

Letters Sent To Eternity

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Chapter 171

I hold her close, feeling the warmth of her body pressed against mine as we step carefully onto the bath mat. Water drips from us, pooling on the floor, but I don't mind the mess. With one arm wrapped securely around her, I reach for a towel and drape it over her shoulders, tucking the edges snugly to keep her warm. Then, moving toward the closet, I stay close, almost unwilling to let her go. I pull out a soft t-shirt and gently slip it over her head, the fabric hanging loosely on her slight frame. Next, I grab a pair of shorts to bring along. She slips her arms through the oversized sleeves and nestles back against me, her grip tightening, refusing to let go. I don't push her—I can sense there's something deeper beneath the surface, something left unspoken, and it unsettles me.

We move to the bed, where I sit down, bare skin meeting the cool sheets. I hold her quietly, letting the silence stretch between us for a moment before I break it. "Lamb, please, talk to me. I know there's more to this. They took you, left you all alone with no one to turn to. What happened after that?" My voice is gentle but urgent.

She breathes in deeply, and through the connection we share, I feel the raw ache in her heart. It's the same crushing pain I sensed when we found her nearly frozen in the snow. A wave of nausea rises in my chest, but I push it down and rub soothing circles on her back. I want to run my fingers through her tangled hair, but the stubborn knot perched on top of her head warns me off—any attempt would only make things worse.

Slowly, she pulls away, creating a small space between us. Her eyes close tightly, and I wonder if she's trying to gather her thoughts or avoid meeting my gaze. After a long breath that causes her chest to rise and fall, she whispers, "They took me back to their camp, tied me up inside a filthy, makeshift tent. Jason's uncle came in, ranting about how they would come for me, how he'd be waiting. Something about reclaiming his place in the pack, being denied what was rightfully his... I didn't really listen. I was too terrified, just trying to figure out how to escape." She nervously twists the hem of the t-shirt in her fingers. "Then he... he... umm... yeah..." Her voice falters, but I need her to say it, to confirm the nightmare I fear. If he took her innocence, there's no forgiveness for him. "He forced himself on me. Said it was what a human like me deserved." Her sobs break through as she hides her face again. After a shaky breath, she continues, "Then he let a few of the others do what they wanted. None of them were creative, and they didn't physically hurt me."

"What do you mean they 'didn't physically hurt you'? They ra—" Before I can finish, she presses her hand firmly over my mouth.

"Don't say it. I haven't even said it out loud yet. I can't. I try to block it from my mind." Her fingers thread gently through my hair, calming me when it should be the other way around. This woman, so fragile and strong all at once.

“How did you get away?” My voice trembles with barely contained fury. I know she can feel the tension radiating from me, but I force myself to stay composed. Inside my head, my wolf paces restlessly, threatening to take over and bring a pounding headache in its wake. I might have to leave her side soon, go for a run just to calm the beast beneath my skin. I can almost feel his fur ripple under my flesh, so close to breaking free.

“That part is true,” she says quietly. “I figured lying outright would be too complicated, so I just left out the things no one can change. I was already treated differently because I’m human—I didn’t want another reason for people to stare or judge. They didn’t tie me up very well, and I managed to take down the three guys who were supposed to be watching me. I didn’t have much knowledge about weapons, but I found a knife and stabbed Jason’s uncle in the back. I didn’t stick around to see what happened next, but I’m pretty sure those dozen or so upward stabs into his vital organs couldn’t have left him in good shape.”

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“You never told Jeremiah about this?” I ask, my voice tinged with disbelief.

Hazel shakes her head slowly. “No, I didn’t. At least you heard the whole story, even though I know you wanted to brush me off and go confront him yourself. Jer would never have stayed that calm—he still loses it if I skip a call, even though we both live separate lives now. Besides, there’s nothing left to handle. The men who crossed the line with me? They’re not around anymore.”

I raise an eyebrow, smirking slightly. “You can swear like a sailor with me, but when it comes to them, you won’t even say ‘d*ck’?”

Before I can stop myself, the question slips out.

Hazel’s eyes flash with quiet intensity. “I like sex. Always have. But that wasn’t sex. That was something else—wrong, disrespectful, and degrading. I don’t want to revisit it again, but I thought you needed to know.”

Gently, I wrap my hands around her hips, careful to choose my words with tenderness. “Was that the first time? Did they... did they take something from you?”

“No. Nothing like that,” she replies firmly. “I was already in control of the situation.”

Curiosity gnaws at me. “Do I really want to know how?”

Her gaze meets mine, playful yet serious beneath her lowered lashes. “You already do.”

My heart skips a beat, and I can’t help but ask the question that’s been burning inside me. “I wish I could say the guy’s a dead man, but honestly, I’m not even mad. You chose him.”

Her eyes soften, and I press on, desperate for the truth. “If I hadn’t been around, if we’d never met, would you have chosen him?”

“No,” she answers without hesitation, her voice steady and sure.

“Why not?” I ask, leaning closer.

She sighs, a wistful smile playing on her lips. “Because he wasn’t meant to be mine forever. That’s what people forget sometimes. I’m not a shifter, but I’ve lived among them my whole life. I understand what the mate bond means. He wasn’t mine. Someone else out there was meant for him—just like you were meant for me.”

The weight of her words settles over me, and I can’t hold back any longer. I lean in and kiss her—slowly, deeply—pouring every emotion I’ve felt through this story she’s trusted me with. This moment, this gift she’s given me, is something even Jeremiah and Ben don’t have—a piece of her that she’s chosen to share with me alone.

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91 – Kennedy

I slowly pull my hands away and look up at Ryker. Although we both appear unchanged on the surface, everything between us feels different now—so much has shifted in these few fleeting moments. It’s almost unbelievable that I managed to get through that intense confession. I never imagined I’d be able to share that story aloud, let alone with him. There’s a strange numbness lingering inside me, as if the words didn’t come from me at all, like some other presence took over and spoke through my lips. Yet here I am, fully present, hands still resting on Ryker’s face without me even realizing when I placed them there.

He remains still, allowing me to explore his features with my touch. My fingers glide from the strong line of his neck, roughened by the corded muscles, up to the faint stubble decorating his jaw—carefully maintained, yet rugged. I trace along the sharp angles of his cheekbones, then gently drag my thumb across his lips. He responds with a soft kiss on my thumb, tender but restrained. As I continue, his jaw tightens and relaxes beneath my hand, emphasizing the defined planes of his face. Closing his eyes, he exhales deeply when I run my thumbs over his eyebrows, a quiet sigh escaping him. Encouraged, I weave my fingers through his thick hair, lightly scratching at his scalp with my nails, which earns a subtle shiver from his body.

“You’re torturing me, Lamb,” he murmurs, voice low and teasing. “I have so many questions swirling in my head, but honestly, I’m tempted to just flip you over and see what other sounds I can coax from that sweet mouth of yours.”

I press a soft kiss along his jawline, feeling his muscles tense beneath my lips. “What questions are you thinking about?” I ask, deliberately slowing the moment down. He made me wait so long to reveal myself—now it’s his turn to be patient. I trail a gentle kiss from his jaw, down the side of his neck.

“Umm... I... umm... I forget,” he stammers, clearly caught off guard as I continue my kiss, moving from one collarbone to the other.

I laugh softly, tightening my hold on the nape of his neck, fingers curling into his hair. “I don’t buy that for a second. That brilliant mind of yours must be buzzing with follow-ups. I’d be.”

He smirks against my skin and replies, “That’s not the brain your body’s telling mine to supply blood to. The upper-level thinking part is out of commission right now.” His eyes remain closed, but his body confirms the truth of his words as his arousal presses insistently against me. I wiggle slightly, eliciting a low groan from him.

“It’s a shame you tried to dress me up earlier. We could have been on round two by now,” he adds with a mischievous grin.

His eyes snap open suddenly, burning with a fiery intensity I haven’t seen before. He’s been challenged—and he’s ready to rise to it.

“Oh, Little Lamb,” he says, his emerald eyes flashing red for a brief moment, “you underestimate why I put that layer on you.” His gaze darkens with desire. “First, I wanted you wearing my clothes—that’s the only thing you’ll be sleeping in from now on, by the way. Second,” he nips playfully at my breast through the fabric of his shirt, making me squeak and jump, “those are seriously distracting, and I needed to hear what you had to say without them getting in the way. And third, I’m going to make love to you every way imaginable wearing this shirt, so you’ll always know you belong to me.” He growls low in his throat and looks down.

Following his gaze, I realize my body has been grinding against his the entire time. Clearly, our physical desires have overtaken our minds, which have been stuck in a state of indecision. He inhales deeply, then smoothly flips me over and slides inside me with barely any resistance.

He spends the rest of the night exploring every inch of my body, as if determined to memorize every curve and contour. I lose track of how many times I moan and cry out his name. For his first time, he’s impressively attentive and passionate.

When morning arrives, I wake up alone, every muscle tingling with a delicious ache. His scent lingers in the air around me, wrapping me in a warm cocoon I never want to leave. Just as I’m settling back into the comfort of the bed, I hear heavy footsteps thudding down the hallway. I don’t think I’ve ever heard a shifter stomp like that before—it’s strange, almost frustrating. The persistent noise drags on, as if whoever it is is deliberately taking loud, slow steps. After five minutes of this irritating racket, I sigh deeply, fully awake now. Might as well get up and find something to eat—my stomach feels like it’s about to collapse on itself.

For the first time, I consider showering, but then I hesitate. I want to keep Ryker’s scent on me. I want everyone to know he’s claimed me, and I can proudly claim him in return.

Making my way quietly down the back steps into the kitchen, I realize it’s almost noon. Cindy is there, preparing lunch.

“Oh, hi Luna!” she greets warmly. “I was just putting together a plate for you. The alpha said if he hadn’t seen you by lunchtime, I should check on you.”

“He did?” I ask, surprised.

“Mhmm,” she nods, focused on her task but smiling. “He said you deserved the rest, but you need to stay healthy...” She giggles, then cuts herself off.

“What?” I smile, curious. Whatever Ryker said must be funny to her, judging by the sparkle in her eyes.

She leans in, whispering conspiratorially, “He said I have to keep you healthy enough to carry all the pups he gave you last night.” Then she bursts into full laughter.

“No way!” I cover my face, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

“Yes way. But Luna, he was so cute about it.” She quickly covers her mouth, mumbling behind her hand, “Don’t tell him I said that!”

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I gently tug her hand down, a smile playing on my lips. “Don’t worry, I won’t spill a thing. His masculinity is safe with me.”

“Whose masculinity?” Sarah asked, entering the room while jotting something in her notebook. She glanced back and forth between Cindy and me, her curiosity piqued.

I motioned for Cindy to fill her in, intrigued by what she meant.

“Well,” Cindy began hesitantly, “the alpha was kind of adorable this morning. He told me to take good care of the Luna and make sure she stays healthy enough to carry all the pups he gave her last night.”

“Oh! Thank the Goddess! It’s about time! I thought he was going to be a pansy forever,” Sarah exclaimed, relief evident in her voice.

I couldn’t help but laugh, mostly at how these two spoke about Ryker as if he were a mischievous child rather than the powerful alpha he truly was. It also helped me mask the awkwardness of the fact that my intimate life felt like an open topic for discussion.

“Where is he, anyway?” I asked, eager to shift the conversation and suppress the whirlwind of anxious thoughts threatening to consume me when I was alone. Last night, I hadn’t even considered protection. Shifters can only get pregnant during heat, so he probably wasn’t serious and was just joking. But that thought stirred a flood of emotions. Why joke about something so important? Out loud... with others... No, I’d talk to him later. For now, I needed to focus on what Sarah was up to. She never showed up without a purpose, and that massive notebook of hers was never just for show.

“The boys have some work to do,” she explained, glancing at me with a knowing look. “They’re out with Ryker’s dad, checking on two new buildings that should have been finished by now, but the projects have stalled.”

“Who stalled them? And why didn’t he take me along?” I asked, suspicion creeping into my voice.

Sarah gave me a pointed look, like a teacher quizzing a student who had to piece together various lessons. “I think you can answer both those questions.”

“That Claude guy?” I said, nodding. “He gave me the creeps at Rory’s party. What’s his deal anyway?”

Sarah sighed. “The short version is, Claude thought he could challenge Ryker after he took over, but lost terribly. Since then, Ryker’s pack has flourished. Claude hoped to trick Ryker into improving the pack he’d destroyed and then take it back. For ten years, he’s been scheming behind Ryker’s back to regain control. But the pack loves Ryker. Despite his fierce reputation, he’s kind and fiercely protective. Claude didn’t expect people to reject him. Now, he’s causing trouble wherever he can. I don’t know all the details—Ryker doesn’t want me to worry.”

“He never really got the chance to explain any of that to me. I do know something happened after we left the party, but Ryker couldn’t—or wouldn’t—mindlink me to explain. Even Jeeves, or Grant, said ‘that was a close one,’ but to me, everything seemed fine,” I added, frowning.

Sarah just nodded, indicating she knew more but was holding back, probably because it would upset me. Another thing to add to the growing list of questions I needed to ask. I decided to change tactics, hoping she might reveal something as we worked on whatever plan she had today.

“So, what are we doing then?” I asked, curious.

Her face lit up, and her whole body seemed to buzz with excitement. “Well, a very tall and handsome birdie told me your birthday is mid-summer, and since Ryker’s is just a few weeks before, I thought it would be the perfect time to throw a party.” She squealed like a teenager, practically bouncing. “It can be just for your birthdays or your Luna ceremony—whatever you feel comfortable with. We have to invite Jeremiah and Rayna, of course. And your Aunt and Uncle, plus any other friends from Silver Crescent. But you have to help me. I refuse to throw something together only to find out later that you hated it or hate parties or anything like that.”

“What about Ryker?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“What about him?” Sarah looked genuinely confused.

“He hates parties and being the center of attention,” I said, laughing at her reaction. She should know that about her son.

“Oh, that,” she waved it off. “That doesn’t matter. He’s an Alpha; it comes with the territory. He’ll do whatever I—well, I mean you—tell him to do, and he’ll cooperate without any whining. Now, Rayna told me your measurements, and I’ve seen pictures of you at the party and your Luna ceremony. I have a few dress ideas, but we can talk about that later. Do you have a color scheme in mind?”

That’s how I spent the rest of the day. By the time I finally made it upstairs, I was so exhausted I think I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow. I had just enough energy to slip on one of Ryker’s t-shirts, but that was it. I wanted to stay awake long enough to kiss him goodnight, but my eyelids felt like lead, and this bed was incredibly comfortable. I doubted I’d make it.

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92 – Ryker

“Cut it out.” I snapped at Danny, who had been pestering me relentlessly, trying to shift my mood. His energy was all over the place—like a hyperactive puppy hopped up on too much sugar.

One of our warriors had spotted Claude moving with a small band of rogues, far beyond the safety of his own territory or any familiar outposts. It was too suspicious to be a coincidence. Without hesitation, I gathered the men and set out to track him down. We managed to catch one of them, but it felt far too easy—like a trap or a distraction. What was Claude trying to pull? Why lure us away from the packhouse? The only answer I could come up with was Kennedy. He must know how formidable I am solo, but now that I have my mate by my side, we’re practically unstoppable. I can already sense my strength and reflexes sharpening—more intense than anything I’ve experienced before.

The footprints imprinted in the soil caught my attention, and for a fleeting moment, I thought about Kennedy. Is this what it feels like for her when she’s tracking? My hearing and sense of smell have sharpened too. I used to have to consciously tune out background noise, but now? I’m pretty sure I just caught a squirrel burping.

“Bossman, what’s the move here? I can see those gears turning.” Josh stepped between Danny and me, stopping me from smacking Danny on the back of the head again. Danny was still bouncing around to some silent beat only he could hear, deliberately bumping into me. I knew exactly what he was doing, but I just didn’t have the patience for it right now.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I don’t pick up any other scents nearby. They’ve been gone for about thirty minutes. I don’t get how they’re slipping away when we’re closing in from all sides. It’s definitely Claude and Rick. The other scents don’t ring a bell, but two are warriors and the last one is an omega.”

“That makes no sense,” Danny finally dropped his silly antics and got serious. “Was Claude always planning to sacrifice the omega if they got caught?”

“Probably,” Josh said flatly. “He never gave a damn about his pack. That’s why no one was upset when a sixteen-year-old took over. At that point, anything was better than Claude. No offense, Boss.”

“No offense taken,” I said, thinking the same thing. “He’s got to be hunting for something, feeling something out, and I’m sure it has everything to do with Kennedy. She’s the only real change in the last ten months. We’re all getting stronger because of her, and he knows it. His time is running out.”

Josh chuckled. “Yeah, I noticed that this morning. I woke up, went three rounds with Tanya before we left, and I still feel amazing. What the hell have you been up to, Bossman? Because I like it!”

I didn’t laugh. “Well, whatever it is, make sure you thank the Luna properly for me,” Josh teased, winking. I rolled my eyes, fighting the urge to punch him, but only earned another round of laughter. Even Josh struggled to keep a straight face.

I let out a low growl, the distance between Kennedy and me gnawing at my nerves. I needed her to calm me down. Being apart, especially for so long, made me restless. I knew Bennet was with her, and I’d asked my mother to keep her distracted so she wouldn’t worry about my absence all day. But Mom had gotten way too excited when she told me not to worry at all—which only made me more anxious. Who knew what she was up to? And of course, she wouldn’t tell me, no matter how much I tried to link with her telepathically. She also told me not to bother Kennedy, which only deepened my suspicions. She was meddling, that much was obvious.

“Josh, let’s head to Claude’s place. Maybe we can catch him there. Danny, take a team and fan out. Report anything you find immediately. Greta…”

“Yeah, Boss?” Greta jogged up to me.

“I want you at the packhouse. Don’t let Kennedy know—at least not yet—but keep an eye on her and my mother.”

“If she asks, I can’t lie to her, Bossman. Just so you know. You’re not the only one getting stronger. Her aura’s been growing every day. Ever since she wiped the floor with Amy and claimed you in front of the pack, we can barely meet her gaze. Her aura might even be stronger than yours when you finally mark her.”

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“She’s got a point,” my wolf murmurs with a low chuckle, sensing my irritation. “You’re upset because you won’t be the strongest anymore, aren’t you?”

I shake my head, frustration tightening my chest. “No, it’s not that. Honestly, I’m okay with her being stronger. She has to be. I want to mark her, actually — especially now that we’re mated and everything I expected hasn’t happened. None of those terrifying stories came

true, and she's already overcome so much. I know I can't underestimate her, but there's this nagging feeling inside me... like something bad might happen to her when I do mark her. I can't really explain it; it's just a gut instinct."

My wolf growls softly. "Claude's instinct will be to hurt her to weaken you. You have a choice to make. Which fear is worse? You accidentally hurting her but being there to help her heal, or Claude hurting her and you not being around to stop him?"

The thought of not being there if Claude harms her twists my stomach into knots. I need my mate desperately, but I can't rush to her side—not yet. There are still things I have to do to keep her safe. My mother said that mindlinking stresses Kennedy out because she can't respond, but honestly, I think that's nonsense.

Josh and I shift into our wolf forms and take off running. We'll reach Claude's place faster this way. Our wolves have shorts strapped on, making it easy to change back when needed. Usually, finding clothes wherever we go isn't a problem, but Claude is notoriously difficult, and the people who back him are just as bad.

As we approach the once-grand house, Josh snorts quietly. I don't even have to ask why. This packhouse used to be a symbol of opulence and superiority — a blatant "I'm better than you" statement. Since I took control, it's the one thing I've neglected. Everyone in the pack works, even the former alphas, if they're still alive. Claude has never lifted a finger, and over the years, the staff here have made their disdain for his elitist attitude crystal clear.

The wooden boards of the porch creak beneath our feet as we move forward, but I don't even get the chance to knock. The door swings open abruptly, revealing a worn-looking omega who looks relieved to see us.

"Oh, thank the Goddess you're here," she breathes out. "He's in such a foul mood right now. I'm scared to get near him." She gestures inside, but I don't need directions. The sound of his anger guides me.

We step inside without bothering to be quiet. His rage is so loud, he probably wouldn't notice us sneaking in anyway. I spot the door to the room slightly open and pause, wanting to observe before barging in.

"It has to be here! I know I read it somewhere—where the hell..." Claude growls, then hurls a book against the door we're hiding behind. "Where did we see that passage, Rick? I need the exact details. She's too close. We can't let her fail over something this simple."

"I don't know, Alpha," Rick replies, and my hackles rise at the disrespect in his tone using that title for Claude. But I keep quiet for now. Who are they talking about? Who is 'she,' and what is she close to? I need to listen more.

"What about Rory, Alpha?" Rick suggests. "He could do just as well."

"He's a pup who can barely shift. No way. It has to be him. She needs him."

Josh links to me, his voice low and tense. “He must be out of his mind. There’s no way he hasn’t smelled us yet. And what the hell is he even talking about? Or rather, who?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper back, “but it’s probably a trap.” Josh shrugs, which is his way of saying he’s ready to stir things up and see what happens.

Without hesitation, I slam the door open. “Hey Claude, what’s going on here?”

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Chapter 177

93 – Ryker

Claude’s voice cuts through the room just as we storm in. “Well, well, Ryker. You’ve caught me at a rather inconvenient moment. Perhaps you should schedule an appointment with my secretary, and we can arrange a meeting soon.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was trying to act like a pompous jerk on purpose. But beneath the surface, I can smell his nerves—he’s rattled.

“I’d argue that now is just as good a time as any,” I reply coolly. “After all, you did come to see me this morning. I was a bit distracted then, but my mate is generous enough to insist I check on you now.”

Claude snorts, clearly unimpressed. “You really let your mate control your schedule? How very modern of you.” He tries to roll his eyes, though his age makes the gesture awkward and forced.

“Your Luna is remarkable,” I say, watching him closely. “She’s survived multiple attacks without a scratch and managed to fight back hard enough to wound her assailants.”

“Bullshit,” he spits out. “She’s a weak human. The only reason she’s still standing is because she’s heavily guarded. I don’t understand why you keep her around. You should be with a she-wolf—someone who can bring you real power and strength.”

He feigns boredom, pretending to bury himself in his books again, but the twitch in his eye betrays him. He’s still watching me intently. His shaking hand gives him away too.

“Is there something you want?” I ask, standing just inside the doorway, arms crossed. Josh moves to my left side, positioning himself near the other exit, ready.

Claude scoffs again, flipping a page with exaggerated disinterest. “What are you talking about, Ryker?”

“You’ve been spotted near my pack house more times than I can count over the past month, yet you haven’t come to see me directly.” I lean in slightly. “That tells me you’re not here for me.”

“I have very little interest in your affairs, boy,” he replies dismissively.

“Exactly. So why come here at all? Why lurk in the forest stalking my mate?”

“I’m tired of your nonsense, boy. Leave. I have real work to do and no time for your foolish questions. I don’t care about your weak, human mate.”

His words sting, but I press on, folding my arms tighter. “Yet you’ve tried to harm my Luna more than once.” His eyes flick to me, betraying his discomfort. Rick watches too—he’s never been good at hiding his emotions.

“Leave her out of this,” Claude snaps.

“She’s human, not a Luna. Certainly not mine. We both know that. So why pretend otherwise?” His tone is calm, but the hatred radiating off him is unmistakable.

“She is my mate and my Luna. You will show her respect.” My voice hardens, anger rising.

“The same respect you show her? From what I hear, she’s neither marked nor mated and is something of a joke among your females. You should get rid of her. Clearly, you don’t want her, no matter how much the Moon Goddess insists.” He gestures to Rick and then to himself. Rick pales at the suggestion. “That way, your hands stay clean, and everyone can continue thinking you’re some perfect little trophy son.” He sneers at me.

I step forward, ready to retort, but a firm hand clamps down on my shoulder. Josh’s voice is low and steady. “Don’t let him get to you, boss. He knows she’s special—that’s why he keeps coming after her.”

His words help me steady myself. I can’t afford to lose my temper now; that’s exactly what Claude wants.

Suddenly, a soothing warmth flows through me, like golden honey cascading from my head down to my toes. I inhale deeply, and her scent surrounds me completely. My body relaxes, my mind clears as if a fog has lifted. I glance up at Claude, who clearly notices the change. Confusion flashes across his face, and I can’t help but smile, sharp and fierce.

“Your Luna doesn’t take kindly to your disrespect either,” I warn. “Don’t come near her again. Don’t try to harm her again. If you do, I’ll make sure your death is the most painful and public spectacle imaginable.”

“Did you just threaten me, pup?” Claude challenges, voice dripping with disdain.

“As your Alpha, I will make any threat necessary to protect my pack and its members,” I declare firmly. “You’re already on thin ice. My father is currently cleaning up the mess you made near the Nightwalker pack. You do realize these alliances and projects benefit the pack, right? They keep you in this house you neither work for nor maintain.”

Claude raises an eyebrow, glancing briefly over his book. “It’s amusing that you threaten me when your father is the one doing all the real work.” He closes the book with a snap. “As I said, I have things to attend to. You can show yourselves out.”

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That arrogant jerk still believes he holds some kind of power here. Maybe he’s grown too comfortable within the walls of his own home, or perhaps I’ve simply been far too lenient with him. Ever since we made our pact, long ago, I have felt bound by honor to uphold it. But clearly, he doesn’t share that same respect and acts as if he’s been granted a free pass. This situation has dragged on far too long.

“I think it’s time we lighten his load a bit,” I say with quiet determination.

Josh looks at me, a sly grin spreading across his face. “What should I grab, Boss?”

“Anything well-used, something they’re holding onto. And if you think Kennedy might be interested, snag it. She loves adding to her library.”

His smile widens. As much as we enjoy a good, direct confrontation, sometimes these subtle, passive-aggressive moves are the most satisfying. Together, we step into the cluttered, chaotic office. I reach for the book Claude has been pretending to read the entire time, while Josh pulls one from Rick’s hands, who looks like he’s about to lose his nerve. I have no clue how Rick ever managed to be Claude’s beta—he’s a total coward. Both men just gape at us, mouths agape, stunned by our boldness as we each gather armfuls of books. They receive nothing but stoic silence in return as we calmly walk out, leaving them speechless.

“Grant, bring us a car. We’ve got a gift for Kennedy, and I’m not carrying this around any longer.”

“On it, Boss,” Grant replies promptly.

Once everything is loaded, we head over to check on my dad, who seems to have everything under control. Apparently, Claude made some last-minute changes and spread conflicting information to various people, all under the guise of my instructions. Thankfully, they were smart enough to halt the operation once they noticed the errors Claude introduced, but some parts need to be torn down and rebuilt to the right specifications.

I invite my dad back to the packhouse so he can finally meet Kennedy. My tendency to bury myself in work must run in the family—he’s always home every night, chatting with my mom all day, but I sometimes think he works so hard just to prove that his injury hasn’t rendered him useless. I can’t argue with him when he’s genuinely handling important business matters. He’s also spent some time in Silver Crescent with Rayna and Jeremiah. Still, I get the sense he’s avoiding Kennedy for some reason, and I can’t quite figure out why.

He's been nothing but supportive of her, though. After I shared her capture story, he even got her a gift. I know she told parts of her story to my mom and Greta but left out the more brutal details for their sake. It's too late for me to argue with him now—I just want to get home to her. I hope she's awake, but knowing my mother, she's probably exhausted from whatever mischief they got up to today.

“Josh, can you put those books in Kennedy's office? Let her go through them and see if there's anything she wants or can use.”

“You got it, Boss. See you in the morning. Are you actually going to make it to training this time?”

“I'll have to see what my Luna wants to do,” I say with a soft smile.

“That's weird, you know that, right?”

“What? Me letting my mate decide the schedule?”

“No, jackass. You smiling about it.” He laughs and dodges away, struggling to carry his armful of books.

“Well, you're just as uncharacteristically cheerful yourself.”

“So, what you're saying is, as long as the Luna's happy, everyone's happy?”

“Something like that.” I turn and head upstairs to my floor, feeling the magnetic pull growing stronger the closer I get.

When I open the door, the room is dim except for the soft glow from the lamp on my bedside table. I spot her tangled blonde hair spread across the pillows. Her face is turned toward my side, away from the door, so I can't see her expression. One hand clutches my pillow tightly, and I move toward her immediately, concerned she might be having a nightmare without me nearby.

I settle onto the bed beside her. Her brows are furrowed, though she makes no sound. I gently trace my finger along her brow, trying to smooth away the tension, and feel a warmth spread through her skin—and mine. She inhales deeply, like she's just surfaced from underwater, then grabs my wrist as her eyes snap open.

“Ryker? You're here?” Her voice is groggy, confused.

I pull off my shirt and slide under the covers with her. “I'm here, Lamb. Go back to sleep.”

As I draw her closer, my fingers brush her bare thigh just beneath the hem of a t-shirt. I move my hand up to her waist, needing to touch every inch of her, but find nothing beneath the fabric.

“Lamb, are you naked under this t-shirt?”

She nuzzles her nose into my chest without opening her eyes again. “You told me I could only wear your shirt to bed.”

“You really are trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

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Chapter 179

94 – Ryker

The soft glow of an early summer sunrise gently stirs me from sleep, but the lingering warmth from being close to Kennedy keeps me rooted in place. This moment feels like pure bliss—right here, right now. I pull her even closer, and a faint, sweet giggle escapes her lips.

“What’s so funny, Lamb?” I murmur.

“We have training to get to, you horny fool,” she replies with a teasing smile.

“They can wait just a little longer,” I say, shifting my weight and rolling on top of her, nuzzling into the delicate curve of her neck. Another soft laugh bubbles up from her.

“You know it won’t be just a few minutes. Besides, you have to set a good example,” she insists, though her eyes sparkle with mischief.

“I’ve been setting a good example my entire life. They can manage without me for a bit.” I press my hips against her, eliciting a low, delicious moan that sends a thrill through me.

“Well, when you put it that way... maybe we can sneak in a little fun in the shower. If you think you can handle it without reinjuring yourself, that is,” she says with a playful smirk.

“Is that a challenge, mate?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Is it working?” she teases back.

She squeals as I leap off the bed, lifting her effortlessly into my arms. I swiftly peel off my t-shirt while carrying her toward the bathroom. Turning on the shower, I wait for the water to warm up before pressing her back against the cold tile. I capture her lips in a fierce, bruising kiss. Her body arches away from the chill, but she’s trapped against me, trying to scold me between kisses. I swallow her protests, and soon she’s moaning softly again.

Her entire body seems crafted just for me. Every gentle curve fits perfectly against my harder lines. My hands wander, unable to settle in one place. I need to feel her everywhere, all the time. Thankfully, she doesn’t seem to mind—the little sounds she makes only encourage me further.

By the time we finally move on to washing, the water has cooled. Thankfully, we’re about to train and will be sweating plenty soon enough.

“It’s about time my favorite girl showed up!” Danny grins as he sidles over, looping his arm around Kennedy’s neck. She giggles, but it’s not the same sound I coaxed from her earlier. I shake the thought away quickly—no way I’m letting my warriors see how I really feel about Kennedy.

“You good, Boss?” Bennet asks, a knowing glint in his eyes.

“Yeah, let’s get this started. Oh, Kennedy,” I say, catching her attention. “My dad brought you a gift. He heard you’ve been training with Jeremiah and the others on weapons. When he visited my sister, he picked up a few extras and added them to your collection. Why don’t you spar with Bennet and Danny to see how well they work?” I flash a wicked smile as their faces pale.

“Watch out for the silver-tipped ones, assholes. And quit flirting with my mate—go find your own,” I warn, linking arms with them and Josh, who bursts out laughing.

The training session flies by. I don’t even break a sweat while the rest of the team is drenched and gasping for breath. They’ll recover soon enough, but I can’t help wondering if the mate bond is giving me an edge. If I feel this strong after two hours of intense work, what will my stamina be like once I’ve fully marked Kennedy?

Unfortunately, I don’t get to discuss these thoughts with her. My mother steps in, pulling Kennedy away to focus on planning and then to meet some pack members from the East side. I forgot she hasn’t even seen the entire pack yet. I’ll have to fix that—soon.

Later, my dad joins Josh and me to go over the books we took from Claude. I’ll let Kennedy decide what to do with them, but yesterday Claude seemed desperate for something, and I’m determined to uncover what it was.

I’ve assigned two of my most stealthy warriors to watch Claude’s every move. He’s bound to slip up, and I’m hoping that taking his research has thrown him off enough to make a critical mistake sooner rather than later.

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Chapter 180

I’ve flipped through countless pages, my eyes beginning to blur from the strain. My father’s expression is intense, sharp with purpose, as if he’s hunting for something specific. Yet, despite his focus, he remains closed off, unwilling to share whatever it is occupying his mind.

“So, Alpha Ryan,” Josh breaks the silence, his voice steady but curious, “why have you been avoiding Kennedy?” The question catches me off guard—I nearly choke on my own tongue. I’ve been wrestling with the same thought, but haven’t found a respectful way to bring it up with Dad. His attitude toward Kennedy has been so inconsistent that I’m left confused.

“There’s a reason, beta,” he replies without looking up from the page in front of him. He doesn’t deny it, nor does he seem bothered by the avoidance. To him, it’s apparently just understood, and acceptable.

“What?!” I stop pretending to read the same line for the third time, frustration bubbling up. “Why would you do that? I thought you approved of her as my mate.”

“Oh, I do approve,” he says firmly. “I’ve seen her with you and the rest of the pack. She fits perfectly—not just with you, but with all of us. Before she came along, we were growing slowly. Now, we’re thriving.” Still, he avoids meeting our eyes. What on earth is going on here?

“That doesn’t add up, sir,” Josh says carefully, his tone respectful. I’m relieved it’s him speaking because I wouldn’t have been so tactful.

“Kennedy and I have history,” Dad admits quietly. “I’m not sure what she remembers, but I’m in no rush to dredge up the past.”

At that, both Josh and I stop pretending to read. Our full attention is on him now. “You’re going to have to explain more than that, Father. How do you have history with my mate? We didn’t even know about her until Rayna met Jeremiah.”

“I’ve known Kennedy Matthews for nearly three years,” he says, voice steady but with an edge I can’t quite place. “But I’ll only tell this story once. If you need to hear it, so does she. Though I doubt it will do any of us any good.” His calm demeanor feels fragile, as though something beneath it is roiling. “Call your mate. Call your mother, too.”

There’s a firmness in his eyes that sends a chill through me.

“Kennedy, baby, come to your office. Bring Mom with you—my dad has something important to say.” I try to mask the worry creeping into my voice over the bond. I know she can sense it, just like yesterday when I was in Claude’s office—she must have been suppressing my anger through the connection. It’s strange because she doesn’t have a wolf, and I always thought that bond between mates was something our wolves created—the magic they share.

I pace nervously as I wait, my heart pounding. I need her close; this feels ominous, and my anxiety is growing. She must have been nearby or running, because less than five minutes later, she bursts into the room and immediately melts into my arms.

“What’s going on?” she asks softly, looking up at me. She’s not afraid—just concerned by the tension in my voice. Goddess, she really is perfect.

“Kennedy, this is my dad, Ryan Tryn. Dad, this is my mate, Kennedy. But why don’t you tell us all how you already know her?” I keep my gaze locked on him while Kennedy and Mom exchange confused looks between us.

Dad settles onto the small couch, and Mom finds a seat beside him. Josh follows suit, and I pull Kennedy onto my lap, sinking into the plush office chair. I wrap my arms tightly around her waist, holding her close to my chest, craving the comfort of her presence.

Taking a deep breath, Dad exhales slowly and fixes his eyes on Kennedy. “Kennedy, what do you remember about your accident and your parents’ death?”