



Mated to the Kingpin

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Description: He rejected me once. Now he's making sure I can never say no again.

Liam O'Reilly was my first love—my brother's best friend, the man who crushed me with a single word: no. Then he saved me from a nightmare and disappeared.

Now he's back, a ruthless kingpin, demanding I marry him.

Tomorrow. If I refuse, he'll release the video from that night—the one that could destroy me.

I should hate him. I do. But hate turns blistering when it's this close to desire.

Liam thinks he's in control. He thinks I'll surrender.

He has no idea who he's up against.

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Chapter 1

Liam

You need to calm down.”

I can’t stop the bark of bitter laughter that escapes me as I turn to face my father. My father who’d been the boss and alpha of the O’Reilly family since I was a pup. The man who I’ve always looked up to, wanted to be just like him so I could run the family like him one day. A day that shouldn’t be for decades.

“How am I supposed to calm down when the fucker who put you in that chair is already setting up his challenge to take over the family?” I demand. Fuck, I want to put my fist through something. Preferably Ronan’s face. Multiple times.

“Liam.”

My father, John O’Reilly, didn’t say anything until I met his steel blue eyes. Despite his physical injuries, his mind has lost none of the sharp edges or lessened in fortitude. Gods know how I’d handle breaking my spine and losing the ability to shift into my werewolf form. I know he’s struggled with his recovery. I’ve caught him staring out the window, lost somewhere in his head, or glaring at his legs like he could make them work again by sheer force of will.

If anyone could will paralyzation away, it would be my father. He had brought the O’Reilly family name back from nearobscurity here in Savannah. He put the Irish back on the map of power players. He fought hard and dirty until the Italians and

Russians respected the Irish once again.

“We don’t know for sure that Ronan had a hand in the attack,” he tells me. “I know you want someone to be punished. Do you think I don’t? But right now, the most important thing for this family is for you to step up and lead. You think your cousin had something to do with this?” He gestures to his long legs. “Then you cannot let him win by taking your rightful place as leader in the family business.”

I glare at my old man. Everyone’s always told me I’m the spitting image of him. He has more than two decades on me at 57, but no one would mistake him for being weak. I share his large frame; when he could stand, we both stood close to 6’3”. I’ve got his hard jaw, though I’m clean shaven where he’s always had a beard. He’s always been larger than life and to see him brought low, to be unable to even shift into his werewolf form? It’s fucking heartbreaking.

“I’ll kill the motherfucker who did this to you, Da.” My voice is thick but I’m not ashamed. I’m my parents’ only child, not for lack of trying. There’s no one else who can get justice for him. No one else to trust the family business to.

“Son.” There’s a sharp reprimand in the single word that has me straightening. This isn’t just my father speaking to me. This is the family boss, my boss.

I let out a rough breath, settling myself and controlling my anger like he’d trained me all those years ago. We may be werewolves but we are not beasts. Our control separates us from animals, who operate on nothing more than instinct.

When he’s satisfied, he leans back in his wheelchair as if it were the chair behind his desk in his downtown office. Even now, injured, my father exudes authority.

“Where is your loyalty?”

“To the O’Reilly family and you, Alpha” The words are familiar, spoken by years of habit.

“Have you given your blood oath under the full moon to obey me as your alpha?”

“I have, Alpha.”

“Then, as your alpha, I’m ordering you to drop the investigation into my attack and focus on securing the future of the O’Reilly family and our business. You will take up the mantle I’ve been training you for. You will not allow this family to fall into the hands of Ronan Lynch, is that understood?”

This time, I’m able to keep any bitterness out of my voice. “Yes, alpha.”

Seeming to be satisfied, he nods once before glancing towards the door in silent dismissal. I turn on my heel, already considering how those in the pack will handle the news of me stepping into the role of alpha. My father was a good alpha, but there are people who’d rather see our endeavors controlled by the Lynches. Ruthless werewolves who have yet to find a line they would not cross.

“Liam.”

I halt just before the doorway, shifting my head towards the side enough to let him know I’m listening.

“You know that being alpha means you must marry, and soon. If you don’t have a wife, you won’t be accepted. You must show that you will carry on the O’Reilly legacy.”

My nostrils flare in distaste at the reminder. I’ve given everything to this family and now I’ll be giving up my bachelorhood.

“Understood,” I answer and leave his office before he decides to make more demands on me.

As I head down the stairs, I keep an ear out for my mother. She’ll know just as well as my father that I need to marry to be Alpha. She’ll have a list of appropriate women for me; women who know of our world; not just the darker side of our businesses but the fact that us males can all shift into a creature of nightmares on command. If I’m lucky, I can escape the estate before she catches me.

I don’t want any of them. No matter how gorgeous or wealthy they are. There’s only ever been one woman for me and I gave her up a decade ago for good reason. If I marry someone on her list, then it’ll be a loveless one. I’d do my duty, welp children with her, and then be satisfied with my fist for the rest of my life. I wasn’t raised to forsake any vow I make.

I make it to the white marble floored foyer, steps away from the front door. Then my mother is beside me, a hand on my arm. Her touch may be gentle, but it stops me as if she’s yanked me from the edge of a cliff.

I bite back the growl threatening, knowing that just because I’m almost 33 doesn’t mean Ma won’t tan my hide for disrespecting her. I was taller than her by the time I was twelve and even now, she only comes up to my chest. Her hair is a pale strawberry blonde, the color of dawn just before it disappears into the blue of the day, without a hint of silver yet. Her hazel eyes are as sharp as my father’s, though hers are surrounded by wrinkles that crinkle when she laughs. She once told me they’re the signs of a life well loved.

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“Please, ma,” I head her off, not able to handle talking about picking out someone to marry. “I’m sure they’re great, but not today.”

Her lips purse before gentling and she pats me. “I just want you to be happy. I know this isn’t how you’d like this to happen. Lord knows none of us expected—“ she cuts herself off as her voice wavers and tears shine in her eyes. I wrap her up in a hug, unable to handle seeing the strongest woman I know crack. She’s been so strong for Da since the attack.

“I promise to come back and talk about your favorites, okay?” I speak into her hair. Even if I hate the idea of marrying a practical stranger. My phone goes off, saving me. I slide it from the back pocket of my jeans to check the notification.

The world around me freezes as an idea comes to me.

No. I couldn’t. I shouldn’t.

There’s a reason I walked away so many years ago and it hasn’t changed.

But once the idea is planted, I can’t think of anything else.

“Actually, I know who I want to marry. I’ll explain when I get back. I’ll need your help planning it.” I bend to press a quick kiss to her cheek and escape while she’s still processing what I’d said.

The moment I’m in my BMW headed towards downtown Savannah, I call Connor, who picks up on the second ring.

“I need you to do something for me,” I instruct before he can greet me.

“Anything.”

“I need you to monitor Claire Douglass and her dating profiles. If she sets up any dates, make sure the guys never show and give me the location and time.”

Connor, as always, agrees without question.

Suddenly the idea of having to marry isn't so bad. The werewolf in me growls in satisfaction, pleased I'm finally giving in and hunting my mate. If I'm going to marry someone, it's going to be Claire Douglass. I don't care how dirty I have to play. I'm claiming her and I won't take no for an answer.

Chapter 2

Claire

I'm cursed. That's the only explanation. Otherwise, why else would I be sitting in the bar at my favorite restaurant's bar during happy hour waiting for a date that was supposed to start thirty minutes ago? We'd confirmed doing happy hour together and now happy hour was winding down and I'd heard nothing from him for the last hour.

I even met this guy from a different app than the first two! I know guys can be assholes, but none of these had sent me dick pics so they were already worth considering. Then, day of meeting face-to-face, absolute silence. Not even an “I'm sorry, something came up,” the next day.

I'd even made it pretty clear that tonight, if we hit it off well and both want to, I'd be down for some action. I've been on a dry spell long enough my favorite vibrator was asking for mercy. Add in that I've been in a grueling interview process for my dream

position as the Creative Director for a nonprofit youth charity, I really wanted to blow some steam off tonight.

Resignation weighs down my shoulders from another disappointing evening. I grab the white wine I'd been nursing since I'd arrived and tossed it back. At least this place has amazing food. I'd been picking at the black bean hummus platter and queso fundido I'd ordered, trying to pace myself while waiting for the guy to show. I'd text my best friend to come join me, but Lizzy is stuck at her office with her asshole boss on a late night project.

I might as well order another drink before happy hour is over. Just because I'm rolling solo tonight doesn't mean I can't enjoy myself since I'm here. I make eye contact with my server, who heads right over. I don't let the sympathetic look in her eyes affect the smile I'm forcing.

I look good as hell tonight. I'd tamed my golden curls into a playful style by pinning half of it back and I wore my favorite outfit. When I arrived, I'd draped my crisp, tailored navy blazer over the back of my barstool so the delicate ivory lace camisole showed off my shoulders that flirts with the line between sweet and seductive. My pants, perfectly matching the blazer, hug me just right to show off the slimmest part of my waist and have my smaller butt looking hot. After leaving work, I'd exchanged my black flats for nude heels, and replaced my clear lip gloss with my favorite red-pink lipstick with a velvety matte finish.

It looks like my vibrator gets the benefit of all of my effort to look nice and be freshly shaved.

The waitress—Lara, I think she said her name was—arrives at the high-top I've claimed. I tell her I'll have a fresh peach whiskey sour just as someone slides into the empty seat across from me.

I haven't been stood up!

I smile, distracted from ordering as I get ready to greet Greg. Except across from me isn't Greg. I freeze, grin stuck in place as my mind struggles to see how this is possible.

"Sorry I'm late. The meeting ran long." Liam O'Reilly smiles at the waitress, the same smile that has been melting panties and turning good girls bad since he hit puberty. "I'll take a whiskeyneat. Jameson Black Barrel if you have it, Bushmills if you don't."

She blushes and stammers as she confirms, standing for a moment longer staring at Liam before hurrying towards the bar. He's looking at me, and I'm still a fly stuck in his spider web. It's been ten years since I've seen him—since that awful day he broke my heart and the horrible decision I made that night. He wasn't even at my brother's funeral eight years ago and they'd once been best friends.

I can't blame her for staring though. If he was gorgeous at 23, he's devastating now. He's wearing a deep red button down, the top few buttons undone, showing he's added tattoos over time, paired with black jeans that show off his muscular thighs. His dark brown hair is tousled in a way that lets you know it's supposed to look messy. He has a five o'clock shadow that only emphasizes his sharp jawline. Those gray-blue eyes seem to pierce into me, reminding me of a wolf's gaze.

Which makes sense, considering I know what he really is. A werewolf. All of the men in the O'Reilly family are.

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He watches me and I remind myself how much of an asshole Liam is. How he broke my heart at 16, how cruel he was about it, and how he couldn't even be bothered to show up to his supposed best friend's funeral. Liam doesn't deserve anything from me.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, folding my arms over my chest. As his eyes track the movement, I wish I hadn't taken off my blazer. My nipples tighten as his gaze is practically a caress. No, I will not let him cause a reaction in me. My lady bits can suck it up—this is not a man I'd be willing to end the dry spell with.

"You look good, Claire."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," I snap, my hackles raising. "Now, why are you here?"

The server brings us our drink and asks if we'd like a menu. Liam answers before I can, telling her he's fine with just the drink and asking for a few more minutes to figure things out. He smiles at her, the charming one that makes it seem like you're the only person in the world.

I take a desperate drink of my whiskey sour and he raises his tumbler as if in toast. "Good to know your taste in alcohol has matured from vanilla vodka."

I set the glass down on the table, toying with it between my hands. I can't look at him when I mutter, "I haven't touched vanilla vodka since that night."

His only reply is a grunt. Silence builds between us and I struggle under the weight of his stare. Irritation snaps inside me and I shoot him a glare.

“Seriously, why are you here?” I demand. “If you’re here just to mess with me, I’m leaving and you can cover the bill.”

His lip quirks up in a smirk. “You’ve grown claws.” When I slide off the bar stool, he raises a hand in supplication. “There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

I hesitate, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. I’m not stupid. I know Liam is a part of the Irish mafia that’s here in Savannah. His dad is the boss, something my brother Seth told me even though he wasn’t supposed to. Seth thought Liam was amazing and envied Liam’s ability to change into a werewolf. Liam and his family lived down the street until his dad bought an estate out on the outskirts of the city after Liam graduated high school.

Whatever Liam wants to discuss with me can’t be good.

“Did you kill my date?”

Liam scoffs. “No. Greg just remembered he had something else to do tonight.” He inclines his head towards the stool and I’m sitting before I realize I obeyed him without question. Crossing my arms again, I then raise one to wave at him to start as if I’m his queen.

“I’m here to collect that favor you owe me.”

I frown, confusion at his meaning before it finally hits. He’s talking about owing him after saving me from the consequences of a stupid decision I made. My cheeks flame at the shame I still feel from that night. Gritting my teeth, I try to shrug like it’s no big deal.

“Fine. What do you want?”

His steel blue eyes hold mine. My heart rises into my throat as a trickle of apprehension trickles down my spine. Whatever he's going to say, I know I'm not going to like it. A moment later, I know I'm right.

“You are going to marry me.”

Chapter 3

Claire

There's no sound in my ears as blood rushes through me. “W-what?”

He repeats the words slowly, as if I hadn't heard him correctly. “You are going to marry me.”

I can't breathe. The walls of the bar close in on me.

At one point in my life, I'd dreamed of this moment. I'd lay in bed at my childhood home, planning out Liam and me's life. Our wedding would be on the beach. We'd have a small, private ceremony and he'd make a joke about not letting his parents see him cry as he slid a ring onto my finger. I'd be wearing a slim fitting wedding dress, having never wanted to wear a ballgown style like so many of my friends talked about. Everything would be simple, down to my seasonal wildflower bouquet. I've always wanted my wedding to focus on the love between me and Liam.

Then, after the ceremony, he'd take me home and fuck me like he owned me, which would be accurate since we'd have tied our souls together.

I haven't thought of that dream since the night he made it clear he didn't want me.

“No,” I whisper, then find my voice. “Absolutely not.”

I push off the stool, ready to leave. Liam stands, stopping me. His large body is a barrier between me and freedom. I'm not sure if he's doing it to intimidate me or because of the other diners.

“Why not?”

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“I don’t even like you.”

He cocks a brow. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you still smell aroused when I’m around?”

My mouth opens and closes. “That’s not—you don’t get to—I?”

“Please. Sit down,” he requests, but the request is really an order. His tone has me hesitating before obeying.

“Why are you doing this? What happened to letting me pay you back when I graduate and have a career and can actually help you?”

“That was never the deal,” he says. “You just assumed that’s what it’d be.”

“That’s not fair.”

He takes a sip of his drink and my gaze tracks the movement, the amber liquid sliding down his throat. “Fair or not, that’s how it is.”

“There’s no way I’m marrying you.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to release the tape.” The room spins and I grip the edge of the table to ground myself. “I doubt Mrs. Williamson would appreciate learning that her

potential new Creative Director has a video floating around out there of her drunk at 16 with four guys.”

I’m spiraling, struggling to breathe at the idea. Hurt after his rejection, I’d gone to a party the same night and gotten drunk for the first time. Teenage, reeling me loved the attention and desire those guys were showering me with. I’d stripped down to my bra and thong, but other than groping, we hadn’t gone any further when suddenly a pissed off Liam was there, throwing punches.

“You wouldn’t,” I breathe out, horrified. I gulp, bringing my eyes back to his face. There’s an ice in his eyes that I’ve never seen before. At that moment I realize I don’t know who this man is anymore. “It’s—it’s illegal to post revenge porn.”

An eyebrow, one bisected with a scar through it, raises. “You really think I give a fuck about what’s legal or not?”

My hands are trembling and I press them flat against the table. This can’t be happening. This is just a bad dream. I’ll wake up soon and this will all be a nightmare.

“There’s no way this is really happening.”

“I’m afraid it is,” he confirms. He drains the last of his whiskey, setting the tumbler down on the table. “Here’s the deal. You’re going to marry me.”

“Or you’ll release the video,” I whisper, numb.

He simply looks at me until I sigh with defeat.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow?! He can't be serious. How am I supposed to break it to my estranged parents, my best friend Lizzy, or my boss? There's no way I can ask for time off if I get this new position with Street Dreamers youth charity.

“I need time to get my stuff together, find a venue,” I protest. Liam can't know what a wedding takes.

“All of that is already handled. I just need you to show up..”

I blink at him, still struggling to process the reality of this. I cross my arms over my chest, indignation rising. “Venue?”

“On the O'Reilly estate.”

My head is shaking back and forth as if it'll stop him from saying the words.

“Catering? Guest list? Floral arrangements?” My pitch rises with each demand, but Liam doesn't flinch. “And, what, am I supposed to just go to the nearest wedding shop in the morning and grab any dress off the rack?”

He lifts a shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “You'll be surprised what a lot of money can do for these types of things. Invite whomever you want. As for the dress and everything else? It's taken care of.”

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A blush roars over my cheeks at his implication. His stoney face turns sensual, a knowing smirk and darkened eyes send a thrill through me.

“Tomorrow night is a full moon, so we’ll marry as my tradition requires. Then I’ll claim you properly under its light, so our union will be blessed.”

I want to laugh at the idea that werewolves would believe such superstitions, but this is the reality of Liam’s world. The full moon is tomorrow. I’d read all I could about werewolves when Seth told me about him and his family. With how distant our parents were, the concept of packs and how family oriented they are made me long to be a part of something like that.

It’s why Liam not attending Seth’s funeral hurt so badly. They were so close and Liam’s absence was another cut in my already grieving heart.

I could have handled the production my business and political savvy parents turned Seth’s service into if Liam had been there to stand between me and the world. But he abandoned me.

Liam pulls a black box from his pocket and opens it, bringing me back to focus.

The ring is beautiful, clearly inspired by the Irish Claddagh ring. Its band, crafted from gleaming gold, twists elegantly, resembling delicate strands of vines to wrap around my finger like a lover’s embrace. Two golden leaves hold a golden heart with a large round diamond and three smaller, just as stunning smaller diamonds cluster together to create a crown. Each stone captures the ambient light of the cocktail bar, sparkling with promises of love and loyalty and woven through with tradition.

Promises that don't ring true for us.

"Give me your hand."

I obey, mechanically, and he pulls the ring free and slides it onto my left ring finger. The fit is perfect, like it's always belonged there.

"There," Liam says, then clears his throat. He's looking down at his open wallet when I manage to look up at him. He pulls out two crisp hundred dollar bills, more than enough to cover the tab, and sets them under his empty glass. He moves behind me and grabs my blazer off the back and holds it open for me. "Let's get you home. You have a busy day tomorrow. I'll pick you up at 8 am."

In a daze, I stand and slide my arms into my jacket. A shiver runs over me as his fingers graze the back of my neck as he eases my hair out from under my jacket. I grab my clutch from the table and peer at him. "I work tomorrow."

Liam's hand settles at the small of my back and I have to walk forward or look like an idiot fighting the pressure he uses. "You're taking the next two weeks off. Your boss will understand and if he doesn't, I'll make sure he does. Keys?"

I don't ask how he knows where I parked or how he got there as I dumbly hand him the keys to my crossover. The engagement ring catches the glow of the lamplight and he has to prod me to finally sit in the passenger seat of my own car.

All I can think on the way home is how the hell has this happened? It consumes me the entire silent drive home.

He walks me to my apartment door and when he unlocks it, it breaks me out of my stupor.

“How did you know where I live?” I ask, the accusation plain in my tone.

He gives nothing away as he dips his head and brushes a ghost of a kiss across my lips. “Remember, 8 am,” he says, as if he hasn’t stolen my breath for the second time that evening.

I stare at him from my doorway as he heads towards the elevator, hands in his front pockets. As if he feels my gaze, he looks over his shoulder and locks his eyes with mine.

“A bit of advice, mo chroí? Don’t try to run.” He cocks his head in consideration before his smirk turns feral. “Or, maybe you should. I’d love hunting you down.”

Chapter 4

Liam

Early the next morning, my thoughts are consumed by Claire.

Even under the hot spray of the shower, her scent haunts me. I can still taste her on my lips, the barest hint of sweetness mixed with the tang of whiskey. I can feel the curve of her waist under my palm and how it flared to her hips. How she’d fit so perfectly in my arms, like her body was created for mine.

I shouldn’t have kissed her last night.

It took everything inside me not to press her against the door to her apartment and take her mouth the way I’d been imagining since walking into the restaurant. It took every ounce of restraint I’d learned growing up an O’Reilly, especially when her lips had parted and her breathing quickened.

Instead, I'd settled for the barest graze of my mouth against hers. I'd felt the shudder that went through her body and smelled the spike of her arousal. I'd known that if she'd offered herself, even the slightest invitation, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself.

My cock aches at the idea. It's been too fucking long since I've had a fuck. Even then, no woman has ever made me feel a fraction of the need Claire does. I know it's because Claire's my mate and the others were nothing but desperate distractions; attempts to scratch an itch.

Maybe choosing Claire isn't the best idea. Now that I've settled on this path, my obsession with her refuses to be ignored any longer. I should be planning to speak with Connor later today after dropping Claire off with my mother. He and Declan have been hunting any leads that will prove Ronan was behind the attack on John O'Reilly. I know my father told me to set it aside for now, and that's what I've done. I just had Connor and Declan, the two males I trust with my life, pick it up.

Instead, my dreams were filled with Claire and now my cock is thick and hard, desperate to sink inside of her.

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Fuck. I grit my teeth and try to distract myself by roughly washing. But my cock still strains upwards, my balls heavy and full. Groaning, I give in to the need coursing through my veins. Bracing one palm flat against the front tiled shower wall, the water hitting and falling down my neck and back, I take my cock in hand.

I think back to the night before. Except, in my head, instead of the barest of kisses, I claim her mouth like I wanted. She opens under me, whimpering against my onslaught. Claire is the type of girl that deserves kindness and to be handled gently. Two things I'm not capable of, even in my head. No, when she gives in, I grip her ass with both hands, picking her up and carrying her into her apartment.

Stroking faster, I think about how I'd set her down and order her to strip down right there in her living room. In this fantasy, she'd do exactly as I commanded.

I imagine how her curves would look illuminated by the moonlight coming in from her windows. Her pale skin would glow and the dark curls between her thighs would look wet and inviting. I know from checking in over the years that she isn't a virgin. I don't give a fuck that I'm not her first. But I sure as hell am going to be her last.

I'd order her onto her knees and take out my cock. The thought of her staring up at me, face framed by wild blonde waves, her red painted mouth opening as her hazel eyes widen, has my balls tightening. I'd fist her hair and feed her my cock, oh so slowly.

I hiss out a breath at the idea of her choking around my length. She'd have to stretch her mouth wide and relax her jaw as I thrust in and out. Fuck, the sight would be so damn beautiful. I'd love seeing her struggle, but not give up. I'd see the

determination in her eyes, her desire to please me, and the flush that would rise on her cheeks and chest as her body responds.

I'd take my pleasure and give her the barest of praise.

I moan as my balls empty in the shower. Instead of the wall, I picture how it'd be all over her cock-swollen lips and tongue, my seed spilling down her chin and onto her perfect tits.

My breath is ragged as my heart rate settles. The water is cooling and with a sigh, I clean the sign of my weakness from the tiles before shutting off the water and toweling off.

If I'd thought rubbing one out would help the need for Claire, I'm fucking wrong. If anything, it's worse now. At least in my current form, I don't have to worry about my knot being swollen. That only makes me think of Claire's perfect pussy stretching to take it. Shaking my head, I wrap the thick towel around my waist and head back into my bedroom.

Tonight, I remind myself as I dress with the seriousness of arming myself for a fight. Tonight, Claire will finally be mine after ten too-fucking long years.

As I pull on a fitted black t-shirt and tough jeans, I can't help the surge of excitement reminding me of the taste of victory awaiting me. I've waited years to claim what's mine, and tonight will mark the beginning of our real story.

I can already envision how the wedding will unfold. Claire's love for wildflowers—a detail I've kept tucked away in a corner of my mind—will color the ceremony beautifully. I won't let this be just another family affair; I'll make it personal, unique to her style and personality. I've kept tabs on Claire's life like a hawk; I know her tastes better than I know my own. Her love for mismatched plates confused my

mother when I made the request, but I hope Claire will notice. If she isn't too angry with me.

Yet as I button my suit jacket, the weight of my past crashes over me. The memory of the night when I killed my best friend Seth, the pain of his loss and the guilt I still carry. Worse, the regret of not being there for Claire gnaws at me. I had saved her once, after breaking her heart and walking away from her. But how could I have faced her at Seth's funeral? Even if I had been able to bring myself to attend, her parents declared me unwelcome in their lives any longer. I can only imagine the bitterness she must feel towards me for my absence, the lingering resentment towards the person responsible for tearing her family apart.

So I threw myself into the family business, distracting myself any way I could from the fact that I couldn't go to the woman who is the other half of my soul. I've stalked her since, needing to know everything about her. Only Connor and Declan know of my toxic pastime. They only found out when I'd downed two bottles of whiskey and decided to go claim Claire that night. She was dating someone and had posted a photo of the two of them curled up in bed together, the caption talking about love.

My best friend's had kept me from making an idiot of myself and doing something I'd never be able to take back. After that, I limited myself to a single drink of whiskey and they helped me keep tabs on her so I wouldn't have to do it myself anymore.

As I hop in my car, my hands grip the steering wheel tightly. Each mile feels like an eternity as excitement clamps down on my chest. I'm damning myself, revealing how selfish I truly am. Because no longer is shame and guilt stopping me from taking what was always but never mine. I can feel our history coiling around me, mixing with anticipation for tonight.

Flashes of the earlier conversation with my father resurface in my mind—a reminder

of the balance I must strike. The responsibilities of being alpha weigh heavily on my shoulders, yet they fade slightly as my thoughts of Claire reign supreme. Balancing duty with love feels impossible, yet the thought of claiming Claire solidifies my resolve to become the alpha I was meant to be.

The thrill surges through me, building to a crescendo as I imagine finally being able to make her my own tonight, and at the same time, bringing her into this life I've bled for, fought for, killed for. Tonight, the world will finally know Claire belongs to me.

Chapter 5

Claire

The audacity of Liam fucking O'Reilly.

I woke up, planning to head to the office where I work in PR for a corporation as normal, regardless of what Liam said last night. Then, after I've showered and gotten ready, while forcing down the green protein smoothie I'm trying to convince myself I enjoy, I get a text from my boss that has steam roaring out of my ears.

I don't know what the hell Liam told my boss, but her message instructed me "to take all the time I need." Like someone died!

Yeah. Just Liam O'Reilly trying to kill the future I'd envisioned.

Abandoning the half-drunken smoothie in the sink, I pace in my small living room. I proceed to have an argument with Liam, even if it's only half-mutters from me and his responses are in my head. After going in circles with an imaginary Liam as obstinate as the one in real life, I stop and drop my head, hands on my hips.

I know who I need to talk to.

I march into the kitchen where my cell sits on the counter, tossed to the side as if it's bearing the punishment of Liam's actions. Pressing my thumbprint to the screen, I swipe until I find her contact and put my phone to my ear. She picks up on the second ring.

"Are you dying?" Lizzy asks, her tone half serious. I'd answer the same, since we rarely call each other and never as early as 7:30 in the morning.

"I'm so pissed off, Lizzy, you have no fucking idea," I grit out, rubbing my forehead with my free hand.

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“Whoa, whoa, whoa, talk to me girly. What’s going on?”

I breathe in harshly, willing myself to settle the fury I’ve wound myself up in so that I can explain as best I can without sounding absolutely insane.

“You aren’t going to believe this,” I warn her before I laugh bitterly. “Hell, I don’t even believe this and it’s my life! I feel like this should be one of those Am I the Asshole fake reddit stories. You know how I was supposed to meet someone last night?”

“Yeah, wasn’t his name Todd or Paul or some other bullshit boomer name?”

“Greg, but whatever, he didn’t show—“ Lizzy starts to say something and I shush her, starting to pace through my apartment again. “This isn’t about him. This is about the fact that a man I haven’t seen since I was sixteen showed up with a damn ring and told me—told me, Lizzy—that we are getting married.Tonight.”

“What?!” Lizzy’s voice is loud and sharp, and she sounds quieter for a moment as she says an apology. She’s probably on the bus still on her way into work. Her voice is louder again, but more reasonable as she hisses into the phone, “What the actual fuck? Who is this guy? Is he crazy? I don’t mean like normal crazy, I mean like actually psychologically insane? Did you say yes to make sure he didn’t follow you home and murder you?”

I brace myself, knowing what I’m about to say is going to make her freak out even more. “It’s Liam O’Reilly.”

Absolute silence follows, save for the background noise of the CAT bus. I sigh and sit on my small couch, tucking one leg under me as I prop an elbow up on the arm.

“Yeah,” I confirm. “It’s the Liam you’re thinking about.”

“How the hell do you know this guy? He’s in the mafia, you know that right? And isn’t he said to be one of those...” Lizzy is the rock in our friendship, nothing able to face her and able to withstand anything the world throws at her. Except this seems to have pushed her into the freak-out zone right alongside me.

“It’s a long story—actually not really,” I amend. “But yes, I know he’s in the mafia. His dad is the head of the O’Reilly family and pack. Because, yeah, he is a werewolf.”

“Okay, I’m almost at my stop. Tell me everything.”

And, for the first time in my life, I do. I tell her about Liam and Seth being best friends, how I first met Liam when I was 13. How I had a crush on Liam and by the time I was sixteen, convinced he was my true love even though he barely paid any attention to me. The embarrassment and shame from then returns as I whisper the confession of how I had thrown myself at Liam, declaring my love for him and how I was ready to give him everything.

How he rejected me, like he was horrified and disgusted. How, heartbroken and stinging from his cruel words, I went to a party and got drunk for the first time in my life. I told her about the attention guys gave me at the party and how it helped me feel better. Like it was a big “fuck you” to Liam, how I let them touch me and didn’t even care as one of them started recording on his phone.

“Oh, god, Claire. I want to go back in time and hug you so bad,” Lizzy says, her voice absolutely free of judgment. It’s a relief, though I knew logically Lizzy isn’t the

type that would think badly of me. “What happened, then? Were you okay, or did they...?”

“So, this is where it gets even more complicated. One moment, I’m drunk and determined to enjoy the attention and then the next moment the guys are freaking out. Liam showed up somehow and he was beating the crap out of them, even though it was him against four. I started screaming at him and he threw me over his shoulder and carried me out of the party.”

“Good on him, even though it doesn’t make up for him being an asshole.”

“Yeah, so, the next day when I wasn’t drunk, it hit me what I let happen.” She knows my dad is fairly well-known in the region’s business world. I explain how, once I was sober the next day I started freaking out because a video like that of me could screw up the contracts he was negotiating at the time. I was sick for three days, barely able to get out of bed, as I waited for my world to crash around me. Then it did but not in the way I expected. Liam walked into my house when no one else was there.

“He said he took care of it. That I didn’t have to worry about anything. I told him I owed him one, and he agreed. Before he left, he told me he’d collect eventually.”

“And he finally has? Damn.” Lizzy doesn’t seem to expect an answer, and I don’t offer one. We sit in silence, my stomach twisting with too many emotions. Anger at Liam. Shame of my past. Embarrassment. Lust. Shame at my attraction. Anger at myself.

“You don’t have to,” my best friend says at last. “You know that right? Like, I don’t care if he’s in the mafia, you always have a choice. This isn’t the fucking medieval ages. Have you told your parents? They wouldn’t approve, right?”

“I don’t know,” I state vaguely, knowing my dad’s business has ties to the O’Reilly

family. “But he’s supposed to be here at eight to pick me up and take me to his family estate to get ready for it. He’s not going to take a no for an answer. I already tried. He threatened to release the video and make sure the charity I’m interviewing for knows about it.”

“That fucking asshole bastard.” The fire I love about Lizzy heats her words. If anyone is as stubborn as Liam O’Reilly, it’s Lizzy. “I’m only two stops from my office. When he gets there, you tell that fucker to pick me up.”

“You have work?—”

“Nope. My best friend is being blackmailed into marriage and I refuse to let you go through this alone. We’ll figure a way out, together. And if we can’t get you out, we’re going to make his life hell.”

My eyes water at the determination and loyalty in her voice. Lizzy has always been my platonic soul mate. A sharp knock comes three times. I pull my phone away from my ear to see it’s exactly 8:00 am. I bring the phone back up. “I have to go, he’s here.”

“Okay, babe. Stay strong. I love you and we got this. And if you don’t get here in the next 45 minutes, I’ll call the police until they threaten to charge me with harassment. I don’t care if the O’Reilly’s have connections with them or not.”

Hanging up, I groan as he knocks again. How can he make a knock sound so arrogant?

I open the door, greeting Liam with a scowl. My irritation doesn’t last long, not when I’m confronted by how damn good he looks. No one can hold onto their anger when confronted by savage beauty wrapped up in an expensive navy Italian suit. If teenage me had thought Liam O’Reilly the sexiest person alive, I’d have been a puddle of goo

at how good he looks as a full-grown man.

Nope. I shut those thoughts down. I'm furious at Liam and I'm planning to make him regret forcing me to marry him.

Chapter 6

Liam

I'm pretty fucking sure Claire and Lizzy are doing their damndest to give me a migraine-induced embolism. I knew Claire wasn't going to come easy. I know her too well for that, even if she doesn't realize it. I expected some demands and already had her favorite coffee in hand when I knocked on her door. I had to stop from grinning when she couldn't resist accepting it by the time we made it to the elevator.

To my surprise, she hadn't called her parents. Maybe she still thought she could get out of this? Too fuckin' bad for her. Now that I've got her, I'm not giving her up. I should have known she called someone, though. I'd just hoped it wasn't the spitfire best friend.

"I seriously can't believe you're being kidnapped and dragged to the altar," Lizzy says for the fourth time, this time practically shouting. She's talking right to the back of my head. The moment I pulled up to the sidewalk to pick her up, Claire had moved to the backseat. I picked my battles.

"This is some real fucked up shit. And you." She stabs a finger in my direction like she's ready to banish me to hell with a gaze alone. "You think this makes you some kind of tragic, brooding anti-hero? Because newsflash, O'Reilly, this isn't a romancenovel, and you're not smoldering your way into forgiveness by being hot and high-handed."

Claire lets out an indelicate snort beside her, and I swear, my eye twitches.

I grind my teeth so hard I'm surprised the steering wheel hasn't cracked under the pressure of my grip. "I could leave you both on the side of the damn road," I say through clenched teeth.

"You wouldn't," Claire says sweetly from the back. "Because then you'd miss the chance to use your dramatic 'get out of the car, princess' line once we arrive."

Lizzy laughs, leaning slightly to the side to grin at Claire. "You know, this is starting to resemble a hostage situation where the kidnap victim is the only one showing mercy."

"Mercy?" I mutter.

"What else would you call it?" Claire deadpans. "I haven't stabbed you yet."

I breathe slowly through my nose, counting the seconds so I don't lose complete control. The fact that I don't snap back immediately says more about how fucking twisted I am over Claire than it does about restraint.

The car rounds the final curve, the trees thinning out to reveal the looming silhouette of the O'Reilly estate. Lizzy's reaction is swift and unwelcome.

"Holy shit," she breathes, sitting upright and staring out the window. "Is that a freaking castle?"

"It's a manor," I answer, voice even.

"No, that's a mansion with a god complex," she says, flinging an arm out toward Claire like she's discovered buried treasure. "Claire, your blackmailing psycho-fiancé is loaded. You better make him pay through the nose for emotional labor."

Claire smirks but doesn't speak.

"You know, you could always just take a lover on the side," Lizzy adds with a glimmer in her eye, "I'm sure there are plenty of good looking options."

That does it.

I slam the car into park right in front of the house and twist in my seat. My stare pins both women with the weight of a threat barely caged.

"If anyone, and I mean anyone, so much as touches Claire," I say, my voice low and vibrating with the weight of every promise I intend to keep, "they'll die with my teeth at their throat."

Claire stiffens, but her gaze finds mine in the rearview mirror, unreadable.

Lizzy, clearly never one to back down from a fight, lifts her brows. "How chivalrous. But really, are you going to give that same speech before each of your mafia mistresses crawl into your bed? Or is that privilege reserved just for Claire?"

I narrow my eyes, lips curling into something that's more declaration than confession. "There will be no mistresses. Ever. The only woman I'll touch until the day I die is Claire. If she doesn't want me, then I'll die celibate. Better that than break a vow I swear."

The silence that follows is deafening. Even Lizzy's sharp tongue falters. I break the stare and push the door open, stepping out into the sunlight, as cold as ever. Claire climbs out second, slower, but her expression's shielded.

My mother, Fiona, is already through the open doors, hurrying to greet us.

“Claire,” she says warmly, stepping forward with open arms. “Welcome, sweetheart. Oh, how you’ve grown.”

Claire stiffens, caught off guard by the embrace, but after a brief hesitation, she hugs her back. I notice the way her fingers touch the back of her neck as they separate, as if grounding herself in the moment.

Beside her, Lizzy shifts, just enough to signal her readiness to make a snide remark or throw a punch, depending on what’s needed. Claire glances between them, then clears her throat.

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“Mrs. O’Reilly, this is my best friend, Lizzy. I insisted she be here,” she says with a small lift of her chin.

“I know it’s been some time, but you know you can call me Fiona.” Fiona’s gaze shifts to Lizzy, curiosity sparking behind her eyes. She offers her hand without hesitation. “Of course. Any friend of Claire’s is welcome in this house. Especially on your wedding day.”

Lizzy, to her credit, clasps her hand with only a flicker of wariness and a crisp, “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

My mother’s smile grows, a genuine gleam behind it. “Oh, please. Call me Fiona, too. You’ve got fire in your eyes. That’ll serve you well here.”

Claire leans closer to Lizzy, whispering just loud enough for me to catch, “I think she likes you.”

Lizzy tightens her lips to suppress a grin. “I think I’m terrified.”

I barely suppress a smirk.

We make it as far as the grand foyer, warm light spilling across the dark marble floors and up over the curved staircase. The ancestral portraits hang solemnly on the walls, and Claire’s steps falter for just a second as if she suddenly feels the weight of all the eyes watching her from frames steeped in age and judgment. Hundreds of years of O’Reilly pride, violence, and tradition stare down at her from varnished wood and oil paint. These werewolves may have traded the pelt for the pen, but the

menace in their gazes wraps around us like a shroud.

Claire doesn't flinch, but her posture straightens. Chin high. Jaw set.

She's facing her future pack here, including every ancestor who growled, clawed, and killed to keep this bloodline wrapped around Savannah's throat.

My mother glides forward, gesturing to a wide staircase spiraling to the left. "We've set up your suite, Claire. You'll have everything you need for the ceremony. Your dress should be arriving shortly. Lizzy," she glances toward the fire-spitter best friend, "we'll prepare a room for you just across the hall, if you'd prefer to stay the night."

Lizzy crosses her arms, skeptical. "Generous for someone who assumes I won't object to the marriage."

My mother isn't offended. Instead, she smiles. "Oh, I definitely like you."

My phone buzzes harshly in my pocket and when I see Conner's name on the screen, I know it can only mean one thing.

I step away and answer with a sharp, "Talk."

His voice is clipped, low. "We've picked up the two men responsible for the attack on your father. We've got them ready for questioning. Shit timing with the wedding tonight, but we have to act fast if we're going to finally get what we need to pin this on Ronan."

"Fuck," I whisper, rubbing a hand down my face.

"There's more," Connor says. "Older pack members that have always supported your

father? Some are wavering. If Ronan convinces them to back his challenge during the Solstice, we won't just be outnumbered. We'll be outmaneuvered."

I glance back toward Claire and Lizzy. My mother stands between them like the seasoned socialite she is, graceful and welcoming while distracting the ladies from listening to my side of the conversation.

"I'll be there within the hour. See what you can get out of them before I arrive."

Connor grunts and I hang up.

Claire watches me with that look again, that quiet curiosity mingled with long-burning fire. She doesn't trust me, and more dangerously, she's trying to decipher me. It means she still sees me as a stranger. I can only hope she doesn't think there's something redeemable under these scars.

"I need to go," I say, stepping back toward her.

Her arms cross. "Sure. It's not like anyone is stopping you from leaving on the day of your wedding," Her tone is sardonic, but something behind it—worry, or maybe something closer to it—crowds her hazel eyes.

I lower my voice as I close the distance. "Something's come up. Pack business. I wouldn't leave unless I had to."

Lizzy snorts. "Right. Easy to believe that, Mr. Blackmailer."

I ignore her. Claire is still watching me. Her hand, unconsciously perhaps, moves over the engagement ring on her finger. I catch the motion. I allow myself one second of silence with her, long enough to anchor me in what I'm about to do next.

“I’ll be back in time,” I say. “See you at the altar.”

“Whatever,” she mutters.

I smile, just enough to show teeth, and start for the doors.

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At the threshold, I turn to Lizzy. “Try not to burn the estate down while I’m gone.”

Her smirk is wicked. “No promises, Alpha-boy.”

Claire doesn’t say anything. But she meets my gaze. Bold. Unafraid.

Maybe I did make the right choice after all. Because no matter what comes next, whether it’s Ronan’s betrayal or the full moon binding what’s already mine, Claire Douglass is no victim.

She’s a firestorm wrapped in silken skin, standing in the center of this hurricane I’ve helped build with claws and blood. And I intend to earn her, even if I have to drag every ghost, traitor, and goddamn challenger into the dirt behind me.

Chapter 7

Claire

They say a woman always remembers the dress she gets married in. I hate that they’re right. Because I’ll remember this one forever.

It’s wrapping me like a memory I didn’t know I’d been avoiding, a whisper of the girl I swore I left behind. Soft cream colored satin slips over my curves like moonlight poured into fabric. The fit is perfect, clinging where it should, floating over the rest like a breath I haven’t taken yet. The bodice is sheer in places, delicate wildflower embroidery twisting up over the illusion fabric like vines reaching for something just out of sight. Dewy seed pearls glisten at the throat and hips, an echo of a dream I

stopped letting myself have years ago.

I look like a real bride—not someone dragged here by blackmail and threats from the man who shattered me before I even knew what love really was.

And yet the mirror, cruel thing that it is, reflects a version of me that looks...serene. As if I've been waiting for this moment all my life. I stare with numb curiosity, like she's a stranger who borrowed my face and is playing pretend in lace and grief.

"God," I murmur, venom-less. Because how can I possibly hate something that looks so right and feels so wrong? "I hate how good I look."

"You look like you just stepped out of a dream," Lizzy says, flopping into one of the cushioned chairs by the dressing table. She's still rocking her combat boots under the dusky green dress Fiona found for her, and somehow she makes rebellion look regal. Her hair has been reluctantly tamed into curls that frame her face, but a few already bounce loose, defiant as ever. "A fever-dream, mind you. Like if a cursed forest spirit was also a runway model."

Her grin is effortless, and I manage half of one.

I pivot slowly in front of the mirror, watching the skirt sway. It's simple, sleek. But the way it moves with my body, the embroidery singing down the fabric—it's stunning. The wildflowers at the hem bloom in pale blues and faded meadow pinks. So subtle that they blend in when I move just right.

I shouldn't love it.

I shouldn't love any of this.

But some stubborn, wounded part of me aches with the beauty of it. Because this

dress doesn't just fit me. It understands me.

"I know this wasn't your choice," Lizzy says in a softer voice, tapping her phone against her palm. "But if it had been, I mean really been... this is the dress, right? The one you dreamed about?"

I hesitate. And then, releasing a long breath, I nod.

I hadn't told a soul about that sixteen-year-old version of me. The girl who saved wedding inspiration photos and imagined Liam lifting her veil like he'd look past every other future and choose her. Back then, I believed in forever and in the look he used to give me, even if it was only for seconds at a time.

That girl? She's still here. Buried under hard-won independence and cynicism and scars I still trace in silence. But this dress? It's her dreams made silk. And that feels like betrayal.

"To be honest," Lizzy says after a moment, breaking the tension, "I was prepared to throw something when I saw it. I was hoping it'd be hideous. Sequins. Tulle. Maybe a rhinestone heart stuck above your ass. Something I could rage against. But this?" She gestures with one hand, overwhelmed. "This is a love letter. Every stitch."

I go still. "What?" I ask carefully. My stomach tightens, caught between rising heat and a far-off kind of grief.

She shrugs. "I mean, I was assuming the O'Reilly Mafia Wedding Committee was going to pick some dress off a rack labeled "Classy but Obedient." But this had to be picked out by someone who knows you."

Before I can answer, a new voice cuts in from the doorway.

“It was,” says Fiona O’Reilly, her voice dipped in velvet sincerity with something flint-like underneath. “And he was adamant about the dress having wildflowers.”

Lizzy sits bolt upright. I turn slowly.

Liam’s mother stands just inside the room, composed and sharp in tailored navy slacks and a silk blouse. No pearls. No nonsense. Just a woman carved from quiet storms. She watches me like I’m a puzzle she already knows how to solve with patience and grace.

“What did you say?” I ask, the question scraped raw from my throat.

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Fiona steps deeper inside while the door clicks softly shut behind her. “He insisted,” she says simply, “on wildflowers. Specifically cornflower blue and foxglove purple. Down to the edge of your skirt.”

My mouth goes dry. “Liam picked this dress for me?”

She nods. “He approved every detail. The cut. The fabric. The thread. Told the seamstress you’d want something timeless. No glitter, no sequins. Just something... honest.” Her voice gentles, but not with pity. “The same for the ceremony and reception details. He refused to let anyone else take over the planning.”

That admission sinks straight into the places I thought were closed off for good.

I can’t answer. Not with the way my heart is lodged in my throat.

Because suddenly I’m sixteen again, wide-eyed and cracked open, hearing the way he used to say my name. Feeling the careful way he never quite looked at me, too long, when he was with my brother. And I’m telling myself, fiercely, that those buried feelings don’t matter now.

That the affection I once clung to with shaking hands won’t turn into vines around my throat.

But they’re still there. That old love. I don’t think it ever died; just turned small and hidden after the void left inside after my brother’s funeral.

“You okay?” Lizzy’s voice floats in. I nod before I realize I have.

She picks up on it quickly. “I’ll give you guys space,” she mutters, eyes narrowing at Fiona before softening toward me. “Holler if she gets weird or asks you to smuggle guns or something.”

With that, she’s gone in a sweep of sass and suede boots.

The air tightens as silence falls between me and Fiona.

“May I?” she asks, nodding toward a velvet chair near the window. The golden light halos around her and I think about the times I followed my big brother to the O’Reilly’s house and saw her drinking tea in her backyard.

I nod and sit down stiff-backed across from her.

She pours two teacups with deliberate, elegant movements. Everything about her is restrained power dressed in linen and subtleties. I wonder if Liam gets that from her. Or if it’s what he learned watching her survive this world with her chin high and heart guarded.

“I remember always finding you on the back porch,” she says softly. “Braids still damp from the pool, following your brother and Liam like his little shadow. You’d always demand Liam make lemonade, and you always said he cut the lemon slices too thick.”

I blink, caught off guard by the memory.

Her gaze softens. “You were just a girl. And Liam, well, he was already shouldering more than most grown men. Even then.”

I stare at my teacup, the delicate china so different than the mugs she would offer when I was over at their home.

“I’m not here to try to convince you that the way Liam is going about this wedding and mating ceremony is right—”

I shoot my gaze up, holding her too-understanding eyes with my own. “Then why aren’t you stopping it? Why aren’t you helping me leave instead of taking a stroll down memory lane with me?”

The bone china teacup in her hands clicks gently in its saucer as she sets it down.

“Though I wish it were different, Liam isn’t doing this just because of some legacy or alpha obligation,” she says gently. “He’s responding to something older, something that he has no choice in either. You’re his mate.”

I chew the bottom of my lip as I consider everything I know about werewolves. After Seth shared Liam’s secret with me, I researched and learned everything I could about werewolves and their cultures. I spent too many days daydreaming about Liam declaring me his mate.

My hands tighten on the teacup handle. I hate the way something in me reacts—how the old ache, the broken heart I swore I buried, flutters behind my breastbone like it’s listening.

“If I’m his fated mate, then why did he cut me off?” I demand. The breath at the end of the question trembles. “Why did he humiliate me and then disappear for a decade? And Seth’s funeral? They were best friends and even if he broke my heart, he could have still been there for me as my friend. I needed him.”

Fiona looks at me for a long moment. Not with pity. Something clearer.

“Because Liam wasn’t allowed to be there.”

The air staggers from my lungs.

She leans forward, tea forgotten, and lays her hand over mine. “Your parents gave my husband a very clear message. Liam was never to show himself around your family again. Threatened him with the police.” Her voice falters slightly before smoothing over, “They blamed him. Your father, especially.” She swallows. “Perhaps not fairly. But completely.”

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I stare at the velvet stitching on the nap of my skirt so I don't have to look at her.

"He wanted to come," she tells me. "He got dressed, managed it on his own despite the cast on his arm. He had flowers. He stood just outside our old gate for nearly an hour, heart cracking every second. And then John talked him out of it."

Fiona shakes her head slowly. "We all knew it would only make the grief worse if they dragged him away in cuffs."

The silence afterward is broken only by the delicate tick of the wall clock and the low chime of wind against the glass panes.

"He honored the distance they demanded," she adds softly. "He stayed gone, even when it broke him, because he thought it was the right thing to do. Because he believed your world would be better without him in it."

Would it have been, though? After the way my parents used Seth's funeral service as a way to deepen business and political connections, I couldn't forgive them. I make the appropriate calls on holidays and their birthdays, but otherwise I want nothing to do with them.

"And suddenly now he decides he's not just going to be in my life, but force me to marry him?" I snap, though the words land dull in my throat. "Blackmailing me with a video and dressing me up and parading me in front of all of his friends? How is any of this okay?"

Fiona doesn't flinch.

“He’s terrified and I doubt he even realizes it,” she says. “He’s still that young man you once knew and cared about, but with sharper teeth and many more scars. The world he lives in is harsh and nothing is given. He’s learned to burn the bridge to make sure no one else crosses it. None of this excuses how he’s hurt you, Claire. But it might explain it.”

We sit in silence after that; two women pulled into the same world.

“What am I supposed to do?” I hate how defeated I sound.

Fiona stands and rounds the table to rest a hand on my shoulder. “Demand answers from him,” she advises. “And trust in fate.”

Later, I stand at the balcony, wind stirring the hem of the dress I’m trying not to love, while watching people set up chairs and an altar in the back garden. He remembered cornflowers. He remembered summer breath and delicate lace and wild hope stitched into silk. And I hate how part of me still wants to believe in that.

But wanting Liam and trusting him? Not the same thing.

I might still ache for him. Still tremble when he looks at me too long and my instincts scream to submit to him.

But I’ve learned how to be on my own.

And tonight, when I walk through that courtyard in this beautiful gown, I’ll remember every wound behind each petal. Every slice he carved into my heart.

This dress might be his declaration of love.

But beneath it, I’m covered in armor stitched from the ashes of the girl he left behind.

Chapter 8

Liam

When I open the door to our warehouse near the river, the scent of blood greets me before my eyes adjust to the dim light within. It's not fresh: metallic with an undercurrent of rot, soaked into the concrete foundation of this space. River Street warehouses tend to hold more ghosts than grain these days, but the real horror lives in what we do here, not what lingers from decades past.

Towards the center of the open area, two men hang from their wrists on an old rail no longer in use. The rusted iron creaks with each small movement they make, and the silence between their labored breaths is tense enough to snap. Their feet barely graze the gritty floor. The pressure on their shoulders is already working them past the point of endurance.

Declan prowls like a caged animal in front of them. The O'Reilly enforcer is eager to spill some blood. His movements are slow and deliberate, a coiled storm under tight control. His shirt is already unbuttoned and tossed to the side, sweat-dripping muscles lit starkly by the glare of bare overhead bulbs. He walks a tight circle around the two of them, slow enough for them to feel the weight of his gaze: sharp and hungry.

Connor is off to the side, leaning against a wide metal table with his arms crossed. His expression is relaxed, too casual for where we are and what we're doing. That, of course, is intentional. Everything about Connor is meant to disarm. Polished exterior. Calm voice. It's deceptive comfort. A man doesn't rise to second in command in this family by keeping his hands clean.

He lifts a chin in greeting and I head in his direction.

Even though the sun is barely above the horizon, Connor is dressed as impeccably as

always: tailored dark slacks, a crisp gray button-up rolled at the forearms, and polished shoes that somehow avoid the grime this place collects. He hands me one of the trio of coffees he clearly picked up before arriving.

“Let me guess,” I say as I bump my fist against his while taking the offered coffee. “They aren’t being helpful?”

“Not in the slightest,” Connor says dryly, his tone laced with boredom, but I can see it in the line of his posture. His restraint is wearing thin.

He’s too calm, which means he’s barely holding his own leash. Good. I’ll let Declan be the teeth and Connor be the shadow.

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Frustrated, I glare at the two men and take a drink. The coffee is just short of blistering hot and black with only a hint of sweetness. Exactly how I prefer it. It's grounding for a few seconds. Familiar. Focused.

It makes me think of Claire, the sweetness she could provide for my life, before I shake it off. This is why I shouldn't claim her, even though she's the mate given to me by the gods. She has no business here, no place around bloodstained concrete and screams softened by distance.

Even thinking of her in a place like this tarnishes her unfairly.

I shouldn't be thinking of her at all right now. My main priority should be getting the information these two have because the O'Reilly family and pack comes before all else. That's what it means to be alpha and boss. It means making choices no one else can stomach. Reconciling your humanity with the wolf long enough to twist power into something that resembles order.

Besides, interrogating someone with a hard-on isn't something I'm keen on.

Centering myself, I approach the pacing Declan, greeting him with a nod, before turning my attention to the two men hanging before me. One is middle-aged, tattoos bleeding up his neck and across roughened skin. The ink tells a story of time inside and an inability to think long-term. The other's barely in his twenties: young, soft-faced, and shivering despite the sweat clinging to his skin. He's shaking like a dog facing a thunderstorm, and he hasn't stopped since I walked in.

Sniffing, I note that they're human. Not surprising. Ronan isn't stupid enough to use

someone from within the pack, and he's not desperate enough to seek assistance from our rivals. Which leaves humans: dispensable and unaware of the bigger rules that govern our world.

They watch me carefully, their fear and anger pungent in the air. One of them is covered in shitty tattoos, ones I'm going to guess he got in prison. He's afraid, but not as much as the one beside him. That man is younger, softer looking. He'll be the one that breaks first.

I pause, studying the younger one. His eyes twitch when I shift my weight. He's close to pissing himself. Already sweating out whatever bravado he arrived with. The older one? He's forcing the front, trying to hold both their dignity on his still-flexed shoulders. Admirable. Useless.

I make a point to check my watch for the time before meeting one, then the other's eyes. "I'm getting married today. So why don't you two do us all a favor and tell me what I want to know?"

The angry tatted one spits at me, the mass of saliva arcing across the space before landing near the toe of the leather Chelsea boots I paired with the suit I picked for the day. The dark mahogany shine dulls in the low light, but I can still see the fleck of spit at the edge of the sole.

I really don't have time for this today.

With a loud sigh, I hold my coffee out. A moment later, Connor is taking it with that unbothered tilt of his brow that says he's ready to burn the whole building down if I need someone to cheer me up.

I unbutton my suit jacket and shrug it off. Connor collects it too.

“Declan, you can kill that one,” I say as I unbutton the cuffs and begin to roll up my sleeves. He knows which one without me needing to specify. It comes from years of working so closely together.

Like the angry asshole, my arms are a canvas of ink. Unlike him, though, I paid for quality work: symbols of my heritage, my kill count, my oaths. Wolves wear their history as scars and ink, both etched with meaning.

I begin to wonder what Claire will think. When she’d last seen me, I’d only had a few on my biceps. She hasn’t seen what’s beneath the surface now, what years of violence and vows look like carved in black lines under moonlight.

I stop myself there. No room for sentiment in the kill room.

By the time I move to my second sleeve, Declan has shifted.

The shift is rapid and brutal: bone crunch and sinew stretching as his limbs twist into something animal, something older than sin. His enormous black and red-flecked werewolf form towers over the dangling men. He steps forward on heavypaws, growling low in his throat as his claws glisten obscenely under the overhead light.

I smirk at the men’s shouts of fear. The scent of anger is completely gone now.

The younger man screams and thrashes, his face pale and eyes wide with terror as he’s splattered with his comrade’s blood. Declan has always been pointedly savage. He doesn’t prolong suffering unless asked. He makes statements with blood and fear the way an artist might use oil and canvas.

He’s been an O’Reilly enforcer since he was a teenager, and as alpha he’ll be my primary enforcer. This is exactly why.

The crunch of bone as jaws sink into flesh isn't something you ever get used to. But if you're born O'Reilly, you learn to listen beneath the horror. The wet thuds that follow—Declan ripping the man's chest open like butcher's paper, one sickening tear at a time—aren't meant to entertain. They're reminders. Exposure therapy for an empire ruled by wolves.

By the time Declan is done, the remaining man is shaking hard enough the chain above him rattles as he sways. All that's left of the other man is a hollowed out corpse, the head nearly entirely decapitated and hanging askew, jaw slack in a frozen scream.

Declan huffs, panting, blood and viscera dripping from his maw and claws. He stalks back on his hind legs, eyes glassy with the afterglow of carnage.

I walk past him, careful to avoid the carnage on the floor. I have places to be soon, after all. I grab the terrorized man by the jaw, yanking his face towards me until he brings his eyes to mine. This close, I can see wet tracks down his cheeks and spots of half-dried vomit at the corner of his mouth.

A new, foul scent hits me. He's shitting himself and doesn't even realize it.

"Now," I say, voice low and razor-thin, "tell me everything about the job you worked when you were paid to kill John O'Reilly. If you don't?" I move his face, my fingers digging into his cheeks with enough force to leave bruises, so that he's forced to look at Declan over my shoulder, "I'll let him question you."

The man's eyes roll in terror. He nods frantically, trying to speak through the choking panic in his throat.

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“I—I didn’t know it was him!” he whimpers. “We—we were just told it was a high-value mark. Some kinda rich business asshole, but no name. Just a picture and a place to be. We were paid to block the exit and shoot. I swear!”

By now, Connor’s beside me. Still calm, but his body is alert.

“Who paid you?” I demand.

“A courier. We got the drop from a woman, dark hair, looked Eastern European, maybe Russian. She didn’t say anything. She just handed the info and cash. No tracebacks.”

Connor frowns. “Russian, maybe the Chernikov bear shifters?”

“Maybe,” I grit. “Or a false lead.”

Declan growls again, low and impatient.

“Anything else,” I bark. “Give me more, or I throw you back to my friend.”

“I swear, she said it was a favor owed. That the target had enemies. We—we got double payout from a third party too, two days after the job went bad. No name, cash only, foreign bank.”

Damn it.

I pull back, stepping out of the rank cloud of blood, bile, and waste clinging to him.

My jaw is tight. There's too much plausible deniability here. And still, the timing, the outsourcing, the layers protecting the original order? This approach reeks of Ronan. He'd make sure nothing ties back to him.

But it's still not enough.

Connor mutters, "It's too clean. No digital trail, no names, no prints. Everything disappears behind cash and corpses."

I exhale sharply. No hard proof, no smoking gun. Just rot dressed in wolves' clothes.

And Ronan is still the closest scent connected to it.

"Clean this shit up. Then make sure you're at the ceremony on time."

I turn without another word and head for the exit. Connor follows, the faint jingle of his keys the only sound for a few steps. Behind us, Declan snarls, and then it's drowned out by screams.

Outside, the afternoon light should be blinding after the dim warehouse, but instead it just makes everything feel too sharp. There's no satisfaction in this. Only confirmation of what we already knew: Ronan's involved. We just can't catch the son of a bitch pinning the knife.

Not yet.

But soon.

If I have to burn every inch of this city down to discover where he slipped, I will.

And when I do?

I'll sit back and listen to him beg while Declan butchers him alive.

Chapter 9

Liam

The gravel crunches beneath my tires as I guide the BMW through the old gates and up the paved curve leading to the estate. Warm flood lights cast a golden glow across the front of the manor house, throwing exaggerated shadows up onto the broad upper windows and the ornate archway above the main entrance. Twilight is beginning to drape its navy curtain over Savannah. To the east, round and arrogant, the full moon is beginning its climb into the sky. That familiar pull tugs at the base of my spine, a subtle tightening beneath my skin that reminds me tonight isn't just symbolic. It's primal. Sacred. And raw.

And still, I hesitate at the edge of the drive. For one stupid second, I just sit there, engine idling and hands curled too hard around the wheel, watching the diffused glow of candles and low lights in the manor windows like someone standing in front of their own damn house, unsure if they belong. She's in there. In a dress I chose. With wildflowers stitched across fabric that will cling to her hip the way my hands long to. She's angry. Hurt. Possibly plotting to stab me with a corkscrew at the reception. But she's here. In less than ninety minutes, Claire Douglass will bear my name, stand beside me as my mate and wife under the moon that braided our fates before either of us were even born.

My wolf paces beneath my skin, restless, eager, satisfied.

Finally, she'll be mine, the beast inside murmurs.

The words stretch like a promise, sharpening into hunger. I force my grip to loosen and throw the car into park. Pack wolves greet me with a few nods near the lantern-lit

entrance, their expressions schooled into reverence, flavored with curiosity. They know what tonight means. Not just for me, but for the entire pack. Tradition, security, legacy. None of those things come lightly.

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Inside, the air is warm. Jasmine-sweet from some floating candles my mother insisted were necessary, mixed with the familiar scents of lemon wood polish and sage. The manor always smells like power and protection. Tonight, there's something solemn woven in too. Like the house itself is holding its breath.

My mother finds me before I can march upstairs to change. "Everything's arranged," she says. Her tone is calm, but her eyes don't release mine. She's dressed in steel-blue satin trimmed in black lace, elegance touched by darkness. Her red-blond hair is pinned up neatly, though a few strands curl low at her nape, wild and stubborn as ever. As much as I've looked up to my father, my mother has always been my person. The one person I could run to when life got too hard and I needed somewhere safe and soft to land.

Like the night when I made the choice to reject the young woman who was my goddess-blessed true mate.

"Your watch," Fiona adds, and lifts her hand. I let her place it on my wrist, settling the weight like an offering. It's my father's old timepiece, simple and elegant. Its silver face catches the amber chandelier above our heads.

"How is she?" I ask, quiet but gruff.

She exhales, the sound soft and short. "Stunning. Angry. Quiet."

My lips twitch. "That bad?"

"She and Lizzy haven't burned anything down."

“Yet.”

Mama lifts her gaze and pins me with it. Her eyes are quieter than usual. Tired, maybe. Knowing. “You’ve cornered a fox, Liam. Don’t be surprised if she bares her teeth.” She steps closer and adjusts the collar of my jacket. “Marriage and power are easy to confuse. But one, my son, is a weapon. The other is a promise.”

“And which do you think I used?”

She studies me for a long second. “You used your teeth when you should’ve led with your heart. But,” her voice softens, “you love her. That’s been obvious since that day you walked away from her ten years ago. You just don’t know how to love without bleeding.”

A bitter laugh catches in my throat. “I’ve never been good at anything clean.” Which is why, if I could go back in time, I’d still push Claire away that day when she told me she was in love with me. Her soul would have been tainted in blood and violence if I’d taken what I wanted, what she so freely fucking offered.

“No O’Reilly man has.”

She rests a palm flat against my shoulder, grounding me. “Tell her about Seth. She deserves that much. Her parents aren’t here to stop you anymore.”

My throat tightens. Of course she knows I never told Claire. Because she’s the one who convinced me not to break when they shut that door in my face. Because it was her hand that steadied me when I ached to wrap my arms around Claire at a funeral I could never attend. There’s little my mother doesn’t carry for me, whether I ask her to or not. “She’ll never forgive me.”

“If you ever want to truly win her heart, you need to try.”

I nod because I can't reply. A few seconds pass. Then my mother reaches into her blazer, withdrawing a small black velvet pouch tied with a bit of crimson thread. She cradles it gently before pressing it into my hand as if it's something fragile.

"What is it?" I ask, my voice rough with questions I don't voice.

"A piece of your legacy," she murmurs, brushing a hand along the edge of the pouch as I untie it. Inside, resting against soft black velvet, is a ring. Not a wedding band, but a signet notched with a marking older than our family crest. The iron set stone is rough-cut, a piece of obsidian etched with a wolf's head surrounded by an unbroken circle.

"Your ancestral mark," she says. "It passed through six generations of Alphas before your father. Always from father to eldest child on the night of their mating mark, if the match was recognized as fate-bound by the pack."

I blink down at it. I'd only glimpsed it once, buried in a dusty portrait that hung in the hallway of my grandfather's old study. A relic of the old world.

"How's Da feeling?"

"He's resting. He'll rally for the ceremony, though," she says softly. She taps the ring with a manicured nail. "He made a choice not to pass this to you the night your wolf recognized Claire. He didn't want to cause you any more pain."

I stare at the ring, heavy in my palm like a ghost finally demanding its reckoning.

She lifts her chin a fraction. My mother lowers her voice to just above a whisper. "If you're going to walk through that arch and give her your name, then do it like an O'Reilly." She leans in then, a glint of iron pride in her gaze. "Not just as a man hungry for redemption, but as a future Alpha who remembers what it means to serve

before you lead.”

She squeezes my hand once, dusts her fingers against her skirt, and turns on her heel with a finality I’ve learned never to chase. I watch her climb the stairs, measured and proud, disappearing one step at a time. My guts are still twisted around the obsidian weight in my palm as I climb the stairs to my room.

After changing into my wedding tuxedo, I look down at the ring in my hand. The cold bite of the metal grounds something restless in my chest. Then I slide it onto the smallest finger on my right hand to carry it with me through the estate and then the back double doors as I step into the open-air courtyard behind the manor.

The garden courtyard has been transformed. Strings of golden light wind between wrought iron lamp posts and branches. Wildflowers line the simple aisle in asymmetrical clusters, lavender, bluebells, poppies, ripped from the pages of her favorite memories. Low music curls through the dusk air. At the altar, draped in linen and green vines braided in silver thread, I wait.

It’s not a grand stage, not gilded or overly ornate. Every detail is deliberate. I scrolled through every wedding inspiration board Claire ever made, even hacking her private ones, saved every color palette and floral arrangement, every candid post she liked from a wedding blogger seven years ago. I memorized the blues she lingered on, the candlelit courtyard settings that made her comment, the wildflower bouquets she reposted without irony. This ceremony isn’t mine. It’s hers. Or as close as I could build to the one she might’ve dreamed.

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The full moon is higher now, bold and watching, a solemn witness painted across the dark sky. Shadows stretch across the yard, long and flickering. Higher members of the pack are assembled, seated in the front. Behind them, each pack member who matters stands witness. Even Ronan fucking Lynch. The sound of murmurs fades like wind through tall grass as music gently shifts.

I look up, and Claire appears at the far end of the path. My pulse slams into my ears. Everything and everyone else falls away.

She's framed by lanterns and honeysuckle, moving with a poise that makes the world tighten around her like a held breath.

She is absolutely unreal. That dress wraps over her in ways that swallow the air from my lungs. The pale ivory glows under the moonlight. Wildflowers stitched across the hem flirt with her steps. Her hair is swept partially up, exposing her neck, the very place I ache to put my mark. She doesn't look like a glowing bride. She looks like she's choosing to walk to the stake and be burned with her dignity intact. And still, she's the most powerful thing I've ever seen.

I hold her eyes as she reaches the altar, ignoring the tremor in her breath, the slight stiffness in her shoulders. She stands beside me with her jaw tight and eyes blazing, but something in her softness flickers when my fingers sift gently over hers. She doesn't pull away.

Words are spoken. Rituals I've known since I could crawl: lineage and loyalty repeated in cadence around us. But I barely hear them.

My vows are quiet but firm when the moment comes.

“You cannot own me, for I belong to no one but the wild and the gods. Yet while the fates will it, I give to you all that is mine to offer. My claws, my teeth, my blood, my soul. I shall serve you in your needs and defend you in every danger. I vow to stand before every threat, a shield at your back and a blade at your side. From this day forward, it shall be your name I howl into the night, and your eyes I seek each dawn.

“You will have the first bite of my meat, the first drink from my cup, the warmth of my fire, and the strength of my hunt. What is mine will feed and shelter you. What is yours will be honored and protected as sacred, by myself and my pack. I vow to you my living and my dying, the fury of my rage and the depth of my mercy, both bound in your care.

“This bond is not made by man nor law, but by claw and heart, breath and bone, hallowed beneath the full moon’s eye. This is my vow to you, my mate, my equal, my home.

“Let the gods mark this promise. Let the pack remember this oath. Let the wild know: we are one.”

Her lips part. Her stare stabs me like something sacred. Then she repeats a version, stripped and hesitant, eyes steady. No embellishment. Just survival cloaked in grace.

The air thickens. The hush that descends over the pack seals something.

Our bond isn’t complete yet, not until my wolf sinks his teeth into her skin, but as she accepts the diamond eternity ring I slide onto her finger, the pack bows its head as one. Respect, even if with gritted teeth. Claire O’Reilly. It lands heavier in my chest than I thought it would.

Afterwards, there's applause. A few men howl, a scattering of claps and exclamations beneath the vaulted sky. Reception unfolds in controlled chaos. Music swells in the lower level of the house. Tables of food and whisky are devoured. Claire and I are ushered forward, sitting at the long table reserved for us before we leave for the final part of the night. She grips her champagne like a blade.

Across the room, Ronan stands near one of the ornate columns, his suit dark as bruised pride. His gaze meets mine once. He lifts his glass. I nod once, all ice.

The wedding cake is cut. A small round tiered thing with violets and white chocolate layers. I didn't pick it, but I made sure the bakery was local, one Claire once tagged on a socialmedia story five years ago. Her smile is reserved but sincere when I pass her a piece without asking. Small victories.

Later, after my brief toast about pack loyalty and sacrifices and a new era rising, I lift Claire's hand and press a kiss to her knuckles under the flicker of gold lights and a dozen eyes.

"To my wife and mate," I say softly enough that only she hears.

"By blackmail," she mutters back. But she doesn't pull her hand away.

The crowd howls as we retreat. The primal tide of voices rises into the night as we leave the ballroom behind. I pull her gently toward a winding path behind the manor, where the lights thin and the trees spill into sloping meadows and wild space uninterrupted. She walks beside me, her body tight but quiet, her fingers curling ever so slightly inside mine.

"Your mother said you picked out my dress?" she finally murmurs.

"Yes?"

“You remember the cornflowers.”

I nod. “I remember everything about you, Claire.”

“Tell me,” she says, voice low and firm, “what happened the night Seth died. Why did you abandon me when I needed you the most?”

My gut clenches. I’ve stared death down more times than I can count and I’ve never felt terror like this. We’re on the edge of a truth I’ve feared since the night I killed my best friend.

“Tell me what happened that night, Liam.”

She takes a single step back, putting just enough space between us that I feel it like a bruise. “Because if you don’t?” Her voice sharpens, each word laced with heat. “I swear, I will do everything in my power to reject your mark under this moon you think binds us so tightly. And being your wife won’t stop me from making your life hell until the day one of us dies.”

Her eyes blaze, no longer just demanding but daring me to deny her.

Chapter 10

Claire

The stars look so deceptively peaceful above me as I stand in the clearing, bathed in silver moonlight and uncertainty. They glitter bright and remote, like they haven't borne witness to everything else: the accidents, the heartbreaks, the nights of silence after Seth died. Like they haven't watched me sob uncontrollably in the garden behind my house where we used to spend time together, where no one would overhear the sound of my grief cracking apart in the dark.

Around me, the Georgia night breathes. Heavy. Slow. Alive. The air is thick with humidity, wrapping itself around my skin like a damp second layer. It clings to my neck, the hollow of my throat, and the inner curve of my knees. Somewhere distant, the low buzz of cicadas sings lazy, overlapping songs beneath the canopy of moss-draped trees. The scent of wet leaves and wild jasmine clings to the edges of the clearing, a haunting sweetness carried on the drifting breeze. Beneath it, the earthy tang of marsh mud and pine sap grounds me just enough to keep the memories from dragging me under.

The wind combs gently through my hair, a rare cooler current against the flushed heat gathering along my chest and neck. My dress dances faintly around my ankles, the hemcatching on the dry grass with each step. I stand rigid against the softness around me because my question still rings between us: "Tell me what happened the night Seth died."

Liam stiffens. It's like I've just drawn a gun and pressed the barrel between his eyes.

The silence is pressed down by the weight of everything he hasn't said for a decade. He looks past me for only a moment, just a flicker of movement in his eyes, like he'd rather study the stars than face the history between us. A frog croaks from a camouflaged perch nearby, the night-song layering higher, thicker, until it feels like even the woods are listening. When his gaze finds mine again, it's not the alpha or the mob boss staring back at me.

It's a boy dragging guilt like a chain he's forgotten how to live without.

"I killed him."

The words rip the breath from my lungs.

"What?" My voice cracks on the single syllable. I shake my head. "It was a car accident."

He doesn't look away. "Yeah, but it was my fault. I killed him."

The chill slices into my skin without warning, cutting through the warm evening. My hands fist into the satin of my gown. It anchors me, barely.

"I don't..." My mouth won't shape the words properly. "You need to explain what the hell you mean."

His nod is mechanical. He's unraveling slowly in front of me, and I can't look away. All around us, the southern night hums. A barred owl calls somewhere deeper in the trees with a low, echoing question. The breeze rustles palmettos, sweetgrass flutters in the damp air along the boundary of the tree line, and beneath it all, the rhythm of coastal life continues, slower and older than anything human.

When he speaks again, his voice is barely more than a breath. Nothing like the

dominant, feral growl of the man who blackmailed me into marriage. This isn't that Liam. This is someone else. Someone closer to the boy I once loved. Someone breaking in front of me.

“We were stupid.”

His fists clench at his sides. He isn't trying to hide the shame, the horror. He's holding it like a punishment he's long given up trying to escape. For the first time since I was sixteen years old, I want to reach for him. I want to scream at him, to hit him, to cradle him, all in the same breath.

“It was a Friday night. Bright moon. Seth was grounded—I don't even remember what for anymore. Something dumb. But he called me. Said he needed to get out, to breathe before he suffocated in that house. I agreed.”

His lips twitch. Not a smile. A ghost of something too grieving to be fond.

“We took the old Mustang. The one he helped me rebuild. He called it the ‘Iron Stallion.’ You remember that?”

The words hit with the force of memory. Seth's eager voice. His laugh. The way he'd lean into stories like they were campfire legends. I nod, the motion small, tight.

“We were just being assholes,” Liam says, his voice warping under the strain of what's coming. “Taking sharp turns too fast, switching the playlist every five minutes, arguing about which Marvel character would win in a fight.”

A tight line forms at the corner of his jaw. His knuckles are white.

“There was a car. Out of nowhere. Drunk driver, turned out. I tried to swerve. We slid off the road into the ditch.” He drags in a breath. “Flipped, slammed into a pine. Seth

didn't have his belt on."

The damp in the air is finally cold enough that my gown clings to my calves. The fabric brushes against wet ferns, soaking up pale beads of condensation glinting like frost on the tree line.

"He was halfway out the window," Liam says quietly, his voice thick. "Laughing about the wind in his face like we couldn't fucking die."

I wrap my arms around myself even though my skin's already cool, goosebumps prickling along my arms beneath the delicate fabric.

"I crawled out through the windshield, bleeding everywhere, screaming for him. When I found him he was?—"

His voice chokes off. His lips move, but no words come out. The only sound breaking the pause is the high-pitched whine of night insects and, faintly, the slosh and drone of marsh water shifting over roots somewhere nearby.

"There was no way to save him."

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My stomach clenches. The world tilts. Salt bites behind my eyes.

“I should have forced him to wear the belt. I should never have picked him up that night. I should have—” He cuts himself off, looking away like the sky might forgive what he cannot.

“You were twenty-three” I manage. “You were barely an adult, both of you.”

“I was his best friend,” he spits. “I’m a fucking werewolf, for fuck’s sake. I was stronger, smarter, faster. I was supposed to protect him.”

“That doesn’t make you a god,” I whisper. “You were just a boy doing his best.”

He turns to me slowly, and what I see in his face makes my throat close. It’s despair, and something worse: resignation.

His voice drops. “That’s the night I stopped being a boy, Claire.”

A bat zigzags past above us, its shadow flickering against low clouds that press like heavy cotton across the canopy. For a moment, the clearing pulses with the press of memory and heat.

Tears spill down my cheeks without permission.

“I was still in the hospital when your dad came by,” he says. “Told me I’d done enough to hurt you and your family. He said that if I tried to come to the funeral or see you, he’d press charges. Or worse.”

My hand is shaking at my side.

“I didn’t know,” I whisper. My voice is threadbare, weak. “All this time... I thought you didn’t care.”

His lips curve into something broken. “I cared so much I let myself rot.”

“You let me rot too,” I snap, the words ripping from my chest before I can stop them. “You let me sit there with nothing but silence and funeral songs and a box of ashes that used to be my brother. With parents who made his death a political performance.”

His breath catches, but I barrel forward, unable to stop the flood breaking loose inside me. The pain is too sharp, too old, too wild.

“You were supposed to be there for me, Liam. Even if you hated me. Even if looking at me reminded you of him. You were supposed to show up.”

“I couldn’t,” he croaks, jaw clenched like he’s swallowing down glass. “Claire?—”

“Yes, you could,” I say, louder now, trembling as I speak. “You could’ve figured out a way. You could’ve met me somewhere or sent a damn text message, or a goddamn carrier pigeon. Instead, it was like you both died that night.” My voice cracks hard on the last word.

Liam exhales sharply, like the accusation steals the wind from him. He looks away, one hand gripping the back of his neck so tightly I see the muscles flex along his forearm.

“I wanted to see you.”

“Then why didn’t you?!”

“Because I was drowning!” he bursts out, his voice rough, shaking at the edges. “Because every time I closed my eyes I saw his grin before the crash, or the way his body looked after. Because I had his blood under my nails and in my fucking teeth. And then your dad tells me I’ve ruined everything, and I believed him. I didn’t deserve to stand beside you after that.” He turns to face me fully again, and for once, there’s no hardness to hide behind. Just something stripped bare, wounded.

“And because I was being pulled deeper into the family,” he continues lowly, like each word costs him. “Into the criminal side. For me, the O’Reilly name isn’t just a birthright, but a fucking crown of thorns. My father made me underboss three days after we buried Seth. Said it was time I stopped running from commands and learned to rule.”

I stare at him, stunned as the weight of those words drags silence between us.

“I didn’t want to drag you into it,” he says after a beat. “You still lived in the light. You still had pieces of your innocence left. And I... I had nothing but rot and teeth.”

Something twists violently in my chest. Part of me—stupid, still soft—understands. Part of me wants to reach across the space between us and pull him back from wherever he’s been drifting these last ten years.

But most of me is splintered. Split down the seam of heartbreak he left behind.

“No,” I whisper. “You don’t get to say that. You don’t get to decide what I could or couldn’t handle. You didn’t protect me, Liam. You abandoned me.”

He flinches. I see it. The truth slices him open the same way it split me a decade ago.

“You were my friend,” I say, my voice shaking. “Beyond the crush, beyond all the stupid fairy-tale shit in my diary—before any of it—I thought we were friends. And friends don’t disappear without saying goodbye.”

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“I was trying to protect you,” he says again, but it sounds thin now. Desperate.

“Then you don’t know what love is!” I shout, breath hitching as I take a step back. “Love doesn’t leave. Love stays and grieves with you. Love doesn’t just walk away when it gets hard.”

The air crackles. Instead of sagging like he did before, something in Liam snaps. The tension that had been coiled tight between us ignites. He crosses the distance between us in a prowling blur, hands on my face before I can suck in another breath. Then his mouth crashes over mine.

The kiss is rough, desperate, edged with something feral and furious. My breath catches as his teeth drag across my bottom lip, mouth claiming mine like it’s a war he intends to win only by surrendering everything.

I should shove him away. I should slap him for daring to touch me like this after what he did, after what he said, after how he left.

Except I don’t. Because my body responds before my heart can shut it down. Because some traitor part of me has been waiting for this damn kiss since I was sixteen years old. Because the girl who fell in love with Liam O’Reilly never truly stopped loving him, no matter how tightly I buried her.

He pulls back just enough to speak, his eyes wild and storm-bright, his breath ragged across my cheek.

“You want a fairy tale? You want Prince Fucking Charming? Then you don’t want

me.”

“Then what are you?” I whisper, throat tight, heartbeat a thunderclap in my ears.

His hands shake where they cradle my jaw.

“I’m the kind of man who loves like a fucking curse. Who will fucking carve my name into your skin, Claire. Who watched you from the shadows because I knew I couldn’t have you, but I couldn’t let anyone else have you either, goddammit.”

My breath stutters.

He leans in, voice low and cold and holy. “I wasn’t there where you could see me, but I was always there. Always. I watched over you. Protected you. Every man who harmed you that night? I learned their names. Their habits. Their routine and lives.”

His eyes flare with something black and glittering.

“I hunted each of them down.”

My stomach twists. My pulse trips. I can barely move.

“I made sure they never laid their goddamn hands on another girl again,” he says, his voice dipping to a rasp. “That’s my love, Claire. Not poems or roses. But vengeance. Rage. Obsession. I’d dig a hundred graves just to make one point, that no one touches you but me.”

I should be backing away. My mind wheezes that this man is dangerous, obsessive, twisted. But my heart is fluttering inside my chest like it recognizes the beast it always belonged to. Like no matter the horrors, he was always meant to be mine.

“I don’t give a fuck what the world thinks,” he growls, pulling me tight against his chest. “I will spend the rest of my life proving it to you.”

I tilt my face up, my mouth barely brushing his, our breath caught between us. Everything inside me screams this is chaos, this is dangerous.

But it’s also real. He’s not the boy I used to dream about. He’s fury and darkness now—obsession shaped into flesh. And maybe, maybe I’ve always wanted that. Not the prince. The wolf.

But I won’t make it easy.

My palm presses to his chest, the thud of his heart a match to mine. My other hand curls into the back of his neck. I watch his eyes, dark with restraint, and I let myself smile.

“If that’s the kind of love you offer,” I breathe, “then I want it. I want you.”

He trembles against me, fingers tightening at my waist like chains about to snap.

“You left me once,” I whisper, “so if you want me now, you’ll have to earn every jagged edge you left behind.”

I retreat a single step, chin up, daring him. He looks wrecked. Ravenous.

“I’ll run, Liam. And if you catch me, you’d better be ready to never let go again.”

And God help me, I’ve never wanted anything more.

Chapter 11

Liam

She doesn't need to tell me that I can never walk away from her again after I catch her tonight. I made that decision the moment I knew I'd take no other wife except her, even if it meant dragging her into my dark world.

Even though her lips are still flushed red from my kiss, even though her scent is tangled with mine in the air—full of rising heat and surrender—Claire looks at me through lashes damp with tears and dares me to catch her like she's finishing a vow she started ten years ago.

Then she turns and runs. Not with fear, but with defiance.

I should shift instantly, should already be on the trail, muscle and claw carving a path through the dark like fury on four legs. But I just stand there, moonlight drenching my skin, her scent still warm on my mouth. My heartbeat fists behind my ribs and pounds so loud I swear I feel it in the dirt. I'll give her a head start, let her think that she might actually escape me.

Claire's challenge isn't about possession. It's not about primal instinct or dominance. Not really. It's about trust, forgiveness, worth.

The kind of hunt she invites me on is more than tooth and tilt. This isn't me chasing a mate with rut in my belly and control in my spine. This is a male earning his female. She wants me to capture her, body and heart.

She wants me as I am, the man I've become after every brutal line I've crossed since

the night I let her go.

I move slowly at first, fingers undoing the top button of my shirt, then the next. I strip in silence, laying each piece of clothing across a low branch like I would battle armor before a duel. The woods watch, quiet and patient, as I unbuckle my belt and step free of the last pieces that mark me as a man rather than beast.

The full moon grips at my spine, coaxing power up and through me. It always reacts to emotion first, and I am fathoms-deep in feeling tonight.

Grief. Guilt. Desire. Devotion.

The shift hits like it always does—fire stretching inside my skin, bones warping under pressure, muscles tearing and reknitting. My jaw cracks sideways and lengthens, teeth sharpen as my eyes blow wide with the transformation. My back bows, ribs pop, and then the long silence between my heartbeats breaks with the low, full rumble of breath escaping me in this new form.

I drop onto four paws, massive and snarling with restrained fury, my fur rippling over taut muscle with each breath. The darkness of my coat gleams silver at the edges, but the black runs deeper—soaked in blood, memory, and hunger. My claws dig into the forest floor, sinking past moss and rot like they were made to carve through flesh. I tense, power vibrating through my limbs, already on the razor's edge of instinct.

Then I lift my muzzle.

And I howl.

It tears from me like a war cry, a savage proclamation to the stars themselves. A song of possession, of warning, of ruthless acknowledgment that after tonight she belongs to me. My howl isn't a plea. It's my dominance echoing into the bones of the world.

Mafia or wolf, I take what's mine and protect it with tooth and claw.

No more hesitation. No more mercy.

Her scent hits me like gasoline to flame: wind, sweat, heat, and fear—not terror, but the thrilling sharp adrenaline that comes when prey knows it's being chased. Except Claire isn't prey. She's the blood in my mouth and the fire in my chest. My obsession in lace and bare feet.

She isn't running to escape me but to make me prove I'll never lose her again.

Good.

Let her run.

I will tear down the fucking woods if I have to.

Each clawed step sinks deep into the earth. With every inch, I track her like a storm hunts the shore. I see it now: a heel print, deep and deliberate between twisted roots. Adrenaline pushing her to run without caring about the obvious trail she's leaving behind.

There. Another print, shallower, near the rise of a slope. I inhale, and something carnal cracks loose in my ribcage. She's close. Her scent is thickened now—salt and lust and defiance all twisted into one heady thread. My spine bows under the pressure of it, snarls coiling in my throat.

Then I find it.

A shard of torn lace, trembling on the end of a low branch. As if she left a scrap of herself behind like a breadcrumb or bait. She knows what she's running from. She

wants this. She wants me like this: wild, ruined, slaving with need.

But what she doesn't know is what kind of wolf I truly am.

I press my snout against the lace and close my eyes, breathing her into my lungs like sacrament. It's still warm. Threaded with her skin. It makes me ache. Makes me feral. Every cell in my body floods with need, not the hollow itch of rut, but a deep, marrow-cleaving desire to catch her, mark her, and drag her back where no one but me will ever touch her again.

She's not a fox, like my mother warned. She's not some clever girl slipping through underbrush.

She is my mate.

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And I am not just her hunter.

I am her reckoning.

I move through the trees, muscles straining and hard with each powerful leap. The deeper I plunge into the forest, the more my thoughts quiet. Guilt strips away. Hesitation dulls. I remember who I am beneath the regrets and the blood: a man who's never stopped loving her. A wolf who's waited ten long years to claim what's his.

She's out there in the wild now. Waiting to be earned.

The scent sharpens.

She's close. I slow near a stream fed by one of the deeper ravines that cut through the estate. A flash of moonlight reflects off of her between the branches. She climbs up along crumbling banks and twists through brambles that grab and tear at the skirt of her dress before she disappears.

I see her in my mind like a flash—hair wild, mouth flushed, legs pumping with purpose. She's wind-stung and laughing through her teeth, completely untamed. Utterly mine.

I burst through the underbrush with speed that makes the trees blur in my peripheral vision. My pulse tunnels into the sound of footfalls ahead—soft but purposeful, the crackle of twigs and her breath just beyond the dip in the path. She's running, really running now.

I leap over a fallen log just as she reaches the edge of a slope above the stream.

She turns at the last second, her chest heaving, a feral smile ghosting across her lips the moment before I tackle her.

I leap, careful with my claws, my full weight braced to avoid real injury. She falls through the air with a shriek of laughter that drowns in the crash of us hitting the ground in a tangle of limbs and breath and heat.

Claire lands beneath me, her back arching from the shock, mouth parted in a gasp, skin glowing against the dark earth.

And then she isn't laughing anymore.

Her eyes search mine, wide and unguarded. Her fingers rise slowly, curl into the thick fur at my ruff, and hold tight.

Not struggling. Not pushing away.

Choosing me.

My heart stutters. The wolf in me shivers.

I lower my muzzle slowly, touching my nose to the curve beneath her ear, scenting the salt of her sweat and the electric thrum of desire humming through her blood. She arches again, a small gasp escaping her. She smells of pure, unfiltered need.

She doesn't speak. She doesn't need to.

Her thighs part as if pulled by invisible strings, welcoming me in as my claws dig into the dirt beside her hips. Her hands stroke across my shoulders, down the ridge of

my flank.

The gown I chose for her is ruined, torn and dirt-streaked, clinging to her in pieces. I nudge a strip of fabric away with my muzzle and bare her inch by inch, worshiping every curve revealed. My tongue drags along her ribs, my breath hot over her skin, each stroke deliberate.

Her cries are music, her whimpers a symphony only I was ever meant to hear.

Her hand fists in my fur, wordless and demanding. I slip lower, inhaling the scent of her arousal, and when I find the heat waiting for me, slick and bold, a growl rumbles through my chest.

Fuck, I've dreamed of this.

Of her. Head tilted back, lips bitten red and eyes glazed with need. I taste her for the first time, slow and reverent, and every part of me howls.

My tongue drags through her slickness in a long, deliberate stroke from base to clit. Her entire body jolts like she's been struck by lightning; her thighs snap tight against my shoulders, her nails carving down my back in frantic, helpless lines. I growl against her as I do it again, slower this time, savoring the heat soaking my mouth.

She's sweet. Fuck, she tastes like honey and salt and something only a mate should ever know—something sacred. Something that belongs to me down to the last trembling drop.

She jerks violently when I lap at her again, slower now, until my tongue lingers just a hair longer over her clit. The tremor that rips through her body makes my own tremble, primal ferocity barely caged beneath thick fur and the bone-molded beast I've become.

I press my snout deeper into her, my tongue lashing greedily against the swollen folds, polishing her with slow agony. She whimpers, frantic with sensation, her scent blooming as her arousal soaks the air around us. Every pulse of her slick against my tongue is a surrender she can't take back.

She sobs my name as she breaks, her orgasm crashing through her like a wave slamming into rock.

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And I devour it.

Her legs tremble as I pull my massive frame up from where I devoured her. I stand over her now, chest heaving, fur bristling with a savage kind of reverence. My shadow swallows her whole, cast by the moon spilling down through the trees. I gaze down at the place where my tongue had tasted everything she'd given, her slick still coating my snout, her scent imprinted into my every cell.

She's still catching her breath, legs parted, her ruined gown tangled around her hips. Hair wild. Sweat glowing on her skin. No wolf has ever looked upon his mate and seen something more divine.

And no one will ever be permitted to look at her this way again.

She blinks up at me, heart open to me, and tilts her chin with aching slowness. A silent invitation. She's not just baring her neck.

She's baring everything.

I lower my massive head, my heavyweight body moving with deliberate, unshakable control. Every ounce of primal instinct urges me to strike fast, to claim her as mine.

My jaws open, the heat of my breath rolling over her collarbones like a storm. My fangs hover above the curve of her jaw where neck meets shoulder, but instead of marking her where tradition suggests, I move. I position my bite higher, angling until a canine grazes where her pulse flutters dangerously close to skin.

Right around the delicate column of her throat. Where it cannot be covered.

Where her beating heart will always be protected by my claim.

My bite will not be hidden. Not with clothing. Not with scarves. Not with time.

I close my jaws. The puncture is precise, terrible, deliberate. She screams, pain turning into release and pleasure.

Her body bows up once more as the bond rips through our blood in a second, searing wave. Lightning surges through our tether, linking us beneath the moon, underneath centuries of tradition. My teeth settle deeper, etching my claim into the very structure of her flesh.

Her hands fist in my thick fur, her mouth parted in an endless soundless gasp, and as her heartbeat stutters beneath her ribcage, the mark seals.

When I release her, crimson blood streaks in twin lines, painting her throat like rubies against ivory. A necklace only I can lay across her skin.

After admiring the sight she makes, I begin to clean her wound. My tongue, hot and velvet, drags over the punctures in long, careful strokes. Each motion helps the healing magic from the bond weave into place faster, closing the wounds until they're nothing more than silver scars.

I don't rush, even as my cock aches and drips with need to claim her body now that her soul is mine. I want to memorize this moment as she sighs underneath me.

My tongue makes one final pass, right beneath the jawline. And I rest my muzzle gently there, laying my head down over her pulse. I can feel it. Mine forever.

Chapter 12

Claire

He shifts above me.

From fur to flesh. Beast to man.

The magic ripples off him like heat from the earth, and I watch it unfold—bones cracking, shadows folding, sinew crawling under skin as he reforms from the monster that just marked me into the man who’s haunted my dreams and my nightmares for ten years.

Liam O’Reilly.

Still brutal. Still mine.

He kneels between my spread thighs, broad shoulders rising and falling like he’s forgotten how to breathe around the sight of me. Moonlight kisses every muscle and scar, turning his sweat-slicked skin to silver. Ink coils down his arms onto his hands and across his chest like scripture carved in sin—wolves, weapons, Celtic knots, dark symbols I don’t understand and don’t need to. They tell a story I’ll learn with my fingers later. For now, they just speak one truth: I’m his and he is mine.

His cock is hard and leaking at the tip, proud and obscene beneath the ink that crawls down his lower abs. One hand drags up the inside of my thigh, slow and claiming, while the other braces into the dirt beside my head.

“I’m gonna ruin you for anyone else,” he says, voice low and ragged. There’s no humanity in it. No velvet. Just gravel and promise.

My breath catches.

“Every inch of you,” he continues, the weight of his cock dragging across my soaked entrance like a countdown. “Every thought about any other man. Every fucking memory that doesn’t include my hands, my mouth, my cock. I’m taking them. Erasing them.”

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A moan slips from my lips without permission—because I want him to. I want him to do every wicked thing those words promise.

He leans down and grips my jaw, forcing my eyes to his. His irises are blue fire, locked to mine like they'll drag the truth from my soul.

“You’re mine, Claire. Say it.”

“Yes,” I whisper. It’s not just my surrender. It’s my declaration. “I’m yours.”

His mouth crashes to mine, all teeth and fury. And then?—

Then he thrusts.

I scream. A full cry ripped from my throat like lightning. He buries himself all the way to the base and I swear I feel him in my lungs. It’s so much—too much—and somehow not enough.

He groans against my neck, grinding in deeper as if the depth he’s already buried in isn’t enough, as if he wants to crawl inside me and stay there until I forget my name and only remember his.

“You feel that?” he growls, hips snapping hard, making me gasp. “That’s your cunt wrapping around what fucking belongs to it. What it’s been waiting for all this time.”

“Oh my God,” I stammer, wrecked. “Liam?—”

“That’s it. Say my name. You remember this.” His breath scorches over my skin. “You remember it every time you walk. Every time you sit down. Every time you even think about touching yourself—this is what you’ll remember.”

His thrusts are savage now, sharp, punishing, and I can’t stop myself from begging. My hands clutch his arms, nails dragging down his muscles, my hips lifting to meet every devastating stroke.

It’s not like I imagined—not as a girl hoping for stolen kisses and meadow sex and whispered promises.

It’s better.

It’s filthy, raw, maddening.

It’s him.

He’s pressed over me like a shield, hands in my hair, breath on my ear, body driving into mine in a rhythm that feels more like confession than conquest. And with each slam of his hips, I feel myself unraveling. His cock hits some bruising place inside me that drags another orgasm boiling to the surface.

“Liam—Liam I—” I cry out, trembling, light exploding behind my eyes. “Please?—”

“You gonna come on my cock, sweetheart?”

I nod frantically. I’m past words. Past sense. Past everything but the feel of him and the heat between us.

“Then look at me when you do it. Look at me while I own every fucking piece of you.”

I open my eyes—and that’s all it takes.

I shatter.

My orgasm crashes over me with terrifying force. My body locks, my throat goes hoarse, and I can’t do anything but sob his name as wave after wave slams through me. My nails claw down his back. My thighs seize. I shake beneath him, overwhelmed and wide open and completely undone.

“You should see yourself,” he snarls, voice breaking with restraint. “Wrecked for me. Fucking perfect.”

He doesn’t stop. He keeps pounding into me, harder now—as if my orgasm makes him lose what little control he had left. Each stroke drives deeper, meaner, like he’s trying to brand my womb from the inside.

“Beg me to come in you,” he growls, voice hoarse. “Tell me you want me to finish inside, fill that sweet cunt with my seed. Knot you up so I fucking live in you for days.”

“Yes—fuck—yes, do it,” I gasp, everything clenched tight. “I want it. I want all of it?—”

“You’re gonna take all of me,” he snarls. “You’re gonna carry me. Smell like me. Bleed with my fucking name on your lips.”

And then he slams in deep, so deep it hurts.

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He holds there.

He pulses.

And he explodes with a growl that echoes in my bones.

I feel it—feel him—hot and thick, endless. My body clenches again like it's trying to pull him deeper, trap him there forever. His hands cage my head, his body wrapping around mine to lock us in place as he comes undone inside me with guttural, broken sounds.

Even after, we don't separate.

His breath shakes against my throat, his lips dragging kisses across the mark he gave me like it steadies him. My body still trembles with aftershocks.

My hand lifts, brushing his hair back from his forehead, and finally he lifts his face from my throat, eyes blazing.

"I own you now, mo chroí," he says, voice low, full of dark promise. "No more running. No more hiding. You were mine before you ever knew it."

I should be scared.

Instead, I smile. Because deep in my bones, I know he's right. I belong here: beneath him, beside him, marked and filled and completely his.

His weight settles over me through the aftershocks, anchoring me to the earth with every inch of slick, sweat-drenched skin.

He doesn't move. Doesn't speak.

Just presses his forehead to mine and breathes, like he's trying to remember what it feels like to be human again. His mouth is against my neck, buried just above the bite he gave me, the air around us thick with the scent of sex and sweat and blood and pine.

I belong to him now. Not just in name.

In body. Bone. Soul.

My fingers thread through his hair, slower now. The violence is spent from both of us, but the heat between us still hums like a low current threaded through the dark.

His voice comes rough against my skin. "Claire. Are you okay?"

I nod, still pinned beneath him, legs trembling, bite throbbing in time with my heartbeat. "I told you," I whisper against the curve of his jaw. "You'd have to earn me."

He lifts his head at that—just enough to meet my eyes.

And then he kisses my temple. Different from everything before. Gentle. Full of too many things he can't say all at once.

"I never intend to stop," he murmurs, gravel-soft.

We stay like that for a long time. Limbs tangled on the forest floor. Breathing in sync.

Our bodies cooling just enough to make the night air prickle across damp skin, the moon now lower in the sky. The burning pulse of the bond hums along the edge of my senses like a second heartbeat.

Eventually, Liam shifts again—this time only in position, not form. He slides an arm beneath my back and another under my knees, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. I don't resist. My head drops onto his shoulder, one hand resting against the expanse of muscle between his pecs.

His heart pounds under my palm, solid and real.

We don't speak for a while.

He walks barefoot over the soft moss and broken leaves, carrying me back toward the manor. It feels like a fever dream. A procession. A turning point in a story older than either of us.

Then his voice breaks the quiet, low and hoarse. "I never kept it."

I lift my head slightly. "Kept what?"

"The video," he murmurs. "I deleted it the same night I took it from them. You were safe. Even then."

My throat tightens.

“Then why?—”

“Because I needed you,” he says, voice low—not ashamed, not meek. He doesn’t flinch, doesn’t look away. There’s no apology in him, no regret for the line he crossed to bring me back. His heartbeat thuds beneath my palm, not a rhythm of remorse, but of resolve.

“I didn’t think you’d hear me out. And I wasn’t willing to walk away without trying something you couldn’t ignore.”

The woods are quiet around us, the leaves whispering above like they’re afraid of interrupting. The weight of what he isn’t sorry for settles heavier than any apology could. I stare at him, my jaw locked tight with the sting in my chest; rage and relief colliding like a hurricane.

“You lied to me,” I say quietly. “You threatened me.”

His grip on me stays firm. Not cruel, just undeniably his. Possessive. Grounding. “I did what I had to,” he replies, his voice rough sandpaper against my skin. “I won’t pretend it was justified or the right thing to do. Things that matter this much don’t come without sacrifice.”

His words wrap around me like barbed wire. They should cut. And maybe they do. But that pain feels honest in a way nothing else has been for years.

“I’m not promising I won’t do it again, if it means keeping you,” he continues. “Not when it comes to protecting what’s mine. Loving you isn’t something I can make soft

or safe. It's not tame. And it never will be."

He's not asking for mercy. He's telling me who he is. A man made of sharp edges and darker intentions. A man who would rather break the world in two than lose the one thing he believes was meant for him alone.

"But I'll try to do it better," he adds, and this time his voice wears the edge of something scraped raw with effort. "That much, I can give you."

No apology. No flourish.

Just truth. The Liam O'Reilly kind of love—dark and unrelenting, steady as a vow burned into flesh.

I don't reply right away. I'm still not sure what this kind of promise means. Still trying to decide if I can survive the kind of devotion that doesn't ask, only takes.

But I find myself shifting closer, resting my hand just over his heart, because it's beating like it's been waiting for me to touch it again. I don't know what we look like from the outside, naked and covered in dirt and scratches, but I think we look like two people who were circling this inevitability for ten years.

"I can accept that," I whisper into the curve of his throat.

His breath catches, just for a beat. "Thank you."

When I tilt my head back and look into his eyes, I see the storm behind the vows he made me, the part of him already calculating what he'd sacrifice to keep me. But I believe it when he says he'll try, because promises given from someone like Liam might as well be deals signed in blood.

“You’ll let me have a say in our future?” I ask, and I’m not teasing.

This is the only condition I need. I may be marked, claimed, filled—but I need to know I’m not powerless inside it.

He doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t hesitate either. He lowers his mouth to my bare shoulder, lips brushing below his mark. Then he speaks low and close.

“You’re the one who decides our future,” he says. “But don’t expect me to ever play tame. Especially if it’s to keep you safe.”

I hum in response, something between approval and warning. “Good,” I say, voice soft but sure as my fingers find their way back to his hair. “Because I don’t want tame.”

His cheek brushes mine. I feel the words he doesn’t say settle between us like iron: promises forged not in tenderness, but in need.

The forest parts ahead of us as he carries me through the final stretch of trees, his bare footsteps silent against the moss and leaves. Moonlight pools in quiet threads along the grass, painting the world in silver. The sky remains heavy with true night, not yet bruised by morning, as though time itself holds its breath in the aftermath of everything we’ve become.

The manor looms in the near distance, a dark and elegant silhouette against the quiet skyline. Where there had been noise and laughter, now silence reigns. The golden wedding lanterns have been snuffed out. Even the wildflowers scattered along the ceremony path have begun to slump, their vibrant edges wilted like the final breath of a dream exhaled. No guests remain. No chatter. No movement in the windows. The event is over, the performance has ended, leaving behind nothing but a darkened courtyard garden.

I feel everything. I feel him, dripping from me with every slow, measured step, warmth slipping down my thighs, proof of what he poured into me. The bond sings like a second pulse in my bones, humming raw and new beneath the arch of my ribs. My skin throbs where his mark spreads across my throat, the shape of his fangs still sharp beneath the stitched magic of our connection. I feel open in places I can't name, claimed in ways no one else will ever reach.

When I close my eyes, it isn't because I'm exhausted, although I am. It's with the relief that only comes when the hurricane is over, when you've fought the gale force winds, swam the rising floods, and still wake up with yourself in one piece. In his arms, I close my eyes with a smile because for the first time in seemingly endless years, something in me finally settles.

This choice, chaotic and brutal, stitched in blood and lust and layered with things I still haven't fully reckoned with, is mine. And even with its teeth, I trust it now.

I trust what I chose.

And I trust that he chose me just as fiercely.

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My alpha kingpin mate.

Epilogue

Liam

The sun climbs gently through the eastern windows of my home, brushing golden light across the floorboards like it's in no rush to announce the day. This place isn't the sprawling estate bearing my family's reputation, and that's why I chose it. It's mine. Quiet. Sturdy. Withdrawn. A two-story brick house tucked behind rows of oak and iron fence, wrapped in quiet. There's no gilded archways here, no ancestral portraits looming overhead. Just high ceilings, dark wood accents, a wide hearth in the den, and enough silence that I can hear Claire breathing two rooms away.

It's the kind of place where you can build a future with your mate.

The office used to be a second bedroom, but I converted it last fall, once it was clear I'd be taking Alpha from my father whether I wanted the title the way it came or not. The room smells like ink and pine, the leather of the chair beneath me creaking faintly as I lean back and watch morning break across the backyard through tall windows. Fresh security wiring lines the back gate. A stone garden path winds through tall sage and lavender. Restoration crews might not think this home screams kingpin, but that's what's beautiful about it. No one expects blood behind warmth. No one expects a monster with claws hiding behind a home full of quiet rooms and the scent of fresh-baked scones.

There's a file open in front of me, only a few pages. A whisper of a trail. The

beginning of Ronan's mistake, printed on two photos and a slim finance sheet. I can already sense the way it'll unravel. There will be blood for what he did to my father. But not today.

Because while the whole kingdom waits for me to exact justice, a stronger command pulses low in my chest. One forged under moonlight, through grit and grace and tangled limbs and ruined silk.

The door clicks open.

My hand stills, resting on the open folder, but I don't need to turn. I feel her before I see her. That bond between us singing a chord as steady as the beat of the heart she gave back to me when she let me claim her.

Claire steps into the sunlight without hesitation. Her tousled hair dampens my shirt that clings to her shoulders. It's unbuttoned, loosely draped, like she's framing the bond mark over her pulse. The silver scars catch the light as if reminding me who she is even before I see her face.

She barely gives the file a glance. Her eyes find mine and pin me.

And gods help me—I stand.

The world falls away, everything outside that one look irrelevant, every pack matter forgotten. She says nothing.

She doesn't need to.

Claire steps forward slowly, each step deliberate. She shrugs the shirt off. It slips from her shoulders and puddles at her feet as she tips her chin up, that fierce spirit of hers clear in her eyes.

My hand cups her nape, my thumb brushing over the twin sets of scars etched into her skin. I think I'll combust if I don't kiss her right now. I lean in.

Her fingers curl into my shirt and stop me.

"I love you, Liam," she murmurs, eyes gleaming.

I swallow. Hard. I've said it in actions. But words? No one's ever spoken those to me outside of my mother.

"I'm not sure I deserve that," I say quietly.

"You don't," she whispers with half a smile. "But I do, anyway."

My fingers tighten at her nape, the other sliding along her hip to anchor her to me.

"I love you, Claire O'Reilly," I say, rough and reverent. "I loved you then. Even when I turned my back. Especially then. I didn't know what name to give it, but it lived inside me like a curse."

Her breath catches.

"And now?" she asks, voice thin.

"Now it's not a curse anymore. It's fucking everything."

Then I kiss her. Deep, fierce, unrelenting.

The folder slides off the desk as her sigh falls into my mouth, and I press her back slowly, gently, until we're nothing but skin and heat and the taste of love given without condition.

Because in this room, in this home that belongs to both of us now, nothing exists beyond the thrum of her pulse beneath my lips and the whispered promise I offer in return.

I love her.

With every part of my blood soaked heart.