

Letters Sent To Eternity

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Chapter 161

85 – Kennedy

I could hear Ryker muttering something from above, but judging by his silence and lack of movement, he must realize I'm right—or at least he agrees enough not to follow me down. Despite the heat of the moment, I can't help but feel a strange warmth at how protective he is of me. Even Alpha kept in touch during the entire trek through the woods, his presence felt in the faint brush of his tail against my leg. It was oddly comforting.

Carefully, I scramble down the steep slope, the descent proving much longer and more treacherous than I anticipated. Admitting to myself that Ryker might have had a point about scouting before leaping, I push the thought aside. I can't stop now—Emily needs help, and I'm the only one who can safely navigate this terrain without risking injury.

From our vantage point at the top, her small frame was barely visible. I hoped she was like most werewolf children—resilient, almost indestructible. Memories flooded back of playing with Jeremiah and the others when we were young, envying how quickly they healed from injuries. I recalled the one time I tumbled down a hill, rolling uncontrollably, and ended up with a broken arm. Months in a cast had been agonizing, but at least I learned to use my left hand better, becoming ambidextrous.

“Em, honey, can you hear me?” I called softly as I neared the bottom. I needed a sign—any sign—that she was conscious, moving, alive. Ryker had said he could hear her heartbeat, but that wasn't enough for me. It felt like I was trudging through thick sand, my body refusing to move faster despite my desperation. Panic clawed at me, but I fought with every ounce of strength to reach her.

“Kennedy, what's going on? Your emotions are off the charts. Is she okay?” Ryker's voice crackled through the comms.

“I don't know,” I whispered, a sob catching in my throat even though I wasn't shouting. “She's not moving, Ryker. What if we're too late? I'm the only one who can come down here without getting hurt. It's bad—she crushed a lot of those purple flowers on the way down. I can smell them in the air.”

“The pack doctor is on site. Move carefully and tell us what you find,” came the calm reply.

Taking a deep breath, I forced my legs free from the clinging dirt and quicksand-like earth, then hurried toward her. “Em? Emily, sweet girl, can you open your eyes for me? I'm going to check you over quickly to see if I can get you out of here. Tell me if anything hurts, okay?”

I scanned her body carefully. Thankfully, none of her limbs were twisted or bent unnaturally. That was a relief—no obvious breaks. “She’s lying on her back. There’s a decent gash on her forehead. It bled a lot, but it looks like it’s clotted now. Other than that, her body seems unharmed. I’m scared to move her, though—I can’t see if there’s anything wrong on her back.”

“Kennedy, darling, gently cross her arms over her chest and roll her onto her side, away from the head wound. Move slowly and try not to jostle her head too much. We’re just checking for any debris she might be impaled on,” Doc Bradshaw instructed patiently. Over the winter, since my “popsicle phase,” I’d grown close to the lead pack doctor.

Following her advice, I settled beside Emily’s left side and carefully turned her toward me, making sure she had no further contact with the wolfsbane flowers and stems that had caused so much trouble. “Hey, sweet girl, I’m just checking you out, okay? I want to make sure it’s safe to move you from this spot.”

A faint, weak whimper escaped her lips, and I froze instantly.

“Luna, you’re doing great. Keep talking to her while you check. She’s responding to you,” Ryker encouraged through the comms.

“Keep going, baby. Her heartbeat sped up when you touched her,” Ryker added, his voice full of hope.

I continued my examination. “I don’t see anything but scratches on her skin. I can’t tell if there’s anything under her clothes, but I think I can move her. Are you ready to get us out of here? I can’t climb both of us up alone.”

“We’re ready for you, Luna. Head back to where you climbed down, and we’ll get you set up for the climb,” Greta’s voice came through.

I shifted into a kneeling position, cradling Emily’s head gently against my shoulder, tucking it beneath my chin. When I stood, I moved her arms over my shoulders and wrapped her hips around my waist, locking my hands under her bottom. Deadweight kids were no joke—she was heavy.

“Hey, sweet girl. I know you can hear me. I need you to hold on so we can go home, okay? Can you do that for me?” I whispered softly as I made my way toward the sheer wall towering at least forty feet above us. I still couldn’t believe she fell from that height and only had a few scratches.

I needed one of the warriors to scout the area and figure out exactly where she’d landed. Adjusting her carefully in my arms, I felt her tense just a little.

“Luna, Bennet’s coming down to help you get set up...”

“Absolutely not!” Emily flinched in my arms, and I held her tighter. “No, talk me through it. And before anyone growls—Alpha or Gamma—calls me stubborn, I’m not. I promise. It’s

really bad down here. The scent is like acid and rotten dirt. If it's bothering me, it will harm all of you. Please, just talk me through this."

"Fine," Bennet grumbled, and I caught Ryker's disapproving glare over the edge.

They lowered the makeshift harness to me and guided me through putting it on. I watched as Ryker and Bennet paced along the ledge, while Josh joined the others on the opposite side after a thorough search of the area. Once everything was set, I barely had to do anything except walk my feet up the embankment to keep us from sliding. I was leaning back, and Emily rested against me like a fragile bed.

As soon as we reached the top, everyone rushed toward us.

"STOP!" I shouted sharply, and I must have put some of my Alpha command into it because they all froze like a scene from a movie. "Sorry, you can move, but stay back. Let Doc Bradshaw clean us up and check her out." I moved toward the pack doctor, doing a little shimmy to slip the harness off my legs.

"Ryker, I love you, but don't touch me until I've washed all this poison off," I said firmly as I strode past him without looking back.

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Chapter 162

86 – Ryker

I stood frozen, my mind refusing to process the words I had just heard. Did she really say that? There was no way I misheard her. She seemed so absorbed in the little girl, Emily, that the words slipped out almost unconsciously. Yet, those three simple words hit me like a thunderclap.

"If that's true, then wouldn't she be repeating phrases she uses all the time? Because that's not something she's ever said to either of us," Alpha teased, a sly grin on his face. "I was kinda hoping she'd tell me first, you know? She does seem to like me better." His joke barely masked the surprise in his voice, and I could tell he was just as stunned as I was. If he caught it, then I wasn't imagining things.

Danny, ever the provocateur, couldn't resist chipping in. "So, Bossman, did you just hear those special three words from a special Luna?"

"Uh, yeah. Pretty sure I did," I admitted, still trying to wrap my head around it.

"Is she high or something? Like, does wolfsbane affect humans differently?" Danny asked, his grin widening. His expression was that of a cat who had just caught a canary, and it made me snap my head toward him sharply.

"Shut up," I muttered, shaking off the distraction and forcing myself to follow Kennedy, who was walking with Emily. Danny trailed behind us, barely holding back his laughter.

As high-ranking wolves, we've all had countless women throw those words at us over the years. It always made my skin crawl when they clung to me, thinking that phrase would guarantee a lifetime with me. Even Greta had been on the receiving end from a few guys trying to get close to me. None of us ever took it seriously outside of immediate family, but this time it was different. My heart stopped, my entire body froze in place. Alpha was right—the words came out so naturally, as if she said them to me every single day. Could she possibly feel that strongly about me after everything I've done to her?

Over the past few months, we'd grown closer—friends, maybe something more—but I wasn't sure if she could ever give me what my parents share, what her aunt and uncle have, or even what my sister and her best friend have. I had thought maybe she held a grudge, something that kept her from feeling anything beyond friendship for me.

I needed to be near her, to talk to her. I could see she was focused on Emily, but this couldn't wait much longer. I had to know.

"NOOOOOO!!!" A sharp, high-pitched scream shattered my thoughts. I pushed through the crowd that had gathered around my mate, Emily, and Doc Bradshaw.

The little girl was thrashing, crying out in pain, while Kennedy tried desperately to soothe her. Another woman, Emily's mother, reached out with trembling, tear-streaked hands, but Emily swatted her away violently.

"Em, please let Mama hold you. I need to see if you're okay," her mother pleaded softly.

"No! Don't touch. The plants hurt," Emily wailed, her small hands pushing her mother's away again.

"I know, baby, but I want to help. Please let me help you," her mother coaxed gently.

"No! You'll get sick too. No!" Emily insisted, fear shining in her eyes.

Kennedy stepped forward, her voice calm and steady. "Em, sweet girl, look at me. Take a deep breath, okay? I know the wolfsbane hurts, but we have to stay calm. Your mom will stay back until Doc Bradshaw says we're all cleaned off." She glanced at Emily's mom, and a silent understanding passed between them. "We just have a few more cuts for Doc Bradshaw to treat, and then we can head to the clinic to get everything washed off." Kennedy gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind Emily's ear, forcing the girl to meet her gaze. Slowly, Emily seemed to surrender and sat still for the doctor. I noticed Kennedy wasn't distracting her from the pain but was explaining what was happening and why. Emily hung on every word, her fear easing bit by bit.

I rubbed my chest, right over my heart, and thought to myself, I want that. That kind of trust, that kind of connection—it had never crossed my mind before.

"What do you want, Bossman?" Danny's voice pulled me back from my thoughts. I realized I'd spoken aloud without meaning to.

“Uh...” I turned to see Danny, Bennet, Greta, and Josh all staring at me with varying expressions of curiosity and confusion. Before I could answer, the doctor spoke again, drawing my attention back.

“All right, Luna, you’re both safe to move now. We need to get you to a car, though...”

“No! I don’t want this stuff inside with any of you. Where’s... Ryker?” Emily’s eyes locked on me immediately, and for the first time, I understood exactly what she wanted without her having to say it. I nodded and took off, Josh right behind me.

“Bennet, Greta, stay with them,” I called over my shoulder. “Make sure everyone gets checked and cleared before we head back.”

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Chapter 163

“What’s the plan, Bossman?” Bennet asked, his curiosity evident as he glanced over at me.

“The Luna insisted on riding in the back of my truck,” I explained, “so there’s no chance of wolfsbane contaminating the other vehicles. Josh will bring a car for Emily’s family to follow behind us. Those two want to keep everyone at a distance to avoid anyone else getting sick.”

Bennet raised an eyebrow. “When did she tell you that?”

“She didn’t need to,” I replied. “It’s the same reason she refused to let anyone else go down the ravine. She doesn’t seem immune, judging by how she looks, but it would’ve been far worse for anyone else to go down there. Honestly, if the roles were reversed, I’d do the same.”

We gathered the vehicles, and I asked Robin to load the truck bed with extra blankets to make sure the ride was as comfortable as possible. The journey would take longer than usual since I planned to drive slower than I ever had before. This cargo was too precious to risk.

Watching Kennedy gently hold the little girl stirred every fluttering feeling I’d ever known deep within my chest. Today had been an emotional whirlwind, and I wasn’t sure the ride was over yet. I wanted so badly to tell Kennedy how I felt—how I had felt for a long time—but even the thought of it made my stomach twist in knots.

Doc Bradshaw was well aware of how anxious Kennedy’s parents and I were about our girls. She efficiently handled the decontamination process they had to go through. I was told it was quick, but they were gone for over an hour. One of the nurses mentioned that depending on the level of exposure and the individual, it sometimes took days to fully purge wolfsbane from the system.

I silently hoped Emily hadn’t absorbed too much of the poison while trapped among the crushed, oozing plants.

When they finally allowed us back into the room, both girls were curled up together on a hospital bed, their eyes closed in peaceful rest.

“Look at her,” Emily’s dad whispered softly. “She almost looks like the Luna’s child.” I couldn’t help but agree. Their eyes were the most distinguishing feature: Emily’s were a warm, rich chocolate, almost amber, while Kennedy’s were a striking, clear blue that sparkled like crystals.

I stepped closer and gently traced a finger down Kennedy’s cheek. She inhaled deeply, a shiver of warmth spreading between us at the touch.

“I’m so grateful you found her,” Emily’s mom said quietly, her gaze fixed solely on her daughter. “She truly is special. I’ve never seen Emily like this outside the house before.”

I couldn’t help but ask, “What do you mean?”

Emily’s mom smiled softly. “Emily’s never been shy, but she’s never really put herself out there. The first time the Luna came to play soccer with them, she scolded all the boys for excluding the little kids. She said it was silly not to work together because the little ones can’t improve or have fun if they don’t get a chance to practice.”

“That sounds exactly like something Emily would say,” I chuckled.

“She also told me the Luna was tough but never gave up. She always knew when to pass the ball to someone better, and she kept smiling through it all, even when things got hard. Now, whenever Emily faces a challenge, she says, ‘The Luna would probably...’ She’s even doing better in school because the Luna is there, and Emily wants to train like her with Miss Greta. The Luna’s been such a positive role model, even if she doesn’t realize it. And the boys love having her watch their games—you should hear them brag to their friends,” she giggled.

Doc Bradshaw gave us an update on the girls’ health and what to expect over the next few days. She recommended keeping them overnight. Since they refused to be separated, she suggested they stay together. Neither Emily’s mom nor I were willing to leave and get some sleep at home. I joked that if worst came to worst, I’d just sleep on the floor in my wolf form.

We were moved to one of the birthing rooms, given how many of us there were. Thankfully, cots were found so neither of us had to endure the floor. Emily’s dad took Todd home and promised to return with breakfast in the morning.

Just before I settled onto my cot, I leaned in close to Kennedy and pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “I love you, Little Lamb,” I whispered.

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Chapter 164

A gentle, tingling sensation brushes softly across my cheek, stirring me from my thoughts. I don't open my eyes right away—I want to hold onto the feeling a little longer. “That’s nice, Little Lamb,” I murmur, “but yesterday was rough. Give me another hour, please.”

A small, cheerful giggle breaks through my reverie. Turning my head, I spot Emily sitting up in her bed, her eyes sparkling brightly in the dim light of the room. “Why do you call her a lamb?” she asks with a playful frown. “She’s not a lamb, silly Alpha!” She covers her mouth to stifle another laugh. I glance toward her mother and Kennedy, noticing the same eager curiosity shining in their eyes. All three silently demand the truth.

“Well, my little ninja,” I say, smiling at the nickname I’ve given her, “your Luna once tried to run away from me. She was clever—hid her scent just like you did. I had to send my wolf after her, and she’d never seen him before.”

Emily’s eyes widen in amazement. “Your wolf is so big! Were you scared, Luna?” she asks, turning to Kennedy with innocent wonder.

Kennedy shrugs, a small smile tugging at her lips. “At first, yeah. I didn’t know who was chasing me. But when I realized it was the alpha, I wasn’t scared anymore.”

Emily’s admiration is clear. “Wow! You’re so brave.”

I cut in before Kennedy’s pride swells any further, noticing the mischievous glint in her eyes. “She tried calling me the big bad wolf, so I told her she was a little lamb for the alpha to chase. And somehow, that nickname stuck.” I shrug, leaving out the playful undertones of that exchange.

“But wouldn’t that make her Little Red Riding Hood if you’re the big bad wolf?” Emily puzzles aloud, trying to follow my logic.

“Technically, yes,” I admit, “but that’s a mouthful. Plus, when I caught her, she was trembling like a little lamb. ‘Little Lamb’ just sounds better.” I wink, and she giggles again. “Now, since both of you are wide awake and teasing me, can I assume it’s okay to take my Luna home?”

“I was not shaking, and yes, we’ve been cleared to leave,” Kennedy says firmly, swatting my arm playfully. “That’s why I was trying to wake you up, butthead.”

Emily gasps, “Luna, you said a bad word! That’s not nice!”

I grin and scoop Kennedy up over my shoulder before she can react. “You’re right, Miss Emily. I’m taking her home, and we’re going to have a serious talk about her choice of words.” Both Emily’s mom and Kennedy chuckle at my mock sternness, but I don’t mind. I just want my mate all to myself. Without hesitation, I stride past everyone in the hospital, heading straight for the exit. No one is going to argue with me.

“Ryker! Put me down! She can’t see us anymore—I can walk,” Kennedy protests, squirming on my shoulder.

“Not a chance,” I reply, enjoying the bounce as I shift my shoulder. “I have some questions for you, and after saving a pup, everyone’s going to want your attention. This way, they’ll leave you alone.”

I carry her past the hospital staff and the bustling common area, back toward my office. As much as I crave taking her upstairs, throwing her on the bed, and sleeping the day away, there’s something I need to understand first—how she managed to track Emily with no scent and barely any trace.

Inside my office, I close the door behind us and settle into the chair behind my desk. Pulling Kennedy to straddle my lap, I face her directly. “How did you track her? I have to know. All the wolves struggled, but you followed a trail only you could see.”

She smiles, a hint of pride in her eyes. “It’s not that impressive, really. I’m human—I don’t have all your heightened senses. Even before you get your wolves, your senses are sharper. Running around with Jeremiah, Ben, Tommy, and Jason, I had to adapt to keep up. I trained harder to become stronger and faster. Our delta is an excellent tracker, and he taught me, just like I teach the pups. The beta and gamma caught on and started giving me assignments.” Her eyes soften as she drifts into a memory. “It used to drive the guys crazy. One weekend, when Jer left for the Alpha’s meeting, I had a tracking assignment. I was so mad because they basically locked me in the house with the guys. They wouldn’t let me train in the woods since Jer and Uncle James were gone.” She rubs her face, a wry smile appearing. “That must be an alpha thing. You all think you’re the only ones who can protect us delicate females.” She looks me straight in the eye, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” I say firmly, “it’s because even they know you’re special. And you are, Kennedy.” She scoffs, but I don’t let her dodge the compliment. “You are special—not just because you’re my mate, or because you’ve been chosen as a Luna while still human. You are special. The way the pack talks about you is incredible. They love you. They’ve loved you from the start. You came in and refused to be intimidated. Everything you do is for the betterment of the pack and all its members. And you don’t want recognition or thanks. You’ve made friends with the entire packhouse staff. I heard a young wolf named Cindy only changes things if you approve first. My mother won’t even listen to me sometimes. I’ve never felt so useless.” I laugh softly, and she smiles back.

Taking a deep breath, I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and cup her cheek gently. “I don’t know if you realize what you told me yesterday, but I do love you, Kennedy. I don’t know exactly when it happened, but it did. And there’s no way you’re getting rid of me now.”

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Chapter 165

88 – Kennedy

Oh no, I actually said it. I was so focused on making sure Emily was okay that when I warned Ryker to keep his distance so the wolfsbane wouldn’t affect him, the words slipped out: “I love you.” He didn’t react or say a thing, which made me wonder if maybe he didn’t feel the same or if I had just imagined saying it. Last night, I lay awake clutching Emily,

anxiety swirling in my chest about what today might bring—until Ryker completely caught me off guard. He kissed me goodnight and whispered softly in my ear, “I love you.”

A small, knowing smile tugs at his lips as he watches me absorb everything that’s happened over the past couple of days. It’s hard to believe it was only yesterday that I threw Amy out of the packhouse and Ryker let me tear down a few more of his emotional barriers.

“How are you feeling now?” he asks gently, his hands rubbing soothing circles along my arms, sending shivers of goosebumps across my skin. He watches my every reaction closely while I study him in return.

“I’m okay,” I say, taking a deep breath as a sudden chill runs through me. He just smiles again. “I spent a lot of time with the healers back in Silver Crescent. We found a treatment I take regularly. Doc Bradshaw’s been making it for me too. It keeps me from getting sick and helps me heal faster than a normal human. That’s what she gave me last night. I do have a few spots where the crushed plant juice irritated my skin, but other than that, I’m fine.”

“And how was Emily this morning? Since you all let me sleep through your check-up,” he says, finally meeting my eyes.

“What? You were so cute, sprawled out all over that cot,” I laugh, picturing him again. It really was a sight—the cot barely big enough to hold him from head to butt, his legs hanging off the sides with feet touching the floor, one arm shielding his eyes, the other resting on his stomach. “The doc said you didn’t sleep much either, so I wanted to give you as much rest as possible. We’ve got some work to do today.”

“What kind of work?” he asks, a playful glint in his eyes. “Because I was planning on following through with Alpha’s threat. That means spending the rest of the day alone with you.” He wraps both arms around me, pulling me tight against his chest. I don’t resist; instead, I loop my arms around his neck, fingers threading through his hair, making him growl low in his throat.

“This isn’t exactly motivating me to work harder, just so you know,” I tease. His green eyes are mesmerizing, and suddenly I can’t even remember what I was going to say. He closes his eyes, gripping my hips firmly, his thumb pressing into the crease at the top of my thigh while his fingers dig into my ass.

“I’m so scared,” he admits quietly, voice rough. “You have no idea how terrified I am of hurting you.” He takes a deep breath. “But I want you too much to hold back any longer. We need you—both Alpha and I.” He grinds me closer to him, and I just hold on, unsure where this is leading.

He’s mentioned a few times now that he fears hurting me, but that he needs me. I’m not sure exactly what he means. If it’s sex, that’s easy—I’m not the virgin here. Maybe he’s worried he’ll lose control; I’ve heard of guys getting a little wild in the heat of the moment. I’ve never experienced that myself, so it’s something we’ll have to figure out together. Or maybe it’s about the marking—though I can’t imagine being marked is comfortable for anyone.

“Whatever you’re planning, it needs to be quick,” I gasp, my breath shallow and uneven. “Because this feels so good, I’m not going to last much longer.” My voice breaks into a moan that doesn’t even sound like me. “Ryker, uh... please.”

“That word coming from you? I really like it,” he murmurs, gradually quickening our pace. I can’t even remember the last time I dry-humped anyone, let alone reached an orgasm that way. But now, I’m definitely on my way.

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Chapter 166

“Mmm... the ‘please’... or maybe... my name?” he murmurs, his voice thick with desire.

I groan, “Rrrrrr, damn it! Both. I love it when you beg me like that.” His hand shoots up, gripping my chin firmly, his thumb tracing slowly over my lips. “But what I really crave is hearing my name slip off your lips. God, it drives me wild. Come for me, baby.”

It’s like he knows exactly how to flip the switch inside me, igniting a fire that consumes every inch of my being. He pulls me closer, pressing harder against me, and my core clenches desperately, aching for release even though nothing is there yet. The sensation is just as intense as every other time he’s brought me to the edge. I’m sure my nails are digging into the back of his neck by now.

“BOSS!!! WHOA, SH*T, SORRY!” The door SLAMS open suddenly.

“What the hell was that?” I glance back toward the noise, startled.

Ryker growls low in his throat, “A dead Delta walking.”

I start to rise. “Sounds serious. We should check it out...”

He yanks me back down before I can move. “This is important, and I’m not finished with you yet.”

I chuckle softly, a teasing spark in my eyes. “Well, now that you’ve decided I’m stuck with you, we have plenty of time.” I reach up, catching his face in my hands, and press a quick kiss to his lips. Then, while he’s distracted, I slip off his lap.

“That’s cheating,” he protests, pouting like a petulant child.

“I thought we agreed I’d use whatever I’ve got to get my way,” I grin, holding out my hand. “Now, let’s go see what our dead Delta has to say after that rude interruption.”

Ryker groans but takes my hand anyway, standing and stalking toward the door with a dramatic scowl. He yanks it open with more force than necessary, clearly having caught the scent of Danny just beyond. “What’s so damn important?” he growls, teeth clenched, not bothering to hide his irritation.

Danny avoids Ryker's gaze, eyes flicking everywhere but at him. "Sorry, Boss. We found a rogue camp." He clears his throat nervously. "They seem peaceful enough, but they're not far from where we found the little girl yesterday. Josh did a sweep with a team—there's about fifty of them."

He nods toward me. "We thought you'd want to check it out yourself, considering..."

Ryker rubs his face with one hand, then squeezes the hand he's holding tightly before looking at me. "Damn. Yeah, I want to see it for myself." His voice softens. "I'm sorry, baby. I have to go and—"

"I have to stay in the packhouse," I finish for him, drawing a slow breath and releasing it calmly. "I've got some work to handle. It's okay. You go take care of the pack. I do need to head into town later—I promised Emily we'd have ice cream since she still has to rest today. I'll drag Bennet and another warrior with me."

Before he can argue with my plans, I tug him up with my hand, planting a quick kiss on his cheek. "Be safe. Love you." Then I start to walk away.

But he doesn't let me go. Instead, he pulls me back hard enough that I crash into his chest. "Not good enough, Little Lamb. No more teasing kisses." His hands cup my face, and he presses his lips to mine in a deep, demanding kiss. My body arches perfectly against his, and a soft moan slips out before he swallows it, deepening the kiss even more.

We barely notice the clearing of a throat nearby.

I pull back just enough to tease Danny, lips still brushing Ryker's. "Sounds like our Delta's got some throat trouble."

Ryker smiles against my mouth and presses a gentle kiss to my lips one more time. "Love you too, Lamb. Please be careful when you go out today. Have the guys check in with me when you leave, okay?"

"Okay." Why does my voice come out barely above a whisper? That sexy half-smile of his always leaves me breathless.

I force myself to step away before I lose control and jump him right here in the hallway—especially with Danny watching, who probably wouldn't mind the show at all.

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Chapter 167

89 – Ryker

"Damn it!" I roar, the frustration bubbling up so fiercely I have to clamp my jaw shut to stop myself from punching a hole in the wall of my office. He was right there—right under our noses—and somehow, we completely missed him. We combed through the entire abandoned camp, every corner and shadow, but came up empty. I can't tell if they were

warned ahead of time or if they simply spotted us before we even got close, because when we arrived, everything was packed up and vanished.

I trust my beta's instincts. He's one of the most stealthy operatives I have on the team. It's hard to believe he slipped up and allowed the rogues to catch wind that we were closing in. The camp itself was barely half a mile from where we found Emily. That proximity can't be just coincidence. I'm starting to suspect they used wolfsbane as a kind of cloak, masking their presence. Who knows how long they've been hiding out there? If Emily hadn't disappeared, we might never have stumbled onto this secret. That ravine borders what's known as neutral ground—an unspoken truce zone. I remember hearing stories about a massive wildfire that tore through that area when I was a kid, a blaze so intense it took weeks for the neighboring packs to finally extinguish it. In the twenty years since, the land has never truly healed. Some of the more superstitious members of my pack whisper that the place is cursed. It's a spot no one dares to tread.

But what stings the most is the faint scent I caught—Claude's. It was subtle, maybe a couple of days old, but unmistakable. That bastard is here, in my territory. And I have this sinking feeling he's after my mate. What he hopes to gain by hurting her, I can't fathom—except to provoke my full, unrelenting fury.

I try to steady my pounding heart by pacing the length of my office, the walls closing in as my thoughts spiral. I can't face Kennedy like this—not tonight. It's late, and I've given Claude's scent far more attention than it deserves. Kennedy has suffered enough trauma; she doesn't need to see me unravel. I take a deep breath, pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes, hoping to ease the headache that's threatening to take hold. Oddly, just thinking about her calms me. I can almost feel her presence nearby, like a warm pulse in the quiet house. If I concentrate hard enough, I might even be able to pinpoint exactly where she is.

A sudden shiver runs down my spine, stiffening my back before melting it into a soft, warm sensation. "I can feel this tension all over the packhouse," she murmurs, her voice gentle as her nails trace slow, soothing lines down my back—not in any intimate way, but in a way that somehow eases the knot in my chest. Her cheek rests between my shoulder blades, and her arms encircle my waist, grounding me. "What can I do to help?"

I inhale deeply again, letting her scent fill my senses. She shouldn't consume me like this, yet I'm powerless to resist. Lost in thought, I hadn't even noticed her slip into the room. And now, this is exactly what I need to clear my head. My mind is a mess. My father never prepared me for this—the mate bond. If he had, I might have rejected her outright. I've always craved control, needed it to feel safe. But here, now, with her, I'm utterly out of control—and for the first time in my life, I don't mind.

"Hey," she coos softly, breaking through the storm in my mind. "Stop overthinking. Let me help you."

I wrap my arms around hers, finding comfort in her touch. "It's Claude. He was at the rogue camp. He's never been able to mess with my head before..." My voice trails off, unwilling to say the words aloud. It sounds too close to blaming her, and she's not at fault—Claude is.

“Before me?” she asks quietly, curiosity coloring her tone rather than pain.

“Yeah. I took his pack from him. Looking back, I realize it was too easy. I was just a teenager, and we fought hard. Both sides lost people, but I thought I had him beat. Turns out, he’s spent the last decade using me to strengthen his pack. Now, he wants it back.”

“He’ll never get it,” she says with fierce certainty, her conviction unwavering.

“What makes you so sure?” I ask, turning to face her.

She shifts, coming around to stand in front of me. “Oh, shit! What are you wearing?” she exclaims, eyes widening as she takes in my appearance. It’s rhetorical—she already knows the answer. I gently push her back just enough to get a better look. Her bare feet rest lightly on the floor, and her long, toned legs are exposed. The hem of my white t-shirt grazes her mid-thigh, and it’s clear she’s not wearing a bra underneath. Her hair is loose and tousled, framing her face in a messy halo.

“You look stunning,” I growl, pulling her close again. I can’t seem to get enough of her today.

“You’re crazy,” she laughs softly. “I look like a mess. But you needed to calm down, so I didn’t have time to change.”

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Chapter 168

“I don’t ever want you to change,” she murmured softly, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me close for a tender kiss. “This is going to be your official sleepwear from now on.” Her words sent a shiver down my spine as she pressed her lips to mine with gentle insistence.

Though I was tempted to give in completely, she began to sway her hips slowly against me, and I couldn’t help but groan in response. “You need to relax…” she whispered, her voice teasing yet soothing.

“I can relax, I swear,” I whined, my voice tinged with desperation. I wasn’t above begging when it came to her. Leaning in, I sought a deeper kiss, but just as I thought she’d give in, she pulled away.

“I’ve got a better idea,” she said, grabbing my hands and tugging me toward the door.

“What’s that?” I asked, completely under her spell, following without hesitation.

“Just follow me,” she said with a playful wink, releasing one of my hands to lead me down the hallway toward the kitchen. I hoped she wasn’t heading for the back stairs—if she even joked about food now, I might just scoop her up and run away.

Thankfully, she wasn't teasing anymore, at least for the moment. Instead, we made our way to her old room. The door to the master bedroom was firmly shut, and she didn't even glance at it. What she didn't know was that Robin had plans to completely renovate it. All the furniture had been cleared out already. I was looking forward to surprising Kennedy during her Luna ceremony.

But she didn't stop at the bed as I'd expected. Instead, she pulled me toward the bathroom, and my mind immediately flashed back to the last time we had shared this space. I had just fixed the shower then, though I wouldn't mind doing it all over again if it meant recreating that night.

"No shower, you horny boy," she laughed, catching me off guard.

"But..." I started to protest.

"No buts! We're taking a bath," she declared. My heart skipped a beat as she peeled my shirt off, exposing me completely.

"You were naked downstairs on the main floor? Where anyone could have seen you?" I asked, my temper flaring with protectiveness.

"Possessive much?" she teased, winking at me before bending over to turn on the water. "I've been up here waiting for you for hours. You're not the only one with blue balls."

Her icy blue eyes locked onto mine over her shoulder, and I couldn't resist any longer. I strode forward, scooped her up with a delighted squeal, and spun her around so her body pressed against mine. Without hesitation, she kissed me with a hunger that was raw and desperate—not sweet or tender, but fierce and consuming. Our mouths moved together in a passionate dance of tongues, teeth, and lips. She began grinding against me, and I felt my waistband shift with her movements.

"Take them off. Now!" she demanded breathlessly.

"Our first time isn't going to be a quick hook-up in the bathroom," I protested.

"Well, it won't be on the bed either. That's too far, and I can't wait. Off. Now!" she insisted, holding on tightly as I obeyed.

My nerves and excitement tangled inside me, leaving me trembling with anticipation.

"Against the wall," she instructed.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Put me against the wall," she said, pointing behind her. "I want to watch."

This woman never ceased to amaze me. She continued grinding her wet core against my now fully exposed length, making me whimper with need. Her juices coated me, and I couldn't imagine anything more intoxicating in the world.

“Please, Ryker, now,” she whispered, eyes locked on mine. I nodded, my chest heaving as she helped me align with her entrance. I watched as I entered her, her jaw dropping open in a silent moan, eyes rolling back before closing in pleasure.

“Look at me,” I demanded, the first clear words I’d spoken. “I need to see you, watch you the whole time.”

I slid out just a little, then plunged back in, finding a steady rhythm. This was pure bliss—absolute heaven.

“Faster, please,” she begged, her voice a siren’s call that was my undoing.

My body took over as if we’d done this a thousand times before. I slammed into her, drinking in every sound she made, watching her breasts bounce with each thrust.

As the hot water filled the tub, steam curling around us, our bodies slick with sweat, I felt the first tremors of her climax. My own body tightened, both of us so close to the edge.

“Come with me, Lamb,” I urged, picking up the pace. She gripped my shoulders tighter.

“Oh, fuck, Ryker! Like that, yes... oh yes, yes, yes. Ahhh!” she cried out.

I growled as my own release followed hers, unable to stop the endless flow filling her. Her body was draining me dry, and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to walk afterward.

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90 – Ryker

I press my forehead gently against hers, my breath coming in heavy, uneven gasps. I’m not sure what just overwhelmed me, but my entire body trembles with the aftershocks. It feels as though my soul has momentarily slipped free from my body, leaving me dazed and disoriented.

“See? Nothing to fear,” she whispers softly, her fingers playing tenderly with the hair at the nape of my neck. “That was incredible.”

“There’s still plenty to be afraid of,” I murmur, my voice rough, “but I don’t want to think about that right now. I just want to hold onto this moment with you. It’s still... amazing.” I haven’t pulled away from her yet, savoring the fluttering sensations radiating from her body as we breathe in sync. I press her firmly against the wall, leaning most of my weight into her, with no intention of moving anytime soon.

“The bathtub’s about to overflow,” she giggles, breaking the silence. I groan in response, realizing I have to relent.

“Fine,” I mutter, sliding slowly out of her embrace, reluctant to lose the warmth between us. “Mmm, we’re definitely not finished for tonight.” My wolf agrees wholeheartedly—locking her away in the bedroom sounds like the perfect plan for the foreseeable future.

“Absolutely not,” she says firmly. “Now that I’ve broken you, I’m going to break you in. But first, you need a bath, and we can’t wreck another room.”

“I don’t care how many rooms we destroy as long as every time ends like that,” I say, still breathless. “How are you so calm right now? My legs are jelly, my mind’s scrambled, and my heart’s pounding like crazy.” She strolls past me, dragging her nails teasingly across my chest, her hips swaying with a slow, seductive rhythm. I groan again, following close behind her. She shoots me a mischievous glance as she bends over to reach the taps, and I nearly lose control, wanting to throw her back against the wall.

“Come here,” she commands, stepping in and turning to face me, waiting patiently. “Just because I’m composed doesn’t mean I’m calm.” She holds out her hand. I take it without hesitation, allowing her to lead me into the tub.

She opens the drain slightly, letting some of the scalding water drain out before pushing me down to sit. When the water reaches a comfortable level, I expect her to sit in front of me, but instead, she surprises me again. She slides out of the tub, rummages through a cabinet, then settles on the edge behind me.

Her slender legs straddle my back, sliding smoothly down either side of my body. She dips a cloth into the warm water, and I catch the familiar scent of my body wash as she begins to gently scrub my back and shoulders.

I am still floating on cloud nine. This moment might be even more intense than what we just shared. Her hands roam over every inch of skin within reach, paying careful attention to each spot. Once she has covered everything above the waterline with a soft layer of suds, she massages the tension from my neck and shoulders with slow, deliberate movements.

I’ve never been cared for like this—never let any woman touch me with such tenderness—and I’m savoring every second. I’m grateful we waited for each other, for our mate. Once my mind starts to clear, I know I need to tell her what this means to me.

Just as my eyelids begin to grow heavy, she shifts, and I grumble softly until she settles into my lap, facing me, and starts working on my chest. I sit still, arms resting on the tub’s edge, watching her with fascination. Her focused expression is endearing, yet there’s a distant look in her eyes, as if she’s lost in her own thoughts. I’ve noticed she sometimes drifts like this when she thinks no one is watching.

I worry silently—have I done something wrong to make her retreat into herself? I want to ask, but I’m afraid of shattering the fragile bubble we’re in. Tentatively, I run my hands up and down her sides as she works, partly because I can’t stop touching her, and partly to remind her she’s not alone.

We sit in that quiet stillness for so long that the silence starts to weigh on me. Just as I open my mouth to ask if she’s alright, she beats me to it.

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Chapter 170

“Has Jeremiah ever told you what happened two years ago? The day I was taken?” Her voice is quiet, almost hesitant. I shake my head, reluctant to shatter the fragile silence that has settled between us since she brought it up. I know she hates revisiting that day, and anyone who knows the story would agree. Still, I wonder why it’s such a painful memory for her. I despise what those wolves did to my mother, and I made sure they paid for it — nearly killing my father in the process. But it’s not something we ever tried to hide.

She sighs deeply before beginning. “The version most people know is simple: I was kidnapped on my way home from school and held captive for two days. The wolves who took me didn’t expect me to be as capable as I am, so they didn’t secure me properly. I managed to break free and took down each of my captors one by one. Jeremiah and the others found me wandering along the roadside, completely lost and unsure how to get home.” She exhales slowly, avoiding my gaze now. There’s a heaviness in her eyes, something she isn’t ready to share. I tighten my hold on her hips, silently telling her I’m here, that I’m listening.

When she remains silent too long, I gently lift her chin, coaxing her to meet my eyes. The tears glistening there and the vulnerability etched across her face make my heart skip a beat. Someone hurt her deeply—so deeply that she’s carrying a secret darker than anything Jeremiah knows. And that’s saying something, considering how close they are.

“What haven’t you told them, Lamb? What’s been weighing on you all this time?”

Her voice barely rises above a whisper. “I know who took me. And I think I know why.” A single tear slips down her cheek. It pains me to see those once-clear blue eyes clouded with sorrow.

I swallow the growl rising from within me, my wolf restless as I hold her close, studying her beautiful, haunted face. “You never told them who it was. Why keep it a secret?”

“Because it didn’t matter,” she murmurs. The confident, commanding woman I know vanishes, replaced by the uncertain girl she hides from the world.

“Does it matter now?”

She hesitates. “Yes. Maybe. No. I don’t know.” Her hands cover her face, wet with tears. I let just two drops fall before gently moving her fingers away. Her hair is a tangled mess piled atop her head, loose strands curling softly around her face. The steam from the bath makes them wavy and wild. Despite her disheveled appearance, she is breathtaking—and she is mine. I cradle her hands in mine, bringing them to my lips.

“Tell me everything,” I whisper, kissing the knuckles of one hand. “Don’t leave anything out.” I press both palms against my chest so she can feel my heart pounding beneath them.

She nods, drawing in a steady breath. “It was the gamma’s brother. Jason’s uncle.” My body stiffens beneath her, but I force myself to stay calm. I know she’s bracing for an angry reaction, probably expecting the same from her friends. When I remain silent, she continues.

“It was just under a year after I moved in permanently. I was still trying to find my place. The girls weren’t openly hostile, but I could tell they didn’t like me stealing all of Jeremiah and the others’ attention. I was grieving, and the guys made sure I was never alone. Most days, it felt comforting. Other days, it was suffocating.” She offers a faint smile, bittersweet and fragile. “A couple of the girls invited me to hang out after school. They said they had this spot where the boys rarely came, so no one would bother us. I thought they were letting me into their circle, but really, they were leading me into a trap.”

Her voice lowers to a whisper. “We were laughing and talking, and I really believed I belonged. Then suddenly, we were surrounded by a pack of wolves. They looked just like the ones who attacked me during my run with Bennet—scruffy, wild, and dangerous. Probably rogues.” She shudders despite the warmth of the bathwater. I pull her closer, wrapping my arms around her trembling frame. She buries her face in my neck, brushing her lips over the spot where her mark would be if she could claim me.

I hold her tighter, vowing silently to protect her from whatever darkness still lingers in her past.