an office running. Things I used to order and organize and never think twice about.

Now I was sitting among them like discarded inventory.

Brother's Best Friends Are My Mates

The storage room smells like cleaning supplies and old paper. Dust motes drift through the afternoon light streaming from the small window, and I press my palms against the one-way glass, trying to steady my breathing.

I can see everything.

Emma Rodriguez sits at my old desk-"my" desk-her perfectly manicured fingers flying across the keyboard with the kind of confidence I used to have. Her hair is swept up in an elegant chignon. Her burgundy blazer fits like it was tailored specifically for her body. Even from here, even through the glass, I can see the way she holds herself. Straight spine. Shoulders back. Every inch the competent professional.

I catch my reflection in the glass and wince. My hair is falling out of the ponytail I hastily threw it into this morning. There's a stain on my sweater-probably from Lily's last feeding. My eyes look hollow, ringed with the kind of dark circles that no amount of concealer can hide.

"Human nanny." The words echo in my head, Emma's voice from yesterday when she saw me at Damien's door.

The office door opens, and my heart clenches as Damien walks in. He's wearing the charcoal gray suit I bought him for his birthday last year, the one that makes his eyes look almost silver in certain light. He looks every inch the powerful Alpha he is-commanding, confident, untouchable.

Emma stands immediately, and I watch as she moves around the desk to greet him. She's close. Too close.

Her body language is professional, but there's something else there. The way she tilts her head slightly when she speaks. The way she touches his arm briefly while handing him a file.

My chest tightens with something ugly and familiar that makes me feel small and pathetic.

Damien doesn't seem to notice her proximity. He's focused on the documents she's showing him, his brow furrowed in concentration. But that's how he's always been-single-minded when it comes to business. It's one of the things I used to love about working with him. We were a perfect team. This content belongs to Find★Novel.net

Now I'm on the wrong side of the glass, watching someone else take my place.

I strain to hear what they're saying, but the glass is too thick. Their voices are just muffled sounds, meaningless noise that makes my frustration spike higher.

Emma laughs at something Damien says, and the sound is like fingernails on a chalkboard. It's a perfect laugh -not too loud, not too soft, just professional enough to be appropriate while still showing she has a sense of humor. I used to laugh like that in meetings. Used to be the one standing beside him, anticipating his needs before he voiced them.

I try the door handle again, knowing it's useless. The lock clicked from the outside when the maintenance guy "accidentally" shut me in here twenty minutes ago. Emma had been so apologetic, promising she'd be right back after she finished "just one quick thing" with Damien.

Twenty minutes ago.

My hands are shaking. I press them flat against the glass and try to breathe through the rising panic. I'm not claustrophobic-never have been. But being trapped while watching this, watching her seamlessly slide into the role that used to define me, is making my chest feel tight and airless.

Emma moves to the window, pointing at something outside. Damien follows, standing beside her as she explains whatever she's showing him. They're silhouetted against the afternoon light, two perfectly matched

professionals discussing business with easy familiarity.

The sight makes my stomach turn.

Damien's attention is completely absorbed by whatever Emma is telling him. She's animated now, using her hands to gesture as she explains something. He nods, asks what looks like a question, and she responds with obvious enthusiasm.

They look like a team. Like partners.

Like everything I used to be to him.

Emma pulls out her phone, shows him something on the screen. He studies it carefully, then says something that makes her smile. Not the professional smile she's been wearing all morning-a real one. Warm and genuine and exactly the kind of smile that would make any man feel pleased with himself.

My fingernails dig into my palms. I'm being ridiculous, I know that. Emma is doing her job. Damien is doing his. There's nothing inappropriate happening here, nothing I can point to and call wrong. But that doesn't make it hurt less.

I close my eyes and try to center myself, try to find some of that inner strength that used to come so naturally. But without Ayla's fierce presence backing me up, I feel hollow. Like I'm trying to draw water from an empty well.

When I open my eyes, Damien is checking his watch. He says something to Emma that makes her nod and gather a stack of papers. They're wrapping up their meeting.

Finally. Maybe now someone will remember that I exist and come let me out of this damn closet.

But instead of leaving, Emma walks around the desk and settles into the chair—"my" chair-like she owns it.

Damien heads for the door, pausing to say something over his shoulder that makes her wave acknowledgment.

And then he's gone.

Emma is back to typing, her fingers moving across the keyboard with practiced efficiency. She looks completely at home, completely in control of her domain.

I slump against the wall and slide down until I'm sitting on the floor among boxes of printer paper and office supplies. The position makes me feel even smaller, even more insignificant.

The thought makes my eyes burn with unshed tears.

Minutes tick by. Five. Ten. Fifteen.

Emma continues working, completely absorbed in whatever task has her attention. Every so often she answers the phone with a crisp, professional greeting.

Finally—"finally"—Emma stands up from the desk. She stretches, checks her own phone, then seems to remember something. Her eyes scan the office, and I see the exact moment when she realizes I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

She looks confused for a moment, then understanding dawns on her face. Her hand flies to her mouth in what looks like genuine horror.

The lock turns, and the door swings open. Emma's face appears, flushed with what I hope is shame.

"Oh my god, Seraphina!" she gasps, her professional composure cracking. "I'm so sorry! I completely forgot—we were discussing the contract and it got complicated and—"

"It's fine," I interrupt, climbing to my feet with as much dignity as I can manage. My legs are stiff from sitting on the floor, and I have to grab the doorframe to steady myself.

Emma's eyes widen slightly at my tone, but she recovers quickly. That professional mask slides back into place, smooth and impenetrable.

"Of course," she says carefully. "I understand you're upset. I would be too."

"You have no idea what I'm upset about," I want to tell her.

But I don't say any of that. Instead, I force a smile that feels like it might crack my face.

"Really, it's fine," I repeat, softer this time. "These things happen."

"Damien had to leave," she explains, moving back toward the desk to gather her things. "You may call him instead?"

My phone starts ringing then, the sound jarring in the tense silence. Emma and I both look down at it, and I see Damien's name on the screen.

Brother's Best Friends Are My Mates

My phone buzzes against my palm, Damien's name flashing on the screen. Emma glances over with those perfectly arched eyebrows, and I swipe to answer before she can make some snide comment.

"Hi."

"I'm downstairs. Where are you?"

"Coming down now."

The line goes dead, and something hot coils in my belly. Emma is still watching me with that curious expression.

"Have a lovely evening," she says with sweetness.

I grab my purse and walk past her without a word. Let her figure out what that was about.

The elevator ride feels endless. My reflection in the steel doors shows exactly what I expected—messy hair, wrinkled clothes, exhaustion written across every feature.

Damien's SUV is idling near the garage entrance, engine purring. He gets out when he sees me, and the sight of him makes my breath catch. Gone is the business suit from earlier. Now he's wearing dark jeans that hug his thighs and a gray sweater that does incredible things for his shoulders.

His eyes rake over me as I approach, and there's heat in that silver-blue gaze that makes me very aware of every inch of skin under my clothes.

"You look like heaven," he says when I reach him.

“Charming.” But I’m fighting a smile. “Is that how you talk to all your dates?” Official source is FundNovel.net

“Just the ones I’m planning to take to bed later.”

My cheeks flush hot. “Presumptuous much?”

He opens the car door for me, leaning close enough that I can smell his cologne. “Am I wrong?”

I don’t answer, but the way my breath hitches tells him everything he needs to know.

The drive is torture. His hand rests on my thigh, thumb tracing lazy patterns through the fabric of my slacks.

Every casual touch sends sparks through my nervous system, reminding me exactly how long it’s been since we’ve done anything more intimate than quick kisses.

“Where are we going?” I ask when we turn onto an unfamiliar road.

“Somewhere with good wine and dim lighting.”

“Planning to get me drunk?”

His fingers squeeze my thigh. “Planning to get you relaxed.”

The restaurant he’s chosen is all string lights and candlelit tables scattered across a stone patio. Romantic as hell. The kind of place that practically screams “anniversary dinner” to anyone with eyes.

The hostess greets Damien by name and leads us to a corner table that’s somehow even more intimate than the others. Flickering candles, trailing jasmine, the works.

“This is very…” I search for the right word as he pulls out my chair.

“Romantic?”

“I was going to say obvious.”

He laughs, the sound low and warm. “I’m not trying to be subtle tonight.”

“Good thing I like obvious men.”

“Do you?”

The way he’s looking at me across the candlelit table makes my pulse skip. “Sometimes.”

We order wine-something red and expensive that I definitely don't deserve after the day I've had. The alcohol helps loosen the knots in my shoulders, makes the candlelight feel warmer instead of just pretty.

"So," Damien says, swirling his wine. "Tell me about your day."

"You mean besides getting locked in a closet by your perfect assistant?"

"Emma locked you in a closet?"

I wave a dismissive hand. "Storage room. And it was an accident. Supposedly."

His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "How long?"

"About an hour. Long enough to watch you two have what looked like a very productive meeting"

"You were watching?"

"One-way glass." I take another sip of wine. "You two make a good team."

There's something dangerous in his expression now. "Are you jealous, Sera?"

I laugh, but it sounds forced even to my own ears. "Maybe a little bit."

"Because if you are, I could fire her tomorrow."

"You will not fire her because I'm having an insecurity crisis."

"I'll fire her if she's making my mate uncomfortable."

The possessive note in his voice makes heat pool low in my belly.

"Forget about it, just an incident."

The food arrives-some fancy pasta thing for me, steak for him. But I'm barely tasting. It's because Damien keeps looking at me like he's planning to devour me for dessert.

"You're staring," I point out.

"I'm appreciating. Being a patient man. I can wait until we get home to show you exactly how much there is to appreciate."

My thighs clench involuntarily. "You're terrible."

"You love it."

And damn him, I do. I love the way his eyes go dark when he looks at me. Love the way his voice drops to that rough whisper. Love the way he makes me feel like the most desirable woman in the world even when I'm falling apart at the seams.

"Take me home," I say quietly.

"We haven't finished eating."

"I don't care about the food."

Something shifts in his expression. Heat flares in those silver eyes. "You sure?"

"Take me home, Damien. Now."

He signals for the check without breaking eye contact. Pays quickly, efficiently, while I sit there trying to remember how to breathe normally.

The drive home is charged with a different kind of tension now. His hand stays on my thigh, but his touch feels possessive rather than casual. Claiming.

"The kids?" I ask as we pull into our driveway.

"Ophelia's keeping them overnight."

"You planned this."

"I hoped."

Inside, he doesn't bother with lights. The moment the door closes, he backs me against it, his body caging me in. In the darkness, all I can see is the gleam of his eyes and the sharp line of his jaw.

"I've been thinking about this all day," he murmurs against my ear.

"Just today?"

"All week. All month." His hands frame my face. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

"Tell me."

Instead of answering with words, he shows me. His mouth finds mine in a kiss that's hungry, demanding, full of weeks of pent-up need. I kiss him back just as desperately, my hands fisting in his sweater.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard.

“Upstairs,” he growls.

But neither of us wants to stop kissing long enough to actually walk. He lifts me instead, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carries me toward our bedroom. We’re still kissing, still touching, stumbling slightly when he misjudges the hallway corner.

“Smooth,” I gasp against his mouth.

“Shut up.”

Our bedroom is dark except for moonlight streaming through the windows. He sets me down beside the bed, his hands immediately going to the buttons of my blouse.

We undress each other slowly, reverently, like we’re unwrapping something precious. When we’re both naked, he pulls me down onto the bed, his mouth finding all the places that make me gasp and arch beneath him.

Without our supernatural bond, I can’t feel his emotions or his wolf’s presence. But what I feel instead is somehow more intimate. More real. This is just us-Damien and Sera, skin against skin, discovering each other all over again.

When he finally moves over me, settling between my thighs, his eyes find mine in the moonlight.

“Happy anniversary,” he whispers.

“Happy anniversary.”