



ESSIE SLOANE



THE
GOLDEN
RECEIVER

THE GOLDEN RECEIVER

CREEPIN U: SEASON 2

ESSIE SLOANE



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This book is for Steve.

*You'll never read it, but I know how much you wanted your name on a book.
It may not be one you wrote, but I can give you this at least. I will miss your
friendship for the rest of my life.*

Rest in peace.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

While *The Golden Receiver* is a feel good romance, there are some themes in the book that some readers may find objectionable or triggering. Please use caution when proceeding.

This book contains mentions of the death of a parent (off-page, in the past). It also contains underage drinking typical at a college campus. This book also contains a sports injury (minor, on-page).

This book also contains bullying and violence (on-page, against one of the MCs). This book does contain a hate crime (Against MC, on-page) regarding a character's species.

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PROLOGUE

KIERAN - MARCH

Music flooded my headphones, drowning out the sound of my footsteps as I ran my umpteenth lap around the cracked track.

My college didn't have the best facilities, the best team, the best classes, the best *anything*, but I was determined to make the most of it. Going here meant I could stay at home with my dad, working part-time at his bar, and taking out less student loans. It saved money, even if I could feel my dreams of ever playing professional football or making a name for myself outside of this tiny ass town slipping away with each passing day.

Maybe things would've been different if I'd gone to a different high school, but the high school team I'd played on hadn't so much as whiffed any kind of notice since before my dad was alive. Scouts didn't come around, and people who played on that team didn't get showered in scholarships or choices. It was just the way that it was.

Scouts didn't come around my college either, which is why I noticed him right away. That and there was something *other* about him. He was a bit too tall and I'd never seen a human with eyes like his, almost fiery. His skin had a grayish tint when the sun hit him just right. Or maybe it was just the gray suit he was wearing. He stood out, and he drew my eyes right to him.

I tried to ignore him as I ran another lap, but it was hard. I'd never seen a monster on campus before. There weren't a lot of monsters in town either. I could probably count on both hands how many monsters I'd seen in town,

and I might have fingers left over. I tried to focus on the music in my headphones. I tried to focus on the feel of the pavement under my shoes. I tried to focus on anything but the man standing on the side of the field, but I couldn't.

He was eerie and unmoving, and after another lap, I gave up entirely.

I stopped in front of him. Up close and personal, I could see that the gray undertones of his skin weren't just from shadows or caused by his suit. He was even taller than I thought, too, towering almost a foot over me. His lips had a blue tint to them, and when he smiled, his teeth were unnaturally white. It didn't do much to quell his menacing vibes. I wiped my sweaty palms on my gym shorts and looked up at him. He wasn't saying anything. Just looking at me.

I sighed and pushed my headphones down to the back of my neck. "Can I help you? Are you lost? Looking for something?"

"Are you Kieran Sawyer?" he asked. His voice was deep and gravelly, but it wasn't unfriendly. It was probably the first non-menacing thing about him. "Coach Carver said I would find him here." He blinked slowly. "Find you here?"

"I am," I answered. I could hear how flat my voice sounded, but I was taken a little aback by the fact that this man knew my name. Had come here looking for me. Had asked my coach where he'd find me. He didn't say anything. God, did I need to insert a coin in this man to make him talk? Could he only answer direct questions? "Why are you looking for me?"

The man looked at me for a moment and then smiled another one of those eerie smiles. "Oh, I should introduce myself. I am Coach Bernt Eriksson from Creelin University. Have you heard of it?"

Heard of it? Creelin University had made the news the year before. It had been the first university exclusively for monsters, founded shortly after the Halloween Wave hit just over two decades ago. Last year, the university opened their gates to humans. It had been national news. I didn't say any of that. Instead, I just nodded.

"Good. Then I don't have to go over the history of our school." He pulled a thick envelope out of the black bag he was carrying. "I am the assistant coach of our football team. Last year, every team except for ours had humans join their rosters. We had hoped that, when we held tryouts for this season, we would have at least one human sign up. None did. However, I was at one of your games last season. I took notice of you, and when we

were discussing human talent, I did some basic research to find your name.” I looked up at him and then down to the envelope in his hand. “We would like to invite you to attend Creelin University and join the football team. Your talent is wasted here.”

I couldn’t disagree with that last fact, but did I want to go to a new college? I would be transferring as a sophomore. I wouldn’t be able to live at home. It would probably cost more than my dad could afford and more than I’d get in any kind of financial aid, which would mean more loans. But it would also mean more opportunity. It would mean playing on a better team. If I was the first human on their team, it would also mean legacy.

And it would probably stand out a lot to the recruiters in a few years if I ever put my name up for the draft.

Coach Eriksson took my silence as an invitation to go on. He extended the envelope out toward me, clenched in a hand that was almost skeletal. “Everything you need to know is in here.”

I took the envelope. “Can I think about it? Discuss it with my dad?”

“Of course,” Coach Eriksson answered. “Read over everything. Talk about it with your family. I hope that you’ll decide to come to Creelin.” A beat of silence passed between us. “You have great form, by the way. I was watching you run. You’re faster than some of the players on our team, and I think you’ll be an asset.”

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving me with an oversized envelope and my thoughts.



That night, I opened the envelope alone in my childhood bedroom.

The first thing that fell out was a brochure on Creelin University. It must have been made in the last year because it mentioned the recent inclusion of humans. It showed pictures of the campus, which admittedly looked a lot nicer than ours. It went over a brief history of the university and some of the offered extracurriculars. I skimmed the paragraphs, hoping to feel a spark of connection that would tell me what to do. All I found was a QR code at the back that linked to the school’s website.

I pulled another sheet of paper from the envelope. It was an offer letter for a walk-on spot to the football team. It included a bunch of boring stats

about the team and the league they played in, a different league entirely from the one my human school was in. There was a paragraph about what the average in-season day of a Creelin football player entailed: team lifts, classes, film study, practice. It went over team culture and when players would be expected to report to campus: two weeks before everyone else. It was signed by Coach Eriksson and the head coach, Coach Shaw.

The final piece of paper was signed by a Dean Yaga, and if I'd seen it first, it probably would have influenced my decision immediately. It had instructions on how to enroll in the college and accept the full scholarship provided by the athletic department. It would cover my room and board and my classes. There would be a small stipend for my schoolbooks. A full scholarship would put an end to my need for student loans.

And it was only a few hours away. I could come home. I could visit my dad and his bar.

My dad.

I wanted to talk this over with my dad because he'd know what I should do. I grabbed my car keys from my desk. The drive to my dad's bar was only ten minutes. One good thing about the small town we lived in was minimal traffic and only one stoplight that was almost always green when you went down the main drag. The parking lot of my dad's bar was crowded, like it always was. I found a spot near the back and locked the car behind me.

My dad was behind the bar when I walked in. He had three other staff members with him, all moving fast to make drinks and chat with the regular clientele. One of the town's three police officers was sitting at the end of the bar, drinking a beer from a brown bottle. He smiled brightly when he saw me. "Didn't know you were twenty-one yet, Kie," he teased.

"Not yet, Chuck," I called back. "Just here to talk to Pops."

Not that it would've been an issue if I weren't. I'd grown up in that bar. I'd spent nights in middle school doing homework in one of the corner booths, drinking soda and eating greasy french fries for dinner. The locals all knew me, right down to the town's small police force. They all knew that my dad didn't have much choice. Late-night childcare was hard to find for an active elementary schooler whose mom had just died, and Pops did his best.

His best just meant having me sitting at a bar for a few hours after school and serving me dinner from the bar menu several nights a week. I'd

thought it was pretty cool when I was a kid, and it had really helped me form a community. I'd probably been the only sixth grader who knew what beer the mayor had to drink every time he watched his favorite team play football.

I went to the familiar bar and wedged in between this older woman, Stacey, that always sat at the same spot and always made me cookies for my birthday, and my high school English teacher. They both greeted me with a smile and scooted over to make room for me.

I leaned against the sticky bar surface and flagged down one of the bartenders who nudged my dad. He came over quickly, a bright smile lighting up his dark blue eyes and highlighting the years of laugh lines around them. "What are you doing here, kiddo?" he asked as he grabbed a clear glass from behind the bar and started scooping ice cubes into it. "Thought you had a paper to write?"

"I do, but I needed to talk to you about something. You got a minute?"

My dad grabbed the soda gun and started filling the glass with club soda. He topped it off with some cherry syrup and gave it a mix, dropped a cherry in, and passed it over the bar to me. "Always got a minute for you, Kie." He looked up and down the bar, and I knew he was making sure everyone was taken care of. Once he was done, he motioned for me to follow him.

I walked behind the bar and through the kitchen doors and straight back to his office. "You eat yet?" my dad asked once we were in the office.

"Plan on making a sandwich later."

"Shit, get something hot here. How many miles did you do today?" When I didn't answer, he just shook his head. "You're not leaving 'til I know you've had a real meal. Not just some sandwich you scarf down half of while you're working and forget the other half." He stuck his head out of the office door and called out for an order of wings and fries to the line cooks. I heard them shout something back before he closed the door and took a seat behind his cluttered desk.

I sat opposite him in the same chair I'd been sitting in for years: an old dining chair with cracked black vinyl from the remodel he did when I was ten. Pops looked at me expectantly, and I drew in a deep breath. "A recruiter came to campus today."

"You're not joining the military to avoid student loans," he told me flatly. "We talked about this last year. The local school isn't too expensive."

“No, not that kind of recruiter.” The words spilled from my lips in a rush, slurring together in their hurry to reach my father’s ears and comfort him. “A football recruiter.”

My dad’s eyes widened. “That’s great! From what school? Was he there for you? Was he—”

“Pops!” I interrupted with a laugh. “He’s from Creelin University. You know how they started letting humans in last year?” He nodded. “Well, apparently every team *but* the football team started getting humans joining.”

“So what? They want you to come be their token human?”

“They’re offering me a full scholarship.” I leaned back in my seat. Saying it out loud made the fact that I was waffling over this decision seem really stupid. A full ride could be life changing, and Creelin was a better college than the shit one I attended now. The information on their football team made it clear that they were a better team, too. They’d won a few championships in their league. The campus was nicer. I was sure the dorms would probably be nicer too, but I’d never been inside the dorms on my campus to compare. “Just don’t know.”

“Well, let’s talk it over.”

For the next hour, we did just that. My dad pulled up the school’s website on his slow office computer, and we looked through majors. We read a few articles about the football team and a few others about some of the humans who were on campus this year. We watched clips of the football team while we ate chicken wings and french fries.

The only thing we didn’t do was make my decision.



I spent the next week pondering what I should do.

I thought about it while I ran laps. I thought about it while I worked out in the poorly equipped campus weight room. I thought about it when I was supposed to be studying for a history exam. It was pretty much all I thought about.

Pops checked in on the process, but he trusted me to make my decision. At the end of the day, it was my life, after all. I was the one that was going to have to live with the decision.

In the end, the choice was obvious. Turning down a full ride and the chance to play football for a real team was too good to pass up.

I was going to Creelin University.

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CHAPTER ONE

KIERAN

I was starting to think I made a mistake coming to Creelin.

I'd been on campus for two weeks. Classes hadn't started yet, and most everyone wasn't moving in until the weekend. From my understanding, a lot of the monsters were moving in that day. They were probably all getting settled into their dorms while I was sweating buckets under the late summer sun with the rest of the football team.

I'd spent most of the first week alone, when I wasn't training. I had the suite I'd been assigned to myself. It was quiet, and I liked it that way. I'd grown up with just me and Pops, and after I got old enough to be left on my own, I'd gotten used to a quiet apartment while Pops was working. One of my roommates, Teagan Dae, showed up last weekend. He got special permission from the campus to be there early. He was some kind of celebrity, but I didn't know a thing about him before we got to talking. I'd never been that into pop culture, but from what he said, he was kind of a big deal.

Our other two roommates would be showing up the next day, so I had that to look forward to. I had a feeling it wasn't going to stay quiet in the suite all that long.

But I didn't need to be thinking about that right now. I needed to think about things that were more important, like the practice I was currently at. I was watching the running backs run routes through our defense. The wide receivers would be up next, and I needed to study what our defense was

doing. I needed to figure out how they were moving, so I could make my way through them.

All watching them did was make it real clear that I didn't belong there. Which was why I was starting to think that I had made a mistake. Everyone around me had some kind of supernatural enhancement. One of our running backs was part cat. Literally. I didn't know what kind of cat he turned into, but you could see it in the way he ran. He was fast and agile. He could make his way through gaps I didn't think anyone else could've. He was damn near impossible for the defense to catch.

And don't get me started on the defensive players. Some of them were pretty much mountains, but they had super fucking strength and things like that. I'd gotten hit by a few of them, and they weren't even going full strength. The colleges we were going to be playing were all monsters. How the fuck was I going to survive? Maybe this was why Coach Eriksson had to come recruiting at a shit hole college to find a human to pop on the roster.

I needed to step up my game if I was going to stand a chance at doing anything other than riding the bench. And I sure as hell wasn't going to be riding the bench all season. I didn't come to Creelin University for that. I came to play.

The running backs finished their drill, and Coach Shaw blew two short blasts of his whistle before shouting out to the wide receivers. I stood up and followed the other eight wide receivers on the roster over to where our position coach was standing, waiting to explain the drill. I somehow ended up standing next to Evander Hemmings. He was a sophomore, just like me. He'd been a backup the year before, coming in when the starters needed a break. I'd heard him chatting with some of the other guys on the team, and he was convinced he was going to not only get a starting role this year, but *the* starting role.

He was determined he was going to be wide receiver one, and well, if I had anything to say about it, he was going to be real disappointed. Of course, he had a few advantages I would never have. He was some kind of monster. I didn't know what, exactly, because I didn't know what the fuck half my team was. I didn't know how one went around asking that politely. I had a feeling it was considered rude to just go up to someone and say *what are you* or anything like that. I just knew that Evander had some killer

reflexes and a vertical jump that would make a basketball player quiver with envy.

And of course, he was the first person to run the drill. I watched as he took off running down the field, spinning around defenders and avoiding them like they weren't even there. He looked over his shoulder a few times and the moment the ball was thrown in his direction, he was correcting his path. I didn't know how he did it, but he met the ball exactly where our quarterback threw it. He jumped up a good five feet to grab it and landed smoothly. He managed another ten yards, evading one of the safeties who had come out of nowhere, before the position coach blew his whistle and called the drill to an end.

Everyone on the sideline erupted in applause, hooting and hollering as Evander came running back to us. His eyes were practically glowing beneath his helmet. They were an unnatural shade of amber. I noticed that when he got closer. He was almost wiggling with excitement as he threw the ball back to the quarterback.

Annoyingly, he sidled up next to me instead of any of his friends. That was a thing I'd noticed him doing since the first practice. Always standing near me like we were friends or something. And he had a bad habit of talking a million miles a minute no matter who he was talking to, even if they weren't replying. Ask me how I know.

"What did you think of the route?" he asked as soon as he was next to me. "I thought we were doing a slant route, but the moment I saw the trajectory of the ball..." He trailed off when he noticed the fact that I was not listening. Guess he had some kind of awareness. "You should look out for that when it's your turn."

I nodded and turned my attention to the guy who was running the route now. He was a senior, but from what I heard, he wasn't very good. If his run wasn't good, then I might be fucked. He was fast as hell, but I noticed why he had never been much more than a kick returner on special teams the moment he located the ball. He had it right in his arms and somehow fumbled it. It fell to the ground, and one of the defenders landed straight on it.

Turnover.

I could do better than that, at least.

Another wide receiver ran before I got my turn. I did take into consideration what Evander said, but it didn't matter. The quarterback threw

a deep ball to me, and I took off running. Coach Eriksson was right about my speed. I might not have supernatural speed, not like some of my teammates, but I could get some distance and do some fancy footwork. I spun around one of the defenders to put some separation between me and him. I didn't jump up to meet the ball, but I was right there when it landed. Unfortunately, the moment I had it cradled tight in my arms, one of the cornerbacks knocked me on my ass.

The only saving grace was I didn't let the ball hit the turf. It was a fair catch.



Practice ended an hour later. I had sweat dripping from places I didn't even know could sweat. I decided to forego the shower in the locker room. I had a perfectly good shower in my suite across campus, and in the morning, I'd have to share it with three other guys. I might as well take advantage of not having to fight for the shower while I had the chance.

Teagan was sitting on the couch in the common area when I got in. I gave him a nod in greeting and went straight back to my room. I grabbed a change of clothes, one of the only things I'd actually unpacked in the two weeks I'd been living there. Most of my other stuff was boxed up against the wall. I'd get to it eventually. It wasn't like I'd brought much. Wasn't like I needed much anyway.

My shower didn't take all that long, and I had to remind myself that I had to take my shit out when I finished. Pops had got me a shower caddy to store all of it, and it had been abandoned on the sink in the shower area since my first night there. I knew Teagan had stuff all over the other sink too. We were going to have to get the suite cleaned up before our new roommates arrived in the morning.

Just another thing to add to my to-do list.

I gathered all my shower stuff right then, while I was thinking about it, and took it to my room. I didn't know where the hell I was supposed to keep it, so I just put it on my desk. I'd figure it out later. Once I felt human again, I went out to the sitting area.

Teagan was still there, curled up like a cat on the sofa. The common area was full of our shit. We had a few things piled up on the table in the

middle of the room. My gym shoes were kicked off by the door, and Teagan had a lot of his stuff laying around too. There were takeout containers sitting on a lot of the surfaces. I sighed. “Think we might need to clean this place up tonight,” I commented.

Teagan put down his phone and nodded. “I think so, too.”

“And the bathroom. Got my shower stuff out already.”

“I didn’t even think of that.” Teagan stood up and stretched. His dark eyes darted around the room. I wondered if he was doing inventory the way I just had, seeing the mess we’d made in the last week, and wondering how the hell we were supposed to get the cleanup started. “Do we have trash bags?”

“Think Pops tossed a box of them in one of my boxes. I can go check?”

“You do that, and I’ll go clean up my sink.”

His sink. Those were the kinds of words we weren’t going to be able to use the next day. I just hoped whoever we got roomed with was just as chill as Teagan was. If I got paired up with someone who had the same kind of energy as Evander Hemmings, then I was going to toss myself out the window. I had a hard enough time dealing with that on the field. I wasn’t about to deal with it in my room if I had a say in the matter. (I didn’t, but I liked to fool myself every now and then.)

I found the trash bags in the third box I looked in, and then Teagan and I got to work making the suite look habitable.



I was up with the sun the next morning. I liked to start every day with a workout, and just because we had people moving in didn’t mean I was going to suddenly start slacking on the things I needed to get done. I made my way to the gym in the student center. I preferred it to the one we used as a team. There were a few reasons for that. The biggest draw was that it had been nearly empty every time I’d gone there so far. That might change as the year progressed. The other draw was the fact that I wasn’t very likely to run into Evander Hemmings there.

I didn’t even know if he worked out in the mornings, outside of what the team required. I’d overheard him talking in the locker room, and I knew he hadn’t been staying on campus during summer training. He was local.

I'd heard him mentioning a warehouse or something, but I didn't pay much attention. It wasn't my business. It was just hard not to hear him.

Evander Hemmings was a loud talker.

There were a few people working out in the gym with me, but they didn't pay me any attention. I didn't give them an ounce of my attention either. They weren't important. The only thing that really mattered to me was getting through my training program and getting back to the suite. I worked out for about an hour and a half, and then I decided to take advantage of the quiet and shower in the locker room.

Probably a better plan than scaring off our new roommates with my post-workout stink.

After my shower, I trekked across campus. Every dorm I passed was full of people going in and out, mostly lugging boxes or looking tired as they made their way back to the parking lot for another load.

When I hit Karloff Hall, I started keeping my eyes peeled, trying to guess who was going to live with me. I didn't have any idea who the hell my new roommates were. I'd been sent a letter with some names, but they didn't mean anything to me. I hadn't looked them up online or tried to reach out. Figured I didn't need to know who was bringing what, because Pops and some people from the bar pitched in to get me my own mini-fridge. With the private rooms in the suite, I didn't figure there'd be much need to share the stuff we brought, so I didn't think there'd be a lot of need to coordinate.

So far, I was right.

But since I hadn't looked up anyone I was staying with, I didn't know why I was bothering to try to figure out who was going to be in my room from the people milling around the building. There was a line of people waiting for the elevator, so I took the stairs up to the fifth floor. Even the stairwells were crowded with people, mostly coming down from their rooms instead of waiting for the elevator. I wasn't surprised when I reached my suite and found the door propped open.

One of the new roommates was already there.

I stepped inside, expecting to see someone my age. Instead, I found a small woman around Pops' age in the common area with a vacuum. I knew me and Teagan had cleaned the night before, but I wasn't going to say shit about someone doing a little extra. We hadn't run the vacuum. I didn't think

we even *had* a vacuum. I hoped this lady was going to leave it behind with her son, because that would be convenient.

She looked up at me and smiled a bright smile. Her teeth were incredibly white against her dark skin, but in a way that was entirely human. Nothing like the eerie smile Coach Eriksson showed off every time he was pleased in practice. “You must be one of Zay’s new roommates,” she chirped as she turned off the vacuum. “I hope you don’t mind me vacuuming. I saw some crumbs, and since Zay and his father won’t let me carry boxes, I needed to be doing something.”

“All good,” I told her with a small nod. I didn’t wait to say much else before I went to my room to drop off my gym bag and change back into my street clothes.

Once I got changed, I had a decision to make. I could go out there and meet my new roommate, wait for our fourth roommate, and make a good first impression. That was probably the smart thing to do, but that required a lot more mental energy than I wanted to be spending. The other option was to do what Teagan was clearly doing. His bedroom door had been shut, and I’d be willing to put any amount of money on the fact that he was hiding in there. It sounded like a better idea than the potential of getting roped into carrying boxes for the new roommate or making small talk with his parents.

Besides, I could hear the low hum of the vacuum through the walls of the dorm, and I didn’t want to interrupt his mom if she was back to cleaning things me and Teagan hadn’t gotten around to the day before.

So instead of going out there and being a good suite mate, I collapsed backward onto my bed and pulled out one of my textbooks. Classes would be starting in a few days, and it never hurt to get ahead. I wasn’t going to risk my scholarship with subpar grades, and I knew I wasn’t going to have a lot of time to study when practices were really starting. I could hear people moving around in the background, and after an hour or two, I stopped hearing all the voices that came with people moving around in the small suite hallway.

I decided it was safe to go out and meet my new suite mate without the annoyance of small talk with a parent.

But once I got out there, I wondered if I’d made another mistake. I’d always been better at talking to people my dad’s age. A lot better than talking to my peers. I blamed it on the hours spent at the bar, but it was too late. One of the bedroom doors was propped open, and when I peeked in, I

got my first glimpse of my new roommate. He looked like he was shorter than me. He had dark brown skin and a lean build. When he turned around, I noticed the silver glasses standing out bright against his face. He cracked a smile, and I could see the resemblance to the woman in the common room immediately.

This must be Zay. That was the name she'd said, right?

"Hi," he greeted brightly. He wiped one of his big hands off on his jeans and stepped around some half-unpacked boxes to come to the door. "I was starting to think I was the only one here, except Mom said she'd seen someone come in earlier."

I fought the urge to grimace. It seemed like this guy was another chatterbox. That was going to be a real pain in the ass. "Been here two weeks," I told him shortly. He raised an eyebrow. "Football practice."

"That could never be me," he groaned. "I'm terribly unathletic, but I'll make sure I come to cheer you on. I love football."

We talked about our favorite professional teams and players for a few minutes before the conversation tapered off. "Teagan's here, too. He's probably hiding in his room."

"Another football player?"

"No," I answered. "Got special permission from Dean Yaga to come early." I figured I didn't need to tell him the reason there. He'd either see Teagan and recognize him or he wouldn't. If he didn't, then it was up to Teagan to tell him the reason he got to move in early. I liked to keep to my own business. "I'll introduce you."

He nodded and followed me down the hall to Teagan's room. The door was shut, but I could hear music playing behind it. I knocked on the door, and Teagan shouted for me to come in.

I led our roommate in. "Figured I'd introduce you." Teagan sat up on his bed. It was bigger than the one in my room, but that was because he'd had it delivered special. His dorm mattress and bed frame were taken apart and pushed against a wall. I didn't know what he planned to do with them over the year, but just like telling people about the reason he moved in early, I figured it wasn't my business. "Teagan Dae, meet..." I trailed off. I realized that in all the talk about football in the hallway, I hadn't even gotten our new roommate's name. I was only partially sure that his mother had called him Zay, nowhere near sure enough to call him that to his face.

“Isaiah Winters,” the boy supplied. “A lot of people just call me Zay, though. You can call me either.” I looked at Isaiah and watched his eyes go wide behind his glasses as he stared at Teagan. “Holy fuck, you’re actually Teagan Dae.” Teagan nodded. “I guess I can figure out why you got special permission to move in early.”

I really hoped this guy wasn’t going to make it a whole deal. Luckily, that was all the freak out he had. He looked a bit starstruck, but we all chatted for a few minutes before Isaiah said he needed to get back to unpacking. I followed him out of Teagan’s room, because honestly, I should probably do the same thing. Teagan’s room was already unpacked and unboxed, and it was making me feel like a real slacker.



Two hours later, our fourth roommate still hadn’t shown up. I made myself a sandwich with food I had in my room’s mini-fridge, and after I ate, I checked my campus email. There was something from housing. I read it over and went out to the living room. Isaiah was sitting on the couch with his computer in his lap. His long legs were stretched out under the small coffee table where Teagan and I had taken to eating our meals. Teagan was sitting in the armchair, his legs curled up underneath him.

“Have you guys seen the email from housing?” I asked. They both shook their heads. “Our fourth roommate isn’t coming.”

“Today?” Isaiah questioned.

“At all.” I looked over at the room that was going to be our fourth roommates and then back at the other two. “Seems like a waste of space.”

“What does?” Teagan asked.

“The empty room.” I walked over to the door and turned the doorknob. It was locked. There was a whole empty room in our suite. My room was pretty full, and I didn’t even have room for the little walking pad Pops and a few of the regulars at the bar had gifted me before I left. It was tucked under my bed. It would be nice to be able to work out in my room when I didn’t feel like going to the gym on the weekends. I doubted either of my roommates would complain about the extra space either. An idea formed in my head.

“If we could get in there...” I trailed off, kneeling to look at the lock. It was a fairly standard lock, like the one on the door to mine and Pops’ apartment back home.

“It’s locked,” Isaiah commented dryly. Like I hadn’t just turned the doorknob and checked that. “Besides, I don’t think we’d be allowed.”

“But if it *weren’t* locked, we’d all have a little extra space.”

Teagan looked up at that. “I could use some extra space. There’s not a lot of storage in these rooms.”

“I could probably get us in here,” I declared, standing up straight.

“And you would probably get expelled,” Isaiah pointed out.

Teagan rose from his seat. “Only if someone found out,” he stated as he crossed the small living room area to come stare at the locked door. He focused his dark brown eyes on me. “Do you really think you could get us in here?”

I nodded. “Easy. I used to have to pick the lock to my apartment back home when I’d get locked out and Pops was working.”

I could’ve just as easily walked across town to the bar and got the key, but that would be admitting to my dad that I forgot them. I’d been about fourteen at the time, and I’d just been given the right to come home after school instead of going to the bar. I didn’t want Pops to think I wasn’t responsible enough for it, so instead of getting him to give me a key, I had one of the downstairs neighbors teach me how to pick a lock. It had made perfect sense in my young mind, and I’d learned a valuable life skill in the process.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Isaiah muttered from his seat on the couch.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Teagan countered. He looked down at the door and then back at me. “What do you need to unlock the door?”

I had what I needed in my room. The same neighbor that had taught me how to get into my locked apartment had gifted me his first ever lock pick set that same year for Christmas. I’d kept it hidden in the bottom of my backpack until I packed my bedroom up for college. Then I stuck it in one of the boxes that was coming with me. I didn’t think I’d have any need for it in a place like Creelin, but I felt weird not having it after all these years. It looked like it was a good thing now that we were facing the locked door to opportunity.

“Gimme a few minutes,” I told my new roommates before rushing down the hallway to my room. I could hear them talking in the distance: Isaiah’s anxious voice mixing with Teagan’s confident one. I couldn’t make out the words, but I didn’t think that mattered too much. I dug through a box of odds and ends from my bedroom back home until I found the worn leather roll that held the lock pick set. I rolled it open on my desk and pulled a few pieces from it before going back to the suite’s living room.

“What are those?” Isaiah asked with a raised brow as he took in the tools in my hand. He leaned in closer to study them. “Did you bring a lock pick set to school with you?”

I heard Teagan make a noise that sounded a lot like a chuckle. “It’s a long story,” I told him as I knelt in front of the door.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Isaiah questioned one last time.

I ignored him as I started toying with the lock. Teagan and Isaiah’s voices blended in the background while I focused. I wished they’d shut up so I could hear what I was doing, but I didn’t want to get into a fight with either of them on the first day living together. Combine that with the fact that I had a lock pick set in my room, and they might start to think I was someone who couldn’t be trusted.

After a few minutes, I heard the click that said the lock was undone. I gave the doorknob a twist and pushed the door open.

The bedroom was set up like my dorm had been: bed against one wall, a desk, a wardrobe, and a little bit of floor space to move around. I looked over my shoulder at Teagan and Isaiah and motioned them in. “Don’t close the door. Not until we figure out how to keep it from locking.”

While they walked into the room, I started looking around for something to prop the door open with. I ended up just grabbing a random box for now, but I knew that wasn’t going to end up working. For one thing, I didn’t know if that box belonged to Isaiah or Teagan, and I was sure they’d want to put their stuff away eventually. I stepped into the room with my roommates. “Would you guys mind if I put my walking pad in here?” I asked, eyeing the space between the bed and the wall.

In my room, I was worried about knocking things over. In here, there wasn’t anything to knock over.

“If I can use the closet for extra storage,” Teagan bargained. “And maybe set up a space to do makeup in here...”

Isaiah was still shifting around nervously, but I caught the way his eyes kept looking at the desk. “You got something you think would go there?” I asked.

“I could use it for crafting,” he muttered in a small voice. His dark eyes darted toward Teagan. “If you don’t mind sharing the desk?”

Teagan and I exchanged a glance before we both nodded. It looked like we all had something we could be using this space for. And well, if Isaiah had a stake in this room, then maybe he’d relax a little.

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CHAPTER TWO

EVANDER

“Do you like your roommates?” I asked Charlie Hensen, one of my pack members.

We were laying in the middle of a grassy patch of campus between buildings, letting the sun bask down on our bare skin. Charlie had been the one to send the text, and a few members of the pack had joined us. Serena Wright had already announced that she was only there to escape her roommate in Poe Hall. She’d spent a good five minutes bemoaning her choice to go for a traditional dorm instead of the suite style.

Then again, only me and one other person in the pack had lucked out and gotten single rooms in our suites.

Charlie wasn’t one of them. He just wasn’t one to complain unless you poked and prodded it out of him. Lucky for me, I was very good at poking and prodding things out of him.

“They’re okay,” Charlie said in the most noncommittal tone I’d ever heard in my life. I nudged Serena who reached over and poked him in the ribs. He let out a squeak that caused Nick Wright, Serena’s twin brother, to snort in laughter. “Fine, fine. There was a fuck up in the system, and I’m sharing my room with a human. He’s interesting, I guess.”

“Are you sure it was a fuck up?” Nick asked as he rolled onto his side. “Maybe the school is trying to integrate things further. Mixed rooms in the dorms. A werewolf would be a safe place to start.” Nick grinned. “Unless the werewolf is Evie. Evie would probably chew his roommate’s slippers.”

“I would not eat slippers!” I exclaimed, popping up into a sitting position and looking around for something to throw at Nick. Unfortunately, there was only grass, and if I threw grass, then dirt would get on Serena. Serena would probably kill me if that happened. I wasn’t in the mood to be killed today. There was a bonfire that night, and I had loved the welcome bonfire the year before. It would really suck to miss it because one of my pack mates shifted and ripped my throat out with her teeth. Better not to throw the grass.

Instead, I opted to flip him off. It was the safer option.

“I think you’d eat slippers,” Serena piped up.

I regretted not throwing the grass. It would be worth the risk to my safety, and I was faster than Serena. Usually. Sometimes. Okay, I wasn’t faster than Serena, and I was a lot more easily distracted. It wasn’t a good idea to throw the grass.

I laid back down and decided to change the subject. “Are you all going to the bonfire tonight?”

Nick and Serena shouted yes immediately. Charlie took more prodding. We spent the next fifteen minutes convincing him to go, but in the end, he agreed. Then he told us a little more about his human roommate. “You should bring him,” I suggested. “Maybe it’ll be less weird living with a roommate if you get drunk with him.”

“That’s a good idea,” Serena agreed. “Maybe I won’t want to kill my roommate if I get drunk with her.”

“What’s even wrong with your roommate?” Nick asked.

Serena began regaling us with a tale from the year before. She and her roommate were the same major, and they’d clashed. A lot. I had a feeling that this arrangement was going to end in violence. While she talked, I wondered if I should give Kali, our pack leader, a heads up. She was one of the only people who could keep Serena in check when she really got going. I wasn’t sure if it was because Serena viewed her as a mother figure or if it was the whole leader of the pack thing. It didn’t really matter.

I decided I’d make that decision if and when the time came. For now, I’d just enjoy the time with my pack.



A few hours later, I was back in the dorm with my roommates. They'd all moved in the day before while I'd been at practice. I'd left behind an empty suite, and when I'd returned, I had three new friends. Two of my roommates, Ryan and Benny, had requested to be in the same room or suite or anything. They were both from Philadelphia, and they'd become close the year before. They were the kinds of friends that had a nonverbal shorthand. My last roommate was a guy named Preston. He was a pre-law major, and I'd found him reading a physical newspaper that morning when I'd come into the common area.

I loved college.

I probably never would've known someone my age who read the newspaper first thing in the morning if it weren't for college. I didn't even know people my age still *read* a physical paper. I never had, except for the comics when I was a kid. My dad would bring them to the warehouse when he and my mom would visit me on the weekends, and I always read the funny pages.

Preston wasn't reading the newspaper now. He was sitting in the armchair reading a very boring looking textbook. He had an array of highlighters lined up on the thin arm of the chair, and I'd watched him swap them out while he read. He must have had a complicated system for reading his books. (I hadn't even opened my textbooks yet, but classes weren't even set to start until Monday. It wasn't like I *needed* to read anything yet.) Ryan and Benny were sitting on the couch playing a video game on the television. I was sprawled out on the floor because I liked to sprawl out and it was hard to do on the hard dorm couch.

"Does anyone know what time the bonfire starts?" I asked.

"No idea. Dark?" Ryan or Benny said from the couch. I wasn't looking at them, and I hadn't learned their voices enough to tell them apart yet. I should probably figure that out, but that seemed like too much work.

"Probably before dark," Preston countered. "Humans don't have great night vision, and there are many monsters who don't either." He had a point. I could see Preston from where I was laying on the floor, and I watched as he fished a phone from his pocket and began navigating the screen, an open highlighter held in his mouth. A few moments later, he put down his phone and popped the highlighter out of his mouth. "The event online says it'll start at seven."

“We were going to grab food first. You guys wanna come?” Ryan or Benny asked from the couch.

I thought for a moment. There’d been a bit of food at the bonfire the year before, but it hadn’t been good. Not that the food in the school dining halls was any better, but it had to be better than barely cooked hot dogs and burnt hamburgers. “I’ll come.”

Preston agreed too.

At five, I got changed, and by five-thirty, we were walking as a group toward the dining hall. It wasn’t crowded, even though the humans had moved in that day. I would have thought there’d be more people in the dining hall. I noticed two members of the football team sitting together. They waved at me, but I didn’t go over. I was with my roommates, and I didn’t want to be rude. I’d talk to them that night at the bonfire assuming they were going.

If not, I’d talk to them in practice on Monday.

It wasn’t like I wasn’t going to have a ton of time with them.

After dinner, my roommates and I made our way across campus to the bonfire. There was a steady stream of people walking through the woods toward the clearing. I could hear the music from a distance, but I wasn’t surprised that no one else in my group could. I had werewolf hearing, even when I was in full human form. The closer we got to the clearing, the louder the music got. Other noises started to join it too: conversations and laughter. Nothing was clear enough for me to make out actual words, and I fought the urge to partially shift. Just enough to whip out my good ears so I could hear better.

I decided that would be pointless. We were close and it wasn’t like anything anyone was saying was my business anyway. I was just nosy.

Minutes later, we were at the clearing. It felt like half the campus was already there, and the fire hadn’t been lit. Preston was the first from our group to peel off. He saw a group of people he knew from classes last year. Ryan and Benny excused themselves moments later, going to join people they recognized. I scanned the crowd and chose a direction. There was a group of my pack mates to the left and some football players to the right.

I’d spent my whole life with my pack, so I decided to go spend time with my teammates instead.

An hour later, the fire was lit. I had a red solo cup of cheap beer one of the upperclassmen on the team had brought to the party to share. I was

listening to one of our edge rushers talk about his summer. He'd gone to the beach with his family, and he'd had a whirlwind romance with a girl he'd thought was a mermaid. She wasn't. She was just a human who played a mermaid at the local aquarium. Our running back decided to try to one-up him with a story about one of his shifts during the summer. He was a cat shifter, and unfortunately his story involved me.

It wasn't my fault.

I didn't know that it was him. I was in werewolf form, and I spotted a giant Maine coon cat. I had biological urges, and one of them was to chase the cat. Wes hadn't found it that funny when he'd shifted back to human to yell at me from his perch on a tree. We might have both been laughing about it *now*, but I could see a gleam in his bright green eyes that promised revenge. I wasn't too scared.

What was he going to do? Claw me? I just wouldn't shift, and I'd pick him up and hold him at arm's length. Was it morally wrong to put your teammate in air jail?

We were several beers and several stories deep when I saw him.

Kieran Sawyer was standing with some Asian guy across the party. He had his hand wrapped around a plastic cup, and from where I was standing, I thought I might have seen him smiling. In the entire two weeks I'd known him, I'd not seen him do anything close to a smile. Most of the time, when he was near me, he just looked annoyed. He always acted like he had a chip the size of Alaska on his shoulder when he was on the field or at practice or anywhere really.

I was kind of surprised to know he could smile.

The conversation around me faded out as my attention focused solely on Kieran. He wasn't looking at me at all, though. It was like he didn't even notice me. All his attention was on the other guy. Until the other guy walked away. Then he was just left alone, standing there with his cup. I thought he might have joined someone else, but he didn't. Minutes passed, and he didn't move at all. He didn't talk to anyone. He didn't even look like he was all that bothered by being alone.

Why did it bother me?

I didn't know, but it *did*. I excused myself from my teammates and started walking through the crowd toward him.

Kieran finally looked up when I got close. The wind shifted, and I caught his scent. I'd noticed the way he'd smelled the first day in practice.

He smelled musky with a spicy undertone and something that reminded me of oak trees. I didn't know how to explain it, but it was one of the best things I'd ever smelled in my life. One thing I liked about his smell was that there was never that sharp smell that came from the chemicals in cologne. That smell always burned my nose, but Kieran never did.

Tonight, there was something different in his scent. Smoke. Probably from the bonfire, but it layered with his natural scents, and it was somehow even more appealing.

"Why are you staring at me?" Kieran asked.

Oh. Had I been staring at him? I hadn't noticed. I'd been smelling him, not in a creepy way, but I hadn't realized I'd been *staring* at him. Oops.

"I'm just wondering if you're having fun," I said. Because that was better than saying I had gotten distracted by the way the smell of the bonfire smoke mixed with his natural scent. That sounded... weird. That did not sound like something you said to a teammate you barely knew.

Kieran shrugged.

That wasn't an answer. Maybe I'd imagined him smiling from across the party because he wasn't smiling now. He was completely stone faced. At least he didn't look annoyed, which was an improvement. He had a classically handsome face, but it looked less so when his thick, dark brows furrowed like they always did in practice.

"So, are you having fun?" I tried again.

"Loads."

He didn't sound convincing. I looked at his cup and then back up at him. "What are you drinking? Because if you want, I can get you some beer. Lowman brought some."

"I'm underage."

"So is half the party." I was underage. I wasn't all that concerned about it. It wasn't like I was getting drunk off a few cups of cheap beer. It wasn't like anyone was driving back from the party either. "That's why Lowman bought it, because he's not underage."

"I don't drink underage," Kieran clarified. That annoyed tone was starting to seep into his voice. Great. I was just trying to talk to him, get to know him, anything, and instead I was just annoying him. "I'm good with soda."

"Okay." I wasn't going to try to pressure him into drinking. If he didn't want to drink underage, then that wasn't my business. That was his choice.

“You know, you could come hang out with the team. You are a member of it. You don’t have to stand over here alone.”

“Not alone,” he grunted. “I’m here with my roommates.”

I looked around. Unless one of them had the ability to turn invisible, then he was alone. Maybe he had the same kind of luck as Charlie and had a mixed room. “Are your roommates invisible? Did you get put in a room with monsters? One of my pack mates has a human roommate, so it does happen.”

Kieran looked at me like I’d grown a second head. While there were probably people on campus who had more than one head, I was not one of them. Ears and a tail? Sure. Not a second head. A beat of silence passed between us. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You said you weren’t alone, but...” I motioned at the empty space around us, beer sloshing over the edges of my cup as I waved at the air.

“Teagan went to...” Kieran’s voice trailed off. He blinked. “I’m not actually sure what he went to do, but he said he’d be back.”

“Oh.” I had to assume that Teagan was one of his roommates. “I take it you get along with your roommates?” I was surprised to hear that. From what I’d noticed so far, he didn’t seem to get along with anyone. I was even struggling to get him to have a normal conversation with me, and people had always said that I was very easy to get along with. Except Wes, but he was just salty about the whole tree incident over the summer. We’d gotten along perfectly fine before that.

Kieran nodded.

This whole one-sided conversation thing was going to get old fast. A normal person might have decided to walk away. They might have picked up on the signs that maybe their conversation partner wasn’t that interested. I’d never been great at picking up on those hints. Well, I could pick up on them, I just ignored them. I danced around them like they were minor inconveniences. Besides, if Kieran and I were going to be teammates, then we would need to get along.

I decided to try again. I knew one thing we had in common, and that was football. I could talk about football for hours. “Are you excited for practice to start Monday?”

“We’ve already been practicing,” he pointed out.

I sighed. “We’ve been doing summer training. No pads. It’s different.”

I saw a spark of something behind his dark blue eyes. Got him. “You were on the team last year, weren’t you?”

I nodded. “And the summer training is very different from the in-season training. It’s not as long, but it’s a lot more rigorous.” I grinned. “I really like the morning training sessions the best. Going to the gym and working out with everyone is a great way to start the day, you know?”

To my surprise, Kieran didn’t clam up. “I work out every morning. First thing.”

“I like to run in the morning. Even when we have early training sessions, I always go for a run first.”

“Where do you run around here?”

Oh, I definitely had him. All it took was figuring out a good conversation entry point. A shared interest was always the best place for that. I was practically quivering with excitement about the fact that he was contributing to conversation. *Don’t get too excited, Evander*, I scolded myself. I’d finally got him to talk. I didn’t need to scare him off.

I told him about a few of my favorite running trails. Most of them were in the woods, but I found it a lot more exciting than running laps around a track or wasting away on a treadmill. Don’t get me wrong, there was value in those, but they were boring. Running on trails had variety. There were obstacles like branches and bumps and other runners. There was scenery, even if it was the same scenery every time.

Kieran listened while I talked, and he didn’t interrupt except to ask a few questions about where the trailheads were and how long they were. I thought about inviting him along for my morning runs, but that might be pushing things a little. I’d just got him to actually talk to me without looking like he was trying to set me on fire with his mind.

Our conversation lasted a little longer before the guy he’d been standing with earlier came back over. There was something familiar about the man, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I could put my finger on the fact that the minute he came over, Kieran clammed back up in our conversation. It felt like a cold dismissal, but I was taking the whole thing as a win.

We talked. We’d had an entire conversation.

I told him goodbye and wandered back over to the team, but for the rest of the night, my eyes kept wandering to Kieran Sawyer.

CHAPTER THREE

KIERAN

The sound of my alarm ripped me from slumber way too early.

It was the same time it always went off, but something about the first day of actual classes made it feel earlier. I forced myself out of bed and into my gym clothes, which I'd been smart enough to lay out the night before. I just had a feeling I wasn't going to want to deal with struggling to find everything I needed at the ass crack of dawn.

I had a real busy day planned. It would start with the first team weight training session of the semester. After that, I had classes, video review, practice, the whole nine yards. I was just glad I'd been smart with my class schedule, and I didn't have more than three classes a day. Had to have some time to actually study if I wanted to take advantage of being at a better college than the one I'd been at. And I did want to take advantage of that. I had dreams of being a professional football player, but I wasn't naive enough to think that was a guarantee.

Weight training was easy enough. I didn't think it would stay that way. Before long, the coaching staff would probably start pushing us a little harder than they were this week. It was the first week, and it wasn't like we had a game to prep for that weekend. I would be lying to say I wasn't excited about getting pushed harder. I was operating at a deficit compared to my teammates, and I would probably be at the same deficit when it came to our opponents. If pushing was what it would take to give me an edge and a starting spot, then that was what I was going to have to do.

The best part of the early morning training was that everyone was too tired to be overly chatty, and by everyone, I did mean Evander. He'd come over and chatted my ear off at the bonfire, and I had been ready to walk off if Teagan hadn't come back over and saved my ass.

Weight training took about two hours, and when we were released, I had to practically sprint back across campus to change for my first class. I'd thought I'd left enough time in my schedule, but I wasn't so sure now. I'd failed to take into consideration the amount of time it would take to get out of the locker room. Coach Shaw had some notes, and he'd wanted to go over the training schedule for the day.

He realized we all had classes, right?

When I'd left for the morning, no one had been awake in the suite. I hadn't seen anyone up and moving when I'd come back to change, but when I'd left for class, I was able to walk out with Isaiah. His dark eyes were heavy with sleep, and he was walking around like he was moving through something thick and sticky. "You okay, man?" I asked as we waited for the elevator.

Normally, I would've taken the stairs, but one look at Isaiah and I knew that wasn't going to be an option.

"Yeah," he grumbled. "Not a morning person."

"Then why did you schedule yourself for an early class?"

"Everyone said that the professor that does this section is one of the best in the department, and it's the only time she offers it."

That made sense. I hadn't looked up any of my professors. I didn't know the reputation of any of them or if they were supposed to be hard teachers or hard graders. I'd just picked the classes I needed for my major that fit into my football schedule. I'd find out later if it was another item added to the list of things I regretted since moving to Creelin, but I didn't think it would make the cut. Classes were classes.

"Are you going to be able to function in class? If you're half asleep?"

"I'll cope," he said as the elevator doors opened. We stepped in together. "I don't know how you get up so early to go to the gym of all places. I don't even remember the last time I went to the gym, and I sure as hell wouldn't wake up early for it."

I laughed as I pressed the button to the ground floor. "I don't feel right if I don't work out in the morning," I admitted. "Even during the summer, I

have a whole routine I could do at my Pops' place without any equipment. Doesn't feel as good as going to a real gym though."

The look he gave me had me wondering if I'd somehow grown a second head.

We kept chatting as we made our way across campus, and the conversation only died down when we had to split to go to our respective buildings.

It wasn't hard to find my class. It was on the first floor, and the lecture hall doors were propped open. A TA with light blue skin stood over to the side, making sure everyone knew what class they were walking into. It was really convenient. I walked inside and found a seat in the middle of the lecture hall. I liked sitting in the middle of the lecture halls. No one ever paid much attention to the people in the middle. The professors tended to keep their attention to the people around the edges: the front of the room, the back, the people sitting on the aisles. The people in the middle faded into the sea of faces, and I liked it that way.

I didn't need to stand out in the classroom. Only on the football field. In class, I preferred to do the work and not draw any attention to myself. It was the best way to make a good grade without any fuss.

The professor started class, and it was just like the first day at my old college. Just going over the syllabus and expectations. It was the kind of class that could have been an email, and I just had to hope the professor was more interesting when he started covering the actual subject matter. Otherwise, I was going to have a hard time staying focused. Hell, I might have a hard time showing up to lecture if it was all just a regurgitation of the textbook.

Fingers crossed.

But the professor somehow managed to take up the whole class talking about the syllabus. Class ended right on time, and then I had a good hour to kill before my next one. I found a place on campus to sit near my next class. I'd scheduled that break on purpose, just in case I had any last-minute homework I needed to catch up on before class. It was one of the first communications classes I was taking, and I knew I needed to do well in it. It was a prerequisite for most of the classes in my major.

I showed up for class ten minutes early. The classroom wasn't a lecture hall. Instead, it was a traditional style classroom with rows of desks. I found one in the middle and started to settle in. People filed in around me, filling

in seats and talking loudly with their friends. I didn't have any friends in that class. Not surprising. The closest thing I had to a friend on this campus was Teagan. Isaiah, maybe, if I really wanted to push the definition of friend to the absolute limit.

Which is why I noticed when someone slid into the desk next to mine. I felt eyes on me, and I forced myself to look over. I figured it was probably someone from the football team, and I should have known it was going to be him. Somehow, I was still a bit surprised to see Evander staring at me.

And I do mean staring.

His amber eyes were practically drilling holes right into my body. It was uncomfortable. I had to say something. "Can I help you?"

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say. It sounded sharp to my own ears, rude even. But then, most people might say the way he was staring at me was rude. I didn't know if the two instances of rudeness canceled each other out, and honestly, it didn't matter one way or another. I wasn't going to be apologizing for the way I questioned him, and I wasn't going to hold my breath for him to apologize for staring either.

"I was just thinking about saying hi," he declared, a grin forming on his face. His smile was so bright it made his eyes almost look like they were glowing. Hell, they might have been glowing. I'd seen weirder in the few weeks I'd been on campus, and that was just with the football players. "But I wasn't sure if it was going to be welcome. Plus, you looked busy. Why were you arranging your pens like that?"

I looked down at the three pens on my desk. They weren't arranged any special way.

Evander must have sensed my confusion because he sighed. "I mean like all straight and together. And three of them? Why do you have three pens? My roommate, Preston, he always has a bunch of highlighters out, but they're different colors."

And my pens were just three black pens.

I sighed. "Been too many times where I open a pen and it doesn't work. Don't like to waste time digging when I should be paying attention." It was a whole thing.

"And if anyone needs to borrow a pen, it's already right there."

I blinked. Who the fuck would be asking me to borrow a pen? Why would someone be asking to borrow a pen? We were in college. From what I'd noticed, most people had their own pens. Actually, most people were

whipping out laptops to take notes. I always found that too distracting. I was prone to browsing different tabs when I had the option. It was better for my grades to handwrite my notes.

Evander was still staring at me like he was expecting some kind of answer about the pen thing. I had a feeling he was going to be a distraction in the class, but I could handle that. Maybe. When I didn't answer, he sucked in a sharp breath. "Did you have a good weekend? What did you think about weight training today?"

"It was good." I didn't know what else I could say about weight training. It was weight training. It didn't really change from one school to another. The only thing that really changed was the fact that the Creelin weight room was a lot better equipped than the weight room at my old college. It was full of state-of-the-art equipment, and they had personal trainers on the roster. I didn't say all that to Evander. It seemed like a lot of words that didn't need to be said.

"Just good? What kind of training did you do at your old school?"

Okay, he was starting to get under my skin. He was just chattering on and on, and I really needed him to stop. How the fuck was I supposed to focus on class if I had Mr. Chatterbox sitting next to me? I didn't have any faith in his ability to shut the fuck up when the teacher started talking. The professor walked in, and I knew I had to make a decision. I could either sit here and risk Evander distracting me, or I could find another seat.

I chose the latter.

I gathered my stuff and moved to an empty seat in the back of the classroom. An empty seat that had people sitting on all sides, so there was no chance that Evander could follow me.



After my classes ended for the day, I had just enough time to make it back to Karloff Hall to drop my school bag and grab my gym bag. I was one of the last people to make it to practice, and I didn't like that. I was going to have to find a way to fix that, because I didn't like the fact that everyone turned to look at me when I slipped into the conference room where we were doing video review. It only lasted a second before my teammates resumed their conversations, but it was a second too long for my comfort.

I didn't even know why we were bothering with tape review. It wasn't like we had a game to prep for. We didn't even have any recent video of the teams we'd be playing, but I had to put some faith in the coaching staff.

At three-thirty on the dot, Coach Shaw came to the front of the room. All the chat in the room fell away, replaced by silence. "Normally, our Monday tape review would be going over what we could improve from the week before," he started. "Starting this week, we will be recording parts of practice. Especially when we're doing game drills. This will last until our first game. Today, we're going to watch some highlights from last season, just so we can all get in the mood. After each clip, we'll talk through the plays. We've done some of them already in summer training, but there's a difference between practice and seeing them against our opponents."

At least that told me what the plan was.

"Bernt, can you dim the lights?"

Coach Eriksson hit the lights, and we spent the next hour going over plays from the previous season. When the tape ended, the lights came back up. "We will continue going over this stuff all week. When the season officially starts, we'll spend the rest of the week studying our opponent's tape and reworking our playbook to best optimize our offense and defense against theirs. Everyone has fifteen minutes until we meet on the field. Full pads!"

He clapped his hands once, and conversation resumed around me. Everyone started gathering their bags and filtering out of the room. I followed a few paces behind. Our full pads were all waiting for us at our lockers, and I took a moment to savor it before pulling on my pads and making my way to the field. I was somehow one of the first people on the field. Hell, I even beat Coach Eriksson down there. Coach Shaw gave me an appreciative smile when he saw me though, so I was going to take that as a good sign.

I needed to make a good impression on him.

Fifteen minutes later, the whole team was on the field running through warm up drills. I kept my focus on the drills and less on my teammates. Except sometimes, things they were doing would filter in. I couldn't bend the same way some of my teammates could. I sure as hell couldn't jump as high. I could see the differences, and I knew I was fighting an uphill battle.

That became even more obvious when we started the football drills.

I was with the other wide receivers for most of the first part of practice, and I could see the physical differences. I might have been built the same as a lot of the guys I was competing with. I had the same height and build, at least within a few inches and no more than twenty pounds than most of them. There was one giant of a player who stood more than a head taller than me. He had to be at least seven feet tall, but he didn't have great hands. I'd watched him fumble an easy ball.

I had a feeling his place on the team was for blocking purposes.

I spent a good part of practice sizing up my competition. Evander was high on the list. I knew from summer practices that he was a good player, but once he had full pads on, he was an absolute beast. He could run. He could jump. He made some catches that would be on a highlight reel for a professional team. He would be the one to beat if I wanted a starting spot, even if there were other people on the team that would be easier.

Maybe it was a pride thing, but I wanted to be the best. To do that, I had to beat the best.

I put all my focus into making more impressive catches than he did. I'd like to say that it worked well for me, but when Coach Shaw called out who was on what team for the mock game we'd be playing, I noticed which one I was on. I wasn't on the team with the players that were pretty much guaranteed starting roles. Evander was. I was on the team with the guys who would probably be riding the bench.

I was not okay with it.

The worst part of being with that team was that I didn't have the chance to prove myself the way I would if I'd been playing with the starting quarterback. I tried, but there was only so much you could do when you weren't getting the targets. Evander was getting the targets. I watched him from the bench when his team was on the field against our defense, and I would admit to being green with envy.

He moved like poetry on the field. He made catches I could only dream of, and he scored three of the team's five touchdowns. He was going to get one of the starting positions. He would probably be wide receiver one when the season started, and I hated him for it. I would be lucky if I even saw the field if today's practice was any indication.

Needless to say, I was not in a great mood when the practice ended.

I didn't say anything to anyone as I changed out, and I went straight to my room once I hit the dorm. I was going to have to figure out how to push

myself harder, because I did not transfer to Creelin University to ride the bench.

It just was not an option.

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CHAPTER FOUR

EVANDER

“When do you sleep?” Preston asked as I entered the suite. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor with that same thick textbook open in front of him. His laptop was to his left, and the now familiar array of highlighters was spread out to his right. He looked up at me through the strands of light brown hair that always fell across his forehead.

I grinned and kicked off my shoes, letting them fall into the messy pile of shoes that had started to build up by our door. “At night,” I chirped. “I don’t sleep much.”

“Werewolf thing?”

There was a hint of intrigue in his voice, and I kind of wanted to egg him on. I wanted to make him think that this was definitely a werewolf thing, something that was just a characteristic of my species. Except it wasn’t, and I wasn’t a good liar. I always started laughing about two sentences into a lie. “Nope. Just an Evander thing. I’ve got a few pack members who could be Olympic sleepers. If sleeping was an Olympic event, I mean.”

“Were you working out?”

I could understand the question. In the near week that we’d been living together, I’d spent most of my time doing something football related. I woke up early to get in a run before weight training. I didn’t get in until after dinner. I sometimes caught glimpses of my roommates when I went

back to the dorms between morning weight training and my first class, but that wasn't always a guarantee. They had their own classes and schedules to keep.

But I hadn't been working out that night. "Nah, I was across town. Kali, our pack leader, invited all of us who live on campus to family dinner. Lost track of time."

It was easy to lose track of time at the warehouse. I'd grown up there, surrounded by my own kind. The family at the warehouse had started with Kali. She hadn't lived in Creelin when the Halloween Wave hit, but the moment she turned, she felt *empty*. She moved from her home and went searching. She'd told us the tale a thousand times, long sleepless nights and even longer stretches of open road while she tried to find what she was looking for. It wasn't until she met Luke, her husband and the co-leader of the pack, that she discovered it.

Werewolves were pack animals. We needed to be around our own kind.

Luke had family in Creelin, people he loved and cared about who hadn't changed with the Wave. Even with that, he'd felt the same loneliness. They talked and they decided that they wanted to open up their home to other werewolves. It started with one, and then it grew. Fast. Within two years, they bought and remodeled the warehouse. They built bedrooms and common rooms. They built a large industrial kitchen and a dining room that could fit every single member of the pack comfortably. They even built rooms for visitors so pack members could stay in contact with their biological families.

My biological parents had spent many hours in the visitors' rooms.

We had dinner at the warehouse, and then Luke brought out board games. Before we knew it, it was almost eleven at night. Kali offered to let us all stay at the warehouse, but I had to get back. I had training in the morning, and while I could run from the warehouse to campus, all of my training gear was in the dorm. I didn't want to waste the time stopping to get it between my run and weight training. The bed would be too tempting.

Serena and Nick had decided to take her up on her offer, but Charlie and I had gone back to campus together in one of the cars the pack owned. It was parked by Charlie's dorm now, and we figured one of us would take it back to Kali later. It would probably be me that weekend since Charlie didn't like to run as much as I did.

“Have you just been studying all night?” I asked Preston as he uncapped a blue highlighter and started drawing on his book. “Do you ever do anything *but* study? Seriously, do you even have that much homework yet?”

“I like to get ahead,” he answered. “Pre-law is a pain in the ass.”

I snorted. I couldn’t imagine a degree that strenuous. I’d gone for something easy: communications. I figured I’d find some kind of job with it, and I could focus most of my attention on football. Even if I couldn’t find a job with my degree, I knew I could always find something to do with someone in the pack.

“You going to bed?” Preston asked as I took a step toward the hallway.

I nodded. “Yeah, five comes early.”

“Don’t know how you do it.”

“Easy,” I answered. “You’re goal-oriented with your studies. I’m the same way about football. Besides, I have too much energy not to get up and run every morning. Surely, you’ve figured that out by now.”

Preston laughed and wished me a good night. I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.



There was a strange hum in the locker room.

Not like a real, physical hum. More like a hum of energy buzzing beneath the surface. I knew where it came from. It came from Coach Shaw’s announcement at the beginning of practice. He’d ended tape review with a notice that during a typical week, one where we’d have a game, if there were roster changes or starter changes, they’d be posted in the locker room. He and Coach Eriksson had decided to post the list after today’s practice. Not that we had a game this weekend. We were still a few weeks away from the start of the season, but it was going to be a great way to see where we all stood.

Especially for those of us competing for starting spots.

I was practically vibrating as I changed out of my practice clothes. Every time someone moved, I looked up, expecting it to be one of the coaching staff coming to post the list. Were they actually going to post it somewhere on the wall for everyone to see? One of my pack mates had done theater in high school, and that was how they found out if they got

cast in the school play every time. I wondered if they felt the whirling nausea in the pit of their stomach while they waited too. Or if they felt like there were a thousand ants crawling under their skin.

I felt both of those things. And other things that I couldn't quite name.

It was very confusing.

I had just tossed my practice shoes back in my bag when Coach Eriksson came into the room. He taped up a piece of paper and left, not saying a single word. Honestly, if he wanted to do it quietly, then he should have had someone smaller do it. He was hard to miss, even in the Creelin University locker room where he, somehow, wasn't the tallest person in the room.

The hum in the locker room shifted. The door shut, and then, a swarm of football players descended on the list. Maybe not a full swarm. There were a few people who were locked into their starter positions. They stayed put. Eric Harrison, the quarterback in his final year at Creelin, looked amused when I passed him. His starting position had never been up for question. Me, on the other hand? I was pushing to the front of the crowd.

I found the wide receivers, and my eyes bugged out. If we were playing a game this weekend, I would've been wide receiver one. I'd done it. I'd shown off and shown out, and I had gotten the position I wanted. Tentatively. I wasn't naive enough to think that I couldn't lose it. Anyone on that list could show a marked improvement over the next few weeks or I could make some mistake, and I'd plummet down the depth chart.

Speaking of depth chart...

I started searching for Kieran's name on the list. He was second in line for the wide receiver two position. At least it meant we weren't in direct competition anymore. If the coaches thought he'd make a better two, then maybe we could actually get along now. Maybe he'd stop being a major grump.

But when he pushed past me, saw where he fell on the depth chart, and stormed out of the locker room, I doubted it.

I knew I should have left well enough alone, but there was a scent in the air. It was acrid and bitter, and I'd smelled it before. Never mixed into the warm notes of his scent, but on campus and in the warehouse and even in the locker room after a bad loss. It was the burning stink of disappointment.

I didn't like the way it smelled, layered underneath his natural scent. It smelled wrong on him, and I wanted that smell to go away. I wanted to find

a way to kick it to the curb.

I made a snap decision.

In less than a minute, I'd grabbed my practice bag, still unzipped, and left the locker room. I stopped outside the door and looked up and down the hallway. Kieran was nowhere in sight. I inhaled, and I smelled him. Layered underneath all the other smells of the practice facility—chemical cleaners and sweat and a thousand other things—was the smell of musk and oak. I closed my eyes and took a deeper breath, focusing only on his scent. I'd only done this a few times, tried to find someone by smell alone. It had always been members of my pack, and always because Kali wanted us to train our natural abilities.

I was grateful for it now.

I followed his scent out of the building and down a path toward the main part of campus. I found him in the shadows of a building about halfway between the training facility and Karloff Hall. That acrid smell was stronger, almost drowning out all the other smells. It was like the time Serena came home really drunk in high school. I could barely pick out her scent under the smell of liquor. It told me the disappointment went deep, so deep that it was almost an intrinsic part of him now. I hated it.

I took a few steps toward him, and when he didn't look up, I cleared my throat. I had to remind myself that he was human. He didn't have my amazing sense of hearing or smell to alert him to my presence. He didn't move when I cleared my throat, so I did it louder. Only then did his head snap toward me.

His facial expression changed as he turned. For half a second, I could see the disappointment etched into all of his features. Then it was gone, replaced by irritation. His sapphire eyes clouded over, and his thick brows furrowed. His thin lips flattened even thinner, and the expression sharpened his already too sharp jawline. "What do you want?" he snapped at me.

I didn't get it.

I'd come after him. I'd noticed that he was upset, and I'd gone to check on him. Why was he being such an asshole?

"I wanted to see how you were?" I could have sounded more decisive. "After the depth chart. I know you were—"

"Did you come to rub it in?" he demanded. Whoa. Aggressive. I opened my mouth to defend myself, to point out that I had no plans on rubbing any of it in and was honestly just trying to be nice, but he barreled on. "Tease

me for riding the bench? Mock the fact that the human can't fucking hack it—"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I interrupted. It was a serious question. What the hell was wrong with him? Why was he attacking me for coming after him, for checking on him? It wasn't like he was swimming in friends. God forbid *one* person notice he was upset and check on him.

The furrow of his brow deepened. Seriously, it was like a crater at this point. A family of incredibly small animals could set up their home in there. Then, his face relaxed.

It was astounding how different his face looked when his jaw wasn't tensed. "Gave up a lot to be here," he admitted. "Thought it'd be a big chance to make a name for myself, maybe get noticed. Instead," his jaw tightened again, "I'm going to waste away on the fucking bench."

"It's only the end of the first week," I pointed out. "You can work harder."

The furrow in his brow was back. I wondered if he'd have a wrinkle there when he got older. Probably, because most of the time I'd seen him over the past few weeks, his brow was furrowed in some way.

"Work harder? You realize that I'm only human, right? Not exactly a fair competition."

I groaned. "Seriously? You're going to play the human card?"

"What the fuck does that mean?" he snapped.

"I mean you're faster than a lot of people on the team. If being a monster was a complete edge, you'd be at the bottom of the depth chart, not around the middle," I pointed out. Maybe competition was tougher against the monsters, but that didn't mean that he didn't have a chance to make a name for himself. If that was important to him, which it seemed to be. I couldn't even judge him for it. Why had I wanted my starting position? To make a name for myself. To break a few school records, maybe. To prove that I could do it.

To maybe, one day, be the first monster that played at the professional level.

So, really, how could I judge him for being butthurt over the fact that he wasn't going to be starting? I wasn't even sure I could safely say that I wouldn't be just as disappointed. (I could safely say I wouldn't have stormed out of the locker room, but maybe he just wasn't good at handling his disappointment.)

He didn't look moved at all by my attempt at a motivational speech. I shouldn't care. I knew that. I shouldn't care that he wasn't moved by my attempts to be kind to him. I shouldn't bother trying to cheer him up. He was a bit of an asshole, and that was becoming clearer by the moment. I shouldn't keep trying, but I knew myself better than that.

For some reason, he intrigued me. Maybe it was the fact that he smelled so good. Maybe it was the fact that I could relate to his desire to make something of himself on the football field.

Whatever it was, I wanted to help.

An idea popped into my head. "I could train with you."

The suggestion was past my lips before I'd even thought it out properly. It wasn't the first time I'd done something like that. If anything, I was less likely to think an idea through before I said it out loud than anything. *Impulsive* was what Kali called it, and she'd called it that most of my life. I was used to it.

Kieran wasn't used to it. I knew that. He raised an eyebrow at me. "With you?"

"Yeah," I told him, even though I wasn't all that sure about the idea. "I run every morning before practice."

"You said I was already pretty fast," he pointed out in the flattest voice I'd ever heard. "How is running going to help?"

"Stamina. Training. Reflexes," I listed.

"Reflexes?"

"Yeah. Gotta have fast reflexes on some of the trails I run." Because I wasn't going to alter where I ran just because I'd invited him to run with me.

Kieran studied me for a moment. I was hoping he'd accept the offer. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned it down flat, though. I'd figured out just enough about Kieran Sawyer to expect that. Instead, he shrugged. "Don't know," he finally said.

"It might help." Once again, the words left my mouth before the thought had even properly formed in my brain. Now that I'd said it, I wanted him to accept. Maybe I could get to know him, and then maybe we could become friends or whatever. I didn't know why, but I wanted to get to know him. His grumpy nature intrigued me, and I needed to know more about him. "Just say yes."

"I don't know," he repeated.

I dug into my still-open gym bag until I found my phone. I didn't say anything as I created a new contact and shoved my phone toward him. "Give me your number. I'll text you where I'm planning to start."

He stared at the phone like it was going to come alive and bite his hand off. I wiggled the phone, and he finally plucked it from my hand. I watched as he typed in his number and handed it back. I sent him a text, just so my number would be on his phone.

"I'll text you," I reiterated. "Or you can text me. Just to say that you're coming."

"Or that I'm not."

I refused to accept that as a possible answer. The only possible answer was that he was going to join me for a run. I was determined and stubborn and now that the idea had taken root in my head, I was going to make sure it happened. I would annoy the crap out of him until he agreed. "You can text me to say you're coming."

I didn't wait for him to answer before I tucked the phone back into my bag and started toward Karloff Hall. I heard his footsteps behind me, his scent carried on the breeze to my nose. The acrid scent of disappointment was still there, but it wasn't as strong as it had been.

Maybe I'd made a difference.

Damn, I hoped I had.

CHAPTER FIVE

KIERAN

Twenty-four hours had passed since the list had been posted. The list that said I wasn't good enough. I'd come all this way. I'd left the team where I was the star receiver. I'd left Pops behind. I was a fish out of the damn water, swimming in a pond of something that didn't move like the water I'd grown up on. And for what? To spend the rest of my college career riding the bench and hoping someone got injured?

Fuck that.

I just kept thinking about it. I just kept replaying the moment I saw that list, saw my name in the second column. I kept feeling that weight settle in my gut and the knowledge wash over me that I hadn't been good enough. I'd been working my ass off since I came to Creelin, and it hadn't been enough.

In other words, I was drowning in self-fucking-pity.

I was also playing through that whole situation with Evander. Him following me out of the practice facility, acting like we were friends of some sort. Him looking all hurt and wounded when I snapped at him. I didn't get that because it wasn't like we were friends. Why the hell would he look so hurt that I wasn't embracing him with open arms? But then, maybe I should be. Maybe if I made more effort to get to know my teammates, to blend in on the team, the coaches would notice and take more of a chance on me.

I knew the way teams worked. I'd been on them my whole life. The locker room chemistry mattered on the field, and maybe the coaches were taking that into consideration when they chose who got to be on the field when kick off came.

And that led me right back to the conversation with Evander. More specifically to his offer to help me train.

It kept turning over and over again in my head. On one hand, it might be good to boost my connection with the team. He'd be an easy place to start since he was so damn eager to be my friend, judging by yesterday. On the other hand, he could be annoying as hell. He was all energy, all the time, and I didn't know if I had the energy to deal with his constant go, go, go. He was one of the loudest voices in the locker room. There were times on the field when I swore he was wiggling with anticipation for his turn.

If he had a tail, then it'd be wagging.

I needed to make a choice. He'd texted me last night, letting me know what time he was going out for a run this morning. I hadn't shown up. He texted me again tonight to let me know when and where he was starting tomorrow. I kept staring at the text while I replayed the conversation, just laying on my bed and staring at the ceiling. I needed to think things through.

I rolled off my bed and left my room. I rapped my knuckles on the door to Teagan's room as I passed, and when he popped his head out, I motioned toward the bonus room. I needed to chat, and I needed to be moving while I did it. I knew better than to think Teagan would want to follow me to the gym or worse, around the campus trails in the late summer heat. The bonus room, my walking pad: it was the better choice.

He followed me into the room and sat at the desk chair while I pulled the walking pad out from under the bed and turned it on.

"What's going on?" he asked, his voice soft. "Is it still about not making starter?"

He'd heard me rant about it for a good thirty minutes last night. He wasn't an athlete, but he'd been up for roles and stuff. He knew how rejection could sting, so he didn't seem to mind the ranting, rambling, and fear that I just wasn't good enough.

I wish I could be ashamed that we were about to do a redux of the same stuff he'd heard the night before, just with a twist that came in the form of the person who *had* gotten what I wanted. "A bit."

“A bit?”

I nodded and stepped onto the treadmill, wrapping my hand tight around the little controller that adjusted the speed and incline. I was planning on starting slow, but I knew myself well enough to know that it wouldn't stay that way. Teagan turned around and flipped on the light of the mirror he'd put on the desk and started pulling makeup from the drawers. “It's not so much about the list, but what happened after,” I explained.

“When Evan followed you?”

“Evander,” I corrected, “but yeah. I told you he followed me, right?”

“Yeah, and then you couldn't even come right back to the dorm, because you realized he lived here too?”

I groaned. I'd forgotten I'd told him about that in my rambling. I'd realized right before we got to the dorm that the path he was walking led to only one place. I didn't feel like having him realize we lived in the same building, so I kept walking. I found a bench and sat for a good fifteen minutes before going back into my dorm. I knew I wasn't really hiding where I lived. Chances were, me and Evander would run into one another in or near the dorm and he'd put two and two together.

“Yeah, but it's not about that,” I grumbled.

Teagan turned around to look at me, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised in question.

“It's about what he said when we were talking. He offered to do some extra training with me, see if we could get me on that starting list.” When I said it out loud, it sounded smart. It sounded really nice of him, not like something that should be tearing me up inside. But knowing that didn't do anything for the way it felt: like I was some human charity case. I'd never been that great at accepting help. I blamed my dad.

“Is there something wrong with that?”

I hit the button on the remote to up the speed. “It wasn't that he offered. It was *how* he offered. He was talking to me like I was something that should be pitied, you know?”

Teagan didn't look like he knew, but I was going to make him understand. Or I was going to do my best. I talked for a good thirty minutes with Teagan asking a few questions here and there, making astute observations, all of it. I probably could have talked longer, but we were interrupted. The room belonged to someone now, a new guy who had just

moved in named Ryker. He was a gargoyle, assigned to guard Teagan for some reason.

When he'd moved in and saw our stuff in his room, he'd raised an eyebrow. We offered to move it, but he'd told us it wasn't necessary. He was only using the room to sleep, anyway. He'd told us we were all welcome to come and go as we liked, keep our stuff in there, whatever. I can't say I minded. My walking pad fit a lot better in his room than mine.

But even though he didn't mind us being in there, it broke the whole mood. Teagan's attention had shifted to Ryker, and even I could recognize the way they were looking at each other. It was time for me to make a graceful exit. I thanked Teagan for his time and went back to my room to mull it over some more.



Sunday night, my phone lit up the same as it had every night since Friday.

EVANDER

Tomorrow morning. 6 AM. Library steps.

I looked at the words. I thought about everything Teagan and I talked about the night before. He'd made a good point about gift horses and mouths and not looking in them. If I wanted to make a real go of my time at Creelin, then I should do whatever it took. That meant meeting up with Evander Hemmings.

I sent back a thumbs up emoji, turned off my light, and went to bed.

My alarm went off a few hours later. There wasn't even light coming through the small dorm window to let me know it wasn't the middle of the night. I flipped on the light, wincing as the harsh brightness filled the room. I felt like a zombie as I got ready to meet Evander, all the while questioning if this was possibly one of the worst ideas I'd ever had. It wasn't like me and Evander were friends. He annoyed the hell out of me most of the time, but I'd already said I was going to be there.

So, I grabbed my gym bag and left the dorm.

Ten minutes later, I found Evander in front of the library. He was bent almost entirely in half, reaching down to touch his toes with a kind of ease I'd never been able to manage. I watched from a few yards away as he

straightened and reached up toward the sky, his hands joined together. His shirt raised just slightly, showing off a slip of his slender torso. My eyes were drawn to that strip of creamy flesh, a sharp contrast to the black shirt he was wearing. That was the only reason my eyes were drawn there, the only reason I struggled to stop myself from looking.

Until he noticed me.

The second he opened his mouth, it was easy to look away. "Hey, you made it!" he exclaimed, his hands flopping down to his side.

I grimaced at his excitement. It was too damn early to be that excited. "Figured it couldn't hurt."

"You need to stretch?"

I knew that I should, so I nodded. I ran through my stretches as quickly as possible, not looking at him as he went back to his routine. I didn't need to get distracted. We stretched for about five more minutes, and then I announced I was ready when he was. He showed me where he was leaving his bag, and I put mine down beside it. It wasn't like anyone was up and moving around, so it wasn't likely anyone was going to steal them.

And what would they get if they did? My sweaty gym socks? That seemed like more of a punishment than anything else I could think of.

I followed Evander around the building and to the edge of campus. He stopped at a trailhead I must have walked past a thousand times without noticing. The entrance was just barely wide enough for him to pass through, and when I followed him, I felt the brush of tree leaves against my arms. "Is this a safe place to run?" I asked him.

He smiled over his shoulder, shrugged, and started running. I guessed that was as good an answer as I was going to get, and while I could have turned back, gone back toward the lights of campus, I didn't. I took off after him. The trail wasn't lit except for the light of the moon and the stars shining down. I could only really see where I was going because of Evander. His light blond hair was some of the only brightness in these woods. The ground was uneven, and there were a few times I felt like I was about to trip and fall, but I kept going. I kept pushing.

About fifteen minutes into the trail, I noticed that I was getting better at anticipating obstacles. I didn't know if it was just the fact that my eyes had adjusted to the dark or if it was like Evander had said when he'd suggested this thing: my reflexes getting better. I figured it was more the former than the latter because I was pretty sure reflexes took time to hone. They weren't

something that you saw a marked improvement in with fifteen minutes of running on unfamiliar terrain.

The entire trail took about forty minutes to run. When we broke back through the tree line, only about five yards away from where we entered, I was dripping sweat. The sun was starting to peek over the horizon. Evander was doubled over, hands resting on his knees. His skin was flushed red and shining with sweat. His shaggy blond hair fell over his eyes, but when he looked up, he gave me a smile that lit up the dark area we were in.

I felt my own lips curve upward in return.

“Good run?” he asked as he straightened back up and started striding back around the library.

I nodded. Then I realized that his back was to me. It wasn’t like he could hear my response. “Yeah. Didn’t even know that trail was here.”

“It’s one of my favorites. Usually takes me less time to run it though.”

He tossed it out so casually, but the words made my blood boil. What the hell did he mean it took him less time to run usually? “Were you holding back so I could keep pace?” I asked him.

I figured he could hear the disgust in my tone, based on the way he turned and looked at me. “You’re used to running on a track,” he pointed out.

“And I’m human,” I spat. “You probably have some night vision bullshit.”

He turned around to look at me, walking backward. “Night vision bullshit?”

“Yeah,” I doubled down. “You probably have some monster ability to see in the dark.”

He paused, his head cocked to the side. I noticed the way his nostrils flared. Then he did the weirdest fucking thing. He smiled, like he was amused at something. No, not at something. At someone. At *me*. “I do,” he told me plainly. “Not in pitch black. My vision’s no better than yours in pitch black, but low light?” He nodded. “Yeah, in low light, I’ve got better vision than humans.”

He kept walking backward without looking behind him to see where he was going. I guessed that had to do with his monster side too. “And the ability to sense tripping hazards?” I asked. I wished I would’ve kept my mouth shut, because he proved me wrong on that front immediately. He bumped into a bench behind him and stumbled backward. I reached out and

grabbed his hand on impulse, pulling him to keep him upright. He tumbled forward against me, landing smack dab in the middle of my chest. I dropped his wrist like it burned and took a large step back. “Guess not on that one.”

He laughed. He didn’t look embarrassed at all by his near fall. He didn’t look put out by my attitude either. He really was some kind of morning person. He turned around and started up the steps of the library, back to where we’d hidden our bags. “You can ask, you know,” he told me as he lifted our bags one-handed from behind the potted plant we’d hidden them behind.

“Ask what?”

“You can ask what species someone is. I didn’t know if you thought it was rude or something,” he chirped as he jogged back down the stairs to hand me my bag. “I ask people all the time when I can’t figure it out. Most of them don’t mind answering. It’s not like you can tell with everyone, you know? I mean, sure, some of them you absolutely can. Like there’s this one guy I had a class with last year, snakes for hair. Couldn’t miss that he was a Gorgon. But the ones that walk around without much sign of what they are? You can ask them.”

He was rambling, and I wanted him to stop. So, I did the only logical thing. I asked, “What are you?”

“I’m a werewolf.”

I blinked. A werewolf? An actual werewolf? “Like shift on the full moon and howl werewolf?” I asked.

“I mean, we don’t *need* the full moon...”

I wasn’t sure why I was shocked. I had a class with a girl with green skin. My new roommate was a gargoyle. One of our teammates was literally seven feet tall, and I still didn’t know what exactly he was. I hadn’t asked. Figured it wasn’t my business, and okay, maybe a part of me knew I’d react like this. I didn’t know why I was blindsided either. It wasn’t like a werewolf was that far out of the realm of possibility.

I’d heard of them. Not just in popular media, but in the news and stuff. They were some of the most common monsters that people got turned into with the Halloween Wave.

“Do you have any questions? About being a werewolf? About me?” He jerked his head toward the path in front of us, the one that would lead us across campus to the training facility for practice.

I shook my head. I had a ton of questions, but I didn't want to hear him yammering on about being a werewolf right now. It was too early to process any of this, even with the post-workout endorphins. Maybe later.

Probably not.

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CHAPTER SIX

EVANDER

Kieran started to run with me every morning.

The first morning, he'd been pretty monosyllabic, especially after the whole werewolf reveal. I thought he might ask some more questions at some point, but he didn't. He did have a small conversation with me the next day and every day after that. They were all surface level, but it was progress. I was pretty sure, when we finished running some paths around campus on day three, I actually saw him smile.

It transformed his face, and I kept thinking about it all day.

I noticed small changes at practice too. Now that Kieran was running with me in the morning, he seemed to be making strides with other members of the team. I saw him talking to another wide receiver on the team. I was pretty sure his name was Marlon or Marvin or something. He was a third-string rookie, a freshman who had played for his high school team somewhere in the middle of the country. I didn't know much about him, but I'd been fascinated watching Kieran have a whole conversation with him.

I'd never seen him have a conversation longer than a few sentences with anyone else on the team. It stirred something in my gut, something that felt almost like jealousy. But that was ridiculous. Why would I be jealous that he was having a whole conversation with Marlon or Marvin or whatever his name was? It was a good thing. It meant that Kieran was making strides at fitting in with the team.

That wasn't just good for him; it was good for the whole team. Anyone who played team sports knew that good team chemistry made a difference at game time.

His conversation with Marlon or Marvin or whatever his name was had taken place on Wednesday. I spent that entire night thinking about it, and I came to a decision. I needed to figure out a way to get rid of the jealousy. The logical thing might have been to talk it out with a friend or maybe just find a way to move past it. However, I wasn't known for being the most logical werewolf in the pack, not by a long shot. I came up with a different solution.

If watching him have that conversation made me seethe with jealousy, then the only way to quell it would be to have a *longer* conversation with him. It would mean that I won, and then the feelings would go away. Simple. Easy.

Except the next morning, Kieran was even less chatty than usual. I could barely get more than three words out of him beyond *good morning*. It didn't help the big ball of jealousy in the pit of my stomach. It made it worse. It turned it from a mild annoyance into something that felt like obsession. I couldn't focus during morning training. I spent the entire time watching him, and when I noticed him making small talk with Eric, I did a bad thing.

I closed my eyes and drew on every lesson Kali had ever taught me. It took less than thirty seconds before I felt my ears tingle. A moment later, my hearing had improved. I knew that it wasn't subtle. My wolf ears never were, but I didn't care. I wanted to hear what he was saying.

It turned out to be a waste. They were just talking about the regimen the trainer had put each of them on and how much they were lifting. I wasn't surprised to find out that Eric was lifting more than Kieran, but the amount Kieran was lifting couldn't have been normal for a human. Could it? Maybe I'd call my biological parents that night, find out what they lifted. Maybe humans were a lot stronger than people thought, or maybe Kieran was some kind of outlier.

Hmm...

I kept my wolf ears out for the rest of the morning's training session, trying to listen to anything and everything Kieran said. While I listened, an idea formed in my head. If I wanted to have a real conversation with him, then I had to know something about him. I could figure out everything I

needed to know. I could listen to him around campus today, and then I could work it into conversation tomorrow.

Was it obsessive? Maybe.

Was it invasive? Definitely.

Was it wrong? Probably.

Did I care? Not even a little bit.

It was the only cure to the toxic ball of jealousy in my stomach. How else would I be able to focus on anything else going on around me? It was all I could think about, and it had been since the day before. It was for the best; it had to be.

Yes, my mind was absolutely made up.



I spent the rest of the day with my wolf ears out, gathering what bits of information I could about Kieran. I couldn't tell you anything that happened in my classes, but I could tell you every detail of a small exchange he'd had with some girl he'd bumped into somewhere across campus. I could tell you details about him and that guy he'd hung out with at the bonfire, Teagan, talking about their new roommate. That was probably the most interesting thing I'd heard while I was listening.

A new roommate was interesting. A new roommate was something I could work with. That didn't happen often, because the dorms were usually full and there weren't a lot of transfers. Maybe I could use that to get him to open up. Then we could have a longer conversation than he'd had with Marlon or Marvin or whatever his name was, and that ball of feeling in my gut would go away.

I didn't shift back to my human ears until we were in the locker room before practice. My helmet would smoosh them down, and I'd learned the hard way that it was very uncomfortable. It had not been my finest hour, the day I got so excited and partially shifted after my first touchdown the year before. The ears hadn't been the worst part. My tail ripping through my uniform pants had been the worst part...

Wes still teased me about it every chance he got. Next time he did, I was going to chase him up another tree.

I still couldn't focus on anything other than Kieran. I was distracted by him, by his presence and the way his smell lingered in the air when he went to run a drill I'd just finished. It was always stronger when we were working out.

I'd hoped that running with him in the mornings would make me less sensitive to the smell, but it had the opposite effect. Instead of making me less sensitive to it, I'd become more in tune with it. I would catch a whiff of him at random spots on campus, and I just knew he'd been there. It didn't matter how many other smells were in the area, I could pick up on his. It was weird.

Needless to say, it wasn't my most productive practice.



I woke up on Friday with a full sense of purpose.

Today was the day. I was going to have a real conversation with Kieran Sawyer. It was going to be longer than his conversation with the rookie. I had conversation topics. I had a plan. I had a bottle of his favorite blue sports drink, the one I saw him downing after every practice. I'd even chosen to meet him at a spot as far away from the practice facility as I could manage without leaving campus. My plan was that we'd have a good run and then afterward, I would use all the information I'd gathered about him the day before to have a conversation.

He had a new roommate. His dad worked at a bar, and he got updates on regulars with names that seemed important to him. He had three classes on Thursdays, and they were all boring. One of them was his Introduction to Monsterkind class, and I'd heard stories about that class. I'd listened the most when he was in there, wondering if he'd ask any questions about werewolves. He hadn't. He'd not asked anything. He didn't talk much in class, just like he didn't talk much anywhere else.

Today would be different.

Today, I would find out what it took to open him up, and then the weird obsession I was developing with learning more about this one grumpy, amazing smelling human would fade away. The weight of the jealousy in my gut would disappear, and I'd be able to go back to normal.

I got to the meeting spot early and started stretching. I finished my stretching before he appeared. In fact, he was a few minutes late. What if he didn't show up? Okay, no, if he didn't show up, then I'd just figure out a way to have a conversation with him another time that day. I'd corner him in the stairway of the dorm or something. I knew he lived in Karloff Hall. Once I tracked him by his scent the week before, I had started to smell him everywhere.

I wondered if that contributed to the weird feeling I had about his conversation with Marlon or Marvin or whatever his name was.

Probably.

Before I had a chance to examine that possibility, I heard the snap of a twig. My head whipped up, and then I saw him walking towards me. This was it. It was time to put my plan into motion. I lifted my hand to wave at him, and he gave me a terse nod in reply. That was normal. He wasn't a morning person, despite waking up early every day. (He'd talked about the early mornings with his roommates, and I'd overheard it. He woke up early on weekends too.)

We exchanged greetings. I gave him a few minutes to stretch, and then we started running. I wanted him to be in a good mood, and I remembered how annoyed he'd been when he realized that I held back. So, this time, I didn't. I went at my full speed. I figured I'd probably leave him behind, and we'd catch up at the end, but every time I pushed myself harder, I heard him close by. Pushing himself harder. I was glad I'd chosen a shorter trail, which had to do with my master plan of getting a full conversation out of him. I didn't know if he'd be able to sustain this speed if we'd run too far.

Or maybe he would have.

Because when we burst out at the other end of the trail, I doubled over to catch my breath with my hands resting on my knees while he stayed standing. He just put his hands behind his head. I angled my head to study him. His face was blotchy, and his chest was rising and falling heavily, but he wasn't doubled over. He wasn't acting like he'd gone too hard. I couldn't lie to myself; I was impressed.

I didn't say much as I got our bags out from behind a tree near where we'd gone in and handed him his. I fished out the bottle of blue sports drink from mine, step one of my elaborate plan, and passed it to him. "I noticed you drink these after working out, but you never bring them to—"

"Thanks," he grunted tersely.

I watched as he uncapped the bottle and poured it into his mouth. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and I was absolutely mesmerized by it. It took me a moment to remember that I had a mission. That mission was not to watch his very distinct Adam's apple bounce like a tennis ball. No, it was to have a conversation. I closed my eyes and counted to three in my mind.

It was time.

"Why don't you ever drink one after our runs?" I asked him. That seemed like a safe entry point to a conversation.

Kieran shrugged. "Cuz they cost money?"

"Not that much money," I pointed out. The way he looked at me told me that was the wrong thing to say. Well, shit. That wasn't the way this conversation was supposed to go. This was supposed to be the entry point into something deeper that would last at least as long as it took to get across campus. Then I'd have won. I'd have officially had a longer conversation than he had with any of our teammates.

I had to get it back on track.

"But I guess if you're trying not to spend too much money, limiting the number you drink probably isn't a bad idea."

"Sugar content, too."

I nodded. I hadn't thought about the sugar content. Maybe I should have thought about that. I knew there were some people on the team who watched their sugar intake and their nutrients closely. They made sure that they kept a high-performance diet or whatever. I should have figured that he was one of them, but I didn't pick up on it yesterday. Maybe he wasn't because I'd seen what he'd eaten for lunch the day before. It wasn't exactly high performance. (I didn't know if there was much on campus that could get that label.)

At least it opened up another potential thread of conversation. Was it the most scintillating conversation topic? No, but that was okay. I wasn't determined to have the most interesting conversation he had with someone on the team. Just the longest. I'd aim for most interesting later, after I got to know him a little more. It shouldn't be too hard. I didn't think anything that the rookie had said could have been *that* interesting.

"Do you spend a lot of time watching your sugars?"

"Are you judging me for watching what I eat?" he asked.

That wasn't the intention at all. Crap. I was trying to have a real conversation, and all I was doing was getting him to raise his hackles. I was saying all the wrong things. It was a good thing I wasn't a quitter. "No," I told him easily as we stepped between two buildings to get back to the main paths on campus. "You just seem like the type that would be into the high-performance diet thing."

"Because I'm human?"

Was he just determined to feel attacked? I heaved a heavy sigh. "No, because you're a serious athlete who wants to be a starter. It has nothing to do with being human." He gave me a look I couldn't really decipher, and I decided to take that as a good sign. He didn't have a grumpy comeback at the very least. I barreled full steam ahead. "So, do you follow a high-performance diet?"

"No," he answered. It sounded like the word was being forced out of him. I was about to ask why when he did the unthinkable: volunteered the information. This whole conversation thing was working. "A high-performance diet is like the sports drinks: expensive. I just eat what's included in the meal plan."

"So do I," I told him with a grin. "But the night before a game, the coaches put out a full spread. Usually, it's a lot of pasta and meat and stuff. It's great."

I thought I saw a flicker of interest in his eyes, but it was gone before I could be sure. Maybe it was just the reflection of one of the streetlights on the path across campus. I was torn. Should I keep poking? On one hand, we'd made it about a quarter of the way to the training facility and the goal was to keep him talking and conversing the entire way. On the other hand, talking about food was boring unless there was something to eat. And I wasn't going to get to eat until after weight training when I grabbed a quick protein bar on my way to class.

Hardly satisfying.

But moving on to another topic didn't guarantee that he'd keep talking and I *really* wanted him to keep talking. "Coach Shaw will probably talk about it before the first game. When he posts the list."

I shouldn't have mentioned the list. The moment I did, his back went rigid. It wasn't like I could forget his reaction the week before. He'd stormed out of the locker room. He'd acted all kinds of pissed off.

"Fucking list," he grumbled.

It was clearly still a tough topic for him.

"Maybe it'll be different today," I mused. "You could have moved up the depth chart."

"To what? Your backup?" He spat the words *your backup* like they were poison on his tongue. I'd met a monster who had a poisonous tongue once. His tongue was a bright green, and that was not the point. The point was the idea of being my backup sounded like a different level of hell for him. I should have been offended, but I wasn't. I don't think I'd be too keen on being his backup either.

I could feel the door closing on our conversation. If I didn't figure out a way to get my foot out of my mouth, then there was no way this conversation was going to last all the way to the gym. The feeling in my gut wouldn't go away. I'd stay weirdly obsessed with him until the end of time. I didn't want any of that. I had to jam my proverbial foot into the proverbial door and fix this.

That should be easy, right? "To a starting position. You've had a really good week of practice. You could make it."

He shrugged, not saying anything. The door was inching shut, closing right on my spiritual foot.

The list was a conversation killer. It was time to pull out some of the information I found out the day before. Without, of course, talking about anything I probably shouldn't know. Which was going to be hard, and it wasn't something I'd thought all the way through at all. My two options were roommates and his dad. Something told me he'd find talking about his dad invasive, especially if I let it slip that I knew anything about his dad.

Roommates would probably be the safer option. Almost everyone on campus had roommates, and I didn't think anyone in Karloff Hall lived completely alone. "Do your roommates plan on coming to games?"

His shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. If I hadn't been watching him from the corner of my eyes, trying to take in every possible clue on how the conversation was going, I might not have noticed it. His roommates were a safe topic of conversation, better than anything that could lead back to money or that damn list. "They might. Zay will. He's a big football fan."

"Zay?"

"My roommate. Bit of a nerd, really into crafts, but strangely into football."

"Strangely?"

“Yeah. Just wouldn’t have expected it from him.” For a moment, I thought I saw a hint of a smile on his face. “But it gave us something to bond over.”

That had to be the most words I’d heard him string together. It seemed that his roommates and/or football were the key to unlocking conversation. I was going to ride that momentum until we got to the gym. “What’s your favorite professional team?”

It worked. We were still talking as we got into the locker room. I’d won.



My victory was short-lived. I coasted on the good feeling all day, right until the moment Coach Shaw posted the current standings.

Kieran hadn’t moved. He stormed out again, and this time, I didn’t follow him. I hung around and chatted with Wes and Eric, joined them for dinner, and went to meet up with a few members of the pack. I didn’t want to risk going backward with Kieran. Which I would. Which I shouldn’t care about, except I did, because the feeling of wanting to get to know him hadn’t gone away at all.

If anything, talking to him that morning had made it grow. I didn’t understand it.

I kept thinking about it while I lounged on the grass outside Poe Hall with my pack members. I didn’t think it was that noticeable until I felt Charlie nudge me with his foot. Right in the ankle, which wasn’t very nice of him. “Where are you, Evie?”

I looked up at him. “Right here?” Had I disappeared? I didn’t think I had disappeared. I would know if I’d gone invisible.

I must have looked as confused as I’d felt, because Serena let out a snort of laughter. “Physically, you’re here. Mentally?” She raised one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows. “I think you’re on Cloud Cuckooland.”

“Where is Cloud Cuckooland, exactly, Sere?” Nick asked as he rolled onto his back.

“It’s a state of being,” Serena informed her brother. “Where it isn’t is here. And Evie is clearly *there*.”

That was a lot of locations. That was a lot of confusing locations, but I understood what they were saying. They were clued into the fact that my mind was elsewhere. More specifically, my mind was in a dorm room at Karloff Hall. I think. He might have been somewhere else on campus. “I’m distracted,” I admitted.

“No shit,” Charlie teased. “You’re not just distracted. We’re used to you being distracted. You’re somewhere else. You didn’t even comment about Serena’s date this weekend.”

Serena had a date? When had we talked about Serena having a date? I must have really been on Cloud Cuckooland if I had missed Serena telling us about a hot date. “Who do you have a date with?”

“Oh no,” Serena teased, “I’m not going through everything again. If you want details about the date, you’re telling us what’s on your mind.”

I didn’t want to do that, but there were three pairs of eyes fixed on me. They were staring at me so hard that it felt like they were looking right through me. If they were, then they could see what was distracting me, so I might as well come clean. I rolled over onto my side so I could face everyone at once. “I’m thinking about Kieran.”

“Kieran?” Nick asked. “That’s the human on the football team, right? The one you’ve been running with?”

I forgot I’d mentioned that to Nick. At least him speaking made Charlie and Serena look at him instead of me for a whole half-second. Then their attention was right back on me. “Yeah,” I confirmed. “He stormed out again because he wasn’t where he wants to be on the depth chart. We’ve been working hard all week, and now he’ll probably stop showing up because he didn’t make a move on the list.”

That was it. That was what was bothering me. That *had* to be it. I didn’t like failing, and him not moving and getting upset about it felt like failure.

“The thing is: I’ve started to like running with him. You know I hate being alone for too long, and none of you want to run with me in the morning, so it’s been nice having the company, you know?”

“Right. The company,” Serena teased. “Not the fact that he’s hot.”

“How do you know he’s hot?”

“Human named Kieran on the football team?” Her lips curved upward into a grin. “He’s gotta be hot.”

Was he hot? He was tall, about an inch shorter than I was. He had a great body, built from years of working out and playing football. He had

dark hair and dark blue eyes, one of my favorite combinations. And his jaw line? I could probably cut a steak on his jawline. I would admit that I had been fascinated by his eyebrows a few times. They were thick and bushy, but one of them had an eyebrow slit. I didn't know if he did it on purpose or if it was just something he was born with. He almost looked dangerous when everything got put together, and the fact that he barely ever smiled helped with that impression.

But was he hot? I'd never really noticed.

Okay, that was a lie. I'd noticed. He was hot. He was very hot, but how did Serena know that?

"Plus, I have a class with him," she chirped, ripping me right out of my mental picture of him. "He smells really good."

My eyes widened. "Oh my god, you noticed that too?" I exclaimed, bouncing up into a sitting position and curling my legs underneath me. "I swear, I can pick up his smell anywhere on campus. Like all the time. It is so distracting! I'm so glad that's not just me."

Serena exchanged a glance with Nick and Charlie. The three of them started laughing. "Who wants to tell him?" Serena asked gently.

"Not it," Nick and Charlie called out in unison.

"Tell me?" I questioned. "Tell me what? What are we telling me?"

"He doesn't smell *that* good. Not the kind of smell... You know what? I think you'll figure it out on your own," Serena explained with the air of someone that was pulling off a very stubborn band aid and giving up halfway. I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off. "Do you want to hear about my date now?"

I nodded. I really wanted to hear about her date, a lot more than I wanted to have my friends tease me about the fact that I thought a human smelled really good. Or more than I wanted to examine the fact that I still wanted to get to know him better.

"I'm going to the Alpha Claw Omega party with some friend of Puck's." She didn't sound excited about it. I didn't blame her. Puck was one of the more annoying members of our pack, and he was a proud member of one of the largest fraternities on campus. "Puck told me to invite everyone. So, yeah, consider this your invite."

"But really consider it an escape route in case Serena's date sucks," Nick teased his sister.

“Are we going?” Charlie questioned. He looked at each of us. Serena nodded. Nick nodded. I shrugged. It was decided. “Meet outside Karloff tomorrow and we can walk together?”

We made a few plans, and then we poked at Serena for every possible detail we could garner about her date.

If nothing else, it distracted me from Kieran.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

KIERAN

The Alpha Claw Omega party was in full swing by the time I got there.

Music was pouring through the open door, and I swear I could see the windows to the frat house vibrating. There were people spilling out onto the porch. I watched as two women stumbled down the stairs, clutching at each other desperately. One of them let out a laugh that was so high pitched I had to wonder if she was a banshee. I didn't even know if banshees were a part of the Halloween Wave.

I did know that I was questioning what the hell I was doing there.

I'd been invited to a few parties back in high school. I'd gone to one or two, and I'd learned something about myself at them. I didn't like parties. I didn't like the loud music or hanging out with a bunch of people getting shitfaced. It was just another way I didn't get on with people my own age, didn't fit in with them. Because hanging out at the bar with adults getting drunk didn't really bother me.

I didn't have high hopes that this party would be much different.

Just thirty minutes, I reminded myself. That was the deal I'd made with myself when I left Karloff Hall to walk to the Alpha Claw Omega house. I had to stay for at least thirty minutes, then I could leave. I also had to talk to at least three members of the football team. I'd shown a bit of improvement on the field after training for a week with Evander, but that hadn't shown on the depth chart when Coach Shaw posted it the day before. If bonding with the other players would give me an edge, then that was what I had to do.

These were desperate times, and going to this party counted as desperate measures.

I took another deep breath, straightened my back, and walked into the frat house. The porch had been an omen for what waited inside. The living room was packed with people, all clutching plastic red cups. Half the party was already drunk. There were people playing beer pong; I didn't know people still fucking played beer pong. I pushed through the crowded living room and made my way toward the kitchen. The counter was piled high with booze and mixers. I grabbed a cup and poured myself some soda.

Might as well blend in. Not that I did, standing there alone.

I took a lap around the first floor of the frat house, which seemed to be where the party was focused. I saw Wes, the team's running back, and I thought about going to talk to him. He seemed like an okay guy. A bit standoffish, but that didn't bug me. I had been described as standoffish on more than one occasion, and I could see how the word fit. I didn't exactly go out of my way to make friends. Fuck, if I did, I might not be at this party feeling like I was about to crawl out of my skin. I wouldn't have to go to some place like this to make a damn friend on the team.

Wes was standing with Eric and one of the offensive linemen. I could have knocked all three out in one go, made some small talk, and got away clean, but I didn't. They were chatting up a group of three girls. If I went over, it'd fuck up the dynamic, and no one wanted to talk to the cock block.

I was about to begin the second lap when I saw Evander walk through the door with three people I'd never seen before. I stopped and watched them for a moment. Evander and the two guys gave the girl with them a bunch of hugs and sent her off. Then they started walking toward the kitchen. It was uncanny, the fact that they all walked the exact same way. I had a feeling Evander knew these guys from before college.

There was a small part of me that was tempted to follow them, study them like they were a weird science experiment. The larger part of me wanted to knock out the three football player goal so I could get the fuck out of this party. I'd decided Evander didn't count because I talked to him every morning. I made another lap, but Eric, Wes, and the offensive lineman were still chatting up the girls. It looked like they were making some kind of progress, and I wasn't going to fuck with that. I didn't think that would help a lot with my goal of making friends and influencing people.

But damn, it was tempting.

Luckily, it didn't come to that. When I stepped into the kitchen, I spotted two players getting drinks. One of them was Zak Reyes, the team's tight end. He was a year above me and had a good seventy pounds and six inches on me. He was a good blocker, and I knew why he'd made the first string. The other guy was Damien Willis. I didn't know much about him, other than the fact that he and I were both in the wide receiver room. I also knew that he was currently taking that starting wide receiver two position. He was the closest thing to my direct competition that there was, but that didn't mean I couldn't still play nice, make small talk, and the like.

I downed the rest of my soda and pushed in beside them. I reached out and grabbed a bottle. "Having a good night?" I asked.

Reyes and Willis turned their heads at the same time, looking at me like I was speaking in tongues. Maybe that wasn't the best opening line. Maybe I should've found something deeper to ask, but what the fuck would that be? I didn't know them all that well. I didn't have any classes with either of them and I figured talking about practice to Willis when I was actively going after his starting job probably wouldn't play very well.

After a second, Reyes nodded. "Yeah. You?"

Okay, this was the start of some kind of forward momentum. "Not much of a party person, but it's not been too bad so far."

The look they gave me made me glad I didn't mention that I was only planning on sticking it out for about thirty minutes. Something told me that wouldn't go over well. It would just be another way I didn't fit in with the other guys on the team. Hell, it was just another way I didn't fit in with other guys my age point blank. Pops used to say I had an old soul, but right about now, I felt like I should be pushing a walker.

"If you're not much of a party person, why bother coming to a party?" Reyes asked.

Fuck. I shrugged. "Seemed like the thing to do." Willis and Reyes were both still looking at me like I had a second head. It made me feel like I needed to elaborate, which usually meant that I shouldn't say anything else or I'd risk saying too much. Normally, that was the path I'd take, but I was trying to get to know the rest of the football team. And the deal was three players or thirty minutes, so I pushed myself out of my comfort zone. "Trying to make some friends."

There. I didn't say too much. I wasn't rambling on like a certain other member of the team.

"Did you have a lot of friends on your old team?" Willis asked. "The *human* one?"

I hadn't had a lot of friends back home either, but I didn't feel a need to point that out. Just like I didn't feel a need to question his weird emphasis on the word *human*. I just shrugged. "Grew up in the same town as my last school, so I knew a lot of people." That was a much more tactful way of saying that I didn't have a ton of friends. I didn't think they could read between the lines. More importantly, I didn't think they cared enough about me as a person to even try.

That was one benefit to not being one of the more popular members of the team—or the human race in general.

One of the bad things about it was the fact that I couldn't keep this conversation going. Neither Reyes nor Willis seemed all that invested in the conversation either and an awkward silence settled over us. I tried to rack my brain for anything that could have kept the conversation going, but I didn't get the chance. They excused themselves, and I knew they were talking about me as they left.

I pulled out my phone to look at the time.

Fifteen minutes. I'd been there for fifteen minutes, and I'd had a conversation with two teammates. Just one more, and I could blow this popsicle stand. I could go back to my dorm and pretend I'd had a good time. I refilled my cup, screwed the cap back on the bottle of soda, and decided to do another lap of the party.

Maybe I'd find Marlon hanging around. I hadn't planned on counting him, but if it meant I'd get out of here quicker, then I was going to count it. Or maybe Wes, Eric, and the offensive lineman whose name I couldn't remember wouldn't be caught up chatting with those girls and I could knock the last conversation out that way. It'd feel less like a cheat than talking to Marlon.

I had a plan. I turned around to start the lap. I made it two steps before someone collided into me, splashing soda out of my cup and soaking my shirt. It was cold, wet, and sticky, and it did not do wonders for my mood. Anger flashed deep inside me, and I didn't bother looking to see who the guilty party was before lashing out. "Watch where the fuck you're going," I snapped, stepping backward and resting my cup down on the drink table.

I reached blindly for the stack of napkins I'd seen there, but another hand kept reaching over mine. A familiar hand, one I'd seen in practice wrapping around balls in mid-air. One I'd seen clutched into fists as he ran or grasping at his own thighs when he doubled over after.

Evander.

Fucking Evander Hemmings.

If it had to be anyone who bumped into me, it had to be him. Because it couldn't have been someone that counted toward my three-player rule, someone that would get me out of the hell that was the Alpha Claw Omega party sooner. No, it had to be Evander. It had to be someone I talked to frequently enough that he didn't count. Maybe I could just say fuck the rule. Let him count. Then I could get out of here and not have to walk around with a sticky, soda-stained shirt for the rest of the night.

Evander tugged me out of my thoughts. Not with words, but with actions. He started wiping vigorously at the stain on my shirt with this dopey look on his face. I took a step back. "You're going to make it worse," I snapped.

I didn't know if it could be worse, but I didn't want him pawing at me like this. I started to dab at the stain, and I was hoping he'd catch the hint. Walk away.

I should have fucking known better. Evander couldn't catch a hint if it was thrown clean at him from a short distance with a perfect spiral by the best professional quarterback in the league's history.

Instead of backing up or even apologizing, he reached out again with that handful of napkins. "I know what I'm doing, Kieran."

I shoved his hand away. I did not want or need his help. I wanted him to go away, find the friends he came with, and leave me alone. His brand of help didn't make things better. The way he was rubbing at my shirt had spread the stain. Meeting in the morning for runs hadn't helped me move up the depth chart. All he did was annoy the piss out of me under the guise of helping, and I wasn't in the mood to deal with that right now.

The soda spilling on my shirt washed away every ounce of goodwill I had left toward this party.

Fuck the thirty minute minimum.

Fuck the three-football player rule I'd set for myself.

Fuck the whole Alpha Claw Omega party.

This wasn't me. This wasn't the kind of shit I enjoyed doing, and I wasn't going to make friends at a party where I was on edge and counting down the minutes until I could leave. Who the fuck wanted to be friends with someone who was in a bad mood and mentally watching the clock?

It was time to go. I looked over my shoulder at the living room. It looked about fifty times more crowded than it had been, but there was another door. Some kitchen door I'd seen a few people slip through on my laps. I didn't know what fresh hell waited in the backyard—probably couples hooking up on patio furniture—but it was a risk I was willing to take. Had to be better than being stuck in here.

It didn't take more than half a second to make my decision. Evander was still standing there, looking down at his hand and then back up at me. I left him standing in the crowded kitchen and pushed my way out the back door. I was hit with the mingling smells of pot and cigarette smoke. There were a few clusters of people standing around, smoking one or the other, but at least it was quieter out here. There was also, predictably, a couple making out on some of the furniture on the porch. I didn't spare them more than a glance, because watching two strangers go at it was about as appealing to me as watching paint dry.

It was quieter outside. I could still hear the music and crowds in the house, but it wasn't so loud that it drowned out every one of my damn thoughts. I felt like I could catch a full breath for the first time since I'd stepped foot into the frat house. I was ready to get back to Karloff Hall and forget this entire failure of a night.

I took the wooden steps down from the patio two at a time and let out a sigh of relief when my feet hit the grass. It was another step away from this damn party. There was a gate on the side of the yard, and I started toward it. I didn't give a shit that it led to what was the Creelin University equivalent of a dark alley. It was only the length of the frat house, and it looked empty to my human eyes. Unless there were students that could turn invisible, I figured it was safe enough.

I pushed through the gate. No sooner than I'd taken a step into the alley did I hear someone call my name.

No, not someone.

Evander.

Fucking Evander.

He really could not just take a damn hint and leave me the hell alone, could he? I ignored him and kept walking, but I should've known better than to think that would work. He was one of the most stubborn people I'd ever met. Within a few strides, he was right behind me. I kept walking, but I could feel him behind me. I started toward campus, and I thought that maybe, since he came with friends, he'd realize I was leaving and go back to the party. Surely, he wasn't going to abandon his friends twenty minutes into a party to stalk me around Creelin.

Except I forgot I was dealing with Evander Fucking Hemmings.

I gave up on the idea that he was going to leave me the hell alone about a block away from campus. He wasn't talking, but I could feel his eyes on the back of my head. He stayed a pace or two behind me the entire walk, and it was starting to grate my nerves. I hated the feeling of being followed, of being watched. I always had. I could feel it like it was something tangible.

I whipped around to face him. He grinned a wild grin at me. His teeth were bright white in the dark, and I suddenly thought of Little Red Riding Hood.

Oh Evander, what big teeth you have...

Not that I thought Evander was the kind of monster that had a taste for human flesh. To my knowledge, those types didn't exist with any more frequency than human murderers. But damn if the old fairy tale wasn't playing in my mind.

Unlike Little Red, I wasn't afraid of this Big Bad Wolf. Not that Evander had anything in common with the fairy tale creature. He had more in common with a golden retriever if anything.

"Why are you following me?" I snapped, taking a step toward him.

Evander looked at me, and with the way the streetlights caught his eyes, they almost looked like they were glowing amber. I'd seen his eyes do that while we were running in the mornings. It must have been some kind of werewolf thing, and I was starting to get used to seeing weird shit on campus anyway. The only thing he didn't do was answer.

"Don't you have friends at the party?" I demanded. "Maybe you should go back to them."

"And let you walk home alone?" he asked.

He sounded amused, and I didn't like it. I felt like I was the butt of some joke. Can't let the delicate fucking human walk home at night alone. Never

mind the fact that I had been staying on my own since I was about fourteen, when Pops decided that I could be trusted for a few hours on my own instead of haunting that corner booth at his bar. My neighborhood back home was a lot shadier than anything Creelin had to offer, so I didn't think there was much danger in walking a well-lit path back to campus without a wolfy escort.

"I don't need it," I told him. "You can go."

I'd hoped the dismissal would make him leave, but it didn't. Instead, he took a step closer to me. "You know, it wouldn't hurt for you to be a bit nicer," he pointed out. I didn't have the patience for this shit. I turned and started back toward campus. He fell into step beside me. We walked in silence for another block. He didn't speak again until we reached campus. "You make it really hard to be your friend, you know that right?"

Had I indicated in any way that I wanted him to be my friend?

"I mean it. You always seem like you're in a bad mood, and I don't get it. What's wrong with you?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. "I could ask you the same thing."

"What do you mean?" Evander questioned, one of his blond eyebrows raising so high it disappeared behind his wispy hair. "There's nothing wrong with me. You, on the other hand..." I opened my mouth to say something, but he cut me off. "I've been nothing but nice to you. I try to talk to you in practice. I tried to sit with you in class. I invited you on my morning runs. I spent a whole damn day trying to figure out how to have a conversation with you. But every time, you shoot me down. You don't talk to anyone on the team and then you wonder why you're probably going to spend the whole season riding the bench."

I saw red.

I reached out and shoved him backward. "Then why fucking bother going on runs with me?" I demanded, pushing him again. "Why try to be my friend if there's no hope?" He took a step backward and I kept moving toward him. "Why not just leave me the fuck alone?"

He took another step backward, right up against the brick of one of Creelin's science buildings. I watched as he put his hands out, like he was going to stop me from advancing on him. That move more than anything made the red clear from my vision. What the fuck was I doing?

I turned around and started to walk off again.

I didn't make it a step before I felt his hand close around my wrist and yank me backward. Within a second, I was the one pressed against the brick wall. One of his hands circled my wrist while his other arm caged me in. "Listen to me," he started. His voice was low, but there was no edge to it. No danger. No Big Bad Wolf. "I meant what I said. You have a chance to be a starter, but not like this. Not with this *chip* on your shoulder."

"Why do you care?" I spat.

That was the question, wasn't it? Why the fuck did he care at all? He had enough friends. He had people in his corner. He had a starting spot on the team. He was friendly and well-liked, and unlike me, he didn't stick out like a sore thumb everywhere he went. He fit in. He blended on the team, on campus, in every fucking room. Why did he want to be my friend?

Why wouldn't he leave me alone?

I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't catch the way he was looking at me until it was too late. There was a softness in his amber eyes. I caught a flash of it just before he closed the space between us. His lips crashed against mine. My body reacted before my brain, and my lips began to move against his. His tongue slipped between the seam of my lips and invaded my mouth. His hand tightened around my wrist, and my hands reached between our bodies, tugging at his shirt, tugging him closer to me until his body was crushing me.

He kissed the way he did everything: enthusiastically. Skillfully. Heat flooded through my body, replacing that blindingly hot rage with something just as heated.

I lost track of everything other than the way his tongue moved in my mouth, the way his lips pressed against mine, the spots where his body pressed against me.

And then the spell was broken by the sound of a voice nearby.

My mind switched back on. I was kissing Evander Hemmings.

My lips went slack against his as my mind raced. What the fuck was I doing? Why the fuck had I let Evander kiss me? I pushed him off me and took off running toward Karloff Hall.

For once, he didn't follow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVANDER

I kept thinking about that kiss all weekend. Saturday night: kiss. Sunday morning when I was out for my run: kiss. Sunday afternoon, when I met with the rest of my pack: kiss.

I had a one-track mind and the only thing on that track was the feel of Kieran Sawyer's lips pressing against mine. Okay, no, that wasn't entirely true. The track was shared with the feeling of his tongue mapping out my mouth and the way he fisted at my shirt to drag me closer to him. It was a whole train of lust, and it barreled right through me every time I thought about kissing him.

What I didn't think about was the *after* part of the kiss. I didn't think about the way his lips froze as reality washed over him. I didn't think about the sharp edge of his scent that lingered in the air after he disappeared into the night. I didn't think about how this could potentially fuck up everything when we went back to practice on Monday.

That was Future Evander's problem.

Unfortunately for Future Evander, time was moving. Sunday night, I was stuck lying in my bed in my dorm, looking at the plain white ceiling, and doing the thing I hated most of all: *thinking*. I hated thinking because my brain liked to take my thoughts on a wild ride. Tonight's wild ride wasn't the feel of Kieran's hands or lips or tongue. I wished it was. That would be a pleasant ride. I could think of lots of fun things with his mouth or his hands or his lips or his tongue.

Instead, I thought about the moment he walked away. I watched him disappear into the night, slipping away from where we'd kissed by the science building into the open greenery of campus and then disappearing into the shadows. Even with my amazing night vision, I hadn't been able to see him for too long. He'd slipped around a corner, and he was gone.

I should have gone after him. It wasn't like I didn't have a reason to follow him. We both lived in Karloff Hall. We both had to walk the same path back to our dorm. We both had reason to go that way, but I'd stayed there. Frozen in place by the weight of his rejection. Because that was what it felt like: rejection.

I hated that feeling. I was familiar with it, and I hated it. I'd felt it my whole life. It had been a constant, unwanted companion in my youth. From the moment I first started showing monstrous traits when I was in preschool, it was there. It was there when I shifted for the first time when I was in kindergarten, turning into the equivalent of a werewolf puppy on the school playground. I remembered shifting back and all my classmates, people I'd thought were my friends, backing away from me like they were afraid.

Not even my best friend would look me in the eyes.

Within a few weeks, my parents had rejected me too. They'd sent me to live with Kali and the pack at the warehouse. They'd never called it rejecting me. They'd said that werewolves needed a pack, that this was what was *best* for me, but that's not how it felt. It felt like rejection.

It had the same sting as Kieran walking away from me the night before, the same sting of a thousand other rejections that all stemmed from the first big one of my parents dropping me off to live with strangers. I knew now that it was the best thing for me, that werewolves needed to be around their own kind, but damn, it took a while to get there.

I didn't want to do that mental work again. I reached in the dark for my phone, found my headphones, and tried to drown out my thoughts with loud music. It must have worked, because eventually, I fell asleep.



Even with the music and headphones, I still woke up at my usual time. I rolled out of bed, and I tried to keep my mind off Kieran and his lips. I tried

to think of anything except what happened between us on Saturday night. If I didn't think about it, then I could make it through my run with Kieran that morning. I'd texted him to meet in front of Karloff Hall before I even rolled out of bed, making the decision to have a nice run around campus instead of in the woods.

I left my bag in my room, because since we were running around campus, I'd have time to go up and get it. I wouldn't have to hide it somewhere and just hope that no one came around and stole it. Not that it had been a problem so far, but there was always a chance. (Then again, I doubted anyone would be interested in the contents of my gym bag. I wasn't always great at remembering to take out my sweaty gym socks, especially now that I didn't have Kali reminding me at home.)

I got to the bench where I told Kieran we'd meet five minutes early and started waiting.

And waiting.

He was usually on time, but this morning, he wasn't.

Ten minutes.

Fifteen.

Twenty minutes passed before I accepted the obvious: he wasn't coming.

I got up off the bench and went on a short run alone.

It was strange. I'd never had a problem running by myself. In fact, I preferred it a lot of the time, mostly because no one else in my pack really cared about running. Especially not when the sun was just starting to rise. They would rather stay warm in their beds instead of starting the day sweaty. But that morning, the run was lonely. I missed the sound of his footsteps behind me. I missed the smug look he got when he would either catch up or pass me. I missed his quiet company.

And okay, I'll admit it, I missed the way his scent turned musky with sweat. It was mouthwatering, and I just wanted to bury myself in the crook of his neck just to get a direct hit.

Even though my run was technically shorter today, it felt longer.

I hoped I'd see him when I went to get my bag or on the walk to the fitness center, but I didn't. He was already there by the time I stepped into the weight room. He didn't look at me. He didn't talk to me. When I greeted him, he ignored me entirely. Like I wasn't even there.

But he talked to Marlon or Marvin or whatever the hell his name was. He didn't seem to have any problem with *him*. Just me.

I didn't have high hopes for our shared class, so I wasn't disappointed when he sat in his usual seat far away from mine. I wasn't even that disappointed when he didn't turn around and look at me once. He never paid me any attention when we were in class. He was always too busy focusing on the teacher, and I knew why now. This class was needed for his major. It wasn't just a class that sounded kind of fun like it was for me. (Actually, a lot of my classes were just classes that sounded kind of fun and then a math class, because my counselor said I needed to have a math class.)

I had hopes for practice though. Especially when Coach Shaw said that we were doing a lot of drills after we did our film study. For once, we were actually studying an opponent's tape. Last season's tape, so who knew how accurate it was, but it was still tape from an opponent as we geared up for our first game. For drills, I tried to wiggle my way over to Kieran so we'd be lined up together, but he managed to get away from me. He kept at least three people between us at all times, and he *still* didn't look at me.

He didn't even stop at the locker room after practice.

It hit me like a ton of bricks. Kieran was avoiding me.



Tuesday was the same as Monday.

He didn't show up for our morning run, even though I saw that he'd read the text message. He didn't look at me during weight training. He ignored me during practice, and then he didn't show up in the locker room after. I was aware of every moment he wasn't looking at me because I was looking at him. I was watching everything he did. I noticed the ways he improved in practice because I couldn't keep my eyes off him. I even thought about not going to the locker room in hopes that I'd catch him on the way back to Karloff Hall, but my roommates did not appreciate it when I came into the room unshowered.

Supernatural senses of smell were not forgiving of post-practice sweat, and I'd already learned that everyone in my suite was blessed with it. Or cursed, if you asked Preston after he caught a whiff of me after morning

weight training. That sweat had nothing on post-practice sweat, and I didn't want to do that to my roommates. They weren't athletes; they didn't find the smell comforting the way I did.

Maybe Wednesday would be better.

It didn't start better. He didn't show up for our run, and while I raced through the woods, missing the sound of his footsteps behind me, I made up my mind. If I couldn't lead the horse to water, then I was going to take the water to the horse. Or whatever the old saying was. I didn't think I had it right, but it didn't matter. The sentiment was the same. If he wasn't going to talk to me willingly, then I was going to have to continue to put myself in front of him. He'd have to talk to me eventually.

Maybe I could even talk Coach Shaw or Coach Eriksson into pairing us together for drills. I could tell them that I thought it would help him develop more. They were all about getting a human on the team, right? And this would prove that the human was integrating more. It would also look good if I wanted a captain's patch next year. It wasn't a real goal, but I could tell my coaches that it was...

I put it on a mental list. Okay, I started a mental list to put it on, because the moment I decided it was a list, my brain decided to supply me with a lot of ideas. Some of them were good ones, like super gluing myself to his side during weight training. It wouldn't be hard to work my circuit next to his. There were more machines than there were players, and he almost always had at least one empty one next to him. I could also get to class early and take the seat next to the one he sat in. That might piss off the person who usually sat next to him, because I knew how some people could be about where they sat in class, but it was a sacrifice they would just have to make. I could handle a person I didn't know not liking me.

I had ideas about figuring out when he ate dinner and joining him there, too. I could sit next to him during film review. There were so many ways I could just insert myself into his life until he stopped ignoring me.

My brain didn't only give me good ideas though. There were a few bad ones, ones that I was pretty sure Preston would tell me could qualify as stalking. Most of those included figuring out which room in Karloff Hall was his and lurking outside it until he came and talked to me or waiting outside his classrooms. Actually, that one was probably the worst idea my brain supplied me. It wasn't just stalking, but it would affect my grades. If

my GPA fell below a certain level, I wouldn't be allowed to play. I might want to figure Kieran out, but not at the point of shooting myself in the foot.

By the time I finished the trail I was running, I had a plan.

It was time to set it into action.

I grabbed my bag from its hiding spot, and I took off to practice. I dropped my gym bag off in the locker room and went to join my team for weight training. There weren't a lot of people in the room yet, but Kieran was there. I spotted him the moment I went in, not that it was hard. Most of the team was performing lazy stretches in an attempt to wake themselves up. Kieran was running on a treadmill. The mechanical whir and the sound of his footsteps on the running pad were almost deafening in the gym.

Even though I'd just had a run, I climbed onto the empty treadmill next to him. I caught a glance at his speed, and just to annoy him, I set mine to a tenth of a mile faster than his. If he noticed, it would piss him off. He'd get pissed enough that he'd talk to me, and then we could settle everything. We could go back to running together every morning, and we'd start having more conversations. Maybe we'd even kiss again, but I wasn't going to hold my breath for that one. I would just be happy to have our tentative friendship back in place.

He didn't say anything. He didn't even adjust his speed to try to go faster than me, and I saw him glance over. I saw him look at me, and he had to have seen the speed.

We ran for almost ten minutes in loaded silence, and every second felt ten years long. The urge to break the silence itched under my skin, and I was not a master of self-control. I managed to hold out for another minute before giving into temptation. "You know, if you really wanted to run before practice, you could've met up with me," I told him, keeping my voice as chipper as possible.

I watched Kieran closely, watched as his eyes shifted to look at me. I saw his lips twitch ever so slightly, and I wondered if he was fighting a smile. If he was, he won the battle. His face stayed stony, and he stayed silent.

I sucked in a deep breath and tried again. "Seriously, the invite is always open."

Kieran stayed silent. He ran for another minute. The moment his treadmill hit 2.5 miles, he hit the stop button and jumped off. He didn't say a single word to me. I followed him around the weight room, trying to get

his attention during weight training. He stayed silent. The only thing that changed throughout the practice was his scent. There was a sour edge to it again. It burned my nose, and I hated it. And considering the way he smelled after he worked out was normally one of my favorite smells... It was doubly upsetting.

Kieran didn't talk to me at all during morning training, and he disappeared *Invisible Man* style right after. It only made me more determined. If phase one was a failure, then it was onto phase two of the plan.

I arrived at our class a few minutes early. I waited for him to take a seat and then I slid into the empty seat next to him. It was almost worth it when his eyes bugged out of his head. "That's not your seat," he muttered.

"It's an open seating class," I told him as I started to unpack my bag.

I hoped that this was it, that he'd start talking to me more. Even if he was just bickering with me about seating. My hopes crashed and burned. He didn't even look my way for the duration of class. He kept his eyes trained on the teacher.

During film study, I once again inserted myself in the seat next to him. He turned and talked to Marlon or Marvin or whatever his name was on the other side instead. When I positioned myself next to him during drills, he stayed silent. He was good at this whole ignoring me thing, and I didn't like it. Not one bit. And I really didn't like that the sour edge to his scent lingered all day long.

No matter where we were or what we were doing, it was there. It lingered in the air after he left too, burning my nose. Normally, when I found an unpleasant smell, I tried to get away from it. Instead, I became more obsessed. I could smell his usual scent underneath the sour, and I wanted to bring it back. I wanted to figure out the reason behind the smell, determine what it meant. Kali had always told us that scent was better than a mood ring. It didn't matter if you were talking about werewolves, humans, or any other monster. Everything had a smell, and every smell was information.

I wanted every bit of information I could get about Kieran Sawyer.

Wednesday night, I laid in bed and decided how to step up the plan. If inserting myself in his day-to-day routines wasn't going to make a difference, then I was going to have to do more.

I sent him the normal text message on Thursday morning, telling him where I was going to be starting my run. I wasn't surprised when he didn't show up. So, I changed my running path. Instead of running in the woods, I ran across campus toward the training facility and did laps around it until I caught his scent. He'd shown up around thirty minutes before training was supposed to start, and I had a feeling it was for him to run on the treadmill. Well, if he wasn't going to run with me, then I was going to run with him.

I stepped inside the training facility. I thought I could hear the whirring of the treadmill from the door, but I wasn't sure. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the partial shift. When I opened my eyes, my hearing had increased. A lot. I could make out the sound of the treadmill. I could hear his footsteps, steady and controlled. I could even hear the tinny sounds of music, like he had headphones on. I'd never heard him listen to music while he ran before. Maybe he'd chosen not to listen when he ran with me because, secretly, he wanted to talk to me as much as I did him.

It put a little pep in my step as I stopped by the locker room to drop my bag off (in the locker next to the one that smelled the strongest of Kieran).

The weight room was empty, except for Kieran. He was on the treadmill in the corner. His face was flush, and I could smell the delectable scent of his sweat from across the room. But even when he didn't know I was there, lost in his own world, that sour edge still lingered. What was that? What did it mean? It had to mean *something*. The sour smell got stronger as I crossed the gym and took the treadmill next to him. Like the day before, I set my speed to a tenth of a mile faster.

He didn't look at me for a good five minutes. Then, the miraculous moment came. He looked at me from the corner of his eye, and then, his entire head swiveled. His eyebrows shot up, and he took out one of his earbuds. He opened his mouth, like he was going to say something, and then he just shook his head and said nothing.

I almost growled in annoyance. Instead, I set the speed on my treadmill to half a mile faster than his. "Something the matter?" I asked him.

"Your ears?"

My ears? Oh. My ears. I still had my wolf ears out. I'd forgotten to shift them away after confirming he was in there. I wasn't going to do it now. Not when they'd been the thing that caught his attention in the first place. If I'd known that bringing out my wolfy traits would get him to pay attention to me, I would have whipped out the ears and tail *days* ago. But I needed to

play it cool now. I needed to act like I wasn't wiggling from excitement inside.

"The better to hear you with," I told him, doing my best Big Bad Wolf impression.

He didn't look impressed. I supposed the Big Bad Wolf was probably scarier than I was. Serena had once said I was about as scary as a Schnauzer puppy. She probably had a point. She knew me better than a lot of people did.

Kieran didn't say anything, but he did press the speed button on his treadmill. He upped it by seven-tenths of a mile, exactly one-tenth of a mile faster than I was going. I was getting to him. I let him be faster than me for about a quarter mile before I adjusted my speed. By the time the rest of the team came in for practice, we were both adjusting our speed every few minutes, trying to one-up each other. I had the biggest grin on my face. Okay, so he hadn't really said anything to me other than mentioning my ears, but he was giving me attention. He was acknowledging me again.

It was a win.

He didn't even try to escape me when we ended up on all the same machines in the gym during training. I did notice that he upped the weight he was using every time he hit a machine after I did. If he wanted to be competitive, then that was okay. I just wished the sour smell would go away, but it was still there. It was just as strong as it had been the day before. At least I could say it wasn't me. It had been there before I got there.

It was there when I found him at lunch and sat at his table. Unfortunately, he didn't stay at the table for long. He finished his sandwich and left without a word. I forced myself to stay put instead of following him. It was still lingering when I sat beside him during film study. He didn't say a single word to me during film study or practice, and once again, he slipped away immediately after practice.

Friday was exactly the same. I found him in the gym before weight training, running on the treadmill. We once again kept adjusting our speeds. I hated running on the treadmill. It was boring, but it was less boring when I was practically racing Kieran. He did the same adjustment on weights as we did our circuit. When I got to our class, he was already there. He'd sat in a different seat, one that didn't leave any empty desks for me to sit beside him.

Damn it. He was onto me.

He also didn't show up at the dining hall for lunch. I didn't see him or catch his scent until film study. With the game the next day, I knew that I couldn't focus on him. I had to pay attention to what the coaches were saying, but it was hard when he was sitting next to me. When we hit the field, Coach Shaw called Kieran's name with the first team. During our eleven-on-eleven drills, he lined up with me.

He'd improved over the last week. A lot. He was moving faster. When Eric targeted him on a deep ball, he caught it easily and took off running toward the end zone. He dodged one of the defenders with an ease I'd never seen from a human before, even the professional players I watched. I was impressed. I would admit it.

It appeared the coaching staff was too, because when the list was posted for the next day's game, he was listed right underneath me. Wide receiver #2, starter. A rush of pride coursed through my veins, but before I could say anything, he left.

He actually left.

I followed him, still grinning like an idiot. I wanted to congratulate him.

I should have noticed the way the sour smell trailed behind him in the air. It was sharper and stronger than it had been all week. I should have noticed that he wasn't going toward Karloff Hall, but instead, he was going toward one of the trails we'd run in the woods surrounding campus. One that led to the river where the welcome bonfire had been held. I followed him, eager to congratulate him for his accomplishment.

"Kieran," I called out, trying to get him to stop. He didn't. I kept following him. I followed him all the way into the woods. "Kieran, can you stop?"

He whipped around to face me. "What do you want, Evander?" he snapped.

I thought he'd be happy. He made it to the starting position, but instead, he was grumpier now than he'd been before. I didn't get it. I didn't understand him. "I wanted to congratulate you," I told him simply. "You're starting to—"

"It's not good enough," he grumbled, cutting me off.

Rage coursed through my veins. It wasn't good enough. He was acting like a spoiled brat, and it pissed me off.

"Not good enough?" I snapped, taking a step toward him. I felt like a wild animal had been unleashed in my chest. Kieran took a step backward.

For a moment, he almost looked afraid of me. “Is anything fucking good enough to make you happy?”

I was starting to have my doubts.

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CHAPTER NINE
KIERAN

Maybe he was right.
Maybe getting that starting position in the lineup should have been good enough for me. I didn't know why it wasn't, but I also didn't know why it was any of Evander's business.

He was snapping at me, like I'd personally offended him. I hadn't asked him to follow me out of the training facility. If I'd wanted his company, I would've asked.

Is anything fucking good enough to make you happy?

I looked up at him, my brow furrowed in annoyance. His eyes were glowing gold, just like they had Saturday night after the Alpha Claw Omega party. Unlike Saturday night, he was looking pissed as hell. I wasn't going to just stand around and deal with his attitude. I had two choices: walk away or fight back.

I already knew what would happen if I started walking away. His stubborn ass would follow me around like a lost puppy.

It looked like the only real option I had was to fight back.

Too bad I'd already taken that step back when he started shouting. He was going to think I'd been afraid of his Big Bad Wolf act, and okay, maybe I'd been a bit freaked out by it. I'd never heard Evander raise his voice once in the weeks I'd known him. Even when he was looking frustrated as all hell about something in practice or when he was following me around campus.

That step back may have cost me the upper hand for a moment, but I was never one to back down from a challenge. I squared my shoulders and met his eyes. "Is that your business?" I asked him.

Evander scoffed. "When you act like an asshole, yeah, it becomes my business. We're on the same team." His voice was still raised, and if I wasn't mistaken, I could almost hear the low timber of a growl underneath his words.

I was glad this was the real world, not one of those movies where werewolves went all furry and feral when they got angry.

"That doesn't make anything I do your business," I pointed out, my voice raising to match his.

"It does," he insisted again. He took another step toward me, and this time, I held my ground. The air between us crackled with tension. It felt like a lit match might set off an explosion, and frankly, I was wondering which one of us would explode first. It would almost be amusing to see him ignite. (Before today, I wasn't sure he had it in him to explode, but now, I was having my doubts.)

"How the fuck does it affect you?" I demanded, turning this whole thing around on him. Because that's what this was really about: Evander Hemmings and his invasive personality. I wasn't the one that kept inserting myself into his life. No, that was him, inserting himself where he wasn't wanted. Inserting himself into my life and my bad moods. If he wasn't doing that, then it wasn't going to affect him.

"Because tomorrow night, we're both on the field together," he started, "and I need to know that you're not going to have a hissy fit while you're out there and cost us the game because you think you're too good to be number two. It affects me because you're a piss poor team player and you know it."

His words hit me in the chest. I had never been accused of being a poor team player in my life. I might not have been the most sociable guy in the world off the field, but on the field was a different story. I'd been told time and time again that I was a good teammate. I'd always played unselfishly at my old school. I'd been a leader on the field, even if I wasn't so good at dealing with people off it.

I took a second. I took a breath. I thought about why he might be saying that. From his point of view, maybe that was what this looked like. I saw that I was the second or third read, not the place I'd spent my whole

football career, and I stormed out of the training facility. I'd said it wasn't good enough because it wasn't. If I wanted a chance to play professional football, I needed to be number one. I needed the kind of stats that showed off my talent, and I wasn't going to get that if most of the time, I was blocking so Evander could get those stats.

Maybe that wasn't a good way to look at it. Maybe that wasn't being a team player.

Fuck. Maybe he was right. Maybe I was only good at being the star player.

That wasn't a great feeling. I hated the idea that he was right, that I'd somehow become a piss poor team player over the years. I hated the thought that I'd been too busy thinking about the ways I could have a better go on the field that I stopped thinking about what was best for the team. And most of all, I hated that Evander had seen it and called me out on it. It might have been easier to handle if he'd been wrong about it, but he wasn't.

And the worst part of all of it was the way he looked at me when the realization hit. Like he knew that he was right.

He sucked in a deep breath, and the glow in his eyes dimmed. Maybe that had been an emotional thing, him getting pissed and some internal fire showing in his eyes. I almost snorted at the thought.

"So, what would be good enough for you?" he asked. His voice was calmer, but those words stoked the irrational anger inside me.

"Being the best," I told him bluntly. That was what would be enough for me. I was used to being the big fish in the little pond, the best player on the field. It had been that way all through high school and at my old college. But here? Here I didn't stand out in the crowd. I was one of the fastest, not the fastest. I was a good catcher, but there were better catchers. I could dodge and block, but other people on the team could do it better. It left a bitter taste on my tongue.

I couldn't read the expression on his face. All I could tell was he wasn't impressed by the fact that I wanted to be the best. Like he could say anything else. I watched the way he played, and someone who didn't want to be the best didn't play the way he did. They didn't wake up before dawn to go running before training every day either. Who the hell was he judging me for wanting to be the best?

He didn't say anything though. Maybe I was reading the whole thing wrong, and he wasn't judging me. I believed that about as much as I

believed that Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy had a fantasy league going.

But I was going to take advantage of him not saying anything. I could get the hell out of here. I could go back to my dorm, and I could put a locked door between me and him. I made it a whole two steps past him before I felt his hand around my wrist. My mind flashed back to Saturday night, to pushing him and him grabbing me. To the moment when the tension in the air shifted between us and he had me pinned against the science building by the lips.

I didn't like the way my body reacted to that memory. I yanked my hand away from him. "Do you have a problem?" I demanded. "Seriously. Do you have a problem? Is it a stalking thing?"

He blinked. "Is a stalking thing an actual thing?" He sounded amused by the question.

I whipped around, glaring in his direction. So much for heading back to Karloff Hall. "You tell me," I retorted. "You're the one that follows me around all the damn time. Hell, you can't even take the damn hint when I didn't come run with you this week. You just interrupted *my* morning runs."

He just shrugged. He didn't even have the decency to look ashamed of the fact that he was following me around campus like a damn stalker. "Maybe I just want to talk to you," he said plainly. I raised an eyebrow because what did that even mean? "Maybe I wanted to find out why you ghosted me after we kissed last week."

Ghosted him? I didn't call not paying him much attention ghosting him. That implied that there was more going on than what had happened.

He'd made me spill my drink at a party, then he'd followed me back to campus. We bickered, and he kissed me. Not exactly a ghosting-type situation. So what if I didn't show up for our runs after that? That had been a casual arrangement. If it had been something more steady, then he wouldn't have to text me every morning to tell me where we were meeting. He wouldn't feel the need to fucking invite me every time. It'd just be a set in stone thing, meet in front of the dorm and head over together.

Ghosting implied we had some kind of relationship before that kiss, even if it was just a friendship. We didn't even have that going for us.

"Are you going to answer?" he asked. "Why did you ghost—"

"I didn't ghost you," I answered. "You kissed me. I left. Big deal."

"You kissed me back," he pointed out.

I had, but that had been a natural reaction. It wasn't a big deal, and I didn't know why he had to make it into one. I'd got caught up in the moment, and the moment my head cleared, I left. That wasn't ghosting. But he was still looking at me expectantly.

I heaved a heavy sigh. "Kissing you back wasn't a thing," I told him. "It was just—"

"Just what?" Evander demanded, cutting me off. His eyes flashed gold again. Was it just the light shining through the trees or was it something else? "Just what, Kieran?"

"A natural reaction."

He took another step towards me. The air was still crackling with tension, but it had shifted. It wasn't as angry as it had been. It was thicker, and it felt like there was some kind of electric charge hanging between us. It was too thick, too loaded. When Evander took a third step, I had to take a step back. Unfortunately, the trail wasn't the greatest, and I hadn't been looking where I was going. I stumbled backwards over a root. Evander's hand shot out to try to catch me, but the momentum was too strong. We both fell backward. His body blanketed mine, and I was surprised by how heavy he was.

I shouldn't have been. He might have been leaner than I was, but he was muscular. I'd seen him working out every morning, mostly because he'd followed me around the gym the same way he followed me around everywhere else.

With him that up close and personal, I was noticing the little things about him. Things I hadn't noticed before, mostly because I didn't spend a lot of time looking at him. The first thing I noticed was the freckles. He had a *lot* of freckles, just barely darker than his skin. They were sprinkled across his nose and cheek, and they disappeared into the five o'clock shadow that grew on his square jaw. I noticed the way his hair fell into his eyes. With how we were laying, some of it hung down and brushed against my face. I had half a mind to reach up and tuck it behind his ear, mostly so it stopped tickling my face.

I didn't even know if it would tuck behind his ears, but the urge was strong as fuck.

I forced myself to look away from his hair. That turned out to be a mistake because my eyes landed on his lips. The second they did, I noticed that his bottom lip was thinner than his top. I'd never paid much attention to

anyone's lips before, never noticed if they were symmetrical or not. But all of a sudden, I cared a lot about the fact that one of Evander's lips was so much thinner than the other. I hadn't noticed when we'd kissed the other night.

I needed to look away from his lips.

I forced my eyes back up, past the freckles, and right into his eyes. That made it worse. My breath caught in my throat, and I felt my heart stutter in my chest. If I thought the urge to tuck his hair behind his ear was bad, the urge to kiss him was worse. It was overwhelming, and after about half a second, I found myself too weak to fight it. I closed the distance between us.

The first brush of our lips was soft, barely anything. It was a whisper, a hint of a kiss.

It wasn't enough.

When our lips met a second time, I took control of the kiss. I took advantage of his open mouth and slipped my tongue between his lips. His reaction was immediate. One of his hands rested on my side, and the other slid down my arm. Every touch left trails of fire in its wake. Probably not the best thing when we were in the woods, but I didn't care. Not when all my senses were filled with him.

All the anger I'd been feeling moments before had faded away, changed to something else. Lust. Want. Greed, maybe. I didn't really know what the hell to call it. I just knew that it was consuming me, and like the anger, it was all directed at Evander. And he was fanning those flames the same way he'd fanned the flames of my rage earlier.

His tongue mapped out my mouth, and my body was starting to react. I wasn't alone in that either. I could feel Evander's cock pressed against my thigh. He was getting hard from this, same as I was. I drove my hips up, letting him feel the effect he was having on me. He let out a quiet moan, the noise going straight from his mouth to mine.

Fuck.

I wanted him to make that noise again and a whole hell of a lot of other noises. It was that whole thing of wanting *more*. Of what I had in front of me not being enough. It was just more of the same that had gotten us into this position in the first place, but in this case, I had the ability to get more. I wasn't stuck just accepting what I had.

My mind was made up.

If I wanted more of those noises, then I was going to pry them out of him. I moved my hands, wrapping them around his waist. One of my hands slipped under his bunched up and sweaty workout shirt. His skin was warm to the touch. I didn't know if that was because of what we were doing or if he was just one of those guys that naturally ran hot. I sure as hell wasn't going to stop what I was doing to ask. Not when the simplest touch made him press down on me.

His cock was rock hard now. Same as mine.

The pressure from him rolling his hips felt too good. I let out a noise that almost sounded like a whimper, and he rewarded me by doing the same thing again. Before long, we were both grinding on each other, and it still wasn't enough. That mental call for *more* was still strong in my head.

I traced my hands around the waist of his pants, forcing them into the tight space between our bodies. I was glad he wasn't wearing jeans because it meant I didn't have to try to fumble with buttons. I didn't have to think. I could just slip my hands beneath the elastic waistband of his sweats. I palmed at his bulge, and he let out another one of those noises. I swallowed it down, and damn, it tasted amazing.

I pulled away from the kiss, just enough to press my forehead against his. "This okay?" I panted.

He didn't answer. He just attacked my mouth again with his. That was answer enough for me, and I wasn't going to stop what we were doing to question it more. I felt his hand slip under the waistband of my shorts and boxers. His hand was just as warm as his back had been, and the moment it wrapped around my cock...

Holy shit.

I was too competitive to let him be the only one touching skin. I reached under his underwear. He was thick in my hand, thicker than I thought he'd be, but I was pretty sure I was longer. Not that this was a competition, but it still gave me a rush. The rush was short lived, drowned out by something almost feral as his hand began to work my shaft. I matched my strokes with his.

Our kissing turned sloppy and then fell away, giving way to just panting against one another's mouths. I worked him over as best I could with limited space. I used the precum from his tip to slide my hand along his shaft. The short strokes were good, but it wasn't enough. The short strokes he was making along my cock wasn't enough either. I used my other hand

to shove his pants and boxers down under his ass, no longer caring that we were on a public trail, not too far away from the campus itself.

Caring required a lot more thought than I was willing to give right now.

Evander seemed to pick up what I was doing. He pushed down the front of my shorts and freed me from the fabric. His cock was hot against mine. I reached down to wrap my hand around both of us, to take advantage of the space between us. Evander's hand wrapped around mine, holding it tightly. He fucked down into our joined hands, his length sliding against mine.

The way our cocks slid against one another's was mind blowing. My eyes fluttered shut as he did it again. Our bodies moved together instinctually, and soon, I was right on the edge. We weren't exactly quiet, both of us moaning and breathing heavily against one another's open mouths.

"Close," I panted out.

"Me too."

I wanted to send him over the edge. I wanted to feel his cum spill over my cock and hand. Mostly, I wanted him to finish first, but that wasn't the way it worked out. He tightened his hand around mine and fucked into our fists harder. The slide and the friction was too much, and I began shooting. I moaned loudly as my orgasm overtook me, and then he followed. His hot release coated my hand and shaft.

We began kissing again as we came down from our orgasms.

Unfortunately, it meant I was coming back to my own head. I was sticky with sweat and cum. I was lying in the dirt. A guy I barely tolerated was laying on top of me, and his cock was going soft against mine. His jizz was on my hand, coating my shaft. How the hell had I gotten into this situation?

My lips slowed against Evander's.

He pulled away. "You okay?" he asked, looking down on me.

I nodded. I was okay. Wasn't sure what had just come over me, but I was okay with it. "Need to shower."

Evander laughed and rolled off me. I wiped my hand on a patch of grass, but that only made it worse. Grass and dirt stuck to my hand. Evander shook his head as he reached into his gym bag and pulled out one of the small white towels he used in the weight room. He passed it over to me.

"Thanks," I muttered as I accepted it. I used the towel to wipe myself off before I tucked my dick away and passed it back to him. He did the same.

He stood and readjusted his pants before tucking the towel back in his gym bag. I noticed he didn't tuck it in the main area. Guess he didn't want to risk wiping his face with it in the gym the next time we worked out. Couldn't really say I blamed him. Once everything was put back, he offered a hand down and pulled me up.

I didn't know what I was supposed to say next. What did you say after something like this? Thank you? See you around?

Not that it mattered. We were both going to the same place. I started walking back to the dorm. I wasn't surprised when he fell into step beside me. I was more surprised by the fact that he didn't start talking. I almost wished he would have, because then we wouldn't be stuck with this awkward silence as we moved across campus. Luckily, it wasn't a long walk back to Karloff Hall. I would be free of this awkward silence in just a few minutes.

We slid through the doors together. Normally, I would've taken the stairs, but honestly, I wanted to get up to my room as quickly as possible. I needed to shower the dirt from the trail off me, and I needed to have some time to myself to think about what had just happened. I had hoped Evander would take the stairs, but no, he waited at the elevator with me.

When we stepped in, he stood a bit closer to me than he had outside. I jammed the button for the fifth floor. "What floor?" I asked him, finally breaking the silence.

"Sixth."

I nodded and hit the button. The awkward silence came back, thicker than it had been the whole walk from the trail. It seemed to grow with every passing second. I was relieved when the chime sounded to let me know we were on the fifth floor. The elevator stopped and two things happened at once.

First, the doors began to open.

Second, Evander leaned in like he was about to kiss me again.

I hadn't even thought that might be a possibility.

Fight or flight kicked in, and I slipped out of the elevator and down the hall without looking back.

CHAPTER TEN

EVANDER

Kieran disappeared down the hall before the elevator doors even closed. I had hoped that, after what happened in the woods, things would be different. Except they obviously weren't. The walk back to Karloff Hall had been uncomfortably quiet. Like so uncomfortable that I couldn't even find something to say. That had never happened before. You could ask pretty much anyone who knew me. I was not a quiet person. But that uncomfortable silence was so heavy that there was no way out of it.

And then, I tried to kiss him in the elevator.

What had I been thinking? I groaned as the elevator doors opened on my floor.

I didn't say anything to Preston when I entered the dorm. He was, as always, perched in a chair with his textbooks and highlighters, working away. He gave me a small nod as a greeting, and I knew he would've been okay with sitting around and talking, but I needed to shower. I needed to think. I needed to change my clothes, because there was dried jizz in my underwear and that was just not comfortable. Besides, I thought better in the shower. It was almost as good as running for thinking.

As soon as I got into the shower, I turned the water onto scalding and started to let my thoughts run away with me.

I thought about what happened on the trail. One minute, we'd been fighting. The next minute, he'd tripped and I'd tried to help. Then we were on the ground, making out, and I'm not really sure how we'd gotten from

fighting to fucking. Now that I thought about it, the same thing had happened the week before. We'd been fighting, and then I just wanted to kiss him. I'd wanted to kiss him today, too, when he was underneath me. But I hadn't been the one to make the first move.

He'd kissed me.

And then he'd run away.

Just like last week.

The only difference was now I knew the way he sounded when he came. I knew what he felt like pressed underneath my body. I knew the way his breath felt against my lips when he was panting and desperate. Now that I knew all of that, I felt some kind of way about him running away. I felt some kind of way about him not wanting to kiss me in the elevator too. Why had it been okay when we were on the trail, but not when we were under the harsh fluorescent lights of the elevator?

I didn't get it.

I needed to talk to him.

I groaned. This shower was not helping. It wasn't helping me clear my mind. It wasn't helping to wash Kieran from my thoughts. I turned off the water and stepped out of the shower. If I was going to obsess over this, I could do it better in my bed. At least then I wouldn't have to worry about my roommates needing to use the shower or running out of hot water. I got changed quickly and made my way back to my room.

Unfortunately, my room had a different thing to occupy my mind: my phone.

I knew that Kieran's phone number was *right* there. I could text him. I could try to talk to him. I could suggest we meet downstairs and talk about our hookup. There were so many things I could do with the phone. None of the ideas were good though. Hadn't I already learned that Kieran wouldn't talk if he didn't want to. He was a master of the silent treatment.

Maybe I should just give it the night. He couldn't avoid me tomorrow.

We had a game to play.



Football games always drew a crowd at Creelin, especially when we played Shuford. It was another all-monster university and one of our biggest rivals.

The fact that the first home game of the season was against Shuford meant that every seat in the stadium was filled. There was a sea of fans wearing the Creelin orange, and okay, there were also some Shuford fans that had traveled for the game. But honestly, who cared about them? They were just there to provide some noise.

Our defense went out first, and I watched from the bench, eager to get out there and prove myself. Kieran was sitting a few people down from me. I could smell that sour thing again, blending badly into his natural smell. It wafted down the bench, and I was pretty sure I knew what it was now. Anxiety.

I'd made him anxious after we kissed, and he was anxious again. I just hoped it was about the game and not what happened between us the day before. Which I was not supposed to be thinking about right now. Right now, I was supposed to be focusing on the game. I was supposed to be watching as our defense attempted to stop the Shuford offense.

Unsuccessfully.

The Shuford team made it down the field in just a few drives. They scored an easy touchdown. That was fine. It was just the first few minutes of the first quarter. As soon as our offense got on the field, we'd be able to show them what Creelin could really do.

Okay, so really, I just didn't want to screw up my first game as a starter. If I ruined things, I might get benched. There were other players who were chomping at the bit to take over my position. I glanced down the bench, and my stomach dropped. I knew one person who would be eager to take my place if I messed up. Would that finally be enough for him? Being wide receiver one? Making sure that he was the first read and got more targets than anyone else? Would it be enough to look out from the field and see me sitting on the bench, hoping to get another turn?

I was not going to let that happen.

I had earned my position on the depth chart, the same as Kieran had. I wasn't going to mess it up, and I wasn't going to let him be the reason that I did.

I put on my helmet and joined the rest of the offense, running onto the field to line up. I took my place on the line and listened to Eric call out the play we were going to be running. I saw one of our tight ends run behind me, taking a different position to match the play Eric had just called. I drew in a deep breath just as the center snapped the ball.

Then I took off.

The play called meant that I should get the ball. I dodged one of Shuford's defenders. There was another one on my tail. This was my moment. I stole a quick glance over my shoulder and saw the ball spiraling toward me.

I jumped up to catch the ball.

My fingers closed around it just as I got hit hard around the middle. I hit the ground harder, and the ball tumbled from my hand. I heard the sounds of the crowd around me, and I caught a familiar scent. Kieran. He was close enough that he could have blocked that defender, but he didn't. Anger rushed through me. What happened to being a team player?

Oh, right, Kieran didn't know how to do that. He was too focused on his own stats and his own accomplishments. Maybe he thought it would look better for him if I had a bad game or took a bad tackle. Consider my hackles officially raised. It took everything in me not to growl at him as I passed him on the way back to the line of scrimmage.

Our second and third snaps didn't go any better. He was targeted on our second snap, and I slowed down a little to let him get a taste of his own medicine. On our third snap, we ended up almost running into one another. Which led to an interception. We went off the field to a very irate Coach Shaw. Luckily, our defense was able to stop their offense from turning that interception into a score, and we were able to score on our second possession. And by we, I meant Wes.

At halftime, we were up by one score. Neither Kieran nor I had made a single touchdown. We'd barely contributed anything. Coach Shaw called us out for it during his halftime pep talk, which did not feel like a pep talk to me. Instead, it felt like I was being scolded like a child. Maybe I deserved it. I was playing selfishly. I swore I'd do better in the second half.

That promise was broken on our third possession of the half. We were about halfway through the third quarter. The ball was thrown perfectly. Both Kieran and I were open. We were also both directly in the path of the ball. One of us should have called for it. One of us should have backed up or blocked the defender that was also charging toward us. Instead, we both jumped for the ball. I managed to pull it into my body, but because he was right underneath me, I wasn't able to get any breakaway distance.

At least this time, I held onto the ball when I hit the ground.

At least he had the good graces not to look smug about it.

He didn't offer a hand down to me, and I wasn't sure I would have taken it either. I was pissed that he was playing so selfishly.

The rest of the game was a series of unfortunate mistakes. Luckily, the rest of the team was still playing well. They were able to make up for all the mistakes Kieran and I were making. We won our first game by ten points, but I knew it should have been more. I felt defeated as we went back to the locker room. My head was hung in shame as I showered and changed. I felt like everyone was looking at me and blaming me for how bad the game had gone.

It was not the way my first game as a starter should have gone.

I was dreading Coach Shaw's post-game speech, and by the end of it, I knew I was right to dread it. Not because he said anything bad during the game, but because he ended it with some terrifyingly ominous words. "Hemmings, Sawyer, stay behind."

I swallowed hard and nodded. I didn't even bother looking over at Kieran. For once, I did not want to be around him. Part of this, a *big* part, was his fault. He'd played selfishly, and it had rubbed off on me. Unfortunately, I couldn't avoid him if we were both going to be made to stay back.

It felt like it took hours for everyone to leave the locker room. Wes clapped me on the shoulder as he passed and gave me a sympathetic look. A few other people did too. When I stole a glance at Kieran, I noticed that no one showed him the same courtesy. Maybe they'd noticed the same things I had. Maybe they had also picked up on his missed blocks and his selfish playing. Or maybe it was just that Kieran didn't have any friends on the team, because he hadn't tried. That would make it hard for anyone to feel sympathetic about his poor performance.

Soon, the locker room was empty except for me, Kieran, Coach Shaw, and Coach Eriksson.

"Office," Coach Eriksson instructed.

I nodded and started across the locker room to the coaches' office. I'd only been in there a few times, but never under these circumstances. I'd never thought I'd ever be in there because I'd gotten in trouble. I felt like I was being sent to the principal's office.

Coach Shaw took a seat behind the desk, and Coach Eriksson stood behind him like some kind of ghoul. Which made sense, given that he *was* a ghoul. I took a seat in one of the chairs on the other side of the desk. For

once, I hoped that Kieran stayed across the room and didn't come anywhere near me. Unfortunately, just like every time I wanted Kieran to do something, he did the opposite. He sat down right next to me. His smell was completely overwhelming, mostly because it had that musky scent that he got after a good workout. I knew he'd showered, but it was still there. Just lingering.

And I was not going to be thinking about that right now. Nope. Absolutely not. I was mad at him. The incredible way he smelled was not going to change that.

"So," Coach Shaw began, "who wants to start?"

"Start?" Kieran asked. His voice sounded different when he was talking to Coach Shaw. He didn't sound as annoyed.

"Explaining," Coach Shaw elaborated. Kieran had a blank look on his face, and I didn't know what my face looked like, but it was enough that Coach Shaw and Coach Eriksson both sighed in unison. "Can either of you explain what the *hell* happened out there? Neither one of you are bad players, but you couldn't tell from that performance. I felt like I was watching a pair of JV guys fresh out of puberty, not elite college athletes. Sure as hell not the future of the Creelin receiving core." His voice grew louder with every word. I could feel the anger coming off him.

"It was just a bad game," Kieran told him plainly. "I missed a block on that first possess—"

"Missed?" I scoffed. "More like you decided not to block so I'd get knocked on my ass."

Kieran turned to face me so fast that I thought he'd been possessed by something. There was no way a human should be able to turn their head that fast without snapping their neck. "What the fuck are you accusing me of?" he demanded.

"I saw you."

"You didn't see jack—"

"Enough." Coach Eriksson's voice was quiet, but it held the kind of power that made us both stop immediately. My mouth slammed shut. I crossed my arms over my chest. "Those are serious accusations, and I understand how you may feel that way after a bad tackle. I would like to think that no one on this team would be such a poor sport."

Great. I had been a poor sport.

“I wouldn’t,” Kieran told him. He didn’t sound or smell anxious. In fact, he sounded like he was telling the truth.

Great. I’d blown my first game as a starter, because I’d been playing selfishly. Because I thought someone else was playing selfishly and sank down to his level. Had it all been in my head? “I’m sorry, Coach,” I said quietly, looking between both of our coaches.

“Do better next week, or else you may find yourself sitting on the bench while your teammates get the opportunity to start,” Coach Shaw warned. “And be prepared to have your asses worked off next week. That was unacceptable. I don’t care about the reason behind it. I don’t care if you thought the other one was sabotaging you. Football is a team sport. Act like it.”

“Dismissed,” Coach Eriksson said, ending the conversation.



I walked back to Karloff Hall alone. I didn’t know where Kieran went. If I had to put money on it, I’d bet that he was probably just as ashamed as how we’d played as I was. And knowing Kieran, he was probably having a temper tantrum somewhere. For once, I wasn’t even curious about where he had gone off to. I had enough on my plate.

When I got back to the dorm, no one was in the common area. Preston wasn’t sitting in his chair with a book and his highlighters. Ryan and Benny weren’t playing video games on the couch. I didn’t hear any noises coming from their room. Maybe they were celebrating the team’s win at some party somewhere. Maybe they were out with other friends. I didn’t know, and I didn’t really care. All I cared about was going to my room and moping.

Unfortunately, moping was a very passive activity. I got tired of it after about five minutes.

Then I moved onto stewing. Stewing was a lot more active, at least for my brain. It required me to really think things over with the game we’d just played. And after I played it all over in my head a few times, I came to a terrible realization: I’d blown it.

The odds of Kieran missing a tackle to make me look bad were slim. It would make him look bad too because blocking was important. Everything else that happened during the game could be explained by a bad game.

Except what I'd done. I could have sped up and made that block on the second play. I could have called for the ball or blocked the defender so he could get it. I could have done so many things differently to make the game better.

And I really could have done without accusing him in front of the coaches like a spoiled brat.

Stewing was not my friend. Stewing was making me realize that there had been a bad guy in the game, and it was me. I had to make it right. I reached over to grab my phone from the shelf beside my bed. Before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled up mine and Kieran's text thread.

EVANDER

Sorry.

There. One simple word. I apologized.

I didn't expect him to answer, but within minutes, my phone lit up with a notification from him.

KIERAN

Me too.

You really thought I would fuck up the game for everyone?

EVANDER

I said I'm sorry.

It was just a bad game, huh?

KIERAN

Yeah. Just a bad game.

I felt like there was so much more to say about this. About the bad game, about the way I'd acted, but now that we were texting, I couldn't find the words outside of apologizing. I wasn't a good writer. I was better at talking, mostly because I could just say what I wanted to say and deal with the aftermath later. When I wrote a text message, I had to actually *think* and then I started to think too much. It was too hard.

I hit the call button.

A few moments later, Kieran's voice sounded over the speakers of my cell phone. It was quiet and tinny, and I couldn't hear anything in the background. "Who the fuck calls people these days?" he asked.

“I suck at texting,” I admitted. “At least about serious things. When it’s just shit talking with my pack mates, I’m an expert, but when I have to actually stop and think?” I grinned, even though I knew he couldn’t see it. “Then it’s just a disaster.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I need to explain what happened tonight,” I started. “At the game, I mean.”

“No, you don’t.”

I blinked. What did Kieran mean that I didn’t? I’d accused him of being a shitty player in front of our coaches. I’d messed up parts of his game because I thought he was messing up parts of mine. I had been a terrible teammate. What did he mean I didn’t need to explain.

“It’s over. Do better next game,” he said, breaking my stunned silence.

“You really don’t obsess over a bad game?” That didn’t sound like him at all. He got mad even after he was the starter because it wasn’t a good enough role. Because he wasn’t first target on the first string. If anyone was going to obsess over a bad game, I’d have thought it would be him.

I heard something shift in the background of his phone. “Sometimes. But I know where I fucked up this game. No need to obsess.”

That sounded so simple. “And?”

“And the plan is to do better next game. Work on what I fucked up on. Get my first touchdown as a Cockatoo.” He paused for a moment. “Be a better teammate. Want to meet for a run tomorrow morning?”

I was so shocked that I almost fell off my bed. Was this the same Kieran Sawyer that had given me the silent treatment all week? Now he was the one suggesting that we go running tomorrow morning. That we started our day the way we had every day leading up to the kiss.

I sucked in a deep breath. Even though I expected him to laugh in my face and tell me he’d been joking, I agreed. “Meet me in front of the dorm? Same time as always?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Kieran hung up, and I was left staring at my phone.

What had just happened?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KIERAN

Morning came early when you spent the entire night tossing and turning. I might have told Evander that I'd put the bad game behind me, but that was a lie. I'd spent the better part of the night replaying it in my head, thinking about the mistakes I'd made. Thinking about the way Coach Shaw had ripped us new ones in his office, and the way Coach Eriksson's quiet disappointment had felt ten times worse.

I also kept thinking about the accusations Evander flung my way. At first, I'd been pissed as hell about them, but I'd come to terms with how he got there before he even sent that apology text. I hadn't been a team player. Not during practices, and sure as hell not during that game. I might not have sabotaged the team, but I hadn't played like I wanted us to win. I'd played for myself.

That had been the reason I'd suggested we meet for the run in the morning, because there was no way in hell I was repeating that.

I needed to do better. I needed to be a better team player, and that started with Evander. He was the first person to reach out to me, to try to welcome me onto the team, and I felt like I owed it to him to try to make it right.

It had nothing to do with what had happened between us on that trail Friday night.

It had nothing to do with the fact that replays of the shitty game had been intercut with memories of that night. Memories and some imaginings of what might have happened if the trail was just a bit more private. There

were some things that just weren't worth giving much mind to during the waking hours.

I rolled out of bed and pulled on the first pair of gym clothes I could find. Lucky for me, I kept them all in one place, and I knew they'd be clean. I tied my shoes and headed downstairs to meet up with Evander. He was waiting on one of the benches in front of the dorm, sitting with his legs extended. He looked well-rested. Asshole.

"Where to?" I asked once he looked up and saw me there.

He stood up. "Around the campus?"

I nodded, and we took off. We ran two and a half laps around the campus at a pretty steady pace. For once, we weren't pushing ourselves to go harder. I had a feeling his reason was the same as mine. My body still ached from being tackled the day before. A nice, easy run was about as close as I came to a rest day.

We slowed down to a walk for the end of the third lap.

"You feeling okay?" Evander asked, his words coming out between pants of breath.

"Yeah. You?"

I could feel Evander looking at me, and I fought the urge to turn to see what expression he was making. "Honestly?" He paused like he was waiting for an answer. When he didn't get one, he continued. "I'm still kicking myself about yesterday's game. I was an idiot."

"Yeah," I agreed. My lips tugged up a bit. Not into a full smile, but I could feel one trying to form.

I risked a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. He had a full grin on his face, and his light brown eyes were sparkling. "Hey! I wasn't the only one that was an idiot!"

I gave in to temptation and turned to look at him. I raised a brow. "Oh? Because I wasn't the one that accused someone of sabotaging the game just because I was having a bad one," I pointed out to him. His cheeks flushed, and I knew it wasn't just from the exertion of the run. "You were the idiot. I was just having a shit game."

Evander didn't say anything. Maybe I wasn't too good at this whole team player thing. Maybe I should have left it alone. We made it past two buildings before Evander spoke again. "Maybe I just needed someone to blame," he finally said. His voice was quieter than I'd ever heard it. "You're not the only one that worries about his stats."

“We gotta do better.”

He nodded.

We didn’t say another word on the way back to the dorm, but for once, the silence felt comfortable. It felt like we’d cleared some of the air between us. When we hit the dorm buildings, I confirmed that I’d meet him in the morning at the bench for our next run.



I beat Evander to the bench on Monday morning. I was stretching on the ground when he came outside. He plopped down next to me and started to stretch. He didn’t say anything, and neither did I. Guess he finally figured out that I wasn’t much of a morning person. Maybe we were both trying to meet more in the middle.

We ended up on one of the trails near the dorm for our run that morning. Unlike the day before, we weren’t going slow and steady. I was pushing myself to keep up with him, and I think he was pushing himself to try to make it where I couldn’t. I don’t think I’d ever run so fast in my life. And I was getting better at running on those trails, avoiding the things that could trip me up. I might not have had the same level of night vision that Evander did, but I was good at following in his footsteps.

The run seemed to take less time than it did the last time we did that trail, and before long, we were grabbing our gym bags and walking over to the training center.

I wasn’t going to pretend that I missed the look of shock on Coach Shaw’s face when he saw us walk in together, actually talking. I just hoped he’d see it and realize that meant that we’d got our shit together. We weren’t going to have a repeat of last week’s game. There was no need to make us ride the bench while the second-string players took our spot on the field.

I didn’t know if it worked, but that afternoon at practice, he had us paired up together for drills. He had us running as many things together as he could. We were paired off together on some toss and catch drills, and I focused hard on catching everything he threw my way. I also focused on making sure he got some good catches, even if throwing the ball wasn’t at the top of my strengths list.

I think we made enough of an impression on our coaches in practice, because during our eleven-on-eleven drills, we were both with the first team. When Coach Shaw called one of the same plays that had fucked us over during the Shuford game, I made sure to call out for Evander to get the ball. I blocked one of the defenders who were coming toward him, and he sailed into the end zone, ball clutched securely to his chest.

I only felt a little bitter that I wasn't the one to get the points.

But if it kept me from riding the bench, then I guess that was just going to be my role on the team. I'd accept it if it meant getting time to play.



I met Evander for runs every morning. On Tuesday, we hit a trail near our dorm. On Wednesday, we ran several miles around the track. It wasn't the most interesting place we'd gone for our runs, but it was somehow fun. Maybe it was the even surface and the fact that I could try to beat him flat out. We kept trading leads, and by the time we made it to weight training, I was more awake than I'd been in a long time. There was something about competition that just got my blood flowing in all the right ways.

After our runs, we walked back to the training center together. The walk was mostly quiet, though Tuesday we talked about an assignment for our shared class. I didn't think anything of it until Wednesday when he looked like he was about to come sit next to me. I shot him a look, and it seemed like he thought better of it. I might have been trying to form some friendships on the team outside of that one single rookie, and I might have chosen to start with Evander, but that didn't mean I wanted to deal with him trying to distract me during class.

He didn't seem to care about his grades nearly as much as I did. Maybe he wasn't too concerned about losing a scholarship. Hell, maybe he wasn't even on one. I just knew that I needed to keep my grades up so I didn't risk losing everything. I didn't know what I'd do if that happened. I couldn't imagine explaining something like that to Pops.

I was relaxed when I went to meet Evander on Thursday morning. I figured it would be another day of the same.

Just like every morning, we met on the bench. He'd beat me downstairs, and he was using the bench to help him stretch. He scooted over to let me

join him, and then we were off. I started getting a feeling of foreboding as we walked away from Karloff Hall. I was proven right the moment he stopped. The trailhead was familiar, even in the dark.

We'd run it before, but that wasn't why it was so familiar. I'd just been there on Friday. My breath caught in my throat. Why the hell had he decided *this* was the best trail to run? Fuck.

I decided I wasn't going to let this affect me. I wasn't going to mention what happened with us, and if he had any sense, neither would he. We'd been managing to get along all week, and I didn't want anything to throw a wrench in that.

I didn't give him a chance to speak before I took off running down the trail. I wasn't taking the risk of it coming up. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep that up once we finished our run. We emerged from the woods, right where we'd gotten each other off almost a week ago. I risked a glance, and I couldn't even see where we'd been.

Unfortunately, Evander caught where I was looking. "Do you think we should talk about it?"

My eyes tore away from that spot. They stopped for a moment on the tall, blond man, and then I ripped them away from him as well. I didn't need to be looking at him while memories of what had happened between us flashed through my mind.

The way his cock felt in my hand.

The way his hot breath felt against my lips.

The sounds he made as he came.

I did not need to think about those things, and I sure as hell did not need to think about them while I was looking at Evander. I sped up.

"Kieran," he called out. I heard his footsteps behind me, fast walking until he settled beside me. "Kieran, do you think we should talk about it?"

"Think I answered that by walking off," I pointed out with a shake of my head. I didn't think we needed to talk about it. I thought we needed to forget about it.

I heard Evander sigh dramatically beside me. It was long and drawn out, and I could almost imagine the look on his face when he made it. I wasn't going to look over to find out if the reality matched what my mind conjured up. I knew I was being a dick; I didn't need to see proof. "Maybe *I* need to talk about it," he said after a moment.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just shook my head and walked faster. My eyes were focused on the training facility, because as soon as we got in there, he'd have to drop it.



Evander might have dropped the topic, but I could still feel it lingering there every time we were near each other. Mostly at practice. Every time he opened his mouth, I flinched, half-expecting him to say something about what had happened between us. I wanted to believe he had enough sense not to do that, but I wasn't entirely convinced.

Nothing happened all through practice.

Nothing happened in the locker room.

Nothing happened until about halfway back to the dorm. Evander sloped up and fell into step beside me. I didn't even have to look to know it was him, because who the hell else would it be? "I still need to talk about it," he said without any kind of greeting.

I sighed. He wasn't going to drop this. He was going to poke and prod until we either talked about it or I bit his head off. I figured the former would probably be better for team morale. "Not here," I told him with a shake of my head.

If I was going to be forced to talk about us hooking up, I wasn't going to do it in the middle of campus where anyone could overhear. I wasn't ashamed of what happened between us. It just wasn't anyone else's business.

"We can talk in my room, if you want," he suggested.

I thought about it. On one hand, I didn't know the first things about his roommates. They might be the type to listen through walls and blab whatever they heard across campus. On the other hand, my room wasn't exactly the neatest. I wasn't sure I wanted him to see it in its current state. At least in his room, I wouldn't be worrying about all that.

I nodded.

We made small talk on the way back to the dorm. I fought the urge to split the moment we got inside, run up the stairs to my room, and lock myself in. I had a feeling he'd just follow and spend all night trying to talk to me through the door, and that seemed like it'd be a pain in the ass. I got

on the elevator and rode it with him to the sixth floor. I followed him down the hall to his room. When we went inside, there were two guys playing video games in the common room and a third sitting in an armchair, reading some thick book with a line of highlighters sitting on the arm. Evander greeted them before he led me to his room.

Evander's room was nicer than mine. It wasn't bigger or anything, but he had things organized a lot better than I did. He had a small table by his bed with a mini-fridge wedged underneath it. The top of his desk was organized, and his bed was actually made. I couldn't remember the last time I'd made my bed, not counting the days I changed my sheets. Unlike my room, there weren't clothes strewn all around either.

He even had a damn collage of pictures on a cork board hanging on the wall over his desk. I looked at it. He was surrounded by a bunch of different people, including the friends he'd gone to the Alpha Claw Omega party with.

"My pack," he said when he caught me looking. "Well, most of them are in the pack. Some of them are just friends from high school. And there's a few from different teams I've played on over the years, but most of the pictures? My pack."

"Are there any pictures of your parents on here?" I asked. No one in any of the pictures really looked like him.

"My parents didn't raise me," he told me in the same kind of tone that someone might have said that the sky was blue or they loved hot chocolate.

I turned around and looked at him. His face was just as impassive as his voice had been. "Why not?"

"Werewolves are pack animals," he said as he took a seat on his bed. He patted the spot next to him. I thought about it for a second before sitting in his desk chair. Something told me sitting on his bed while we talked about what I'd come up to talk about wasn't a great idea. "When I started showing signs of being a monster, my parents found Kali and her pack. They talked to her for a while before sending me to live with her. They came to visit a few times a month, but they were never really *parents*, if you know what I'm saying."

I didn't really know what he was saying. I couldn't imagine not growing up with my dad. I couldn't imagine him or my mom handing me off to live with strangers at a young age. The whole thing piqued my curiosity, and

more than that, it meant we weren't talking about what had happened between us on Friday. "What was that like?"

"What was what like?"

"Growing up in the pack," I clarified. "Was it like having a bunch of siblings? Was it like a big family?"

Evander gave me a weird look, like he could see exactly what I was doing. But he shrugged and started talking. "The pack is like a big family," he started. "Kali and her partner, Luke, are the ones in charge, but they aren't really *parents* to us. They were our legal guardians, though. They have big dinners at least once a week for those of us who have left the warehouse."

"Warehouse?" I interrupted.

"Yeah. Kali and Luke bought this massive warehouse across town and converted it into a living area. A bunch of bedrooms, some bathrooms, a few common areas, things like that. Moving into the dorm and having my own room was the height of luxury."

I laughed. "I've had my own room my whole life."

"Are you an only child?" I nodded. "That must have been lonely."

"It wasn't. Never really knew anything else," I told him with a shrug.

I was hoping Evander would keep talking about what it was like growing up in the pack, but he didn't. An awkward silence fell over the room, weighing down on us like a heavy blanket. I knew what was on the other side of that silence. I knew that it was unavoidable, but I couldn't bring myself to start the conversation. Besides, he was the one that wanted to talk about it, so I figured that was on him.

I watched as Evander fidgeted with the blanket on his bed, balling it up under his fingers. I heard him take a deep breath and exhale loudly. I was starting to think he just did everything loud. He took another breath. "So..."

I looked at him. "So."

"Friday."

Was this his way of talking about it? I had never known Evander Hemmings to be at a loss for words. I'd known him for just over a month, and he was annoyingly talkative. Of course, I'd never really noticed him fidgeting with anything before either. He seemed nervous, and if I was a nicer person, I might have tried to take the conversational reins and driven the discussion. But I wasn't the one that wanted to have this conversation in the first place.

When I didn't say anything, he let out another one of those loud drawn out sighs. I watched as he stood up and started pacing the small area beside his bed. "What happened on Friday," he started. I noticed he was still fisting and unfisting his hand, still fidgeting. "That was a mistake, right? Like it wasn't something that we should repeat. It was just... I don't know, some heat of the moment kind of thing, right?"

"Yeah," I told him with a nod. That was all it had been. If he hadn't fallen on top of me, it never would have happened. And if he hadn't followed me into the woods, it never would have happened either.

"Right," he agreed. He stopped pacing, and he was standing a little too close to me. "But if it were to happen again..."

I looked up at him. What the hell was he saying? "It won't."

"But if it did, it wouldn't be a big deal, right? We're both adults. We know that it's not some big thing. Just two people..." His voice trailed off as he rubbed the back of his neck. He looked incredibly uncomfortable and awkward.

"Are you saying you want it to happen again?" I asked bluntly. It was the only obvious conclusion that I could think of.

Evander shook his head. "No. I'm just saying that if it happened again, it wouldn't be a big deal. Not that I want it to happen again." Color flooded his cheeks. "I don't know what I'm saying. I wanted to talk about this all week. I had a whole thing I was going to say, but now that we're here..." He groaned. "Whoosh. Now that you're here and we're talking about it, whoosh. Everything is just gone from my head."

I laughed in spite of myself. Evander looked shocked for a moment, and then his deep laugh joined mine. Our laughter filled the small dorm room. I didn't remember the last time I'd laughed like that, but *whoosh*? It was just how he'd worded the whole thing.

It took a few minutes to calm down from our laughing fit, and when we did, I noticed that he looked a lot more relaxed. He was no longer clenching his fist. He wasn't pacing anymore. That smile I'd grown used to seeing on his face was back there, but his amber eyes were practically sparkling. I'd never seen anything like it.

"I think that's the first time I've ever heard you laugh," Evander pointed out.

I looked up at him. Our eyes met, and all of a sudden, that same heat from Friday night was back. It replaced that heavy awkwardness, like the

laughter had driven it from the room. My mouth started to go dry, and I swallowed hard, trying to fix that. It didn't work. I sucked in a breath.

I should go.

I should really go.

I stood up, which was a mistake. I was too close to him. The heat ramped up between us, and before I knew what I was doing, I closed the distance between us and kissed him.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

EVANDER

One moment, Kieran and I were laughing in my room.

The next, he was kissing me.

It wasn't one of those slow kisses either. It was passionate and explosive, lips bruising and tongues immediately slipping into mouths. It was the kind of kiss that started fires. I wouldn't have been surprised to hear the smoke alarms going off in the dorm with how hot this kiss was starting out.

I had a feeling that this was going to get out of control fast.

Not that I was doing anything to stop the kiss from getting out of control. Instead, I was hellbent on stoking the fire that was sparking between us. This wasn't what I'd invited him upstairs for, but the moment I'd mentioned the chance of it happening again, I knew that was what I wanted. I wanted to drown myself in the way he smelled when he got aroused. It reminded me of this spiced cider Kali made every winter—full of cinnamon, warm, mouthwatering. I wanted to find out every single sound he could make when he got going, and I wanted to be the one that pulled them all from him.

Normally, this might be a concerning thought, but how could I think of anything else when he was kissing me like this?

How could I think of anything else when that spiced cider scent was starting to fill my teensy-tiny dorm room? There wasn't a lot of space for it to go. There wasn't a lot of space for *us* to go. There was the desk chair

behind him, and there was the bed behind me. I knew where I'd rather have us go, and it sure as hell wasn't that uncomfortable wooden desk chair. I wasn't even sure it could support our weight.

I tugged Kieran backward. It was only three steps before the backs of my legs hit the dorm bed. I sat, and Kieran bent to keep our lips together, to keep kissing me. I felt the bed shift as his weight settled on top of me, one knee on either side. He was heavy, but I didn't care. I already knew that he had a bit more muscle than me. Just like I knew that he weighed more than me. Our stats weren't exactly private on the team.

It wasn't just his weight that was doing it for me either. It was the way his scent surrounded me. It was as intoxicating as the way his lips moved against mine, the way his tongue explored every inch of my mouth. Every part of him that touched me made me want more. I wrapped my arms tight around his waist, pressing him closer to me. The press of his body against mine was good, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to feel his skin on mine. I wanted to see more than just the stolen glances of him half-naked in the locker room.

Okay, more than half-naked.

I'd seen him in just a towel less than an hour before, but I'd been trying not to look. It wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't enough to satisfy the cravings that were growing inside of me.

I needed to feel his skin against mine.

I reached down to the hem of his shirt and tugged it up. He lifted his arms and let me peel the sweaty tee shirt from his body. I dropped it on the floor of my room. His hands immediately found the bottom of my shirt. The moment my shirt was abandoned, our lips collided again. Just kissing him was not enough. I needed more than the feel of his lips on mine or the weight of his body on my lap. Every touch of his skin against mine made me desperate for another.

This wasn't going to be enough.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid him back on the bed, slotting myself between his open legs. I broke away from the kiss and looked down at him. His broad chest was mouthwatering. He had actual ab lines. I worked out just as hard as he did, but my abs were nowhere near as defined. I wanted to trace every line of muscle with my fingers and then my tongue, commit them to memory.

As he looked up at me, his lips formed a straight line. No longer smiling. "What?" he asked.

Was I hallucinating, or did I hear a hint of insecurity in his voice? That was not at all what I was hoping for. That would be a mood killer. I reached down and traced my index finger over his chest. "Just taking in the view," I told him with a grin. I saw his lips twitch ever so slightly. "You're really hot." I saw a hint of color flush his cheeks. "Surely you know you're hot," I teased.

"Heard it once or twice."

He almost sounded shy. I was into this version of him. I would never have thought that he was going to be the shy type when he was in bed. To be fair, I never thought I'd have him in my bed. Even after we hooked up on Friday, I had just assumed it would be a one-time thing. Something that could be shrugged off as a mistake by Kieran.

Until he kissed me, I was sure that's what he was going to do when he came upstairs.

There was still a chance he'd write this off as a mistake. If that was the case, I had to take full advantage of the moment while I had it. I leaned down over him and began to kiss along his chest. His back arched, pressing more of his flesh against my lips. The aroused flavor of his scent grew stronger. It was overwhelming. In the very best way, of course. I wanted to drown in it.

I kissed up his chest until I was close to his armpit and breathed in deep.

His scent was stronger there. I could make out the individual flavors and layers. There was that scent that was just distinctly him. There was the musk from practice. There was the cinnamon spiciness that told me he was turned on. The only smell I'd come to associate with him that I couldn't find there was that sour anxiety. Without thinking, I licked a stripe of skin near his armpit.

He let out a quiet moan.

I kissed over his collarbone and began down his torso again, stopping briefly to explore his dusky nipples. I flicked my tongue over them when I felt them harden. The salt taste of his skin was enhanced by the strength of his smell, and I just... Holy fuck. I wanted more.

I continued my journey down his chest, finally getting to trace the lines of his muscles, until I reached the top of his sweatpants. I looked up at him,

taking in the relaxed way his eyes were only half open. “Is this okay?” I asked as I danced my fingertips along the elastic waistband.

“Yeah,” he exhaled. The word was almost lost in his breath, and I wasn’t sure a normal human could have heard it. Lucky for me, I wasn’t a human.

When I started to tug down his sweats, he lifted his hips to make it easier. I pulled down his underwear with them, leaving him naked on my bedspread. I’d known his cock was impressive when I’d held it the week before, but touching it had nothing on seeing it. He was long and slender, with just a slight bend to the left. There was an impressive vein visible along the shaft. I couldn’t fight the urge. I licked along the prominent vein. He shuddered underneath me immediately.

So, he was responsive.

I liked that.

I began to work his cock over with my tongue, playing along the shaft and watching the way his body reacted. When I got closer to the head of his cock, his thighs tensed. I could make out the lines of muscle there too. I’d seen him doing squats in the weight room, and now that I was up close and personal, I could really appreciate the results. Eventually, teasing became too much for me.

I pulled his cock into my mouth, taking him down as far as I could. I wrapped my hand around the shaft to work the rest of it. My own dick ached in my shorts, but I didn’t care. The only thing I cared about was the way he felt heavy on my tongue and the little noises he was making. I felt his hands tangle into my hair. I moaned around his cock as his fingers tangled deeper, sending little bites of pain along my scalp. I was losing my mind just pleasuring him.

I increased the pressure, took him deeper, worked my hand and mouth in tandem. I tasted his salty precum on my tongue, and I couldn’t wait to taste his entire release. He began to thrust shallow thrusts, never pushing too deep. I almost wished he would. I almost wished he’d push deeper in, make me gag around the head of his cock. He got so physical on the field, and I wondered if he could get just as physical in the bedroom.

Not that I was sure if the dorm beds could handle that. They were small, and I didn’t think they were sturdy enough to handle us going at it full force. I’d be willing to test the theory if he was. Not today, because today, the only thing I had on my wish list was tasting his load. And then, okay,

getting off myself. I wasn't entirely selfless. Just partially selfless, and that was only when his dick was in my mouth.

I felt his hands tighten in my hair, just as his hips stuttered. He was close. I inhaled through my nose, and that spiced scent was even stronger. It was almost enough to make me dizzy. I wondered if it would affect the taste of his release. I was so eager to find out that my mouth was already watering. Of course, that could have had more to do with the cock in my mouth than the way he smelled, but I was going to claim it was just his scent.

"So close," he moaned out.

Perfect. That was exactly what I wanted to hear. I took him down deeper, gagging around his shaft. His cock pulsed as I pulled back, and my mouth was filled with the salty release. It did not taste like cinnamon, but he still tasted amazing. I swallowed down every drop that I could, and I mourned every bit that leaked out. I really hoped this was not a one-time thing, because he tasted amazing.

I was still coming down from the high of getting him off when I felt his hands on my chest, pushing me backward. I barely caught myself on the back of the mattress. Kieran's hands made quick work of my shorts, pushing them down until my dick sprung out. He spat on the palm of his hand and wrapped it around my shaft. His lips found mine again as he began to stroke me.

I was almost embarrassed by how little it took for me to shoot all over his hands.

We kept kissing, even after we both got off, making out on the bed as we came down from our orgasms. When I finally felt my head stop spinning, I pulled away. "So that happened," I teased.

"I should—"

I already knew where this was going. He was going to say he should go, and then he was going to freeze me out for another week. We had a game in a few days, and that couldn't happen. Another game like last week, and we would both find ourselves riding the bench for the rest of the season.

"Stop," I cut him off. His eyes widened, and I had a feeling he was going to flip his lid. Time for damage control. "Don't freeze me out this time, okay?"

He looked at me for a moment before giving an almost imperceptible nod. "I won't. Do need a shower though, so I should get going." He sat up

and swung his feet down onto the floor. “Run tomorrow?”

“Same time as always?”

Maybe this wouldn’t change anything.



I was wrong.

I mean, I was used to being wrong. It wasn’t the first time it happened. Hooking up a second time had changed things between me and Kieran. Not in a bad way, luckily, but things had changed. There wasn’t any coldness between us when we met the next morning for a run. We had some amazing moments at practice the next day. During Saturday’s game, we worked together as a seamless unit. That was the first big change.

The other change came halfway through our run on Sunday. We were at the furthest point of the trail away from campus, and the wind shifted. That amazing musky scent he got when he was working out filled my nose, and my mouth began to water. Before I knew it, I grabbed his wrist and kissed him. One thing led to another, and I got to experience his mouth for the first time.

It was the first of multiple hookups over the course of the next week.

It wasn’t every day, and it wasn’t something we talked about. Sometimes, it was a sloppy hand job on our runs. Once, it was a quick blowjob in one of the bathrooms in a building on campus that stayed open twenty-four hours a day. Lucky for us, no one else was there. It never went beyond that, but I wasn’t bitching.

I was becoming addicted to the little sounds he made and that spiced cinnamon scent of his arousal.

I thought about it when he wasn’t with me. I dreamed about it at night. Once, I was in my dorm, and I could have sworn I smelled it coming in through the vents like a special brand of torture designed only for me. I’d been trying to do homework when that happened, and let’s just say, new tabs were opened on my computer to handle a little problem before I could get back to focusing on my assignment.

On the field, we were starting to work together better too.

Unfortunately, it meant that I could notice other little changes. Like the way Damien Willis and Zak Reyes kept looking at Kieran and then

whispering together. They weren't the only ones, but they were the ones I noticed the most. It made me wish my helmet was more suited for my wolf ears. If I got my good ears out, I could hear what they were saying. Maybe it was all innocent. Maybe they were just talking about a play he made or something.

I was probably being paranoid.

It was just hard to watch anyone look at Kieran that way.



One of the downsides of being on the football team was that I didn't have a lot of free time. I had weight training in the morning, classes in the day, and then practice until late. Then I had to study and at least pretend I cared about the academic side of college, that I wasn't just there so I could play football for just a little longer and keep my dream of being the first monster in professional football alive.

It meant I didn't get to see enough of my pack. Not the ones on campus, and certainly not the ones who still lived at the warehouse. I missed them. Which was why when Kali sent a text to our (very active) group chat to invite us all to dinner, I agreed immediately. It was an invitation for a Sunday: meeting in the afternoon and staying as late as we wanted. Most of the pack members who were on campus agreed to go.

Luke picked us up outside of Karloff Hall in one of the SUVs the pack owned. We all piled in. The closer we got to the warehouse, the more relaxed I became. When we got to the warehouse, we all piled out and went inside. Kali was in the industrial sized kitchen with a few of the younger pack members. I didn't know what she was cooking for dinner, but it smelled amazing.

"Need any help?" I asked, more out of obligation than any real desire to help in the kitchen. Kali had tried to teach me to cook over the years, but I had never mastered more than the basics. I could make a mean spaghetti, and that was about it. Anything else required careful supervision, and it usually resulted in at least one fire alarm going off. It was a whole thing.

"We've got it. You kids go relax," Kali answered, smiling over her shoulder.

I didn't need telling twice. I turned around and left the kitchen. Nick and Serena were right behind me. Charlie lingered for a moment. It took Serena tugging at his arm to get him to follow the rest of us. We all ended up in one of the common areas on the third floor of the warehouse. It had overstuffed couches, a television, and a Foosball table set up. I plopped down on one of the couches, taking over the entire thing. Nick and Serena settled on another. Charlie plopped down onto the floor, leaning against a giant armchair. A few younger pack members were playing Foosball.

"How's college?" The question came from the younger girl, Daisy. She was a senior in high school, and I knew she was planning on applying to Creelin University next year. She was an amazing swimmer, and she had eyes on the school swim team. I wasn't surprised that she was the first person to ask about school.

We told her a little about our classes. Luckily, no one pointed out the fact that I talked the least about my schooling. After all, they all knew that I wasn't the most serious student. School was nothing more than a means to an end for me: the ends being playing football. Charlie, on the other hand, had the most to say about his classes. He loved school. Honestly, I thought he and Preston would probably make very good friends. They could bond over schoolbooks and taking notes.

Conversation moved on from our classes to the more interesting topics of social lives. Well, more interesting for Nick and Serena. They had much more active social lives than I did, but then, they didn't spend most of their time playing football. Next semester, I'd have more time for a social life.

"Oh, and Evie's got himself a boyfriend," Nick chirped a few minutes into the conversation. It wasn't as non-sequitur as it seemed. Serena had just been talking about a guy she'd been going on dates with for the past few weeks.

But it knocked me for six.

"I do not have a boyfriend," I corrected immediately.

"Then why do you always smell like that human on your football team?" Serena asked. "You reek of him. Like all the time."

Did I? I must have smelled really good then, because Kieran was the best smelling person I'd ever had the pleasure of knowing. And that included all humans and monsters.

"We're not dating."

“Then why do you smell like him?” the boy playing Foosball with Daisy, Will, asked. He was a junior in high school, and I’d heard enough stories over the summer to know that he wasn’t exactly innocent.

“I hang out with him a lot. We’re both on the same team, and we run together,” I explained. Unfortunately, I could feel heat rising to my cheeks. If I could feel it, then I knew that they could see it. Maybe they wouldn’t be able to see the redness because colorblindness was common in werewolves, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t notice if my cheeks got darker.

I looked down, trying to avoid the inevitable.

“Oh my god, he’s blushing!” Serena shouted.

Clearly, looking down did not work.

I took a deep breath. When my face cooled down, I looked back up. “I wasn’t blushing,” I lied. “And we’re friends. That’s it.”

Serena and Nick exchanged looks. Charlie let out a hum of disbelief. I refused to look back to see if Daisy and Will looked convinced or not. Everyone was quiet for a moment. I got that weird feeling that sometimes came when I felt like people were communicating with their eyes and leaving me out. “Do you have a crush on him?” Charlie asked.

I guess the silent communication meant that the question fell on his shoulders.

“No.”

I knew that my answer was a lie the second it passed my lips. Worse, I knew that they knew too.

Luckily, my pack mates let the topic drop.

For now.

With them, it was always just *for now*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KIERAN

Things were starting to look up.
Kind of.

I was getting along better with Evander, mostly because we kept getting off with each other. It was translating to us playing better on the field. I still thought he could be annoying at times. He talked too much, and there were too many times where he kept poking and prodding when I didn't want to answer a question. But I was starting to get used to these tendencies of his. I was even starting to find them endearing.

My classes were going well, too. I might not have had the best social life on campus, but I had created a good schedule to keep up with my coursework. I'd even helped Marlon figure out a study schedule too when he was bitching and moaning about failing a test in his math class. He'd been having a hard time balancing the requirements of the football team with his classes, and he was like me. He cared about his grades. I took the fact that Marlon had come to me for help as a sign that things might be going better on the team.

At least I had one friend that wasn't Evander on the field.

It was on the field where I was finding most of my problems. It wasn't my performance. I was playing really well. It wasn't me being full of myself saying it. Coach Eriksson had pulled me aside to tell me how proud he was of my performance, and I chose to take his word as truth. However,

it seemed like the better I was playing, the more I noticed some problems with the rest of the guys on the field.

Okay, it was Evander that noticed it first. He'd noticed that Zak Reyes, the tight end, and Damien Willis, the wide receiver who was behind me on the depth chart, kept their heads together a lot on the sidelines. He claimed that he'd heard my name coming from their lips a few times. I didn't think much of that. After all, why would I? I hadn't made myself popular with the team, and I figured it was a case of sour grapes for Willis. He wanted to be on the field, same as I did. I wasn't going to fault him for that.

But it made what happened the Thursday before our first away game a little suspicious. Eric called out a play that meant that I'd be the most likely target. I managed to break away from the other team's defenders, and I had a wide-open field. Reyes was nearby, and I looked over my shoulder in time to see the ball coming my way. I caught it, and it should have been a touchdown. I had an almost empty field between me and the end zone. I had Reyes nearby, and he should have picked up the block from the safety coming toward me.

He didn't.

I hit the ground almost immediately after catching the ball. I didn't even make a yard after reception.

I tried to tell myself that it was just a coincidence, but there was something in Reyes's eyes that had me thinking there was more going on.



Winning Saturday's away game didn't make things better.

In fact, it seemed to make things worse.

On Monday, during eleven-on-eleven drills, the right guard was supposed to be catching a defender so I could get around and be open to run a route almost parallel to the one Evander was running. The guard made a half-ass effort, and I got knocked down before I could even make it past the initial line of scrimmage. During another play, Reyes bumped into me while we were both running down the field, and I missed a catch entirely. On the other side of the field, Evander wasn't having any of these problems.

I was starting to think that maybe I wasn't just being paranoid. This had to be more than just a coincidence.

Especially when the same shit happened during Tuesday practices. I noticed Coach Shaw and Coach Eriksson talking over their clipboards and my stomach dropped. If practices kept up like this, then I was going to find myself riding the bench while Willis took my spot. Especially because he wasn't having problems on the second team. Instead, he was showing off, making impressive catches, and probably proving that he should be getting reps on the first team.

I wouldn't be surprised if it started happening, the way things were going. It kept me up all night Tuesday, thinking as I tossed and turned and tried to sleep.

To no one's surprise, I was not in the best mood when I met up with Evander Wednesday morning for our run.

I basically bit his head off when he said good morning. It had been the first time in about a week I'd gotten snappy like that with him, but he had the good sense not to poke and prod about it. I didn't know he had it in him. We just walked in silence across campus to the first trail we'd ever run. I felt bad about snapping at him, but I appreciated the silence. I appreciated him backing off and letting me stew. We took off running down the trail without a word. About halfway down the trail, he slowed down to a light jog. When I went to pass him, he reached out and tugged at my arm to get me to match his pace.

"What's going on?" he finally asked as we jogged along the dirt trail.

I sighed. I had to know him being quiet was too good to be true. When, in all the time I'd known him, had he ever just left well enough alone?

"Didn't sleep well." I knew that wasn't the whole truth, but I didn't need to bother him with what was eating me alive. All he was going to do was tell me that I was thinking too much. He'd probably roll his eyes and claim I was overreacting or something. I wasn't in the mood to be told that I was paranoid.

There was just enough light from the moon filtering through the trees that I could see Evander raise one of his pale eyebrows at me. "Did you know that werewolves have a really good sense of smell?" he asked.

What the fuck did that have to do with anything? "Interesting fact?"

Evander nodded. "You're right. It is an interesting fact, but that's not why I'm telling you. I'm telling you because I've learned something about you. Because of the really good sense of smell thing." When I didn't say anything, he rambled on. "Did you know that when you get anxious about

things, you smell sour? Not like lemon or lime or anything. In fact, I can't really explain what it smells like. Just, I don't know, sour."

What in the hell was he talking about?

"You smell sour right now."

Oh.

"It's nothing."

"Bullshit," he called out as he slowed to a stop. I could have kept jogging, but I knew that wasn't going to stop anything. He'd just speed up or tackle me down to the ground so he could say his piece. "So, I'm going to ask again. What's going on?"

I stopped a few paces away from him. "It's stupid," I told him with a shake of my head. "I'm probably being paranoid."

"What about?"

"I think Reyes and Willis are conspiring against me. Not just them," I told him. It sounded like absolute bullshit the moment the words came from my lips. It was one thing to think it, to toss it over in my head, but the moment I said it out loud, I sounded paranoid. I sounded like I was looking for a scapegoat for my own bad performance.

Shit, I sounded like Evander after our first game when he ripped me a new one in front of our coaches.

"It's probably nothing," I decided. I was being just as paranoid as he'd been. Maybe I'd been missing little things. I should have seen the safety coming last week. I shouldn't have just depended on the guard to pick up the block at practice this week. I was getting in my head, and I was making careless mistakes.

"You've noticed it too?" Evander asked.

Wait. What?

"I'm probably being paranoid."

"I don't think you are," Evander clarified. He sounded as concerned as he looked. "I told you I've heard your name come up between Reyes and Willis at practice, right?" I nodded. "They're not the only two. I've heard a few of the o-line mention you, and then yesterday in practice, you took that hit when Dobson didn't block fast enough."

Okay, so he'd seen that too? He'd thought it was just as strange as I did.

"You don't think I'm being paranoid then?"

"No, I don't. I think they have a problem with a human coming in and earning a starting role." He shifted from side to side. "If you want... I

mean..." He rubbed the back of my neck. I didn't need a supernatural sense of smell to see that he was anxious, but I figured if I had one, he'd be smelling pretty sour himself.

"Spit it out, Evander." I could not deal with him twitching about all nervously. It was making me anxious.

"I can try listening in to what they're saying. Tell you if they're actually saying anything bad about you?"

I almost laughed at the offer. I didn't need someone eavesdropping. "Nah," I brushed it off. "I just need to do better. Make it where no matter what they do, I just play better."

I was determined. Now that someone else told me I wasn't just being paranoid, I was pissed. Being pissed could be really motivating. I looked over at Evander and then down the dark trail. "Can we run now?"

"Almost."

I raised an eyebrow, but I got my answer when he leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. It wasn't like the other ones on the trail that lead somewhere. It was just a quick, chaste peck on the lips. Then he took off full speed down the trail.

I took off after him, feeling a thousand pounds lighter.



By the end of practice on Wednesday, I was starting to think that maybe I was being paranoid again. Nothing had gone wrong. No one had missed anything in a way that looked obvious to me. I was sure I could have convinced myself that it was all in my head if I hadn't talked to Evander about it that morning. Maybe it would have been better if I'd done that, if I'd let sleeping dogs lie.

Because it got me in my head.

It made me make stupid mistakes during practice.

It turned out that if I got in my head, I didn't need anyone else doing anything to make me look bad. I was more than capable of doing it on my own. I missed a few easy catches. I fumbled one of the catches I did make. It was a series of unfortunate events, one bad play after another, and I could see the look of disappointment on my coaches' faces when I went by them on the sideline.

Thursday wasn't much better, and I wasn't surprised to find myself playing with the second team during seven-on-seven drills at the beginning of practice. I was back with the first team during eleven-on-elevens, but I knew what that second team assignment meant. It was a warning. It was a sign of things to come. If I didn't get it together, then I was going to be riding with the second team for the rest of the season, and the second team hadn't had much time on the field during games.

I stayed in the locker room until everyone left. I wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone. I figured if I waited long enough, I could make a quiet walk back to the dorm. I could figure out a way to get out of my head. I had a feeling that if I didn't perform the way I should on Saturday then I was going to be spending a lot more time with the second team.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Evander didn't get the memo. He was waiting for me on the steps outside the training center, just sitting there like we had plans to meet. He turned the moment I walked out the door, a smile on his face. "Took you long enough," he chirped as he bounced up.

"That was on purpose," I told him as I readjusted my gym bag on my shoulder. I started down the steps, not waiting for him. I knew that he'd follow. Why else would he have waited?

Evander fell into step beside me. "Yeah, I figured that was what it was going to be."

So, he'd gotten the hint. "And you still waited?" I raised an eyebrow at him. "Is there a reason for that?"

"Did you see how smug Willis looked when you got put with the second team?" he asked.

He was being a little too glib about this for my liking. "No," I snapped. "I was too busy trying not to fuck up something else."

Evander held his hands up in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. You didn't notice. No need to get grumpy with me."

I wished I could tell him that I wasn't being grumpy, but I was. I'd had a shit practice, and I was taking it out on him. Again. Maybe everything going on with the team was just karma for the way I let my bad mood get the better of me. Hell, wasn't that what had happened during practice? I took a deep breath. I was going to be less of a dick. At least for this walk back to Karloff Hall.

"So, Willis was looking smug?"

"Like all of his Easters came early or whatever the saying is."

“Christmases,” I corrected.

Evander smiled the kind of smile that lit up his face. I could see his eyes shining even in the dusk lighting. “Right. Like that then.” There was a bit of a skip in his step as we walked down the path back to Karloff Hall. “I’m pretty sure he thinks his cunning plan is working.”

“His cunning plan?” I questioned.

“Yeah. His cunning plan to take over your spot on the team,” he clarified. “You know he thought it was going to be him, right? I mean he had the spot on the first few test rosters, and he was also pretty much heir apparent after last season. I think he thinks he’s entitled to it.”

“Then he should play better.” So much for not sounding like a dick on the entire walk back to the dorm. At least this time it wasn’t directed toward Evander. It even seemed to amuse him, given the way he snorted.

“I think the same could be said about you,” he teased. I glowered at him, and he actually looked contrite. I guess there was a first for everything. “I’m sorry! Don’t hate me.”

The dramaticism of his pleading caused the smallest bubble of laughter to escape my lips. “I don’t hate you, and I do need to do better,” I admitted. “The last two days? It was all on me. I wasn’t playing well because my head was all over the place.”

He nodded. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I think this is just something I’m going to have to figure out. I just know that Willis is not going to be looking so smug after this week’s game.”



I was nervous about Saturday’s game. It felt like a make it or break it kind of moment. Like one of those things that if I messed it up, I was going to mess up *everything*.

When I got into the locker room before warm up, Evander came over and helpfully let me know that I had that sour smell to me again. He sounded concerned, but there was nothing he could do about it. If that sour smell was anxiety and nerves, then it made sense that it was filling the area around me. My stomach was in knots, and all I could think of was the fact that I was going to blow everything.

Evander took my lack of an answer as an invitation for distraction, and he began chatting. “Did I tell you that Kali and Luke are watching tonight? Probably a bunch of the younger pack members too.” He looked excited.

“So, you want us to make sure we play our asses off?”

He nodded. “Yeah, and I mean, tonight’s opponent? They’re not that great. I think we should kick their asses.” He reached into his locker and started pulling on his pads. “It’ll be a pretty easy game to get your head back on straight. Just don’t let other people get to you, okay?”

I wished it was that easy, but he sounded confident enough. And if we were going against an easy opponent, then maybe he was right. Maybe this would be the perfect game to get my mojo back. I nodded.

He kept talking while we finished getting ready. As we filed out of the locker room and onto the field, he leaned in to whisper one simple sentence that strangely put me at ease: “You smell less sour now.”

Less than an hour later, the whistle blew and the game started. The first play out of the gate had me catching a ball after a fifty-yard throw. I got another ten yards after the catch. It gave me the confidence I needed to really focus on the game. Evander was right. I needed to stop worrying about what everyone else was doing and focus on the things I could control. And the only thing I could control on that field was how I played.

I kept that mindset through the first quarter. By the end, we were up by three scores. I hadn’t scored, but I wasn’t concerned about that. I’d been playing well. I’d blocked a defender, which let Reyes run into the end zone, which led to the first points on the board. I was being a team player, and maybe, just maybe, the rest of the team would see that. Maybe they’d pick up on the fact that I was good for the team. I was a good player.

No.

I wasn’t going to think like that.

The other team didn’t score until the second drive of the second quarter. I’d been watching from the bench, and I was pretty impressed by the way their tight end had spun around one of our defenders to break through. He might have been playing against us, but I was a football fan first and foremost. I loved a good play.

I was in high spirits as we got near the end of the second quarter.

Which, of course, meant that everything had to turn to shit.

One minute, I was running a slant route down the field. The play Eric called meant that the ball would either come to me or Evander, depending

on who could get open. The third wide receiver, Hopkins, was nearby. The other team's cornerback was distracted by him at first. Hopkins fell back. I saw him just before the cornerback tackled me.

It was a clean tackle, but I did not have a clean landing. My ankle twisted underneath me, and I cried out. My ankle hurt like hell. I dared a look, and I was grateful that it didn't look as bad as it felt.

Evander was the first person to run over to me. One minute he was across the field from me, and the next, he was by my side. He knelt beside me. "Can you get up?"

"Not sure. Don't think I want to risk it," I winced out.

He nodded and motioned toward the sideline. A pair of medics ran out to the field. They did the quickest examination possible on my ankle before giving Evander and the other team's cornerback the all-clear to help me up. My arms wrapped around both of their shoulders, and they helped me to the sideline and into the medical tent.

As I went in, I noticed Willis and Hopkins sitting on the bench. Willis looked exactly like Evander had said a few days before: like all his Christmases came early.

I was left alone inside the medical tent for less than a minute. The same pair of medics that had examined me on the field came in to give me a more thorough examination. They tested me for concussion, though I hadn't even hit my head. They checked over my ankle. After a few minutes, they ducked out. I heard them talking, but I couldn't see who they were talking to. It wasn't until I heard Coach Eriksson's low voice that I had my answer.

Another few minutes passed before Coach Eriksson was looming at the door. "The medics said you've twisted your ankle," he said in that grave way of his. "You're out for the rest of the game. I want you to rest tomorrow. We will see how you're doing on Monday to determine if you can join us for practice."

He didn't wait for me to answer. He just walked out and let the medics come back in to do their work. They wrapped my ankle in an ace bandage and passed me a pair of crutches. I went back to the bench to watch the game.

The game I should have been playing.

And just like earlier that week, I knew it wasn't a coincidence. If it was, Hopkins would've come over to help. He wouldn't have looked so smug

when I went down. He wouldn't have looked gleeful at the idea of Willis joining him on the field.

I was starting to second guess this whole Creelin thing.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EVANDER

Even though I hadn't expected to see Kieran on Sunday morning, I was still disappointed when I set out for my run alone. I missed him. I missed his quiet company and the sound of his footsteps on the trail behind me. I missed the way we ended up racing, pushing each other to go faster, even when it wasn't always the smartest idea. I even missed his grumpy, one-word answers when I tried to start conversations before the sun was fully over the horizon.

It felt like something was missing the entire run.

I wanted to see him.

When I finished my run and got back to Karloff Hall, I thought about going to check on him, but it was still too early. He might have been up with the sun most mornings, but I doubted his roommates were. He might not even be up yet, since he couldn't work out. Maybe he was on medication that knocked him out, and then if I knocked on the door, I'd be bothering him. I didn't want to bother him and make his healing take any longer than necessary. So, I just went to my room and took a shower.

I had breakfast. I tried to study, but I couldn't focus. I ended up playing video games in the common area until Preston came out and took up his post in his usual chair. Then, I tried to talk to him a little. His single syllable answers made me think of Kieran, and once again, I wanted to go check on him. Was ten in the morning a good time to check on someone? It was a Sunday, so maybe his roommates were trying to sleep in.

I groaned.

“Something wrong?” Preston asked. The surprise of his question caused me to crash my virtual car into a wall. Preston’s laugh filled the small room. “Besides the fact that you’re not great at video games?”

“I’m good at video games!” I protested as I paused the game. I couldn’t carry on this conversation while trying to focus on not killing my little digital driver. “I was just shocked that you were using more than one syllable.”

“You ramble. I’m perfectly capable of having a conversation when *someone* lets me get a word in edgewise.”

Did I do that? Oh. I hadn’t realized. “Sorry.”

Preston waved the brightly colored highlighter in his hand, like he was brushing off my apology and my rambling at once. “So is something wrong?”

“Kieran got hurt during last night’s game, and I’m wondering if it’s too early to go check on him. I mean, most people are awake at ten, right? Or is ten too early to go see someone on the weekend? Or—”

“Rambling again,” Preston interrupted me. He capped his highlighter and put it on the arm of the chair with the others. “First, who is Kieran?”

“The guy I run with.”

“And he’s on the football team?”

I nodded. Had I never mentioned Kieran to Preston? Actually, that shouldn’t have surprised me. I hadn’t spent a lot of time chatting with my roommates. I was always busy with football and pretending to care about my classes and hanging out with my packmates or trying to learn things about Kieran. It didn’t leave a lot of time to get to know them or tell them about what was going on in my life.

“So, is it too early to go knock?” I didn’t need to waste time thinking about how I was living with strangers who I barely knew anything about, even after a few months. That wasn’t important. That was just a part of college life sometimes.

“I don’t know Kieran or his roommates, but I think ten is an acceptable time to knock on a door.” He looked at me for a moment before pressing his lips together in a thin line. “I don’t think that outfit’s going to do you any favors, though. Maybe change out of your pajama pants.”

I’d completely forgotten I was wearing them. They had paw prints on them, a gag gift from one of my pack mates last Christmas. I thought they

were adorable, but they probably weren't the best pants to wear to go check on Kieran. I turned off the video game. "Thanks. I'm going to go change!"

I didn't wait for Preston to answer before I went back to my room. I changed out of my pajamas and into a pair of jeans. Luckily, my shirt was a plain black tee so I didn't have to worry about finding anything else. I didn't bother with my sneakers since I was just going down to the fifth floor. I found an old pair of flip flops that I'd tossed at the bottom of my closet and slid them on. I stuck my phone in my pocket and left.

I heard Preston call good luck to me as the door closed.

Maybe I should get to know my roommates a little more. Preston seemed pretty cool.

I took the stairs down to the fifth floor and paused. I realized the flaw in my plan; I didn't know which room was Kieran's. I had watched him get off the elevator before, but I'd never been to his room. I thought about texting him. My hand was in my pocket, and I was about to pull out my phone when I caught a whiff of his too-familiar scent. I breathed in deep, filling my senses with him. I started down the hallway the way I'd seen him go when he got off the elevator.

The smell was stronger, but I didn't think I could pick out which door he was behind. I thought about shifting and going full bloodhound, but I decided that might be a little too much. Instead, I decided to use my other senses. I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds and smells around me. I took another step. I thought I heard someone say his name further down the hallway, but I couldn't be too sure.

I could be sure about the sound of a song playing a few doors down. It sounded tinny, the way it had when he'd been listening to it in the gym. I took another sniff and kept walking. I stopped in front of the door where the music was loudest and the smell was strongest. I opened my eyes and stared at the door like it would give me some kind of answer. There were no signs or anything, nothing that told me if I was at the right place. I just had to take a leap.

I knocked.

I could hear movement behind the door: a whisper, a door closing, heavy footsteps coming toward me. I heard the click of the door unlocking. I was surprised when it opened. I was expecting a human. Most of the time, humans roomed with humans. But the man standing in front of me, practically glaring at me, was distinctly a monster.

Maybe I had the wrong room.

“Can I help you?” the man asked. His voice was strangely professional, far more than I’d expect from anyone answering a dorm door.

“I—uh,” I rubbed at the back of my neck nervously. “I think I maybe have the wrong room. I was looking for... Actually, that doesn’t matter. This is clearly not the right room.”

Except the room smelled so much like Kieran. It was like his scent was assaulting me from behind the open door.

The man nodded. “Who are you looking for? Maybe I can tell you where their room is.”

Okay, so he was helpful. That was nice. I liked helpful people. “Kieran Sawyer. He’s on the footb—”

“You’ve got the right room,” the man cut me off. I expected him to open the door and let me in, but he didn’t. He stayed exactly where he was, his large body filling the open part of the door. “Who are you?”

Who was I? Who was *he*?

Right. Probably someone who lived there. I sighed. “Evander Hemmings. I’m on the football team with him.” The man studied me like I was something interesting. I didn’t know what he thought he was going to see. I felt the need to explain myself more. Maybe I needed to say more to get him to open the door and let me in. “I wanted to check on him. Since he got hurt, I mean. See how he was doing. If he needed anything?” I was rambling. Exactly what Preston accused me of doing that morning. I sucked in a deep breath. “So, can I come in?”

He nodded and finally stepped back to let me in. I noticed the way he positioned his body, like he was trying to use it to block me from seeing anything past him. “I’ll show you to his room.”

“You could just point out which one is his,” I suggested.

He glared at me like I’d suggested he throw a kitten out of a skyscraper window. “I will show you to his room,” he repeated, his voice hard as stone.

I decided that arguing with him was pointless. I just nodded and let him lead me down the hallway to the room at the end. He rapped his knuckles against the door twice, and I was shocked at how loud he knocked. The noise did not match the force he was using.

“Whoever it is, just come in,” I heard Kieran grumble through the door.

I looked at the tall man. He nodded. I pushed open the door and strode in like Kieran was expecting me.

Kieran was lying on his bed in a pair of shorts. The dark green comforter underneath him was rumpled, and I could see a corner of his mattress from underneath the matching sheet. There were clothes all over the room, and a laptop open next to his bed showing off a black screen. His desk was covered with empty water bottles and a giant tub of Bro-tein powder. I could smell the chemicals through the closed container. There were a few empty bottles of the sports drink he liked sitting around too. There were a few boxes still packed, pushed up against the far wall of his dorm. A few pieces of clothing hung over the sides of the boxes. Most of the surfaces in his room had something on it.

And I'd thought *my* room was a bit of a mess when I'd had him over.

"Hey," I greeted as I stepped around a pile of clothing on the floor to walk closer to him.

Kieran looked at me before sitting up on the bed. "Didn't expect to see you." His voice sounded rough, and there were bags under his eyes.

I took a deep breath, trying to pick up what I could from his scent. It smelled duller than it usually did, like he'd found a way to turn down the intensity. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew that I didn't like it. Every time there was a small change to his scent, it meant that something was wrong.

Obviously something was wrong. He got hurt in a game. "How are you doing? Do you think you'll be good for practice tomorrow?"

His ankle wasn't wrapped anymore. That had to be a good sign. Or maybe it wasn't, and he was just stubborn and refused to keep it wrapped the way he was supposed to. He readjusted himself a little, scooting over and leaving space for me on the narrow mattress. I looked at the empty spot and then at him. He nodded, so I went over to sit on the bed. I was careful not to jostle his leg too much.

"It still hurts," he admitted. "I'm not sure if I'll be ready for practice tomorrow. I'll be at film study, but then Coach Shaw wants me to be seen by the team doctor."

There was something in his voice that raised my hackles. Maybe it was the memory of watching him get tackled and not immediately get back up. Maybe it was the memory of the look on Hopkins' face while he was just standing there after Kieran got hurt. It wasn't the face of someone who had just fucked up. He almost looked proud of himself. Maybe it's just me, but

if I'd been supposed to block and my teammate got hurt, I would've looked sheepish and been the first person by his side.

The guy who tackled him shouldn't have had a chance to be the first hand to reach down to help our teammate up.

"Are *you* okay?" Kieran asked after a moment. He was looking at me weird, and that sour tinge was starting to creep into the room, emanating from him.

That combined with the gentle pressure of his hand reaching out to touch my leg brought me back to the present more than his words could. "I keep replaying that tackle in my head," I told him with a shake of my head. "Mostly Hopkins' face after."

"You think he missed it on purpose, don't you?"

I nodded, and I hated myself for it. He didn't need me being paranoid about our teammates. He needed comfort, but he also didn't need me to lie to him about what I thought. I had a feeling that would piss him off more than anything.

"I think he did too," Kieran admitted. "It's just like last week with Reyes in practice. I'm starting to think no one wants me on this team."

Rage shot through me like a bolt. "Fuck that. I want you on the team," I told him fiercely. "And that Marlon guy does, too. I see him watching you all the time in practice, and I noticed that he was following what you did last week during a drill. Got a ball he normally would've missed." Heat rose in my cheeks. I'd clearly said too much, but now that I'd started, I couldn't stop. "Wes and Eric have had nothing but good to say about you all season. Except after the first game, but that wasn't just you, you know? And I've heard Coach Shaw compliment you like fifty times. If a few people don't want you here, fuck them."

When I finally dared to look back over at Kieran, his eyes were wide. I don't think he was expecting that outburst. I know I hadn't expected to make it. After a moment of silence, Kieran shook his head. "I just... I'm starting to wonder if I should have come to Creelin at all. I was doing good at my old school. Might not have had a bunch of friends, but my team depended on me. They trusted me to make the plays we needed, and they sure as hell didn't try to sabotage me."

My heart ached for him. I hadn't realized how hard it had been on him. He'd mentioned feeling out of place once, being the only human on the team had to feel a little weird, but I hadn't realized just *how* hard it could be

for him. I hadn't realized how it made him feel. I reached down and covered the hand he had left next to my leg with mine.

The moment my hand made contact with his, he looked up. Our eyes connected like magnets, and I couldn't look away. We'd touched each other before, but it had never been like this. It had always been heated and passionate, a means to an end. A way to get each other off when we were too riled up with each other. It never felt emotional before.

"I want to kiss you," I told him softly, "but I don't want to hurt your ankle."

"You won't hurt my ankle," Kieran assured me. His voice was just as soft as mine.

I was still careful when I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. The kiss was as soft as our voices had been, as soft as the touch between our hands. It was different, the kind of kiss we'd never shared before. Even though it was feather light, I felt it down to the tips of my toes. I felt flutters through my entire body, and I swear I felt goosebumps from that kiss. I hadn't expected that.

I mean, I knew I had a bit of a thing for him, but this? This felt like potential. This felt like more than a little crush on my teammate.

It jolted me enough to pull away from the kiss, but I couldn't stop looking at Kieran. He looked softer than I'd ever seen him. His eyes were half-closed, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. It was so opposite of what he'd just said he was feeling. I wanted to do whatever I could to keep that look on his face. No, I wanted to turn that small smile into a full one that lit up his entire face.

I bet he would be breathtaking with that kind of smile.

"Kiss me again," he requested.

I was powerless to resist.

This time, when I kissed him, he opened his mouth and pried my lips apart with his tongue. He pulled me in closer. I felt the heat of his bare chest through my shirt, the weight of his arms around my waist. I shifted on the mattress, trying to move carefully so I didn't jostle his ankle. He pulled away.

"I'm not breakable," he reminded me. There was that hint of annoyance in his voice that I'd heard a thousand times before.

He sounded like himself.

“I know,” I assured him. “I know you’re not breakable, but I’m trying not to hurt you.”

“It’s a twisted ankle, Evander.”

He didn’t wait for me to argue before he crashed his mouth back against mine. He pulled me down until I was almost on top of him, twisting at the waist. It wasn’t the most comfortable position I’d ever been in, but I didn’t care. Not when he was kissing me like this.

When Kieran’s hands drifted down my side to the bottom of my shirt, I broke the kiss long enough for him to pull it off. He dropped it off the side of his bed and into the sea of clothing that was already on his floor. His hand touched my chest, his fingers brushing over my nipples. I let out a soft breath. “You’re so hot,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” I teased. I was never going to refuse a compliment from an attractive man. Especially since I’d never particularly thought of myself as too hot when I was shirtless. I was covered in freckles, and there had been a few guys that hadn’t been too impressed by that.

“No,” he grumbled, running his thumb over my chest. “I mean, yes, but that’s not what I meant. Your skin is really hot. It always is.”

“Werewolf thing.” I would have explained more, but he leaned forward and began to kiss over my chest. He sucked my nipple into his mouth, and I moaned. I did not need to talk to him about werewolf anatomy right now. Not when we were in the process of exploring one another’s anatomy. He sucked on my nipple, turning it into a hardened nub before flicking it with his tongue.

Heat unfurled in my chest and spread downward. Heat, or maybe just blood, because the touch was getting me hard. My jeans were starting to become uncomfortable, but I didn’t give a shit. I was too lost in the way Kieran moved to my other nipple, giving it the same treatment. I needed to be doing something. I ran my finger down his sculpted chest, down to the hem of his shorts, over the soft material. I palmed at the bulge growing there.

He moaned, sending vibrations through my chest. Oh, that felt good.

I slipped my hand under his shorts and grinned. “No underwear?” I teased.

“Wasn’t like I was expecting company,” he reminded me. His voice was muffled by my chest, and well, I didn’t mind that one bit. “Take off your

pants.” I raised an eyebrow at him. “I’d take them off for you, but I’m bedridden, remember?”

“Thought it wasn’t that bad,” I teased him as I pulled my hand out of his shorts to unbutton my jeans. Because I might have been teasing him, but taking off my pants sounded like a really good idea. I pulled away from him completely before I kicked off my shoes. I pulled down my pants, leaving me in only a pair of black boxer briefs.

I hadn’t put them on thinking about this, but I knew they made my ass look great. So, no regrets.

I especially had no regrets when I saw the hungry look in his eyes. “Those too,” he told me, eyeing the fabric. “I want to see every part of you.”

I smiled as I tugged down my underwear and left them on the pile of clothing. I just hoped I could find them later. But if I couldn’t, I could freeball it up to my room. One good part about us living in the same building.

“Your turn,” I told him, looking down at his shorts. If I was going to be naked, I wanted him the same way. That, and I was a very greedy werewolf who wanted to see every inch of the other man. I had memories of him all spread out on my bed when I sucked him off that first time, but reality would always surpass memory.

He looked up at me. “Think I could use some help with that.”

I wasn’t sure if he was playing up his injury, but I was happy to oblige. I reached down and slid his shorts down his legs, unwrapping him like the world’s best birthday present.

The moment he was naked, I got back on the bed. He spread his legs, giving me room to slot myself between them. Our lips crashed together again, and I found the whole thing overwhelming. The feel of his skin against mine was electric. The slide of his cock against mine every time we moved sent fire racing through my body. The way his hands explored my bare flesh made me wish I wasn’t worrying about keeping as much weight off him as I could, because I wanted to explore too. I wanted to touch him, tease him, taste him. I wanted to drown myself in him.

When he wrapped his hand around both of our cocks the way he had that first time in the woods, that need grew hotter. I moaned into his mouth before pulling my lips away from his. I kissed along his neck, nipping and biting and sucking. Trying hard not to leave any marks on his soft skin,

though I wanted to make a visible claim. Which I did not have the right to do, but it didn't matter.

The more my lips moved along his flesh and the more his hand moved along our shafts, the more I craved. I didn't just want hands or mouths or whatever other way we could think of getting each other off. I wanted *him*. I forced myself up to my knees, giving much needed space between us. Because otherwise, I wouldn't be able to think, wouldn't be able to tell him what I wanted. I'd be too lost in the sensation, which wasn't a bad thing, but it wasn't what I wanted today.

"Everything okay?" Kieran asked. I could hear the concern dripping from every syllable, and it only made me want this more. I don't think anyone had ever sounded so concerned about me before. Not just in the bedroom, but anywhere.

I fought the urge to kiss him again. "Yeah," I assured him instead. "I just..." I sucked in a deep breath. I could tell him what I wanted. What was the worst thing that happened? He wasn't feeling up to it, and we went back to making out. We got each other off in ways we'd already done? He asked me to leave his room, and I was stuck jacking off in the shower in my room? Neither of those were things I couldn't live with. "I want you."

"Yeah?" he questioned. His lips twitched, and I saw that smile grow for half a second. Oh, that was so worth my discomfort.

I nodded. "Do you... uh... do you have supplies?"

"Desk drawer." His answer came out fast. So fast that I was left with zero doubt that this was what we both wanted. I rolled off the bed and found a small bottle of lube and some condoms in the desk drawer. He reached out and took them from me when I got closer, putting them next to his laptop. Right within easy reach of the bed. "How?" he asked after they were put away. "I mean, do you want to fuck me? Do you want me to fuck you?"

I looked down at his ankle. I didn't think he was going to be very comfortable topping on that ankle, and I didn't have a strong preference either way. I wondered if he did. "Is there—do you have a preference?"

"You could ride me," he suggested. The idea of riding his long cock was hot. I could imagine it. "Or..." I saw color rise to his cheeks. "Or you could fuck me. I'm not that picky."

I laughed. "Let's save you fucking me for a day you're not hurt," I suggested. Even with me riding him, he might be tempted to plant his foot

on the mattress and thrust up. I didn't want him to make his ankle worse just because we were getting lost in lust.

The moment he let out a noise of agreement, I was all over him. Our lips collided. Our tongues explored. I stopped worrying about crushing him and let myself touch him as much as I wanted. When I finally got too desperate for him, I reached for the lube. I slicked my fingers and began to open him up, taking in every noise he made. I studied his face for any sign of discomfort or any clue that he loved something I was doing.

My own cock was aching as I opened him up, but I ignored it. Drawing those noises from him was worth the wait, and it would just make the whole thing better when I finally buried myself in him.

Not that it took too long. Before long, he was practically pleading with me, trying to thrust up to take more of my fingers. The incoherent desperation was hotter than anything I could think of, and I couldn't hold out any longer. I reached for the condom and ripped the foil open with my teeth. I slid it down over my length and positioned the head of my cock at his entrance.

"You sure?" I asked. I wasn't sure how I'd survive if he said no, but I'd manage.

His response wasn't verbal. His legs wrapped around me, pulling me in closer. If that wasn't a yes, then I didn't know what was.

I pushed into him slowly, inch by inch, pulling out before pushing in deeper. He was so hot and tight. I wanted to say screw the slow and steady approach and just bury myself into him, but I also needed this to be good for him. I didn't know how this was going to end. Just like the first time I blew him, I didn't know if this would be a one-time thing. If it was, I wanted to leave him with good memories.

And, okay, I wanted it to be so good that the idea of only hooking up once sounded like a nightmare to him.

I finally bottomed out after a few thrusts, and I swear I almost lost it right then. Especially when he tightened around me. I had to take a few breaths as he adjusted, and it wasn't just for his benefit. I was not going to lose control and leave him with anything less than full satisfaction. Once I knew I wasn't going to bust as soon as we started, I began to move.

He felt so good.

Every movement of our body brought more pleasure. Our lips and tongues tangled together as we moved. The small dorm room filled with

moans and the smell of his lust and the smell of sex and it was overpowering and overwhelming. If I'd allowed myself to imagine this moment, it wouldn't have lived up to what was actually happening. Nothing could ever live up to this.

I lost track of everything but pleasure. I lost track of everything but the sounds he was making and the feel of his sweaty chest sticking to mine. All that existed in the moment was the two of us. I felt his cock leaking sticky precum against my stomach, felt him tightening around me, and I knew he was close. I pulled myself up to where I was kneeling and pushed his legs against his chest. The change in angle blew my mind, and judging by the sounds he was making, he didn't seem to mind it either.

I began to drive into him. Slow and steady might win the race, but this was much more fun.

"So close," he moaned out as I plowed into him.

Close wasn't good enough. I reached down between us and began to stroke him, matching the movement of my hand to my thrusts. It only took a few strokes before he shot over my fist, painting his chest. The way he tightened around me sent me over the edge. "Holy fuck," I moaned out as I emptied into the condom.

When I finished, I collapsed against his chest. His legs fell against the mattress, and I spared half a thought to his ankle. If I were more clearheaded, I probably would have checked in on that. Instead, I just kissed him softly. We kissed for a few minutes before I pulled out and tossed the condom in the half-full trash can next to his bed.

I spent the rest of the day with Kieran. We ordered pizza for lunch, and I went downstairs to get it for us. We watched a movie.

It was the first time I'd spent any time with him that wasn't about football or getting off, and yeah, that crush I had? It was getting bigger by the moment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KIERAN

I didn't get cleared to participate in practice until Wednesday.

I still showed up every day. I hobbled over to the weight training room and did a little bit of upper body and arms training. All of which had been approved by the trainer on the team, so long as I was being careful and wasn't messing around and doing anything that could fuck up my ankle. I showed up to all the film study sessions, and I took notes on what our coaches were saying about the team we were playing that week.

According to Coach Eriksson, they had won the championship the year before. They were *the* team to beat in our division, and I wanted to do my part in beating them. I even went to practice and sat on the bench.

I noticed Evander stuck to me during all of it. He chose machines near me whenever he could. He sat next to me during film study. He came and sat with me on the bench in between drills. I knew why he was doing it. He was trying to protect me. It was sweet, in a weird kind of way. I didn't need protection, but it was nice to know that someone was on my side.

Between him and Marlon, I was thinking he might have been right Sunday in my room. He might have been right about the fact that some people did want me on the team. I did have to wonder if he had said something to Marlon too, because when Evander wasn't at my side during drills, Marlon was. I really hoped he hadn't, because the last thing I needed was the rookie thinking that I was someone that needed protecting. I didn't

like anyone thinking that, but at least I talked to Evander outside of practice.

Even with Evander watching me like a hawk, I was nervous when I finally suited back up for practice on Wednesday.

Mostly, because I saw the way Willis and Reyes were looking at me in the locker room. While I'd been out, Willis had been getting all the first team reps at wide receiver two. He'd been doing pretty good too, but I saw some catches he should have been able to make. I would have been able to catch them, but I already had a feeling he wasn't going to see it that way. If anything, being put back on the second team was going to piss him off.

I just hoped they weren't going to cause any problems today at practice. I'd just got the all clear on my ankle, and I didn't want to spend any more time off the field. I really didn't want to miss this week's game. Not when I knew there were people chomping at the bit to take my spot on the roster, and not when I knew the team we were going against was one of the best. Pretty sure if I made a few good plays against the previous year's champions, then I wouldn't have as many worries about holding on to my starting job.

I couldn't deny that I was nervous though. And even if I tried, Evander yanked any chance of denial away from me as we walked out onto the field. He pulled me aside. "You okay?" he asked, his voice low enough that only I could hear it.

"Yeah."

"Nervous?"

Right. He could smell that I was nervous. He was like a wolfy mood ring or some shit, and I wasn't sure how much I liked it. On one hand, it was nice not having to pretend. It was nice to have someone I didn't have to fake anything with. On the other hand, it might have been nice to have the choice.

"Little bit," I admitted because what other choice did I have?

At least he didn't try to hide the concern in his eyes. I think that might have pissed me off if he had, or if he'd looked at me with anything close to pity. He just nodded. "I'll be close. I've got your back, okay?"

I knew he did. It was a strangely comforting thought, knowing that if shit went pear-shaped, at least I'd have him to help me back up.

It turned out that the worry was for nothing. Practice went smoothly, and I was starting to feel like an idiot having spent so long wondering if I

should've come to Creelin in the first place. I still didn't feel like I could breathe easy though. Maybe they were just going easy for a day or two, just to make sure that no one else noticed that they were fucking with me. Or maybe my injury had just been an accident.

I was torn on what to believe, but I was glad that practice was uneventful.

After practice, I knew I should get back to my room. I had homework to get on with. I had a chapter I needed to read for the next day. But I was hungry, and the idea of eating some microwave ramen noodles wasn't all that appealing.

What was appealing was a burger from the dining hall, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to eat that burger alone. I found Evander while we were leaving the locker room, and an idea formed in my head.

I liked the time we spent together on Sunday. Not just the sex, but the stuff that came after. I'd liked talking to him, which wasn't something I could say about most people. With the exception of my roommates, there weren't many people I cared to have a conversation with off the field. I wanted to spend a little more time with Evander. It took no time at all for the idea to go from thought to action.

"You hungry?" I asked him as he fell into step beside me.

He raised an eyebrow at me. I didn't blame him. He'd always been the one to instigate anytime we hung out together.

Evander nodded, and I went on. "You want to get a bite to eat? I was thinking of hitting the dining hall. Not really feeling microwaved ramen tonight."

"Who is ever feeling microwaved ramen?" he asked. I could hear the disgust in his voice, and I took it as an insult. There was nothing wrong with microwaved ramen noodles. "You know there's a kitchen in the dorm, right? You can make better ramen noodles."

I laughed. "I know, but that takes time. I microwave them up and study while I eat them."

"Boring," Evander groaned. "Please tell me you do more than football and study?"

I couldn't tell him that. It wasn't like I had a lot of time left after I did my homework after practice. I knew he didn't care as much about his grades, but I didn't see how he could have much time left for socialization.

But I didn't like that reality. I didn't like the idea that he was judging me for not doing more in my social life.

"I talk to Teagan, Zay, and Ryker," I countered. He raised an eyebrow, and I realized that while he'd seen Ryker the day before, it was likely he hadn't actually been introduced. Not if Ryker was in full bodyguard mode. "They're my roommates. Ryker was the one that showed you to my room yesterday."

"Is he always that serious?" he asked.

I choked back a laugh. Serious was one way to describe Ryker. Teagan said that he wasn't always like that, but I hadn't seen it. "He's Teagan's bodyguard," I told him. "He takes it seriously, but he can be a chill guy too. And Zay, he's really into football. Hasn't missed a home game yet, and we watch pro games when I have the time."

Now that I was saying it out loud, I really did sound like I had more of a social life than I thought I did. The realization hit me strangely. I had actual friends at Creelin, and that wasn't something I was thinking I had just a few days ago. It seemed like Evander's question had made me learn something about myself, mostly because I didn't want to sound as lame as I felt with my lack of a social life.

Interesting how that worked sometimes.

Evander and I made small talk while we walked to the dining hall. Most of it was about practice, and I wondered if we'd be able to hold up a whole conversation when we were eating. If we couldn't, at least we'd have food as a distraction. Something to make it all feel that much less awkward until we finished eating and could go our own separate ways. It was possible that the only things we had in common were football and hooking up.

Guess we'd find out.

We joined the line when we got into the dining hall. I wasn't sure why I was so surprised by the food Evander put on his plate. He'd gotten two burgers and some chicken tenders. When I gave him a look, he sighed and reluctantly grabbed a side of french fries and a fruit cup. My meal was a lot more balanced. I'd gone for the burger and french fries, but I'd also grabbed a small bowl of peas and a side salad.

We paid and found a table. "Is there a reason your plate looks like a vegan's worst nightmare?" I asked him as I started pulling apart my burger to get it dressed the way I liked: ketchup and pickles only.

“I’m a werewolf,” he reminded me, as if it should mean something. When I didn’t nod or act like I understood, he let out a put-upon sigh and shook his head. “I eat a lot of meat. It’s a diet thing. Kali used to get on me and tell me that werewolves are not full carnivores and made me eat my vegetables.”

“When you were a kid?”

“When I went over there a few weeks ago.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter. I didn’t know why I was imagining a younger version of Evander that refused to eat his vegetables when there wasn’t a bit of green on his plate. “My pops used to have that same problem.”

“With you?”

I shook my head. “No, with him. I remember when I was really young, my mom used to get on him about not eating any vegetables. He got better at it when Mom died. Guess he thought someone needed to be a better influence on me.” The moment I mentioned my mom passing away, he gave me a look that I’d seen a thousand times over: pity. I could almost predict the next words out of his mouth. Some kind of apology about losing my mom when I was a kid. I knew people always meant well when they said things like that, but it always bugged me anyway. I wanted to cut it off before it could happen. “Of course, there were a bunch of line cooks at Pops’ bar that always made sure I had carrots or celery with my wings when I was there after school.”

“Your dad’s bar?”

The distraction worked.

“Yeah. My dad owns a bar back home. I wasn’t old enough to be left home alone, so I spent a lot of time hanging out there.”

Evander looked really interested in what I was saying. He seemed almost as interested in what my childhood was like as I was his, not that I thought mine was anything special. I hadn’t grown up in a warehouse surrounded by other werewolves. I had the same story as probably a million other people: raised by a single dad who just did what he could to make sure I had what I needed from life. I didn’t think my life was all that interesting in comparison.

But Evander was looking like I was telling him some kind of exotic story. “What was it like?” he questioned.

I tried to think of a way to tell him what it was like growing up the way I did. What it was like growing up spending hours doing homework at a bar, how I fell in love with football watching it on the bar television. I tried to think of how to word stories about spending time in my dad's office while he did paperwork or about the time I watched two of my teachers get so drunk they were falling over.

He took my silence as something else though, and he elaborated further on the question. "Growing up with a dad, I mean."

Something about the way he worded it made my heart ache. He'd not grown up with that. He'd told me how his parents had given him to the pack after he first shifted. "I can't imagine anything else," I told him honestly. "I had a lot more freedom than a lot of my classmates. Especially once Pops decided I was old enough to be left home alone. I'd walk home after football practice, do my homework, make a sandwich for dinner, things like that. And every morning, I'd wake up and he'd make me breakfast. That was our real time."

"You mean, someone could get you to do more than grunt in the mornings?" he asked with a laugh.

"No, but Pops tried anyway. He got used to the fact that I wasn't a morning person. Never took it personal."

"I'm getting used to it too," he teased. "Though maybe I should try your dad's way. Bring you food for our runs. See if that makes you any less grumpy."

I glared at him as I took a bite of my burger.

Evander asked me a few more questions about my childhood while we ate. Most of the time, when people did that, I always felt like I was being interviewed or something. Evander seemed genuinely interested. He laughed at the right times, and he loved my bar stories. When I told him how I'd gotten into football, he started telling me stories of his own. Him and Luke and a few other pack members used to watch every weekend. Then Luke would take him out back and throw to him, mostly because he had too much energy.

I could imagine that part easily.

Before long, we'd both cleared our plates, but I didn't want the time to end.

That was new. Usually after about an hour with anyone, I was ready for them to disappear. I could count on one hand the number of exceptions I'd

had in my life, and one of them was Teagan. Another one was my Pops. When I'd met Evander, I sure as hell hadn't thought that he'd put his name on that very short list, but he had.

I'd noticed it Sunday, and I thought it was maybe just a post-sex glitch. I was thinking that I knew better now. He was something more than just a teammate who I had great sexual chemistry with, and I didn't want this time to end.

"You wanna go for a walk?" I asked him once we got outside. We'd turned toward the dorm, and that feeling of not wanting the time I was spending with him to be over doubled and tripled immediately.

Evander smiled, and I swear it was brighter than the setting sun behind him. It made his eyes do that glowing thing I'd seen a few times. "Why do your eyes glow?" I asked him suddenly. I'd been curious about it since the first time I'd seen it.

"They don't really glow," he told me. "It's... you know when you see pictures of cats and dogs and sometimes their eyes look like they're glowing? It's a reflection of the light. Happens usually when we need to see better, you know? Like when the sun's setting or it's dark out."

That tracked with the times I'd seen his eyes glow. The first time had been after the Alpha Claw Omega party, when he'd followed me home and we'd ended up kissing outside the science building. The second time had been in the woods after I found out I got the starting job, but not the one I wanted. Now that I was thinking about it, I thought I'd seen his eyes spark a bit during our morning runs, but I'd only had quick glances. I'd thought it was a trick of the light, but now I knew it was just a werewolf thing.

"Any other weird things about werewolf anatomy?" I asked him with a grin.

"I have a tail," he told me with a bright smile.

"I think I would have noticed if you had a tail." I'd seen him naked, and I hadn't seen a single tail in sight.

"Not all the time," he informed me. He let out a laugh. "But when I turn into a werewolf, I have a tail. And Kali made sure that we could partially shift at will. One year, I went as a dog for Halloween, and I didn't have to buy a tail or ears. It was really cool."

I was almost tempted to ask him to show me his tail, but I figured that might be intrusive. It might also be a little weird to see some guy I was hooking up with sprout a tail. I'd have to get used to it eventually, but that

seemed like something to ask for in private. Not walking across a campus with a bunch of other people around. Not that anyone else seemed to mind. We'd just been passed by a girl with antlers holding hands with some guy with purple skin.

"You want to see it, don't you?" he teased.

Were my thoughts written all over my face or something? I wasn't used to people being able to read me the way he did. "Does curiosity have a scent?" I asked, elbowing him playfully.

"No, but most people hear about the tail and want to see it."

Well, that was something. "Maybe another time."

"Just let me know. I'll happily show it to you. Or my ears. Or even the full werewolf form sometime. Just say the word."

I nodded. I wasn't sure if I would ever ask, but it was nice to know I had an open invite.

We made a lap around campus, and we somehow never ran out of things to talk about. I learned about some of his pack mates, and I told him about the team I played on before I came to Creelin. He told me about the first football team he ever played on, and I told him a little about mine. He seemed to remember a lot more about his than I did.

When we got back over near Karloff Hall, I still wasn't ready for the night to be over, but I had my responsibilities. I needed to read a chapter before bed, and I knew I had an early morning.

"Do you want to come up to my room?" Evander asked when we got to the dorm.

I did, but I knew better. "I've got homework." I could hear my own disappointment, and I knew that there was no way in hell Evander would miss it. He had that superhuman hearing, after all. He also had that uncanny ability to read me like a book. "I have to read a chapter before class tomorrow."

"Bring it to my room." He said it like it was the most obvious solution in the world. "Maybe I'll actually do my reading for once. You can be a good influence on me."

"Alright, but I have to read this chapter."

That was non-negotiable. He agreed, and we went inside.

I got the chapter read, but only after many distractions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
EVANDER

We lost our next game.

It was an away game at a college three hours away, playing the team that had won the previous year's championship. I didn't know what to expect from Kieran after we lost, even if it wasn't his fault. Reyes had gotten tackled at the last minute, ending a drive that could have won the game for us. But I still knew Kieran. He could get moody about things like that, and I was fully prepared to find him sitting alone in the front of the bus, glowering at anyone who dared to come close to him.

Including me or Marlon.

I was surprised when I got on the bus first and a few minutes later, he slid into the seat next to me. "I'd ask if I could sit by the window, but you might want to roll down the window and put your head out," he teased.

"I don't do that!" I told him with a laugh loud enough that the people sitting three rows in front of us turned around to see what was going on.

I'd done it once when I was a kid, about six months after I'd joined the pack. I'd seen a dog do it when we were driving somewhere, and the dog looked like he was having the time of his life. I wanted to see if it was the same for werewolves.

It wasn't.

There was no reason for Kieran to *ever* hear that story.

"Then you have no problem with me taking the window seat?"

“Normally, I’d say no, but I might have an uncontrollable urge to stick my head out the window.”

I was rewarded with a small smile. Mission accomplished. I was almost willing to give him the window seat after that, but it was a matter of principle now.

Kieran and I got comfortable in our seats while the rest of the team piled onto the bus. It took about fifteen minutes before we were on the way, driving into the night. The first twenty minutes or so on the ride was pretty quiet. I think we were all a little disappointed in ourselves for losing that game, even if we had gone in as the underdogs. But slowly, conversations started around us.

I looked over at Kieran, thinking that maybe I could draw him into conversation. What I saw was not encouraging me to try to get him to talk. His lips were in a straight line, and I could see the tension in his jaw. His shoulders were square, and his posture was incredibly rigid. Without thinking, I rested a hand on his thigh. I could feel the tension there, too.

And then I felt his muscles begin to relax.

His hand covered mine. It rested there for a second, and then he pulled it away. His head swiveled to the left and right, like he was making sure no one was looking. Did he think... Oh my god, did he think I was about to start something? Right there on the bus?

I mean, I could get the appeal, but a three-hour bus ride with my teammates chattering in the background did not sound like the smartest place in the world to get freaky. I had a feeling Coach Shaw would have something to say about it. I knew some of my teammates would. Judging by the panic in Kieran’s eyes, he might have something to say about it too. I wanted to tell him to relax, that I wasn’t trying anything, but how could I?

Someone might overhear, and we’d never talked about any kind of comfort levels with letting the rest of the team know that we’d been hooking up.

I pulled my hand away.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice quiet.

I nodded. “You looked like you were freaking out,” I whispered back. I leaned in closer. I knew it wouldn’t make anything less likely to be overheard, but it *felt* like it would. “I wasn’t trying to start something.”

“I know,” he told me quietly.

I wasn't sure if I believed him, but I chose not to argue it. Especially not when he reached down and took my hand. He lifted it and placed it right back where it was on his thigh, offering me the smallest smile in the process. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew that the only thing that would make me move my hand now was him physically moving it off him.

I liked it there.

Kieran seemed to like it, too. He relaxed a little when it was there, and that was what mattered.

We started talking about the game, about plays we thought we could have done better or things we wished we could have changed about the game. Other than the outcome, obviously, because I felt that it went without saying. We both liked to win, so we didn't need to say that we wished we'd won the game. The longer we talked, the more relaxed he became.

We stopped at a truck stop halfway back to Creelin, long enough for people to use the restroom and grab snacks. I bought some fruit candy, and when I got back to our seat, Kieran was already there. Sitting next to the window. The grin he gave me when I sat down next to him could only be described as *cheeky*, and a strange warmth bloomed inside me when I saw it. I didn't know he was even capable of smiling like that.

"That's my seat," I teased, even though I had no desire to take it from him. Not if him stealing it made him grin the way he had.

"Haven't you ever heard the old saying: move your feet, lose your seat?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Guess I won't be scaring other drivers by sticking my head out the window then."

"Guess not."

The last of our teammates got back onto the bus and the lights went out. The bus pulled out of the truck stop, and we hit the highway again. Kieran and I sat quietly. I ate my candy, and Kieran looked out the window. I didn't know how much time had passed before I felt the weight of his head falling onto my shoulder. I looked down, just to see what was going on, and I noticed his eyes were closed. His breathing was slow and steady.

He was asleep.

I took advantage of the moment to study him. He looked younger, more relaxed. When he was awake, he somehow managed to look older than he was. Maybe it was all the stress he put on himself or something, but when he was asleep? It all fell away. I wanted to keep looking at him. I wanted to

memorize every detail of his face when he slept, because who knew if I'd ever see it again. I'd never expected to see it in the first place, honestly. We might have hooked up a few times, but I didn't think he'd ever relax enough to sleep next to me, let alone *on* me.

Then he stirred.

It was like he could feel me watching him. I didn't want him to wake up. He'd probably freak out about the fact that he had fallen asleep on my shoulder, and then he'd move. He'd pull away. I forced myself to look away from him. I closed my eyes to resist temptation. The moment my eyes were closed, tendrils of conversations started to fill my ears.

Marlon and his seat partner were talking about their shared math class.

Someone two rows away was snoring, and the guy he shared a seat with was listening to music with a lot of screaming. Probably to drown out the snoring.

I could even hear Reyes and Willis whispering at the back of the bus. "Would've won if they played you," Reyes muttered.

"That corner should've hit him harder last week," Willis agreed. There was something nasty to his tone. Chills raced down my spine. "Maybe we should do something about it."

"Like what?"

"Leave it with me."

I didn't like the sound of that, and I kept listening. I kept listening as they pulled Dobson and Hopkins into their conversation. Most of it was bitching and moaning about how much Willis felt like he deserved the starter job, the one that Kieran won in fair competition. He could have put in more effort, the way Kieran had. He could have done anything to improve himself, but instead he was bitching and moaning.

Maybe I shouldn't have kept listening, but I did. All the way until we pulled back into Creelin University, long after they stopped bitching and started talking about boring things like classes and the party they'd gone to the night before.



The next two weeks passed in a blur.

Kieran and I fell into a comfortable routine. We met every morning for our runs and then walked to weight training together. We separated after training, but we found each other between classes. I still didn't sit next to him during our one shared class. He said I talked too much and distracted him. I didn't see it, and I thought he took that class way too seriously, but I knew a losing battle when I saw one. I was just glad he waited for me outside the classroom. Then we went to lunch together, before we went to our other classes.

We sat together during film review, and we always ended up lining up together during drills. After practice, we sometimes went our separate ways, but more and more often, I ended up tagging along with him to the library and watching him study. I tried to study. I really did. I brought my books and had them open on the table, but the library was just too quiet for me to study. I needed noise and conversation in order to focus. I blamed growing up with the pack.

Not that it was the pack's fault.

Even when I was surrounded by people, I still couldn't study very well. I just didn't like it. It was boring.

During the two weeks, we also had two other games. We won the first one, but we lost the second one. It was our first loss at home, and I think it sucked worse than losing on the road. It had probably sucked just as bad last year, but I hadn't been a starter then. I'd only been on the field for a few plays here and there, when the offense needed a rest or an extra man for a play.

The only good part about losing at home was that I was able to distract Kieran a lot more effectively than I could on the bus.

The problem with spending all this time with him was that when I wasn't with Kieran, I wanted to be with him. I couldn't focus in my classes because I was thinking about him. I couldn't pay attention when I went to visit Kali and Luke, because my mind was across town at the dorm. When he wasn't in my sight, I kept thinking back to that whispered conversation on the bus.

Not that it was better when I was with him.

When he was across the field at practice, it took every ounce of my self-control not to watch him. Especially when other members of the team were nearby. I kept worrying that something would happen, and I'd be too far away to stop it.

Nothing happened, though.

As a team, we were working together better. Maybe all Willis and his crew needed was to bitch a little. Maybe it was the fact that Willis had gotten some field time during our home loss the week before and he'd fumbled a ball that Eric had thrown right to him, leading to the other team recovering it and scoring on their next drive. Maybe he'd finally realized that he just wasn't a better player than Kieran.

Maybe that meant I could relax.

I wished someone could tell my mind that, because the strange fixation with being near Kieran all the time didn't stop.

I even waited for him to be ready before we left the practice facility every day. There might have been ulterior motives for that, like the simple way he stepped up next to me and asked if I wanted to join him for dinner, which was another thing we were doing together more often.

"Normally, you know I'd say yes, but Kali has called a pack meeting. Blood moon preparations," I told him when he asked after practice.

"Professor Fan said that's a big night on campus, right? Everyone shifts?"

I nodded. "It's an even bigger night for my pack. Kali and Luke lead us on a big run at this park near the warehouse. There's some woods. Last year, it turned into a really weird game of hide and seek with some of the younger pack members. They tried to sniff us all out, which led to us trying to make it harder to be tracked. It was a lot of fun."

"Is that what you're doing this year?" he asked me. He sounded genuinely interested. I wished I could take him to the warehouse with me, but planning the blood moon would be boring for him. If I ever introduced him to the pack, I wanted it to be something that he enjoyed.

Not that I'd thought about it.

Much.

"Maybe? We're definitely doing the run, but we'll talk over everything when we're all together. Kali may be the leader of the pack, but she doesn't rule with an iron fist." That was a complete stereotype that humans made about werewolves. The alpha was meant to care for the pack above all else, and that's why Kali was the perfect alpha. She kept us out of trouble. She made sure we were where we were supposed to be. She did a lot of the planning for everything the pack did as a group.

She even still scheduled my doctor's appointments, but that was because I always forgot.

"What time are you meeting everyone?"

I pulled out my phone to check the time. I knew I was cutting it close, but I didn't want to leave Kieran halfway across campus all by himself. It was that whole weird thing that had been happening since he fell asleep on my shoulder on the bus. "About now," I admitted.

"And where are you supposed to meet them?"

"At this bench halfway between Poe and Karloff."

"Then shouldn't you head over there?"

I groaned. I should, but I didn't want to leave Kieran alone. I looked at the fork in the path that would take us back toward the dorms. Kieran sighed and started down the path, away from the dining hall where I'd thought he was going. "Aren't you supposed to be going to dinner?"

"I can eat in my room," he told me. "You're going to make everyone late, and then I'm going to have to hear you bitch about it all week when they get annoyed that you're late."

I wanted to argue with him, but he wasn't wrong. I sighed and followed him down the path.

Like I would have done anything else.

We were close to the dorm when I heard Serena's familiar voice. "Evie!" she called out. I heard Kieran snort, and I elbowed him. "There you are. I told Nick and Charlie that your practice probably ran late, but they said you probably forgot."

By the time she finished her sentence, she was standing in front of me with a bright smile on her face. Nick and Charlie were following behind her at a slower pace. Her dark eyes landed on Kieran, and her smile grew even bigger. "Oh my god, is this *him*?"

I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

"You know that's him. You saw him at the game," Charlie pointed out as he stopped next to Serena. Nick fell into place on her other side. "Kieran, right?"

Kieran nodded. I didn't need the sour edge of his scent to tell me that he was nervous. His body language had changed. He'd been relaxed all the way up until Serena landed in front of us. Now he was tense. He reminded me of the guy I'd met on the first day of summer training. It had taken ages

to get him to relax. I swear if my pack mates had made us go back to that closed off Kieran, I would bite them.

“Are you going to introduce us, Evie?” Nick asked after a moment of painful silence.

“Nick, Serena, Charlie, this is Kieran. Kieran, this is Nick, Serena, and Charlie,” I introduced quickly. I jabbed my finger at each of my pack mates as I said their name. Not that it mattered, because Kieran didn’t seem to be paying attention.

“Evie has told us a lot about you,” Serena said in what I could only assume was an attempt to be helpful.

It wasn’t.

“Evie?” Kieran asked, one of his eyebrows raised.

Okay, maybe it was.

“Do not call me that,” I warned him. “They get away with it because they’re basically family.”

“Basically?” Nick snorted. “I’m telling Kali that you said we’re only *basically* family.”

“Speaking of, we need to go,” Charlie reminded us, practical as always.

“Nice to meet you.” Kieran’s words sounded painfully polite. Then he continued down the path. I couldn’t take my eyes off him as I watched him walk away.

“Oh, you *like* him, like him,” Serena singsonged. “I knew you were crushing, but you’ve got it bad.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, no, we are talking about this,” Serena teased. She looped one of her thin arms through mine and started dragging me toward the parking lot. Nick and Charlie followed us. “Does the human know you’re crushing on him? Or is he painfully oblivious? He seems like he might be the oblivious type.”

“What does that even mean?” Nick questioned. “How does someone seem like the oblivious type?”

“Ugh, it’s a thing. But does he know?”

I shrugged. I didn’t have an answer to that question. I knew a shrug wouldn’t be enough for Serena, but I couldn’t answer it. If Kieran knew I had a crush on him, he’d never let on. He knew I was attracted to him because we were hooking up. He knew I liked his company because we spent time together.

Maybe he did know, and if he did, I wasn't sure if it was a good sign or a bad sign.

Maybe I did need this talk with Serena, Nick, and Charlie. Maybe they could help me figure it out.

They didn't.

All they did was tease me about my crush and ask invasive questions about if Kieran and I had kissed. I'd ended up running back to campus after our meeting instead of risking round two of their questions. Besides, running as a werewolf was just relaxing. It got me out of my head for a while. I was able to just follow my instincts.

I chose to ignore the fact that every instinct led me back to Kieran.

Literally.

I ended up outside his dorm room door, listening to the quiet noises going on behind it. Which was invasive and wrong.

I forced myself upstairs to my own room and pretended that had never happened.



The next day, Kieran was back to normal. He asked me about my night with the pack and listened when I told him about our plans for the blood moon. It would be dinner at the warehouse followed by our annual run. I would probably sleep there that night, and I'd run back to campus in the morning. It wasn't like shifting back to a human before the sun came up would be an option.

He looked excited about the idea of running with me when I was shifted. I almost offered to shift right then to try it out, but I didn't.

The day was normal all the way until we got to the eleven-on-eleven drills during practice.

One minute, we were lined up. Our center snapped the ball to Eric. I started to run the route that was called, dodging and weaving around defenders. Kieran was supposed to be running another route, one that didn't take him as deep up the opposite side of the field.

Except he didn't make it past the line of scrimmage.

He was tackled even though he didn't have the ball. I heard the metallic sound of the whistle and Coach Shaw shouting at the defender who had

tackled him. I saw Eric lean down to help Kieran up. My heart was racing. Anger burned in my blood.

There was no reason he should have been tackled.

I started running toward the defender who had hit him. I was practically vibrating with rage. I could feel it happening.

An uncontrolled shift.

It had been years since it happened. Like it hadn't happened since puberty. I could feel my body trying to change shapes, and I tried to hold myself together. I forced myself to breathe, but every breath was filled with Kieran's scent. Even across the field, he was all I could smell. All I could think about.

I had to get closer to him.

He was *mine*, and someone had hurt him.

"No." One word. One simple word in Coach Eriksson's deep voice. He stepped out in front of me, almost like he'd materialized from thin air. "Hemmings, leave."

Two more words.

I didn't say anything. I just ripped off my helmet and started running toward the edge of the field. My helmet fell to the ground as I ran. I didn't stop until I hit the woods.

I doubled over as I hit the familiar trail, the same one where Kieran and I had fooled around for the first time.

Kieran, who was on the field.

Kieran, who had just been hurt.

Kieran, who was mine.

I shifted.

Every instinct in my body was screaming at me to run back to practice, to be with him. Every instinct told me not to let him out of my sight. He was in danger. He could be hurt. He could be injured right now, and I'd been sent away. No. No, I wasn't allowed. I'd been sent away. I ran faster. I went off the trail. I kept running until the anger started to ebb, but that desire to be near him didn't.

I didn't know how long I was out there before the desire to be near him became too overwhelming.

I started back toward campus.

"That was fucked up."

A voice caught my attention. I ran toward it instead of Kieran.

“Shut the fuck up, Dobson,” another voice hissed. That voice was familiar. Willis. I would know that voice anywhere. “You agreed to do it. Don’t be backing out now that Coach ripped you a new one.”

“He almost benched me!” Dobson’s voice was loud. He was shouting. “All because you can’t stand that Sawyer—”

His words were cut off by the sound of a thud. The coppery smell of blood filled the air around me. “Fuck you. He’s not better than me,” Willis hissed.

“Calm down,” another voice warned. “If you fuck this up...”

Reyes. That was the other voice.

“I’m out.” Dobson’s voice sounded like he was in pain. Good. He deserved to be in pain if he’d done something to Kieran. Because that was who they were talking about, wasn’t it? He’d said his name. He’d said *my* human’s name.

“Say anything, and you’ll regret it,” Reyes warned.

Dobson didn’t say anything back. I heard him walk away, his footsteps made louder by the crunch of dead leaves under his feet.

“You still thinking about making him pay?” It wasn’t Reyes or Willis, but the voice was familiar. I knew the voice, but I couldn’t place it.

“Yeah,” Willis answered, “and he’ll never see it coming.”

I didn’t know what they were planning on doing. I didn’t know when they were planning on doing it. When they started to leave, I followed them. I stayed at the edge of the woods, and I followed them all the way back to their dorms, but they didn’t say anything else.

Whatever they were planning couldn’t be good for Kieran.

I needed to protect him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KIERAN

Campus felt different the day of the blood moon.

It was like everyone around me was buzzing. Or *almost* everyone. None of us humans were buzzing around with that unseen energy. I heard a few humans in one of my classes talking about their plans for the night. There was a group planning on sitting somewhere on campus and watching all the monsters roaming around. It felt voyeuristic, like it was turning our classmates into some kind of sideshow.

I didn't have any plans.

Practice was canceled for the day, because it was starting to get dark by the time we finished up. The coaches knew that once the moon was up, there wasn't anything that could keep the monsters on the team in their human shapes. And as I was the only non-monster on the team, that could be a bit problematic. Might be interesting to see what all my teammates turned into and might be interesting to see them try to play football, but I could see how that might not work. Especially if any of our teammates had claws.

Might puncture the ball.

When my last class got out, I wasn't surprised to find Evander waiting outside. He'd been doing that a lot since the day he left practice early. I didn't know what had happened that day, and I didn't know what had changed, but something clearly had. I'd gone down, and he'd disappeared. Ever since then, he was practically glued to my side. He waited for me after

every class and appeared out of nowhere. Even when I was pretty sure he was supposed to be in class.

I didn't know the reason behind it, but I can't say that I minded too much. I was starting to really enjoy Evander's company.

"How was class?" he asked as he fell into step beside me.

I shrugged. "About a third of the class didn't bother showing up. The rest of them were too busy talking about their plans tonight for class to be useful." It had been a waste of time. I could've been making headway on my homework. Guess I did have plans for tonight after all. "Aren't you supposed to be in class right now?"

He waved off the question, and I decided not to poke at it. Evander was an adult. If he wanted to blow off his classes, that was on him.

"What are your plans for tonight?" There was an underlying tightness to his question that I didn't really understand.

I chose to ignore it. "Might head over to the library. Get some studying done."

His reaction to my words was immediate. His shoulders tensed up, and the smile I was so used to seeing on his face had fallen right off. His amber eyes hardened, and I felt a chill race up my spine. But when he spoke, his voice was normal. I could still hear some of that tightness there, but it didn't match the rest of his demeanor. "Or you could stay in tonight."

I raised a brow at him. Why the hell would I stay in? "Why? You think one of our classmates is going to eat me or something?"

"No."

He didn't elaborate further. That wasn't like him at all. He always had too much to say. Most of the time, I couldn't get him to shut up. I didn't like this. I needed to get to the bottom of it. I sucked in a deep breath and looked at him. I didn't want to miss any clue in his answer. "What's going on, Evander?"

"Nothing."

"That's bullshit. You've been acting weird as fuck for days." His lips tightened into a thin line. "Just tell me what's going on."

"It's nothing. Just paranoid," he told me. "After everything with the team, I guess..." He let out a small breath. "I guess I'm just worried that something might go down tonight, and I'd feel better if I knew you were in your dorm. Safe."

"I'll be safe in the library."

“Kieran.”

“Evander.”

“Can you just say you’ll stay in your room?”

“I’m not going to lie to you,” I told him with a shake of my head. “Like you said, it’s just paranoia.” We were getting closer to Karloff Hall already. “What time are you meeting the pack?”

“Grabbing a few things then heading over to Poe Hall to meet up.” He gave me one more pleading look. “Can you just promise you’ll try to be safe tonight?”

I nodded. That I could promise, because Professor Fan had said many times: no one was really in danger during the blood moon.



The walk to the library was an interesting one.

I’d never seen so many monsters in one place. I mean, I had. All semester since I’d come to Creelin, but they hadn’t all walked around looking like monsters. But tonight, under the light of the blood moon? The campus was full of monsters. I passed a giant walking tree holding hands with some normal looking guy. I passed a group of people with skin in varying pastel colors with wings. In fact, I saw a lot of people with wings or horns or tails just roaming around the campus.

There were people with glowing eyes, and I was sure I saw Coach Eriksson walking down a path. He looked taller than he did in practice, and that was saying something. The guy was already taller than anyone else on the field. I only recognized him because his skin looked just as gray as it always did, and he was the only person I knew with actual fire in his eyes. He waved to me when he saw me passing, so that was another clue of who he was.

Most of the other monsters just ignored me.

It wasn’t just the monsters that were out. I saw a few of the humans I’d heard talking in class doing exactly what they said they’d be doing: sitting on a bench and watching people walk by. For half a second, I thought about joining them. Making friends or something, but I really needed to get to the library and get a chunk of my homework done.

I thought the library might be busy when I got in there. It might have been the blood moon, but there was class in the morning. Surely even monsters had to do their homework.

But it was mostly empty.

The spot I always took when I studied, up on the third floor at a little corner table, was completely deserted. I didn't see another person anywhere. It was almost too quiet without the sounds of people walking around, talking in whispers that carried more than if they just fucking talked quiet.

After about thirty minutes, I was having a hard time focusing on what I was supposed to be doing. I was supposed to be studying a speech, analyzing it for my communications class. We had a paper due on it for our midterm. I'd watched the speech about a hundred times, so many times I could pretty much picture every movement the speaker made when I read through the words. I could almost hear his inflection.

At this point, I should have been able to write the damn paper, but I couldn't. Nothing I wrote sounded all that good. I struggled with my words for about thirty minutes before I moved on and started studying for another class.

I couldn't focus on it either.

I gave up after about two hours. I packed my beaten up laptop back into my bag and tossed my books in. I did a final check, making sure I wasn't leaving anything behind—not that it was a possibility given that I hadn't taken much out of my bag to begin with—and went downstairs. Guess Evander was going to get his way, and I was going to spend my night lounging in the dorm.

When I stepped out of the library, I noticed that things had changed. There weren't a lot of people around. The humans on the bench had gone inside. Most of the monsters that had been roaming around campus had gone somewhere else. Maybe they all had their own little things to do like Evander and his pack did. I wondered if he was having fun right now, running around, howling at the moon, and doing whatever else his pack had planned.

I'd made it halfway around the building when I heard a leaf crunch behind me.

Evander's paranoia must have bled through to me, because the moment I heard that crunch, I whipped around to see if I could see what caused it.

Nothing.

I was jumping at fucking shadows.

It had probably been a rabbit or a cat or something. I'd seen them around campus all semester long, and they'd never spooked me like they did tonight. I blamed the full moon. I blamed Evander. I blamed myself for being so jumpy. "Being a fucking idiot," I muttered under my breath before starting back toward Karloff Hall.

I'd made it three steps before I realized I wasn't being an idiot.

Two large figures stepped out of the shadows in front of me. Neither of them looked human, and I wasn't sure I could have picked either of them out of a lineup if I'd seen them in their human forms. One of them had a good foot on me. Their skin was dark blue, and they had the largest set of horns I'd ever seen in my life. The other creature next to him had expansive wings, dark red skin, and a tail that flicked like an annoyed cat. He was about six inches taller than me, and he was at least double my width.

I heard footsteps behind me, and my heart skipped a beat. I turned around, and there were three other creatures behind me, blocking me from going down the path that way. I swear, one of them looked like it was just made of shadow. Didn't even look like it was something I could touch.

My heart was pounding against my ribcage as they started walking closer to me. My fight or flight instincts kicked in, and I did what anyone in my position would do: I tried to run.

Worst idea ever.

The red creature grabbed me and flung me back into the middle of the group. I fell onto the ground, my backpack breaking my fall. I just had to hope my laptop wasn't crushed in the process. I couldn't afford to replace it, and I had hours of work and research saved on it.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going, Sawyer?" the blue monster asked in a voice that I knew.

I'd heard it in practice. I'd heard it in the locker room.

Damien Willis.

I scrambled back to my feet. I was not going to lose my shit. I was not going to let them know that they were freaking me out. "Is this some kind of hazing ritual?" I asked him, trying to keep my voice steady. I hoped some of the others would speak. Maybe I could figure out who they were.

Of course, I had my ideas.

If Willis was out here, then I'd bet my life that Reyes was too. Those two were damn near inseparable.

Willis took a step closer to me. The rest of his cronies followed suit, tightening up the circle and making it where I didn't have any room to escape.

"Why the hell would it be a hazing ritual?" Willis spat. One of his clawed hands grabbed my shoulder. I felt the bite of his claws as they sank into my skin. "Hazing means we want you to be a part of the team. We don't want that."

"No one wants that," the red creature growled. Beneath the growl was the unmistakable voice of Reyes. I wasn't too surprised. "No one wanted a *human* on the team other than the coach, and we sure as hell don't want to keep depending on one to win."

"Especially not when the human sucks," a voice behind me said. I might have recognized the voice, but I couldn't put a name to it. I was pretty sure it was some third string guy that I'd never talked to. Maybe I should have taken the time to learn more of my teammates' names.

You know, in case they ever cornered me in the dark under a full moon.

Willis pushed me backward again. I stumbled, but I didn't fall. Didn't have a chance before one of the monsters grabbed me from behind. My arms were wrenched behind my back, holding me in place.

I felt sick.

I felt fucking sick.

Never in my fucking life had anything like this happened. I might have grown up in a pretty shit part of town, but nothing like this had ever happened to me. People in my neighborhood might have had a bad reputation, but they'd always looked out for one another. It wasn't just the guy downstairs that helped me pick locks. I wished I was back there now. I wished I'd never come to Creelin University, because then I wouldn't be in this position.

"You weren't supposed to do anything other than warm a fucking bench," Willis spat.

And I do mean spat. Wetness splattered on my face.

"Which is what you'll be doing this week," another voice growled from behind me. It wasn't the guy holding me. The voice came from the left, and it was another voice I recognized: Hopkins. The same guy that had stood by

and watched me get hurt a few weeks ago. “Should’ve let you get hit harder in that game. Maybe you would’ve gotten the damn message.”

It hit me right then. This wasn’t some scare tactic. I was in actual danger.

I started to struggle, but I couldn’t break free of the death grip on my arms. The second I started to shout, a hand covered my mouth. I looked at the arm attached to the hand. It was the same guy I’d thought looked like he wasn’t quite solid, but he was. His nails bit into the skin of my jaw, muffling my attempts at shouting for anyone or anything to help me.

Campus had been bustling earlier, but now? Not a damn person outside of these guys.

The first blow to my gut hit hard, almost knocking the wind out of me. “Only reason you’re starting is so the coaches can say they got a human on the field,” Willis taunted. He drew back his fist for another powerful hit straight to my gut.

I couldn’t even double over. Not with the guy behind me holding me up.

I tried. I tried to squirm away, to fight back, but I couldn’t.

The hits kept coming, wave after wave of pain.

Willis, Reyes, Hopkins. The other two whose names I didn’t even know.

I could taste blood in my mouth after a hit to my face. I could feel wetness sliding down my cheek and jaw.

When they finally let me know, I crumbled to the ground.

I felt feet connect to my torso.

“Think he’s got the picture?” a distorted voice asked.

I couldn’t tell who it was anymore. I couldn’t tell one thing from another. My head was swimming and I was barely hanging on.

There was one more kick and a cold, bitter laugh. “Has now.”

I watched as their feet retreated, leaving me on the sidewalk.

Alone.

Bleeding.

Wrapping my body in on itself, because otherwise, I didn’t think I could hold myself together.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EVANDER

I loved running.

I loved the feel of the ground underneath my paws and the crisp fall air. I loved the way the wind ruffled my fur. I loved the sounds of the woods coming alive around me. I could hear *everything*. I could hear the sounds of the rest of the pack in the woods. They were running too. Occasionally, the night would be broken up by a familiar howl somewhere in the distance, someone calling out to see where everyone else was.

Mostly, I loved the freedom.

I never felt freer than when I was running with the pack.

There weren't any expectations. There was no pressure to be anything other than just Evander.

It was a freedom I'd never felt anywhere else.

Until I met Kieran.

He let me be free, too. His small laughs at my jokes made me feel like I was powerful. He tried to keep up with me when we ran, but he never asked me to slow down. He gave me little secret smiles that I knew he didn't share easily, because he didn't just smile to smile. Not like I did. I mean, sure, sometimes he got annoyed with all my antics, but I never felt like he was trying to make me be *less* than I was.

I missed Kieran.

I wanted to see him.

I wanted to sit outside Karloff Hall and make sure nothing happened to him.

I wasn't thinking. It was that same animal instinct that led me back to his door a few days earlier. My paws started leading me through the woods, across Creelin, back to the college.

A different smell pierced the air. It was coppery and warm and wrong. It didn't smell like fall; it smelled like ruin.

A noise caught my ear. A whimper.

His whimper.

I'd heard it when I was taking him apart in one of our beds. But this one sounded wrong. It was distorted.

Pain.

He was in pain.

I let out a loud howl that ended in a snarl.

All my instincts narrowed to one point. Him. My human. *Mine.*

I ran faster than I ever had in my life, tearing through the woods and jumping over briars and underbrush. It didn't take long to break through the tree line on Creelin University's campus.

I paused long enough to get my bearings. I was on the far edge of campus, near one of the science buildings that I'd never stepped foot into. Kieran and I had run the trail that started a few yards over just last week. A few other times too, but that was the most recent. I cocked my head to the side, my ears going rigid, as I tried to hear him again. Listening for that whimper. I breathed deep.

There.

I caught the smell of copper again.

I heard the whimper.

I took off running toward it.

I was near the library when I saw something lying on the sidewalk. I thought it was a bag at first. A really big bag. But then I noticed the slight movement, a subtle rise and fall in the middle. I noticed the way it smelled. Familiar even under the copper.

A growl formed at the base of my throat and ripped through me.

Mine.

My human.

My Kieran.

I wished I could shift back into my human form. I could call for help if I did. But the blood moon meant that I couldn't. I couldn't turn back into a man, and I just had to hope that I didn't scare him. I moved closer to him, and the smell of copper burned my nose. Underneath the copper was that sour smell I knew too well and a few others I didn't. I'd never smelled them before, and I knew I never *wanted* to smell them again.

I got closer, and I heard it. The whimper. The sound of his heartbeat, too fast.

I reached him, and I nudged him with my snout. His eyes opened a fraction, and he tried to scoot away. The sour smell grew sharper.

Fear. Anxiety.

He was afraid of me.

I whined and nudged him again.

See me. Know me. It's me, Kieran. It's me. I'm not going to hurt you.

"Ev-Evander?" he whispered.

I nudged him another time. Letting him know he was right. It was me.

I needed to get him back to the dorm. Out of danger. Somewhere safe.

I hated walking on two paws as a wolf. Some of my pack ran that way. Some of them loved it. I had never liked it because it felt wrong. I also felt like I was one of those weird dogs you saw in online videos that walked around on their hind legs like some kind of domesticated demon. They were scary, and I'd seen myself doing it. I looked scary.

But I couldn't carry him any other way. I couldn't help him.

I stood up. I reached down and picked him up, cradling him into my arms.

Kieran's arms wrapped around my neck. "Soft," he whispered.

If I could smile, I would have.

I took off running again, slower than before, careful not to jostle him. I didn't know how hurt he was. I didn't know if I was right to even take him back to the dorm. Should I take him to the campus clinic? But I couldn't. I couldn't tell them how he got hurt. Not until the sun came up and the blood moon ended and I could turn back into a form that was more *useful* to him. I didn't even know if he'd *want* to go to the clinic.

I only knew that I needed him to be somewhere safe, and the only place I knew he could be safe was with me.

We got to the door of Karloff Hall, and I realized the next problem. My key was across town at the warehouse. It wasn't like I had pockets.

I growled in frustration.

“Pocket,” Kieran groaned. “My key. It’s in my pocket.”

Oh. Right. Kieran probably had his key. Except his pockets were not made for my paws. They were made for small human hands.

He seemed to realize it at the same time I did. He slowly moved his hand to his pocket and pulled out his keycard. I held the card to the reader until I heard the quiet *click* of the lock. I used my back to push open the door and started down the hall. When we reached the elevator, I pushed the up button. Once we were on, I pushed the button to the sixth floor.

I couldn’t leave Kieran alone.

I didn’t want to assume that his roommates would be okay with a werewolf hanging around their dorm.

There was only one choice: my room.

We reached my door, and I was once again reminded of the fact that my keys were across town. I should have remembered that. Maybe I should have taken him to his room.

But I heard movement behind the door.

I kicked at the bottom of it in an attempt at knocking before I heard Kieran clear his throat. “You can put me down,” he said quietly. His voice sounded hoarse and pained, and it made the idea of putting him down a complete non-starter. Instead, I held him closer to my chest.

I kicked the bottom of the door again, and the sounds inside changed. I heard the lightest of thuds, like something was being put down. Then I heard heavy footsteps. No one in my room walked like that normally. My hackles raised.

I bared my teeth, ready to attack if someone came too close to *my* human, as the door opened.

“Evander?”

Oh. Right. Blood moon. The heavy footsteps were Preston. He’d said that he was going to stay in tonight. I’d forgotten all about it while I was running with my pack. I’d really forgotten all about it once I found Kieran.

“What’s wrong with him?” Preston asked as he noticed the man in my arms. He held the door open for me.

As soon as I got in, I started toward my bedroom. I wanted to put Kieran down somewhere soft. I wanted to put him on my bed, somewhere I knew he’d be safe. Preston followed me. I was glad that we all figured out ways to have our doors partially open when we weren’t in them. Mostly

because there had been more than one incident where one of us got locked out.

Okay, by one of us, I meant me, Ryan, and Benny. Preston never got locked out of his room, but after we had the RA in our room to unlock doors three times in one week, we figured out a way around that. And by we figured out a way, I mean we all put something small and barely noticeable at the bottom. I'd found an old drumstick at the warehouse and when no one claimed it, I decided it was the perfect doorstop. Benny used colored pencils, but they snapped a lot. He had to keep replacing them.

Preston held the door open for me so I could get Kieran into the room. I got Kieran laid out on the bed, and I noticed that Preston was still there. Leaning against the doorframe.

"What happened?"

My tail twitched. I didn't know how to answer that. Stupid werewolf tongue not being great at forming words.

"Got jumped," Kieran provided.

I growled low in my throat. I wanted to demand answers, and then I wanted to go and hunt down the people who did this to him and get my revenge. I had never been a violent person, but there were exceptions to every rule. Anyone who could do this to Kieran was the exception. They were worth my violence, and I would rip them to shreds.

"We should get you cleaned up," Preston said quietly. "I'm going to—uh, bathroom. First aid kit."

He sounded out of place.

He was out of place.

I should be the one cleaning Kieran up, but the idea of leaving his side was unthinkable. Plus I wasn't sure how I could help him. Stupid paws. Stupid lack of opposable thumbs.

Preston returned a few minutes later. He stepped close to Kieran, and another growl ripped out of my throat.

"Down boy," Preston warned.

Right. He was helping. He was *able* to help in a way that I couldn't. I fell back down onto my four paws and walked closer to the bed. I rested my head next to Kieran, just in case he needed something soft to touch while Preston did whatever he needed to do to help my human. It was the only kind of comfort I could think of giving him.

He didn't take it.

Kieran's fists clenched as Preston began to wipe him down. He moved slowly and carefully, which I appreciated. Before tonight, I hadn't known that Preston had any kind of first aid knowledge. I was grateful that he could do what I couldn't. I watched as he cleaned a few small cuts on Kieran's face. I growled when he reached down to touch Kieran's chest.

That was when Kieran reached out and touched my head. "Fuck that hurts," he hissed. I no longer cared that Preston's hand was touching *my* human. I only cared that Kieran was in pain. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to be able to do anything to help him, but I was useless. I was so useless in this form.

I suddenly hated the blood moon.

After what seemed like forever, Preston stopped doing whatever he was doing to help Kieran. He straightened up and took a few steps back until he reached the desk chair. "I think we should get him to the clinic. He might have hit his head."

I'd thought about that. Preston could come with us. He could do the talking.

My tail started to wag in agreement, but Kieran nipped that plan in the bud. "No."

One simple word.

Preston opened his mouth to argue, and Kieran sat up. "I'm fine. Hurt, but fine. I didn't hit my head. Don't need—I don't need the clinic or a doctor or anything."

Preston sighed before shrugging his shoulders. "If you need anything, let me know."

Kieran nodded. "Thanks."

One simple word. I spun around and nudged Preston's knee, my own personal way of thanking him without words. He reached down and scratched my head like I was some kind of house pet. I hated that it felt good.

Once Preston left, I sat by the bed until Kieran finally told me to get in there. I curled up in front of him, determined to stay up and guard him all night.



I did not stay awake all night.

I woke up sprawled out in my bed, Kieran's warm body tucked neatly behind mine. His arm was thrown over my bare chest. At least with the sun up, I was back to my human form.

I was back to useful.

I heard his steady breathing, and I sighed in relief. He was still okay. Nothing had gone wrong in the middle of the night. I hadn't let him down by falling asleep next to him.

I turned my head, and I was taken aback at what I saw. I could see the bruising underneath his morning stubble. There was a cut over one of his eyebrows, exactly over the slit I'd always thought was so attractive. His lip had been cut open. I wanted to kiss him better. I wanted to kiss every single injury on his face, like it would somehow fix anything.

It would probably make it all worse.

I heard him grumble before his arms tightened around me, trying to hold me still. I could give him that. I could let him sleep for as long as he needed, even if it meant that I had to lay there when my body wanted to move. The need to do whatever I could to help him was greater. I needed to take care of him. I needed to make sure he was okay.

I laid there, watching the shadows of my room change as the sun rose higher. I didn't know how long it was before he stirred again. Before his arms fell away from me and he rolled over, groaning as he did.

"Are you okay?" I asked immediately.

"Feel like I've been hit by a truck," he admitted.

I wanted to find the people who did this to him and make them feel like they'd been hit by a truck. I wanted to force them to see the damage they'd done to Kieran, and then I wanted to inflict the same damage on them. I thought the feeling would dim overnight. I thought maybe it was just the animal part of me being in control, but it wasn't. Thinking of the way I'd found him the night before was unbearable.

He'd looked so small on the concrete, curled up into himself. He'd sounded so wounded the night before, groaning every time Preston touched him.

Whoever did this to him needed to pay.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked softly.

Stupid Kieran. Why was he concerned about me? I wasn't the one that had been beaten black and blue. I wasn't the one who groaned in pain after

rolling over. I wasn't the one with a bruised face or a cut lip or memories of being attacked in the dark. I hadn't needed to be rescued.

Why wouldn't I be okay?

"Who was it? Do you know? Do you know what happened?"

I rolled over to face him as the barrage of questions fell from my lips. I needed answers. I needed to know what happened last night. Maybe when I had them, I could settle the rage boiling under my skin.

"It doesn't matter."

"How does it not matter?" I insisted. "You got attacked!"

"Drop it, Evander." His voice was ice cold, and that told me everything I needed to know.

He knew who did this to him. Maybe he even knew why this had happened to him. Dropping it was not an option. Not when it wasn't random. Hell, even when it was possibly something random, dropping it wouldn't have been an option.

"I can't," I told him bluntly. "Someone hurt you."

Didn't he understand what that meant to me?

"It's fine."

"It's not fine!" I didn't mean for my voice to get so loud. Kieran winced away from me. He looked like he was trying to shrink into my small mattress, and I felt terrible. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to shout, but it's not fine. It's not." How could I make him understand that nothing about this was okay? I sat up because I couldn't lay down anymore. I propped myself up against the cold wall and looked down at him. "Kieran, whoever attacked you, they left you there. If I hadn't found you, you'd still be out there right now."

My voice cracked as emotion welled up in my chest. I was desperate for him to understand. What would have happened if I hadn't found him? Maybe the injuries weren't bad enough that he would've bled to death or anything, but nights got cold. He could have gotten sick. It might have gotten cold enough for him to freeze to death. Maybe. I didn't know how cold it had to be for that to happen, but the fear was still there. Deep in my chest.

"Evie," he whispered. "Can you please just drop it?"

He sounded so desperate. His eyes were pleading with me, but I couldn't. I just couldn't drop it.

“Just tell me. Please?” I would get down on my knees on the dorm floor and beg if that was what it took. I needed to know. I needed to know what had happened so I could protect him from whoever had done this to him.

He let out a small sigh before shifting on the bed. He laid his head in my lap, and my heart nearly skipped a beat. Without thinking, I moved my hand down to rest on his shoulders. I was careful with how I touched him, not wanting to do him more harm than had already been done to him.

“I was walking back from the library,” he started. His voice was quiet, and when I looked down at him, he was looking across the room. I’d heard the phrase *thousand-yard stare* before, but I’d never known what it looked like until now. “They came out of nowhere. It was—it was five of them.”

I physically bit my tongue to stop myself from interrupting him. I wanted to ask questions, but it wasn’t the time. He was finally talking, and if I interrupted him, he might stop.

“I tried to run away. I did, but they grabbed me. They threw me to the ground, and when I got back up, one of them grabbed me from behind. Held me there while...” He stopped and shook his head. “It was—I’m fine. It’s over now. It doesn’t matter.”

“Who was it? Do you know? Were they humans? Monsters?” If they were monsters, it might be harder for him to know who it was. “Do you think it was personal or were you just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

He didn’t say anything. Not for a whole minute. He kept his eyes fixed on that point across the room, and I wished I could read his mind. I wanted to know what was going on in that head of his, wanted to know if he was replaying the attack over and over again.

“It was Willis. Willis, Reyes, Hopkins, and two other guys. They spoke, and I recognized their voices.”

If I thought it would help my rage, I was wrong.

It came back hotter than it had been before. My blood was on fire as it coursed through my veins.

I moved Kieran’s head from my lap and climbed out of the bed.

“Evander?” he whispered.

I grabbed a shirt from the floor, not caring if it was clean or dirty. I just couldn’t leave the dorm in the pair of basketball shorts I’d woken up in. I didn’t bother with shoes before I left the room.

I heard Kieran behind me. I heard his voice, but I couldn't make out the words.

"Where's he going?" a voice asked as I passed through the living room.

Preston. Preston, who had helped last night. Preston, who deserved an answer.

"I'm going to give them a taste of their own medicine."

"Them?" Preston asked. I could hear him moving around, but my hand was already on the door.

I left the room. I didn't care. I had only one thought on my mind, and it was to find the assholes who had hurt Kieran. Find them and let them see what it was like to be attacked. I took off running down the stairs and out of the building.

The moment I got outside, I felt my body begin to change forms. My paws hit the ground, and I was off.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

KIERAN

“I’m going to give them a taste of their own medicine.”

The harsh words sounded wrong coming from Evander’s lips. His roommate looked confused and called out his name, but Evander didn’t answer. He just took off like a shot. I wanted to explain, but I couldn’t.

Because if Evander got in trouble because of me, I’d never forgive myself. I took off running after him, following him down the stairs. My body ached with every step, and I knew I was going to regret this later. I probably should’ve just stayed in bed, but Evander needed me. He needed me to keep him from making the kind of mistake he couldn’t come back from.

The kind that would get him kicked out of Creelin or worse.

By the time I got outside, he was heading away from Karloff Hall. He wasn’t human anymore. He was a giant wolf with golden fur, bounding down the path, barreling in between groups of people who screamed when they saw him coming. Overdramatic as fuck, but I didn’t really blame them. I might have had the same reaction if I saw something like that coming at me looking feral.

Feral.

Fuck.

I might not have given a shit about Willis or Reyes or any of that crowd, but I did care about Evander. I started to run after him.

He was fast, but I'd spent all semester training with him. I'd spent all semester running uneven trails and trying to keep up with him, even when he wasn't holding back. That kind of speed built up, and the adrenaline of the moment was blocking the pain.

I followed him across campus, all the way to the practice facility. Then I saw them.

Willis and Reyes coming out of the building with shit-eating grins plastered on their faces. They didn't look like they had a hint of remorse over what had happened the night before. For a moment, I thought about falling back. Letting Evander have his way with them. I thought about sitting back and just watching as they got a taste of their own medicine.

The impulse lasted for less than a second.

I charged after Evander, fighting the urge to call his name out. I wasn't going to draw any attention to the giant werewolf barreling toward my attackers. That was the last thing he needed.

I got one last burst of speed just as he got close to Willis and Reyes. I tackled Evander to the ground. "Evander," I hissed. "Stop. Just fucking stop."

He looked at me, and I swear even if I hadn't seen him in this form before, I would have known it was him immediately. Somehow, those light brown eyes had become ones I would recognize anywhere. I kept my eyes trained on his, ignoring the burst of pain the tackle had caused me. It was worth the pain to keep him from doing something that he would regret. And I knew Evander well enough to know he would. That was my biggest priority, making sure he didn't do something that he'd regret in my name.

Evander seemed to vibrate underneath me. His body grew warmer under my touch, and a second later, the man I'd come to know was back underneath me. Replacing the furry, angry beast that had been there just moments before.

And he looked afraid. I couldn't handle that.

"Hey," I whispered. I rolled off him. "Help me up. Let's take a walk."

Evander didn't say anything. That was a first. He was never speechless. I could understand him not talking the night before. His giant werewolf tongue didn't look like it would be great at human speech, but in human form? This was extremely out of the ordinary. He stood up and reached a hand down to me. I let him pull me up. He made it seem effortless, like I weighed nothing.

He tossed one more look toward Willis and Reyes's retreating backs. They had left the steps and luckily started walking in the opposite direction of us. I couldn't be sure that I'd be able to hold him back a second time. Not if they were face to face, right within attacking distance. I pulled him in the other direction, back toward the dorms. I stopped at the first trailhead we reached. I tugged him through the opening.

We had walked a few paces before I realized where we were.

It was the same trail we'd first hooked up on.

Somehow, we always ended up back here.

We walked in silence for a few minutes before I drew up the nerve to speak. "Are you okay?" I asked him quietly.

"You keep asking about me," he muttered. "I'm not the one that got hurt."

"No, you're the one that lost your cool the moment you heard what happened," I pointed out. I wanted to sound angry about it, but I couldn't. His reaction made me feel safe. I felt safer just having him walk beside me, especially after seeing Willis and Reyes. If I hadn't had to focus on saving Evander from himself and his baser instincts, I wasn't sure how I would have reacted.

I don't know if I would've been able to remain calm and collected with the memories of their attack so fresh in my mind.

I could feel Evander's eyes on me. The same way I could that morning when I tried to tell him what happened. I'd been fighting every moment during that confession, trying to keep the memories at bay, and trying to keep the words coming. I didn't like to show weakness. At least I could trust Evander; I could trust that he wasn't judging me.

After a few moments of silence, he reached out. I looked down at his hand resting on my forearm and then back up at him. "I'm surprised you didn't lose it when you saw them," he said softly.

"I was too busy keeping you from doing something you'd regret."

Evander snorted. "I wouldn't have regretted it." I gave him a look, and he shook his head. "I mean it. I wouldn't have regretted it. I know I would have gotten in trouble, but it wouldn't have mattered. Not if they would've got what was coming to them."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "And how would that help?" I demanded. I was surprised by the anger in my voice. I didn't like Willis or Reyes or any

of the guys that attacked me. I didn't think I would ever be able to look at them after what they'd done to me.

At least it solved the one doubt that had been bouncing around my head for weeks. I'd been wondering if I belonged there, and I knew I didn't. They'd made it damn clear to me last night. But I no longer regretted coming to Creelin University. If they thought attacking me was going to drive me off the team and out of their lives, they were wrong. I was more determined than ever to make my name on that team.

They weren't going to run me off and get their way like that. Fuck that. I was too stubborn for that shit.

I was too stubborn to let Evander get himself kicked off the team on my behalf either.

He hadn't answered my question. He hadn't told me how beating them black and blue would help anything. I stared at him, arms crossed over my chest, while I waited. When he stayed silent, I shook my head. "You don't know the answer to that either, do you?" I questioned. "You know what would have happened, right? You would have gotten kicked off the team. Hell, you might have gotten kicked out of the school."

"If I got kicked off the team, I'd probably leave the school," Evander admitted. "I'm not really that invested in my degree."

I couldn't relate to that. The idea of going into all kinds of student debt for something that I didn't care about was beyond me. I'd done a lot of research choosing my major, back before I came to Creelin on full scholarship. "Are you on a scholarship? Would you lose it if you got kicked off the team?"

Maybe he didn't care because of that.

He shook his head. "Nah. I just really came to school so I could play football. Kali and Luke like it because I'll probably walk out of here with a degree and can get a decent job, but if not, I could probably learn a skill or something." He sounded so nonchalant about it all. "So, still would've been worth it."

I groaned. "Not to me. It wouldn't be worth it to me for one of our best players to get kicked off the team because he was defending *me*."

What was so hard to understand about that?

Evander tossed his hands in the air in mock surrender. "Fine, fine! I'll leave them alone."

"Thank you."

We started walking further down the trail. I wasn't ready to head back to the dorms. I wasn't willing to risk Willis and Reyes still being close or a run in with Hopkins. Not until I knew he was properly calmed down and not just trying to placate me.

We'd made it a good ten minutes down the trail before Evander spoke again. "Are you going to tell Coach Shaw?" His voice was hesitant. He almost sounded like he was afraid of what my reaction was going to be.

"No," I told him bluntly. I hadn't thought about telling Coach Shaw. Hadn't thought about telling Coach Eriksson either. I didn't think that would solve any problems on the team. Hell, telling someone might make it worse. It might make them come after me again, and this time, they might bring more people, and they might not walk away.

I didn't need to look at Evander to know the expression on his face, but I did anyway. He looked pissed, but it was my decision. I'd made up my mind. Now I just had to make Evander understand.

I had a feeling he wasn't going to just accept my decision.

I was right.

"Why not? You said that I could get kicked off the team if I attacked them, so why shouldn't they face the consequences? Coach Shaw would have something to—"

"No," I cut him off. My voice was sharp enough to cut, and I didn't give a shit that he'd winced at the loud sound. "It'll make things worse."

Evander groaned. "Either you let Coach handle this or you let me handle it."

I'd never been a fan of an ultimatum, but I knew he wasn't fucking around. I'd seen that look in his eyes when I'd told him who attacked me.

I still had to try. "I told you no. I'm not talking to Coach. You're not going after them. We're just going to drop it, play football, and say fuck them. Okay?"

For half a second, I thought maybe I'd gotten through to him. He'd cocked his head like he was weighing my words.

Nothing was ever that easy.

"No," he said, imitating the blunt tone I'd used when he'd suggested I talk to our coach about what happened the night before. "Either talk to Coach or I talk to Willis."

I'd never seen Evander look so serious. "Fine," I sighed. "I'll talk to Coach."

He reached out and took my hand. “We’ll talk to Coach. I’m not letting you out of my sight until this shit is sorted.” He looked down the trail, back where we came from. “In fact, let’s go see if he’s in now.”

Damn.

I’d hoped I’d get at least a day to think it over and hope he forgot.



As luck would have it, Coach Shaw and Coach Eriksson were in the office.

“What happened to you?” Coach Shaw asked the moment we stepped into the office.

No greeting, no nothing. No way to ease into this conversation.

Evander nudged me, causing me to wince because his elbow hit my side right on a bruise. The sound caused Coach Eriksson to look up from whatever he was scribbling on his open notebook.

His eyes narrowed. “Sit.” His voice left no room for argument. We both sat in the seats opposite Coach Shaw’s desk. Coach Eriksson rose from his seat and glided over to take his post behind Coach Shaw. “Speak.”

I couldn’t look at him. I couldn’t look at Coach Shaw either. I chose a spot on the floor, some scuff mark from another player’s shoe most likely. “I was attacked on campus last night.”

Silence fell over the office. I couldn’t look up, couldn’t look to see the expression on my coaches’ faces. The only thing that kept me grounded was that scuff on the floor and the weight of Evander’s hand landing on my knee. He gave my leg a gentle squeeze, reminding me that he was there. That this was okay.

It wasn’t. I would rather be anywhere but here.

“Tell us more,” Coach Eriksson requested. Except it didn’t feel like a request. His voice held the kind of gravitas that made it really hard to argue.

I focused harder on the scuff. It was a strange shape. It reminded me of a picture of a parallelogram from my high school geometry textbook, except it veered off at the very end. Like some kind of spotty tail leading away into nothingness.

“I was leaving the library, and I was cornered. I was surrounded. There were five of them,” I started. My eyes closed as the images began to cloud my head, as clearly as if it were happening now. Happening again. “They

said—they said some things about the team. About how I didn't belong here, took their spots, things like that."

"Do you know who it was?" Coach Shaw demanded, his voice deathly serious.

I sucked in a sharp breath before forcing myself to look up at my coaches. I couldn't look at Evander right now. "No," I lied.

Evander's hand tightened on my knee, and I knew he did not approve of my lie. I knew he wanted me to tell everything, to have Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins punished for their late-night attack. To get the coaches to pry out the names of my other attackers.

"It was the blood moon. They were—they weren't in their human forms," I told him. At least this part was honest. If they hadn't spoken, I never would have known who had attacked me. I probably could have figured it out from context clues, but there was no need to clue our coaches in on that little tidbit. "I wasn't going to say anything, but—"

"You did the right thing," Coach Eriksson interrupted. "Tell us everything, and we will get to the bottom of this."

I spent the better part of the next hour answering questions about the attack. I told them what I could remember of what my attackers had said. I described my attackers, but I left it as vague as I could. They might have wanted to figure out who was to blame for all this, but I didn't need the trouble.

Even if I gave them the names I knew, there would still be the two I didn't. There could still be other people on the team ready to take up where Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins left off.

It wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't make me safer.

After they were finished, they called up the team doctor and made me get checked out. There wasn't any real damage that they could see, but they told me I needed to sit out the next few practices. I'd probably be forced to sit out the next game, too.

Guess Willis was going to get his wish and get to start.



It was well past lunchtime when Evander and I finally made our way back to Karloff Hall. We stopped by my room long enough to get me a change of

clothes. I was lucky none of my roommates were out in the common area. I could hear the TV coming from Zay's room, and I could hear other kinds of noises coming from Ryker and Teagan's room. I sure as hell wasn't going to interrupt them to tell them what happened. I knew it would have to happen eventually, but I was more than happy to put it off.

"How'd it go?" Preston asked when we stepped into his suite. He was sitting in the same chair he'd been in when we'd left, meticulously highlighting a passage from a textbook. "Did you make them pay?"

"No," Evander grumbled. "Kieran stopped me before I could get my claws in them."

"Yeah, heaven forbid I stop you from assaulting someone," I scoffed. I wasn't going to regret that decision either. "He made me talk to our coach instead. Coach made me see the team doctor. Now, I just want to fucking relax."

"Let me know if you two need anything," Preston requested before he went back to his highlighting.

I followed Evander back to his room. The moment the door was shut, he leaned in and gave me a soft kiss. I knew he was trying to watch out for the bruising on my face and my busted lip, and I appreciated the care. He pulled back and went to sit on his bed. I sat down beside him, because the only other place to sit was that uncomfortable as all hell desk chair.

I was in enough pain.

"Why didn't you tell them who it was?" Evander asked the second we were sitting down. The way the words came out made me wonder how long he'd been holding them in.

I knew I owed him that answer, but I also knew he wouldn't understand my reasons. Nothing I said could make him see why I'd made the choice I did. I knew he'd hoped that Willis and Reyes got some kind of punishment for what they did, but I just couldn't do it.

"Snitches get stitches?" I suggested with my best attempt at a soothing smile. I could feel on my face that it was a failed attempt.

His face made it pretty damn clear too. His usual smile was nowhere to be seen. In fact, in the past twenty-four hours, I'd seen him looking serious more times than I had in the months I'd known him. I didn't like it. I'd much rather have him smiling like an idiot while he chased his own tail or got distracted by a squirrel on campus or whatever it was he was doing. This serious demeanor just looked wrong on him.

But it wasn't going anywhere.

"Not telling keeps you in danger." His voice was just as serious as his face, and it was just as out of place.

I wanted to poke him or something. Do something to put a smile back on his face. Unfortunately, with the mood he was in, I didn't think it would do either of us much good.

"And you think getting them kicked off the team would make them my biggest fans?" I questioned with a raised brow. "They'd just get more pissed. Look at it this way. I'm sitting out this week's game. They won. When Willis shows his ass off on the field and the team loses, maybe they'll realize there's a reason I'm starting over them."

Evander seemed to contemplate this for a moment. He sat stiller and quieter than I'd ever seen him. In fact, I didn't know it was possible for him to be so still or quiet. He was always moving, always talking, always tapping his fingers or doing something. He was loud and energetic, and just like that serious look on his face, this seemed *wrong*.

I needed to explain more. I needed to explain *better*. "Besides, I only know three of the five people who attacked me," I told him. "That leaves two people who could do it again. And who knows if there are other people on the team who think like they do. Friends of theirs that would be willing to join in and help them get their revenge." I shook my head. "It's better this way."

It had to be.

Evander didn't look convinced, but he nodded. "Just know I don't like it, and I don't think not saying who it was is a good idea. I just want that on the record."

"Noted." I leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. "Now can we drop it?"

He kissed me back, one of those lingering kisses that said much more than words ever could.



Even though I knew I was going to be sitting out the next practice, I made up my mind that I was going to be there.

I wanted Willis, Reyes, Hopkins, and their crew to see that they didn't drive me away. I wanted them to see me there and see that their little attack wasn't going to stop me from doing what I loved. I thought Evander might try to talk me out of it, but he didn't. He seemed happy that I was going to be somewhere he could see me.

He'd barely let me out of his sight since the night of the blood moon. I'd had to push him out of his own bed for him to go on his run this morning, and by the time I was dressed and ready for class, I had about twelve texts from him. They were all asking how I was doing, making sure I hadn't left for class, asking if I was in my dorm, stuff like that. I could read the concern in every letter, and it touched me in a way few things rarely ever had.

By the time I stepped foot out of Karloff Hall, he was waiting outside on our bench. He showed up between all my classes, and I just knew he'd skipped a class or two of his own to keep me company. Of course, when I called him on it, he told me that he was just trying to keep me safe.

At least it meant I wasn't going to have to fight him about my decision to go to practice.

We walked into the room for film study together. He tried to pull me into a seat near the back, but I wouldn't let him. I kept walking right to the front of the room, meeting Willis's shocked eyes when I passed. I noticed Dobson lean in and whisper something to him, and I had to wonder if he was a part of the group that had attacked me. None of the voices had sounded like him, but maybe some monsters sounded different than they did when they were humans.

I just knew that I didn't trust him. I wasn't sure that I could trust anyone on the team anymore, other than Evander.

That short list grew a little longer when I sat down. Marlon was sitting in front of me. He turned around to greet me, and the moment he saw my face, his gray eyes went wide. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It's nothing," I told him.

Unlike Evander, Marlon didn't push. I had the same reaction when Eric and Wes saw me. I could tell by their faces that they hadn't known what had happened. Eric looked like he wanted to go crush some heads or something. I hadn't expected him to look as pissed as Evander had. It's not like Eric and I were friends.

Maybe we could have been if I'd given him half a chance. Same for Wes. I promised myself right then that I was going to make more of an effort. I scoffed at myself. Like I hadn't made that same resolution before. I meant it this time, but then, I'd meant it the last time too.

By the time Coach Shaw and Coach Eriksson came in, almost every seat was taken. Half the team had seen my face, and more than a few of them had looked disturbed by it. I'd heard a few whispers, and judging by Evander's reaction, I knew I should be glad that I didn't have any kind of superhuman hearing. His knuckles were white. I decided right then and there that I would not ask him about the whispers, no matter how much my curiosity burned.

The coaches filed onto the raised bit of stage at the front of the room. Normally, this was when they'd start talking about what we were about to watch and what we should be paying attention to, but the screen was dark. I didn't think they'd even turned it on yet. Coach Shaw clapped his hands to get everyone's attention, and the room went completely quiet.

"Before we start, I need everyone's attention on a very serious matter," Coach Shaw began. I knew what this was about, and I kind of wished I could sink down into my seat. Disappear. Maybe I shouldn't have come to today's practice. I wouldn't have if I'd known that this was going to happen today. "Over the course of the last week, we've gotten information on what I can only hope is hazing happening on our team. This is completely unacceptable behavior, and if I ever find out who is instigating these incidents, there will be consequences."

He went on about the importance of teamwork and making sure everyone on the team felt like they fit in. He didn't go into any details, but I'd seen a few people turn to look at me. Judging by the look on Marlon's face, he'd been able to put two and two together.

And when the film started, I noticed the way Reyes was looking at me.

He'd put two and two together too.

Chills raced up my spine, and I once again questioned if talking to our coaches had been the best idea.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EVANDER

I couldn't sleep.

It had been a few days since Kieran's attack, and it was the first night I hadn't been able to convince him to stay over. I knew he had to go back to his own room at some point, but that didn't mean I had to like it. And I did not like it. Not one bit.

What if something happened when I wasn't there?

I knew that Ryker guy in his room was a trained bodyguard, but his attention was on Kieran's roommate. Maybe if something happened, he'd step in and make sure he didn't get hurt, but I didn't want to depend on him.

I wondered if Kieran would be mad if I showed up at his door. One of his roommates could let me in, and then I could get some sleep.

We had a game tomorrow. How was I supposed to play if I couldn't fall asleep?

Except it was already after midnight, and Kieran would probably already be in bed. I grumbled as I flopped over to my other side. I closed my eyes and tried to count sheep. It didn't work.



I eventually fell asleep. I was still tired when my alarm went off, and I immediately checked my phone. There were no messages from Kieran.

Nothing saying that he'd been hurt in the night. I sent him a text to tell me when he woke up, because I was already anxious.

I just needed to be around him. It wasn't my fault that every time he was out of my sight, I got nervous.

He texted about thirty minutes later to ask if I was going to go on a run and if he could join me.

Our run was slower than usual, but it was worth it. I'd missed running with him the past few days. We ended our run at the student center where we got a small breakfast. We spent the rest of the morning together, and when it was time to head over to the stadium for the game, we walked there together too.

When the game started, Kieran sat on the bench. He looked miserable. The only thing that made it not too terrible was the fact that Willis was not playing very well. He missed a catch I knew Kieran would have made. Including the last play of the game. We were down by three, and Eric threw a ball that went right into Willis's arms.

And then he dropped it.

The final buzzer sounded and we'd lost the game.

I hoped that would make Willis and his crew realize that Kieran deserved to be in the starter position. If they had any sense they would, but then if they had any sense, they probably wouldn't have attacked him in the first place. They would have trusted that our coaches made the best decisions possible for the team every time. I didn't think they'd risk everything to say they had a human starting on an all-monster team.

They could get the same kudos just having a human on the roster riding the bench all year.

I still got Kieran out of the locker room as soon as I could after the game though. I didn't trust that Willis and Reyes wouldn't start their shit again, and honestly, I didn't want him anywhere near them. I still didn't agree with his decision not to tell anyone who had attacked him. If I had my way, they would have faced some kind of consequences for their actions. Actually, no, if I had my way, they'd have been kicked off the team.

Maybe out of the school entirely.

Kieran and I ended up spending the night in his room, because I couldn't stand another sleepless night.



“You have to go to class today,” Kieran demanded as we were leaving the gym.

Unfortunately, he said it right as we were walking by Coach Eriksson. Our assistant coach was positioned by the door, watching as everyone left. Same as every practice. I noticed he never liked to leave the weight room until everyone else did. I didn’t know if it was because he wanted to lock up or make sure nothing happened. Sometimes, I wondered if he worked out on his own after we all left.

Maybe he and Coach Shaw worked out together.

It was one of those mysteries of the universe that would probably never be solved.

“Hemmings, may I speak to you?” Coach Eriksson asked.

We hadn’t even made it two steps out of the gym. I glowered at Kieran because I knew it was about what he’d said. It wasn’t like I could tell him no, though.

“Wait here?” I asked Kieran. “Or in the locker room?”

“I need a shower before class,” he told me with a shake of his head. I wanted to growl at him. Didn’t he understand that I needed to be with him to keep him *safe*? “I’ll see you at lunch, okay?”

No. He’d see me when he got out of class. Because I would be waiting outside of his classroom the way I had been for the past few days. I was smart enough not to say that in front of the coach though, so I just nodded in agreement. I watched as he walked through the glass doors to go outside before I followed Coach Eriksson back to his office.

It was the third time this season I’d been in there. I’d only been in his office *once* the season before, and it wasn’t because of any kind of trouble. This was becoming a bad pattern.

I took a seat across from his desk. For once, Coach Shaw wasn’t in there. I thought, maybe, it would mean that Coach Eriksson would sit down behind his desk. He didn’t. He stood behind it, looking down at me with his fiery eyes and grave expression. “What is it that Sawyer meant about going to class today?”

“It’s nothing,” I told him with a shrug.

“You are here for school. That requires going to class,” he told me. If his voice weren’t so emotionless, I might have felt like I was being scolded. Instead, it just sounded like a fact.

A wrong fact. "I'm mostly here for football, honestly," I answered. I gave him my most charming smile.

He did not look charmed.

"This is not a laughing matter. Are you aware that if you find yourself on academic probation, you will not be allowed to play?"

I blinked. I was not aware of that. "Doesn't it take a while to get on academic probation?" I asked. It probably wouldn't happen because I missed a week of classes. Right? I wasn't going to get kicked off the football team for missing a week of class.

"We receive midterm reports for each of our players, as well as updates throughout the semester." That did not answer my question. The flames in Coach Eriksson's eyes grew brighter. "Go to class, Evander."

Coach Eriksson never called me by my first name. He must have been serious. I sighed. "Okay."

Coach Eriksson dismissed me, and I headed right back to Karloff Hall for a quick shower. Afterward, I did mean to go to class. I really did. I even had the book for my next class in my bag, but then I passed Willis while I was walking across campus and that dread filled me again. Anything could happen to Kieran while I was in class. I wouldn't be able to protect him.

Instead of heading to my first class, I went to Kieran's. I sat on a bench by the door and waited for him to come out.

Fifteen minutes later, Kieran appeared in front of me. "I take it Coach Eriksson wasn't talking to you about class?" he asked.

I didn't want to lie to Kieran. "He did, but it's okay. I'm—"

"No, Evander," Kieran interrupted. His tone was sharp enough to draw blood. "It is not okay that you keep missing class because of me."

"I have to keep you safe," I reminded him.

Kieran pulled me back down onto the bench I'd just been sitting on. His hand covered mine. Without thinking, I flipped my hand over and laced our fingers together. The simple contact relaxed me. There was something about the casual intimacy of it that just felt... right.

"I think we need to talk," Kieran started.

Well, damn. I no longer felt relaxed. No one ever wanted to hear those words. Those words were never paired with anything good. They were only paired with bad news, but he was still holding my hand. Maybe that was a good sign. He wouldn't have held my hand in public if he was going to say

something awful, right? He wouldn't have this conversation in public, either.

I braced myself for the worst. Just in case. "Okay."

"Calm down," he started. "It's nothing bad. We need to talk about your... God I don't even know what to call it. Your compulsive need to protect me? The fact that it's interrupting your normal life?"

Oh.

Well, at least he wasn't saying that we needed to stop hanging out together. That would be impossible for me. Not just because we had to see each other on the team, but because my feelings for him had just gotten too big.

"Can I blame it on being a werewolf thing?" I asked him because it was easier than mentioning my feelings.

I didn't want to scare him off.

Kieran shook his head. "No. You can say that you'll relax. Just a little bit. You can say that you'll go to class. You can tell me what I can do to help you with your fears. That will let me protect you."

"I don't need protecting," I grumbled. I wasn't the one that had gotten attacked. I wasn't the one being targeted by disgruntled teammates.

Kieran rolled his eyes at me. He actually rolled his eyes. "You need protecting from yourself," he clarified. His voice sounded like he was talking to a child.

"No, I don't."

And now I sounded like a child. Damn it.

"Evie, just let me protect you, okay? I'll let you protect me, but you have to let me protect you, too. That means going to class, and I'll do what I can to help make you feel better when we're not together."

"You could give Coach Shaw the names," I suggested. "That would help me feel like you were a little safer."

He gave me a look so sharp that it wouldn't have surprised me if I'd started bleeding. "No."

I wasn't surprised. I'd spent a lot of time the last few days trying to get him to change his mind, but he kept stubbornly refusing. He kept repeating the same reasons, like hearing them for the fiftieth time would convince me that he was right.

"You want to protect me, but you're the one—"

“This isn’t about me,” Kieran interrupted. “This is about you not going to class. How about we figure out how you can start going to class without freaking out?” I opened my mouth to make the same suggestion I’d already made, but he talked right over me. “One that doesn’t include talking to either coach.”

I knew I wasn’t going to win this argument right now, so we came up with a few things he could do to help ease my mind—mostly just texting me that he got to class safely—and then, for the first time since I’d known him, Kieran walked me to class.



The texts helped.

Some.

I still got twitchy every time I was away from him. Unfortunately, I had a class with Serena, and she noticed.

It wasn’t like it was hard to miss. The entire time I was in class, I was checking my phone. I was tapping my fingers on the desk. When Serena shushed me, I moved to tapping my foot instead. The moment the professor released us from class, I was off like a shot.

I wanted to get to Kieran’s class before he got out. Which wouldn’t have been a problem if *someone* hadn’t decided to follow me. “Can you slow down?” Serena demanded as she jogged to catch up with me. “I promise your boyfriend will still exist if you’re away from him for like five minutes.”

Her words stopped me dead in my tracks. “Kieran isn’t my boyfriend.”

“Isn’t he?”

“No,” I insisted. I started walking again, slower this time. That way Serena could keep up. I didn’t want to listen to her bitch, and besides, she was deceptively strong. She’d probably yank my arm and make me slow down. It wouldn’t be the first time. “We’re friends. Friends who hook up, but just friends.”

“And yet, you’re rushing to meet your *friend* at his classroom. You left the blood moon because you had a bad feeling about your *friend*. You refuse to leave your *friend*’s side because something bad happened to him,” she

listed out. Every time she said friend, she seemed to add more emphasis to the word. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Why couldn't she just believe me?

Instead, I decided to focus on one thing she said. "I wasn't wrong. And it wasn't just a bad feeling. I heard him. I could smell him across town, and he was *hurt*. I could smell his blood, and I heard him whimper. That's not just a bad feeling."

Serena laughed. "You still haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

I stopped again, whipping around to face her. I was so confused. What was I supposed to figure out? I knew I had a crush on him, so that couldn't be it. "I have," I told her. I hated that she was going to make me say this out loud to her before I ever said it to him, but I knew that if I didn't, she would never let it rest. "I know I like him."

Serena blinked once, twice, three times. She looked at me like I was completely lacking in brain cells. "Oh my God, Evie, not *that*. That is just obvious to literally anyone who has ever seen you near Kieran." No, it wasn't. Was it? "You haven't figured out the smell thing yet, have you?"

The smell thing? What was she talking about?

I shook my head.

"Did you ever pay attention to anything Kali and Luke said about werewolves?" she asked with a laugh. "Like some of the little idiosyncrasies of our species?"

I nodded. She didn't look like she believed me. Probably because whatever she was talking about was something she'd learned from our pack leaders. It was probably something I should already know.

"When a werewolf meets someone that they're really compatible with, they smell really good to them," she explained. "Kali said she didn't think it was any kind of mate thing, because there can be multiple people that smell really good. And they don't always work out, you know?" I didn't know, but I nodded anyway. "Luke thinks it has to do with the fact that we're social animals by nature. Maybe it helps werewolves who don't have a pack find someone that can be *theirs*, but Kali thinks that's silly. Otherwise, it would always be another werewolf, and it's not."

"What do you think?" I asked.

Serena shrugged. "Never gave it much thought."

I started walking again. Serena and I talked for a few more minutes, but then I saw Kieran. He was walking out of his building. My face split into a

smile, and Serena nudged me with her arm. “Go get your boy. I’ll catch up with you later.”

I didn’t need to be told twice.



The rest of the week passed quickly.

When I wasn’t in class, I was with Kieran. He insisted that we sleep in our own rooms the night before our game, but since it was an away game, it meant I got to sit with him on the bus instead of going to my boring science class. We sat at the front of the bus, and I noticed that a few people who normally sat further back chose to sit near us.

I wasn’t surprised to find Marlon sitting across the aisle from us. He had gotten close to Kieran, and I was even starting to trust him. Eric and Wes sat directly behind us. They’d figured out what had happened. Maybe not who was involved, but that our coaches’ speech before practice the week before had been about Kieran. Afterward, Eric had come up to make sure Kieran was okay and let him know that not everyone thought hazing new teammates was funny.

The game was amazing.

Unlike last week, our offense played like a well-oiled machine. Our defense was on fire, blocking and tackling like nobody’s business. It probably helped that the team we were playing did not have a winning record, but I was taking the positives where I could.

And the positives were that Willis and his lackeys could see that Kieran was the better player. Eric even helped with it by feeding Kieran a deep ball at the end of the game that resulted in a touchdown. It hadn’t been the game winner or anything, but it was highlight reel material. It was the kind of touchdown that our opponents would be watching in film study for the rest of the season.

I was beaming with pride the entire ride back to campus.

I was even more excited when I caught a whiff of my pack mates as we filed into the locker room. They were close by. Probably waiting to hear how the game went.

I think my excitement was the reason it happened. Somewhere between going into the locker room and leaving, I lost sight of Kieran. I didn’t

realize he was gone until I grabbed my bag and went over to his locker so we could walk back to the dorm. I grumbled under my breath and left.

As expected, Serena, Nick, and Charlie were waiting outside the stadium. I'd hoped Kieran would have been with them, but I didn't see him.

"How was the game?" Nick asked.

"We won," I announced with a bright smile. "Kieran got the final touchdown, and you should have *seen* Willis's face. He was so fucking red."

Charlie gave me a look I couldn't decipher. "Is that who did it?"

Fuck.

I'd been so careful not to name names. Not even with my pack. I might not have agreed with Kieran's decision, but I couldn't betray him. The worst part was that I had no poker face, so I knew the answer was plain as day. Of course, Willis was one of the people who attacked Kieran.

I didn't have to answer. I could see it on their faces. My silence and expression were all the confirmation they needed.

"Where is Kieran?" Nick asked after an awkward moment.

"I think he left before I did. Not like him, but maybe he was tired. I hoped he'd be out here, but I guess I'll see him back at the dorm." I shifted nervously, looking back at the building. Where was he?

"Which you're anxious to get back to, because being separated from your emotional support human is literal torment?" Serena teased.

I flipped her off, but I couldn't tell her she was wrong when she wasn't. I really wanted to get back to Kieran and know that he was safe.

We took off toward the dorms while I told them about the game.

We hadn't made it very far when I heard it.

Behind me.

There was the sound of a body being pushed against a building. I heard Kieran grunt. I stopped and immediately summoned my good ears, trying to determine exactly where the noise had come from.

I whipped around, shifting as I ran toward the sound. I felt the change in energy behind me and heard the beat of three sets of paws on pavement. When I looked over my shoulder, my pack had shifted. I charged back toward the stadium. I saw the figures from a distance. Three figures crowding in the shadows.

I growled and jumped into battle, ripping the largest person away from *my* human.

I landed on him, ready to maul and maim. The other two attackers were pinned down by Serena and Nick.

“Evander, no!” Kieran’s voice was loud and scared, and it forced me back to my senses.

I shifted back to my human form, but I tightened my grip on Willis. “Do you really think you’re doing anything?” I demanded as I looked down at him. Now that I had my human hands back, I had the urge to punch him.

I must have been radiating that kind of energy because Charlie pulled me off him. “You’re not helping anything either,” he said calmly. He looked over at Serena and Nick. “Both of you, off.”

They complied immediately. It was rare that Charlie got demanding, and every time he did, we couldn’t help but listen. He turned his attention to the prone forms of Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins. “You three, up.”

I don’t know what it was, but they scrambled right back to their feet. Maybe one day Charlie would take over the pack. He had that commanding presence thing that Kali had down pat.

I took a step closer to Willis and his cronies. “If I hear that you’ve touched *my* human one more time, no one will be able to stop me,” I warned.

Willis laughed. He *actually* laughed at me. “Like I’m scared of you? You’re not scary, Sawyer. Even when you’re all wolfed out. You’re about as scary as a damn golden retriever.”

I wanted to prove him wrong. Let him see that I might be a nice guy, but I wasn’t one to mess with.

Especially not when it came to Kieran.

I was stopped by the familiar pressure of a hand on my shoulder. I didn’t need to turn around to know it was Kieran. I didn’t even need his all-too-familiar scent. I would know him anywhere. I could just feel him.

He stepped up beside me, staring down his attackers. “This is the last time,” he told them with a shake of his head. “Because now I can see you. There’s no mistaking who you are, and there are witnesses.”

I saw fear register on Willis’s face.

“Meaning tomorrow, you’re done.” Kieran looked at each of the boys who had attacked him just for being a human on the team, for outperforming Willis, for whatever other bigoted reasons they might have.

Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins looked at each other and back at Kieran. Despite the fear on his face, Willis still had to push things. “You’re not

going to do anything.”

Kieran took a step closer to them. I could feel the rage coming off him, warm in the cool fall night. When I took a deep breath, I could smell him, but there wasn't a trace of that sour anxiety I'd come to know. He locked eyes with Willis, and I saw the way his lips curved upward into a dark smile. “You're right, because I'm not like you.”

Kieran pushed past his attackers, and my pack and I followed him.

I was surprised when Kieran didn't go toward the dorms. Instead, he went back to the gym. He found Coach Eriksson and Coach Shaw outside and asked if he could speak with them.

We went to their office, and Kieran told them everything.

I was so proud of him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KIERAN

Tonight hadn't gone the way I thought it would.

One minute, I'd been ecstatic at the fact that we won our away game. I was riding high on a last-minute touchdown. I knew it was the kind of play that professional recruiters could watch to see what I had to offer. If I decided to try going pro after college. I was still on the fence about that. I was also buzzing on Evander's contagious energy. He'd been excited when we got off the bus because he could tell that some members of his pack were hanging out by the stadium. Probably waiting to hear how the game went.

He'd been buzzing with energy, which probably explained why he wasn't still in the locker room when I got back from the bathroom.

I didn't mind. As much as I loved his company, it was nice to have a short break from the possessive werewolf. I figured I'd text him when I got back over to Karloff Hall, and then we'd meet up when he was done hanging out with his friends. If I passed out before then, I'd meet up with him in the morning.

Then things took a turn.

I'd barely made it outside the stadium when I was grabbed and pushed against the building. Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins crowded around me, and this time, they didn't bother changing into their monster forms. Maybe they thought that since I hadn't identified them to our coaches, I wouldn't if they

fucked with me again. Before they could do anything, Evander and his pack were suddenly *there*.

Everything was a blur from that point. One minute, I was being pinned and I knew I was about to get my ass kicked again. Well, I figured they were going to *try*, because I wasn't going to make it easy on them this time. The next, Evander was pinning Willis to the ground, and two other wolves had his friends. Then suddenly, the wolves were gone, replaced by their human selves, and Evander was making threats.

I'd never heard him like that before.

It ended in our coaches' office. I told Coach Shaw and Coach Eriksson everything. I gave them details I'd left out from the initial attack. I told them how I'd felt targeted all season with examples. I told them about tonight's attempted attack, and Serena, Nick, Charlie, and Evander gave their points of view. Evander told Coach Shaw about something he'd heard in the woods before the blood moon. We answered questions, and they told us they'd look into everything.

After tonight, I knew I had to draw a line, and I did.

I thought I'd be exhausted when we finished, but adrenaline coursed through my veins the whole walk back to Karloff Hall. Adrenaline and the need to talk to Evander about something he said during the confrontation, something I didn't even know if he *realized* he said.

But the words were hanging in my head like moths around a light, and I knew that nothing would put it out of my mind.

"Can we go to your room?" I asked him as we waited for the elevator.

"You're staying tonight?" he asked. I swear if he still had his tail out, he'd be wagging it. He looked that excited.

When we got to his room, I wasn't surprised to find Preston still studying in his chair. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd seen him anywhere other than the chair, and that included the cloudy memories of the night I got attacked when he helped clean me up and tried to convince Evander to take me to the campus clinic. We waved as we passed him, but he didn't even look up.

The moment we pushed into Evander's room, I grinned. "Does Preston ever leave that chair?"

"To go to class and to go to bed," Evander answered with a laugh. "We've just accepted that it's his chair."

“What about your other two roommates?” I’d seen them in passing, but I hadn’t really gotten to chat with them much. Same as Evander with my roommates, I supposed.

Evander shrugged. “They’re around. When they’re in the suite, they’re either in one of their rooms or playing video games on the couch. But they have a lot of friends, so they’re not here a lot.”

So, from what I understood, the typical college experience of the non-athlete. Well, the non-athlete that actually got along with people outside of a select few they’d spent too long making their mind up about.

I had a few more questions, ways to ease into the conversation I wanted to have with him, but I didn’t get a chance.

Evander swooped down and kissed me hard on the mouth. My arms went around him immediately, pulling him in closer to me. I lost myself in the way his tongue parted my lips, in the touch of his hands on my body as he tugged off the Creelin University Football shirt I’d put on after the game. I could have just let that kiss carry me away, and I would have done it gladly.

But those words came back into my head.

My human.

I pulled away. “What did you mean earlier?”

Evander furrowed his brow in confusion as he stared at me. He looked cute, all confused like that with his kiss-wet lips. I almost wanted to say fuck finding out what the words *my human* meant, but I knew it would just be bouncing around up there the whole time. Better to get it all out in the open, find out if it meant what I thought it did.

And if it didn’t, better to walk away with a bit of dignity.

Unfortunately, those words hadn’t seemed to have left the same impact on Evander the way they had me. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

I groaned. “When you said if they touch your human again. What the hell does *your human* mean?”

I saw color rise to Evander’s cheeks as he turned around and started busying himself with straightening the blankets on his bed. I wasn’t having that. I reached out and touched his shoulder, squeezing with just enough pressure to get him to turn back around. “C’mon, Evander, tell me.”

He sighed. “Just what it sounds like,” he finally said.

Well, that clarified exactly nothing.

“What does it mean?” I repeated.

Evander looked like he was in physical pain from my questioning. I almost felt guilty about it, but I needed answers. It wasn't the kind of thing someone could say and not have to explain. "It means you're mine," he finally said. I grumbled because that wasn't an answer. It was just repeating what he'd already said. "I don't know what else to say, Kieran. It means I care about you. I *like* you, but you already know that."

I must have had a strange look on my face because Evander stopped dead.

"You did know that, right?"

I laughed. "I had a feeling, but I didn't know what kind of like it was," I admitted. "I know we're friends. I know we have great sex. I know—"

"I don't feel like just friends with you," he interrupted. Evander reached out and cupped my face. "I haven't for a long time. I..." Evander's face somehow got redder. It made his freckles stand out even more, and he looked so adorable. "That's what *being mine* means. To me, at least. It's okay if you don't feel the sa—"

I cut him off with a hard kiss.

Of course, I felt the same. I didn't know when the feelings had started, but I knew they were there. They were undeniable. They'd only gotten stronger after the blood moon, when he showed me the kind of care that no one else ever had. I'd told Pops about him, for crying out loud. My feelings for him had snuck up on me, but I'd never even thought of telling them to him. Not because I feared they weren't reciprocated, but because I didn't know how to have that conversation.

My human had unlocked all that.

My human had made it impossible not to have the conversation.

My human had warmed me up, and I knew that it was what I wanted.

I wanted to be his, and I wanted him to be mine. I pulled away from the kiss one more time, just to make sure he was aware of this fact. "I am yours," I told him. "At least, I'll be yours, if you promise that you'll be mine."

His forehead rested against mine, and I could feel the words warm on my lips. "I've been yours for a very long time."

I closed the space between us, kissing him gently. I wanted him to feel everything I was feeling. I wanted to tell him how much this all meant to me. I knew there were things for us to work out, but we had all the time in the world for that. Right now, I wanted to seal our claim on each other.

I wanted to seal my claim on him.

I walked him backward toward the bed. The moment he got there, he lowered us both down onto it. The blanket he'd just straightened got wrinkled by our combined weight. Our kiss got hotter the longer it went. I might have been trying to put all kinds of emotion into the kiss, but that didn't mean that it had to be chaste.

I didn't want it to be chaste. I wanted to consume him, and I wanted to fill him with every emotion I wasn't great at saying. I wanted him to know how much he meant to me, how much I wanted him, and how much I needed him. I wanted every touch of my hand on him to relay the way he'd touched me. Not just physically, but emotionally.

Evander seemed to be putting the same kind of motivation behind every single one of his touches. I felt promises in the way his tongue slipped into my mouth. I felt security in the way his arms wrapped around me. I felt desire and want and care and every other little thing I wanted to make him feel.

I reached down to the hem of his shirt and lifted it. It was the first time our lips had come apart in a while, and I took advantage of the pause to catch my breath. He used that space to get rid of our shirts. I have to say, his was the better use of time.

I groaned as he started kissing my neck, a groan that turned into a full moan when he bit down and started to suck. I knew what he was doing. He was marking me as his, somewhere visible. I wasn't normally a big fan of hickeys, but in this case, I wanted it. I wanted to walk around with everyone knowing that I was his.

My head fell backward, making it easier for him. I ground down on his growing bulge, desperate for just a little more. It must have worked, because he pulled his lips away and rolled us over so I was underneath him. His hips ground down against me, and I could feel his hard cock on my thigh, right through the fabric of our sweatpants. The friction and his weight on me were driving me mad. The longer it went on, the more desperate I was becoming.

I wanted more touching.

I wanted more everything.

I flipped him over and started kissing down his chest, stopping to flick my tongue over his nipples. His back arched into the kiss, especially when I bit down. He moaned the further down I kissed, and damn, it did something

to me. By the time I got down to his waistband, I could see the full outline of his cock straining against the fabric. I felt like I was doing him a favor when I tugged down his black Creelin branded sweats right along with his underwear.

He lifted his hips to make it easier, and I slid them right down his legs. He was naked underneath me, and I was enamored by the sight. Same as I was every time. I wanted to count the freckles that covered his body, draw constellations between them with my tongue.

Actually, that didn't sound like a bad idea.

I found a few freckles on his inner thigh and started to connect them with the tip of my tongue, drawing a heart and then a star. His thighs tightened, and he let out a whine that sounded almost as animalistic as the noises I'd heard him make in werewolf form. I followed the freckles up higher. Every stroke of my tongue made him breathe heavier, brought out new noises, made me more desperate.

Then, I sucked his balls into my mouth, and he let out the kind of moan that traveled right through my core. My cock throbbed at the sound, and I knew this was exactly what we both needed. This was how I was going to show him that he was just as much mine as I was his.

I teased his balls with my tongue for a few moments longer before licking a stripe up the underside of his thick cock. There was a shining bead of precum on the tip, and I lapped it up, moaning at the taste. I'd come to get addicted to the way he'd tasted in the time we'd been hooking up, and I loved it even more now. Now that I knew that I was the only person who was going to be getting to hear these sounds or taste him.

It all belonged to me.

I was his, and he was mine.

I swallowed him down after teasing his tip, taking him as far as I could and wrapping my hand around the base to make up the difference. I felt him adjust underneath me, and when I pulled back long enough to look, I found his knees bent and feet planted at the foot of the bed. I took him back down, and he began to thrust up. I matched his thrusts, working with him to give him as much pleasure as I could.

I kept going until he stopped thrusting up and called out my name. "Too close, too close," he panted out.

I didn't want it to be over yet, so I pulled off him with a pop. Our lips collided again. While we kissed, he pushed down my pants. My cock broke

free and slid against his spit wet shaft. The feeling was overwhelming. Shit, I hadn't realized how worked up I'd gotten just from sucking him off. I almost had to call it quits because this wasn't how I wanted to get off.

I wanted to get off *in* him.

I wanted to feel his warmth wrapped around me.

It was one of the few things we hadn't done yet. I'd spent too much time injured this semester, between getting hurt on the field and getting jumped at the blood moon. Hadn't really been conducive to finally taking that step with him, to figuring out what he felt like wrapped around me. I pulled away and looked down at him.

"I want to fuck you," I whispered.

Because if that wasn't what he wanted, then I wasn't going to push. The first time we'd hooked up, he said he liked it both ways, but if he preferred being the one to fuck me every time, then I was more than okay with that. But damn, did I want to claim him the way he'd claimed me. I wanted to make him as much mine as I was his, and this felt... I don't know. This just felt like the best way to do it.

Evander's amber eyes went wide before he nodded. He rolled over, scrambling to get into the little table by his bed. He yanked out the bottle of lube and a condom and thrust them at me.

"I take it that's a yes?" I asked him with a laugh.

"A hell yes," he agreed, flopping over to his stomach and spreading his legs wide. "I've been..." He looked over his shoulder at me, and I saw the redness spread across his cheeks again. "I've wanted to know how your cock feels inside me since the first time I touched it."

I might not have needed an ego boost, but I wasn't going to complain about getting one anyway.

I did need one other thing. I draped my body over his and gave him another kiss. This kiss was full of promise. Not just promise for tonight but promise for the future.

My cock slid between his cheeks while we kissed, catching the sensitive skin around his hole. We moaned into the kiss, and I was going to lose it. I needed more than just this. I needed him. I needed every bit of him. I forced myself away from his lips and back up to my knees.

I grabbed the bottle of lube and spread his cheeks, drizzling the cool liquid over his hole and then over my fingers. I worked my first finger inside him, slow as I could. His hole threatened to suck me in further. God,

if it felt this tight around one finger, I wasn't sure how I was going to survive having this hot heat wrapped around my cock.

I took my time though, opening him up with one finger and then two. By the time I was stretching him with three fingers, he was whimpering and whining underneath me. Begging for more. Begging for my cock. I didn't know how much longer I could take his begging before giving him what we both wanted.

"Just fuck me already," Evander panted when I thrust my fingers deeper in him.

I pulled my fingers out and grabbed the condom. I ripped the foil open with my teeth and slid the latex over my shaft. I slicked myself with lube and poured more over his hole.

While I got ready, he did too. He changed his position, pulling himself up onto all fours. "Really?" I teased as I grabbed one of the round globes of his ass. "Doggie style?"

He laughed. "Can't help if it feels good."

Our laughter combined, and honestly, it made the whole thing even hotter. It was hot to be doing this with someone who knew me so well, someone who could tease smiles and laughter out of me. I knew it wasn't always an easy task, but Evander somehow made it seem effortless.

Because he knew me.

I lined my cock up with his hole.

He knew me, and he'd chosen me. He'd claimed me, publicly in front of our teammates and privately in his room. He'd claimed me time and time again.

I started to push past the tight ring of muscle.

Evander had looked at every person on this campus, and he'd somehow chosen me. He'd pushed past all my barriers, all my walls, and he'd snuck his way into my heart.

I pushed in further.

Just like he had. He'd made himself a home in my heart.

When I bottomed out, I wanted to make myself a home right there too. I stayed still, giving him time to adjust. Then a moment longer, because damn did it feel good to be buried balls deep into him. It was hot, seeing the way his hole stretched around my cock.

Evander moved first.

Just like he had at every moment of our relationship.

He pulled himself away and then slammed himself back, taking me deep.

I cried out in pleasure, and then I took over. Our bodies moved together. Every movement sent pleasure jolting through my body. It was overwhelmingly good, and I couldn't stay quiet. I almost felt bad for Evander's roommates, having to hear us go at it.

Almost.

How could I feel bad for them when I was so focused on the way Evander's body felt? I leaned over him, wrapping one arm around his chest and bracing the other on the bed as I drove into him. My lips found the back of his neck, his shoulder, anywhere I could. I kissed and bit and sucked at his skin as I fucked into him. Evander whined and moaned and strained his neck trying to turn around to kiss me back.

I needed to feel his lips on mine again.

I pulled us both up onto our knees. The change in position made my vision white out for a moment, but I didn't need to see to continue to drive my cock into him. His back stuck to my chest with sweat, but I kept holding him tight. One of my arms snaked up to his face, pushing lightly until he turned his head.

I captured his lips with mine.

Our tongues matched pace with our bodies. The feeling of pleasure changed. It was just as good, but it felt more intimate.

It changed from having sex to making love.

Love.

Fuck. I loved him.

My lips froze against Evander's.

"Everything okay?" he asked quietly. His voice was ragged and panting, but it was oh so concerned. His lips moved against mine with every word.

I couldn't hold back. I knew I should, because the least romantic time to make a love confession was when I was balls deep into him, but I could no longer fight it. "I love you." The words tumbled out of my mouth and into his.

His body stilled against mine. We were frozen in a moment. Time stood still while I waited for his reaction.

"I love you too," he whispered.

Fucking him from behind no longer felt right. I pulled out of him. "Onto your back," I whispered. "I want to look at you."

He nodded and repositioned himself. He shoved a pillow under his lower back, and I found my way back into his heat moments later. We went slow at first, whispering confessions of love as we kissed, until it got to be too much.

I pushed his knees up to his chest, and I began to drive into him. His hand wrapped around his cock, and he began to stroke. "I'm so close," he cried out. "I'm so close, Kieran. I'm so—"

I wanted him to cum. I wanted to feel him tighten around me as he reached that peak.

I got my wish moments later. Ropes of cum shot from his tip, painting our chests. His channel tightened around me, and within a few thrusts, I was filling the condom. My thrusts were erratic and uneven, and I had only one goal in mind.

When I finally finished, I collapsed down onto his sticky chest and kissed him again.

We kissed until he whined. "Too sensitive."

I pulled out, pulled off the condom, and tied it off. I tossed it into the trash can before we began to kiss again.

He was mine, and I loved him.

I was his, and he loved me.

And nothing had ever felt more right in my entire life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EVANDER

I spent the first day of my new relationship with Kieran plotting and planning. Scheming, actually. I was sending off secret texts and making plans that 100% involved my boyfriend and he couldn't know. Not until I was able to put all these plots and plans and schemes into action.

Which I was able to do on Sunday.

We spent the first half of the day together. We went for our run and then we got a quick breakfast. When we went back to my dorm, Ryan and Benny were playing some racing game on the couch. Kieran looked interested, and we ended up playing with them for the rest of the morning. I'd never seen Kieran so engaged with other people. He was laughing and shit talking, telling stories about playing the same game with the few friends he had back home.

I realized it was one of the only times I'd ever actually heard him talk about the friends he'd left in his hometown. I had a feeling the list just wasn't that long. He talked about his dad and customers at his dad's bar a lot more than he did anyone our age. I think watching him cut up and joke around just made me love him more. It also made it a lot harder to leave him at lunchtime.

But he thought I had lunch plans with Kali and Luke.

I walked him to the library, and I told him that we'd meet up later. When lunch was over.

The second he walked through the glass doors of the library, I turned around and started setting my plan in motion. I met up with Eric and Wes and gave them several envelopes to hide around campus before heading off to the trail. Serena was waiting there with a few shopping bags of supplies. We worked fast, getting everything set up. I didn't even have to worry about Kieran being safe, about any kind of repercussions from Willis and his crew, because I knew Nick and Charlie were nearby. They were keeping an eye on him for me, so that I could plan this perfect moment.

I left Serena in the woods with everything set up so I could rush back to the dorm and get dressed.

An hour later, I got texts from Wes and Eric, wishing me luck and telling me that they'd set up their part. I practically ran back to the woods to relieve Serena.

Ninety minutes later, I got a text from Charlie saying that Kieran was on the move.

Almost three hours after I'd left Kieran in the library, I heard the snap of twigs and crunch of leaves on the trail. I took a deep breath, one that filled my lungs with Kieran's presence. I swallowed down the familiar notes of his scent and felt a sudden calm rush over me. Which was good, because a moment later, he stepped into view.

He was still wearing the same jeans and tee shirt he'd been wearing when I saw him that morning. His backpack was slung casually over one shoulder, and he had a white card in his hands. When I first saw him, he looked so confused.

Then he saw me, and he smiled.

"What is this?" he questioned.

I took a step forward, away from the picnic blanket I'd set up in the middle of the trail. "It's a date," I told him. "I mean, not just a date. If it was just a date, I would have just texted you to meet me. It's also... It's also a question."

Kieran's eyes widened and filled with fear. "Evand—"

"Oh God, no! Not that question," I interrupted so fast my words slurred together. It hadn't even occurred to me that going through all these steps would make him think I was proposing to him. We hadn't even been officially dating for three days! We hadn't even known each other for three months! I might not have been the best thinker in the world, but even I

knew that was rushing things a little. “This question is a lot less permanent. Less serious too,” I promised him.

He raised his slitted eyebrow at me.

I took a deep breath. I didn’t know why I was so nervous. It wasn’t like this was the kind of question that could make or break our relationship. It was just the kind of question that determined my plans for next weekend.

“Spit it out, Evie,” Kieran teased.

I relaxed. The teasing was exactly what I needed to remind myself that it was just Kieran. He wasn’t just the guy that I loved. He had also become one of my best friends, the person I could be myself with. I didn’t need to hype myself up just to spend time with him. “The Halloween Ball is next weekend,” I started. Kieran nodded, and I could see the start of a smile forming on his lips. “Would you, maybe, like to go to the dance with me?”

Kieran’s smile grew wider. He closed the distance between us in just a few steps before wrapping his arms around me. “Might not be too into dances, but I’ll go with you,” he answered before giving me a quick kiss.

I couldn’t restrain myself.

My arms wrapped around him. I lifted him up and spun him around in a circle laughing. I gave him another kiss. Which turned into another, and then another, and then a repeat of our first hookup right on the picnic blanket I’d put down.

We did end up eating.

Just later than I planned.



The Halloween Ball was the Saturday before Halloween.

Kieran gave me a kiss goodbye that morning because he said he wanted to surprise me with his outfit. I wasn’t as anxious being away from him because Willis, Reyes, and Hopkins had been expelled on Monday. So had the other two attackers: a third string receiver and a member of the offensive line whose name I didn’t even remember. Dobson, the right guard who had missed the tackle that practice he’d gotten hurt, had spilled everything he knew to Coach Shaw when things started coming out.

He was suspended for a game, and he apologized to Kieran.

It wasn't enough to make me or Kieran forgive him, but at least I didn't have to worry that he'd try to seek revenge for his friends.

I found myself waiting for Kieran outside the dorm later that night. He'd texted me to tell him to meet him at our bench, and I thought that meant he'd already be down there. Instead, he made me wait a good five minutes before I felt his hand on my shoulder. I'd been watching the door, waiting for him to come out, and he'd somehow managed to sneak up behind me. It was rare that anyone could sneak up on me; it was even rarer that he could.

I was usually too tuned into him for that.

I turned around to face him, and my breath was taken away. He was wearing a dark gray suit and a thin tie that looked fancy. Instead of his usual sneakers, he was wearing a pair of black dress shoes. They were polished to a shine, and I was adequately impressed.

I was more impressed by the fact that he had a small box in his hand. He opened it and took out a light blue flower in a ribbon that looked the same as his tie. "I got Nick to tell me what colors you were planning on wearing," he admitted as he pinned the flower to my lapel. "I wanted to get you something special. Since you put together that whole scavenger hunt thing to ask me."

My cheeks hurt with how hard I was smiling.

I fingered the soft ribbon tied around the stem of the flower. "This is a silly question, but is this red or green?"

"Green. Same as my tie," he answered without thinking. Then, it was almost like the words settled on him. "Wait, are you colorblind or something?"

I shrugged. "I'm not so great at red and green," I admitted. "Never have been. I think it's a werewolf thing, but my biological parents said I was colorblind even as a kid."

"How have I never known this about you?" Kieran questioned.

I leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me."

"And I have all the time in the world to learn them."

He linked his arm through mine, and we walked across the campus to Union Hall.

On the walk over, we passed all kinds of students in varying degrees of nice outfits. Some of them were walking around in full human form. Others

had some of their more monstrous traits on display. Without pausing, I closed my eyes and partially shifted, letting out my wolf ears. Kieran gave me a sideways look. “I wanted to fit in,” I teased. “I can—I can put them away.”

“No,” he assured me as he reached out and delicately touched my fur tipped ears. “Those ears are a part of you, and I like *every* part of you. No need to hide any of it from me.”

I couldn’t fight the urge to give him yet another kiss. He deepened the kiss enough to make me contemplate saying screw the dance and taking him back to the dorm so I could strip that nice suit off him. It was an appealing thought, and I was close to giving into temptation when he pulled away. “Let’s get to the dance.”

I whined.

I couldn’t help myself. How could he kiss me like that and then just expect me to be able to go *dancing*? The only kind of dances I could think of when he kissed me that way were of the horizontal variety.

My whine had zero effect on Kieran. He just tugged me toward Union Hall.

I guess I would just have to wait to strip him out of that suit until *after* the dance.

When we got inside Union Hall, I was impressed with the decorations. All the lights had been replaced with floating candelabras, casting dancing shadows on the walls around the room. All the tables were pushed to the side, leaving room for a dance floor. They were draped in gauzy fabrics of black and... well, not black. I had to assume orange, given the theme, but orange was another one of those problematic colors for me. It looked like strange, muted gold, and well, that was pretty, too.

Music was already playing, and the doors opposite the ones we entered were thrown open to the quad.

“Dance or explore?” I asked Kieran.

He didn’t take a moment to think. “Explore. I need more people to be dancing before I get out there.”

“Afraid of looking bad?”

Kieran nodded. “Not much of a dancer,” he admitted. “Never have been.”

Just another endearing fact about the grumpy Gus I’d fallen in love with.

We walked through Union Hall and out to the quad. It was filled with students gathering around selfie stations, taking pictures to post to their Fangstagram accounts. Other students were just standing around, chatting and laughing.

I spotted Preston talking with some girl with blonde hair and antlers. She was wearing a gorgeous sparkling gown and had a corsage around her wrist that I'd seen in the suite's mini-fridge just that morning. I'd thought it belonged to Ryan or Benny, because I had a hard time imagining Preston leaving his study chair to go to the dance. I pointed him out to Kieran, and we went over to say hi.

Preston introduced us to his date, some girl from one of his pre-law classes. Then Preston forced us to go take selfies with him.

We mingled outside. We talked to a few members of the football team. We went back inside and ate our share of the offered hors d'oeuvres. Every moment of the night was magical, but nothing more magical than when the music slowed down and Kieran looked at me and then back to the dance floor.

The sour, anxious smell was wafting off him again.

"It's time," he said solemnly.

"Time?"

"To dance."

Judging by the tone of his voice, I would have thought we were sending him off to execution or into battle. I was about to tell him that it wasn't needed, we could dance later or something, but he pulled me onto the dance floor. I wondered if it was to stop himself from chickening out.

We found a place near the edge of the dance floor. I noticed Eric nearby, dancing with a cheerleader whose name I didn't know. He smiled at us, and I waved before having all my attention stolen by Kieran.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close. We swayed in time to the music, not doing anything fancy, but that didn't matter.

It was better than I'd imagined. Every time I'd thought about dancing with him at the Halloween Ball, I'd imagined him doing it with a scowl on his face. I'd imagined having to pull him out onto the dance floor during some fast song. Never in my wildest dreams had I even thought about dancing with him like this. I'd never have thought I'd get to hold him tight in my arms, pull him close, and kiss him on the dance floor.

But I could.

And I did.

It was better than I imagined it would be.

“I love you,” I whispered as the music faded.

He gave me one of those rare smiles of his, and that was worth every step it had taken to get here. It was worth all the early morning runs. It was worth the weeks of prying every individual word from him. I’d climbed over his walls, and he’d let me stay there.

He’d let me make a home in his heart, and I was never going to let it go.

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EPILOGUE

EVANDER - TWO YEARS LATER

I could hear the noise from downstairs. Everyone I loved was gathered at the warehouse, and I should have been down there with them. Instead, I was hiding upstairs in my childhood bedroom with Kieran.

It had been two years since he'd come to Creelin University. I was even more in love with him now than I'd been at our first Halloween Ball. We were weeks from graduation and today would determine our futures. We'd both made the decision to put our name up for the draft. We both wanted to go pro, but we knew the risks.

We knew that there was a chance that only one of us would get drafted, even with two national championships in three years. Even with the records I'd broken at Creelin or his status as the first human on the Creelin University team. We'd watched the first two rounds of the draft the night before, each time hoping our phones would ring. When they didn't, we'd gone back upstairs to my childhood room and fell asleep together.

Kali had nicely given us the room to ourselves.

She'd also made up guest rooms for my biological parents and Kieran's dad. They'd all come to Creelin for this. They'd all come to cross their fingers and hope that our names were called.

"You nervous?" Kieran asked.

I gave him what I could only hope was a scathing glare. Judging by his lack of reaction, it wasn't. But seriously, what kind of a question was that? I'd been pacing the length of the room, walking between the two sets of

bunk beds, for the last fifteen minutes. I'd barely slept at all the night before, and not because my very sexy boyfriend had kept me awake. I was just too anxious and too nervous.

Kieran stood up and caught my arm as I passed him for what had to be the five hundredth time. "Evie, it's going to be okay," he told me as he pulled me close to him.

"What if we don't get drafted?"

"Then we revert to our backup plans," he reminded me.

Right, backup plans. He was going to take a job at the same company where he'd interned this semester. He'd already been given an official job offer. I would start teaching gym class somewhere in Creelin. Hopefully Creelin Middle School, because they had an opening and their gym teacher was always the football coach. We were going to get an apartment near the warehouse after graduation, and we were going to live happily ever after.

We'd come up with this plan the same day we officially entered the draft, mostly because I'd been freaking out.

"What if we do get drafted but we're across the country from each other? What if we're not even in the same division? Or the same conference? We'll never get to see each other—"

Kieran silenced me with a kiss. "Then we will get a place halfway between our two teams. We will see each other during the off-season. We will spend the rest of the time video calling each other every night. We've talked about this too," he reminded me.

His forehead rested against mine, and I breathed in his comforting and familiar scent. What would I do when I didn't have him to ground me? "You're not nervous at all, are you?" I asked. I had only just realized the lack of that sour smell he always got when he was nervous.

He shook his head. "How I see it is even if I never play another football game as long as I live, then at least football already gave me something important. It brought me to Creelin, and I got to meet you out of it. Whatever happens, we'll cope."

"We'll cope," I repeated.

"We'll cope."

Kieran smiled and pulled me into a soft kiss.

"Evie, Kieran," Kali bellowed upstairs, preventing me from deepening the kiss with my boyfriend. "Round three starts in fifteen minutes. Get your tails down here!"

I pulled back and grinned. Kieran gave me a suspicious look, and I turned around, wagging my tail at him. He laughed. “Really?”

“She did say to get our tails down there,” I reminded him. “Who am I to disappoint?”

Kieran shook his head before he took my hand. We walked down the stairs together. The moment Kali saw my tail, she thwacked me upside the back of my head and called me an idiot. I couldn’t say that I didn’t deserve it, but it was worth it to hear everyone else laugh.

And I did mean everyone.

Pack members who had moved out of the warehouse years ago were gathered around the main sitting area. Every couch was full, except for the small, black leather love seat in the middle of the room. That couch had been reserved for me and Kieran, and there was a camera in view. Ready to record if we got drafted. We wove our way through the crowded room, dodging a few of the younger pack members who were sitting on the floor coloring.

Fifteen minutes later, the television started playing the opening notes of the draft theme music. Talking heads came on to recap the first two rounds of the draft. Then, it started.

We watched as four people’s dreams came true, watched them celebrate with their friends and family.

The entire time, my hand stayed latched onto Kieran’s.

The Washington Warrior’s turn came up on the draft. Then it happened. Kieran’s phone rang. He almost dropped it in the rush to answer it, and I watched the moment through teary eyes. He’d been drafted. He’d been picked in the third round.

I thought I would have been jealous. After all, we’d both been competitive our entire relationship. Neither one of us had taken our spot on the team for granted, and we’d both played hard for our roster spots. Even if it meant that we tried to outdo one another. We’d become known as one of the best wide receiver pairs in college sports. Watching this happen to him, knowing it might not happen to me or it might change everything... I’d secretly thought I would be jealous.

Instead, I was so happy for him.

Across the room, the camera started flashing, recording part of Kieran’s initial reaction.

“The pick is in,” the talking head announced moments after Kieran hung up his phone. “The Washington Warriors choose Kieran Sawyer, wide receiver from Creelin University.”

Scenes from our party played on the screen. People cheering for Kieran and his good news, my hand squeezing his. When the camera switched off and the next team went on the clock, I leaned in and kissed Kieran hard on the mouth. “You did it. You’re going pro,” I whispered, beaming with more pride than I ever thought possible.

Even if my name didn’t come up, I knew this would go down as one of the happiest moments in my life. Joining the ranks of the night Kieran agreed to be mine or the first time we danced at the Halloween Ball. Joining the way he kissed me when we won our first national championship ring the year before, right there on the fifty-yard line, in front of the cameras and everything.

“You will too,” he whispered. “I just know it.”

I wasn’t as confident. There were still no monsters in professional football, even if I knew multiple who had put their name up for the draft. Even Eric hadn’t been drafted, and his stat line had been abnormally impressive for a quarterback. “Even if I’m not drafted, I don’t care. We’ll go to Washington.”

“There’s a pack out there,” Kali piped up. “In fact, the only state that has a pro team that doesn’t have a pack is Wisconsin.”

“Yeah, but who wants to move to Wisconsin?” I asked with a laugh.

Kieran nudged me playfully. “You. If you’re drafted there.”

“I’d move to Wisconsin,” Charlie piped up. “You know, if you ended up drafted there and needed a pack.”

“Us too,” Serena and Nick piped up.

I had never felt more loved in my life. “Let’s just see if I get drafted before you all start packing,” I reminded them. Secretly, I was hoping I did not get drafted to Wisconsin. I mean, I’d take it, but there was a reason they’d had the second overall draft pick. They weren’t even the best at being the worst team in the league.

Two more people were drafted, and the mood in the warehouse was still as excited as it had been when Kieran’s name appeared on the screen.

“Wisconsin is on the clock,” the announcer called out.

My phone rang.

“You’re fucking with me,” I grumbled. Everyone laughed as I pulled out my phone. “Shut up!” I called out. Because I did not want to explain to my new team why we were all laughing. The camera flicked on as I answered the call. “Hello?”

“Is this Evander Hemmings?” a woman on the other line asked.

“Yes.” I was pretty sure the GM of the Wisconsin Rangers was a man. No, I knew he was, because I’d just seen him the day before, drafting a running back in the second round.

Maybe this was his assistant. “Perfect. This is Eleanor Montgomery, GM of the Washington Warriors.” My eyes widened. “We want you to come to our team.”

I noticed the television screen. The Warriors logo had replaced the Rangers in the *On the Clock* box. They’d traded. They’d traded to get me. I was too choked up to speak. Kieran reached over and squeezed my thigh, and I could focus again. “Really?”

“Really.”

There was small talk, specifics that went in one ear and out the other. Tears were streaming down my face as I hung up.

“The Wisconsin Rangers have traded picks with the Washington Warriors, and the pick is in!” the announcer called out. Once again, the party filled the screen, and there I was. On the television. Sitting next to Kieran and crying. “The Washington Warriors have drafted Kieran Hemmings, wide receiver from Creelin University.”

“Fun fact about Hemmings: he will be the first monster to ever play professional football, Dalton,” the other anchor announced.

“And we all know why,” the first reporter quipped. Suddenly, there was a clip from my college career. It was a deep catch from this year’s quarterback. It was the touchdown that won Creelin University their second national championship.

All around me, people were cheering. None of them mattered.

None of them mattered as much as Kieran. He was looking at me with watery eyes and a proud smile.

“We’re going to Washington,” he whispered.

“We’re going to Washington,” I repeated.

I didn’t care that the cameras were still rolling. I didn’t care that this was being broadcast all over the country, to anyone who cared to watch the

draft. I leaned in and kissed Kieran hard on the mouth. The sound of our loved ones cheering faded away, and there was only me and Kieran.

I'd somehow gotten everything I ever wanted: the game, the man, and a love that filled me to the brim.

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Boy Meets Monster by Leslie McAdam

Shadows and Stone by Kota Quinn

First Kiss with a Mothman by CD Rachels

Anchored to You by Ashley Rayne

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Essie Sloane (she/they) currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky with their daughter and sortie cat. They're a lifelong reader and has dreamed of being a writer since they were a child. When they're not reading, they enjoy doing small craft projects like crocheting and diamond painting. They also enjoy listening to music, studying queer history, and playing on their computer.

You can reach out to Essie on Facebook or Instagram. They love to chat!



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