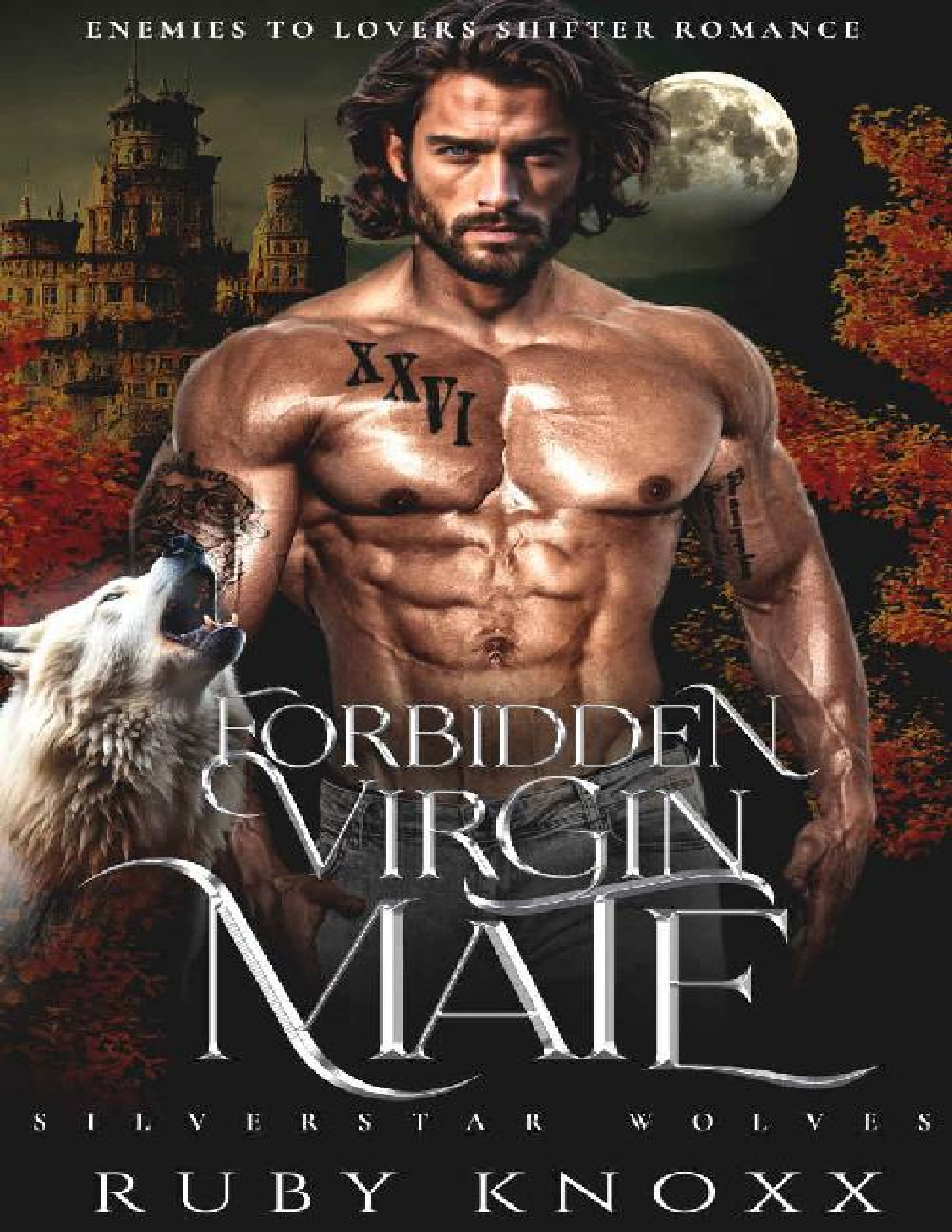


ENEMIES TO LOVERS SHIFTER ROMANCE



# FORBIDDEN VIRGIN MATE

S I L V E R S T A R W O L V E S

R U B Y K N O X X

# FORBIDDEN VIRGIN MATE

*Enemies to Lovers Shifter Romance*

*Silverstar Wolves Book 5*

Ruby Knoxx

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## Chapter 1 - Tanya

"I can do this, I can do this," I mutter as I straighten my shoulders, tilt my chin, and walk straight into the lion's den.

Not that any of these people enjoying the opening of their fancy new pavilion know they're my enemy. The beautifully carved white pavilion was probably made from the very timber felled by my parents' old company on the land my parents owned before it was all taken from them. We were framed, banished by the pack, and lost everything.

Now, I'm here to take it all back from the family who took it from us. But first, I'm going to look them in the eye. This moment has been such a long time coming. It's worth the nerves swirling in my stomach and the effort it's taking to put one step in front of the other and paste a smile on my face.

In a stroke of luck or serendipity, the daughter, Saffy, is one of my new students at the college. When I saw her last name was McCormick, my heart pounded with anticipation, but she wasn't at all what I'd expected. She's sweet, soft, and scared of her own shadow. Talented, too.

It was actually Saffy and some of her friends who convinced me to come to the pavilion today. They were buzzing about the new sports complex. But when she said her brother Zack would be there, I knew this was my chance.

With their parents dead, Zack and Saffy are the heirs to everything that was stolen from me. Zack is the one who was alive when we were banished, and he appears to be the one running the show now, so he's my main target. Saffy will be collateral damage, just like me.

I weave my way through the crowd, occasionally greeting a student or parent. Although I've only been at the college for a few weeks, I must admit the people here give off a friendlier vibe than I'd expected. Perhaps because the pavilion is located between both packs, I feel less exposed to the gossip and stares plaguing me around town.

The new alpha Mateo and his wife Billie have been the most welcoming to me. I was surprised by how keen he was to have me return to Silverstar, all things considered. But the idea that I could just come back here and pick up where my parents left off annoys me. Mateo told me he didn't hold me responsible for my parents' actions. I don't know how I bit my

tongue when I wanted nothing more than to lay out all the evidence of their innocence.

That's not the kind of revenge my parents and I are after, though.

I'm not sure the rest of the town got Mateo's memo preaching forgiveness. I was only able to rent a property when I told Billie I was having problems finding one. She offered me one of their holiday rentals, though she genuinely couldn't understand why I found the market so slow. I didn't like to admit that my money was apparently no good with most pack members. It seems they think thieving and treachery must run in my family.

The stares are openly hostile, the whispers are barely whispers at all, and even people I recognize from my childhood pretend they don't recognize me.

It is precisely what I'd expected, but it hurts more than I could have imagined. I thought I was pretty tough, having grown up in a rough part of the Bay Area with no pack and with parents who were too bitter and disillusioned to do much parenting. But being back here has forced me to dig deeper than I ever thought possible.

I've found solace in my students, though. Bringing tech skills to this part of the country is a dream come true. It's the future and a potential source of untapped wealth for these young people.

It's also those very skills that have put me in the perfect position to execute my plans. Not to brag, but there are very few hackers in the entire US who can do what I do. Necessity has made me a more formidable enemy than Zack McCormick could ever imagine.

But right now, I need to deal with something even more urgent.

My rumbling stomach.

I'd felt out of sorts and nervous before coming to the community fair today. At the thought of seeing so many people and attending it alone, I hadn't been able to eat breakfast. And now I'm starving. Not sure what I fancy, I pick my way among the stalls, pointedly avoiding anyone from my pack.

I must admit the fair smells pretty incredible now that all the stalls are set up. The pavilion is an amazing space housing a vast variety of local food vendors. It reminds me of the fresh markets in San Francisco that I once loved wandering around on weekends. Missing my most recent home and all the baked goods I usually consume at the markets, I'm about to head over to

the vendor with inviting bread aromas when I turn and walk straight into a towering stack of walking boxes.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry!" I exclaim as I only just manage to catch three large cake boxes as they slide from the stack and land practically on top of me.

Only then do I see the person holding the rest of the boxes. And what I see almost makes me drop the ones I'm now holding.

A seriously hot man with light brown hair and piercing crystal-blue eyes is staring down at me in obvious surprise. "No, I am so sorry," he says, trying to regain control of the remaining boxes. "I was rushing."

I can't help but laugh as he tries to control the sliding, oversized boxes. He quickly places mine on the empty tables of the stall I presume he was aiming for before turning back to get the rest.

"I've got them," he says. "Just hold onto the bottom one."

Once we set the last boxes on the counter, he turns back to me. "Thank you so much. That nearly went sideways, and Saffy would have killed me."

"Oh, these are for Saffy?" I ask, confused. "Is she running this stall?"

"Yeah, she practically runs the store here," the handsome man replies. "I was just picking them up for her."

I find myself almost unable to tear my eyes away from his face.

"You know Saffy?" he asks.

"Oh, um, yeah, I work at the college," I say, getting increasingly flustered under his gaze. "You know her? I mean, obviously, you do."

I groan inwardly. Of course he knows her. He brought all these cakes here for her.

"Yeah. I'm her brother, Zack."

As his words register, my head begins to swim. I'm vaguely aware that he's still talking, but my brain can't catch up. He looks nothing like Saffy, which I hadn't seen coming at all. I try to pull myself together and focus on his words.

"So, you're at the college, too?" Zack asks. "Are you the teacher she mentioned? Tanya?"

It's now or never, so I paste a smile on my face before replying, "Yep, that's me." I nod as I smile, hoping I don't look like a complete idiot.

"Wow," Zack says. "I gotta say, you don't look like any teachers I

remember."

I almost gasp as his eyes flicker down me appreciatively. I want to say all I'm thinking about is how much I hate him, my mind racing with thoughts of revenge, but all I can do is reflect the heat in his eyes. My wolf is practically howling her interest.

Damn. I seriously need to get a grip.

Zack appears to hear someone shouting, and I turn to see where he's looking. Saffy is waving at him frantically, gesturing to the boxes. I guess her meaning, and Zack rolls his eyes and starts unpacking them quickly. "My work is never done, apparently," he says with a chuckle.

I remain frozen for a minute as I watch this strong, rugged man try and fail to arrange platters of beautiful cakes. "Do you need a hand?" I ask, grabbing one of the platters just before it crushed the frosting on the tray below.

Zack cringes, flustered at the scene in front of him. The expression only makes him look more attractive. "Yes, yes, please. I don't know why Saffy isn't here. She should be sorted by now."

I quickly take the cakes out of the boxes. The stall is already getting lots of interest from people passing by, and almost as soon as the cakes are out of the packaging, Zack has to start taking money from customers. I can't help but laugh as he does his best despite clearly knowing nothing about cakes. I wrap the customers' orders as he handles the register.

"What's Saffy doing, anyway?" I ask after a customer walks away.

Zack scans the crowd momentarily. "She's helping set up a surprise. But she needs to get her ass over here so I can go do my part."

"That sounds interesting. Very secretive, but interesting." I laugh, wondering what the surprise could be.

I'm about to ask when a huge man walks over to us. My wolf immediately recognizes the presence of an alpha, so I take a step back, busying myself with the remaining cakes and not wanting to draw his attention. Having grown up away from Silverstar, other wolves still make me nervous. As nice as Mateo is to me, my wolf struggles to be in his company for very long without feeling intimidated or worried that he'll see through my reason for coming back.

"Why are you running a cake stall?" the alpha asks Zack, breaking into a mischievous grin.



I look between the two imposing men and can't help but smile, too. It's true. Zack looks completely out of place here.

"Don't you start. Saffy's left me hanging—"

Zack starts to answer, but the alpha cuts him off. "That's my fault. She's keeping Quinn distracted, something about needing flowers. You ready?"

They're clearly talking about the surprise, and I can't help noticing the alpha—Diego, I think—looking strangely nervous. Zack scans the crowd again, obviously looking for Saffy.

"Erm, you go if you need to," I say to Zack. "I can stay here with the cakes until Saffy gets here."

"Thank you," Diego says to me. "Come on, Zack!"

Zack looks at me with gratitude in his eyes, mouthing, "Thank you."

He's obviously under pressure from his alpha. Besides, I feel more comfortable hiding behind this cake stand than pretending to mingle with the crowd. Plus, this whole encounter with him has been a bit of a win as I've now met my enemy in person.

Even if he wasn't quite what I was expecting.

Zack hands me the cash wallet and starts to walk away with Diego. Suddenly, he spins on his heels and comes back to the table.

"Forget something?" I ask.

"Only your number," he says with a grin, then groans. "Sorry, that was cheesy. Look, you're new in town, right? You helped me out here. Let me take you out for a drink?"

I freeze, not knowing what to say or do. My heart is pounding, but then I hear Diego yell Zack's name impatiently.

I stammer, "Yea-yeah, of course." I scribble my number on a pad and give it to him. He flashes me a thoroughly disarming and sexy smile before rushing off.

What have I done? I can't go out with him.

Or can I? I have a plan for revenge on the McCormicks, but I'm sure it would be even better if I get to know Zack better. I could make it hurt even more.

I'm still mulling over my options when I see Diego take the stage and reveal the big surprise: he's proposing to his mate, Quinn. It's all very romantic, and even though I roll my eyes at the corniness, I can't help

wondering what it feels like to actually find your mate.

It sounds as though they've already had a mating ceremony, so I'm not sure why they're having another.

Saffy suddenly bursts through the crowd, her eyes widening when she sees me behind the stand. "Oh, thank you, thank you," she gushes. "I was supposed to keep Quinn, Diego's mate, occupied, but it all took longer than I expected. How did you get talked into this?" she asks with a laugh.

"I met your brother...well, I walked into him and the cakes." I gesture to the table. "And here I am."

We both laugh, Saffy's gorgeous red hair cascading around her as she ducks under the counter and appears by my side. "This is very sweet," I say, gesturing to Diego and Quinn on the stage. "But why the ceremony if they're already mated?"

Saffy cringes before laughing again. "Well, it's a long story. Diego sort of kidnapped her, but obviously, it all worked out really well, and he's lovely."

"Kidnapped!" I exclaim, though I try to keep my voice low.

"I could say it sounds worse than it is, but I think he's just really lucky it's worked out so well," Saffy says, and I nod. "Kinda romantic, though," she adds.

I roll my eyes at her naivete. "As your teacher, it's my duty to tell you that kidnapping is definitely not romantic." But then I look at the couple swooning at each other and sigh. "They do look very happy, I'll admit."

We both sigh, and Saffy hands me a delicious-looking cake with chocolate frosting. "Cake for the single girls?" she offers.

I laugh and accept the cake. As we continue to watch the romantic spectacle, my eyes wander to the side of the stage, where I spot Zack talking to some of the witches gathered for the ceremony. As if sensing my gaze, he glances at me. I blush furiously, trying to look away in time.

My appetite lost, I thank Saffy for the cake and excuse myself. She thanks me for my help as I head away from the stall to the edge of the pavilion for some air.

My first meeting with Zack McCormick hadn't exactly gone as I'd envisioned. I'd spent years hearing about our enemy from my parents and picturing the moment I'd come face to face with them. I'd thought about all the things I'd say to them.

In reality, I helped my enemy with a cake stall and accepted a date with him.

Zack doesn't at all look like I'd expected. I'd looked him up online and seen pictures of him, but nothing could have prepared me for how hot he is in person.

Taking a few deep breaths, I remind myself that nothing and no one will stop me from avenging my family. I straighten my shoulders and walk away from the festivities.

## Chapter 2 - Zack

I throw the last of the logs into the back of the truck and secure them before driving away from the site. I'm not even halfway down the road when my cell rings. It's Saffy, so I put her on speaker.

"Where are you?" she demands.

This is how it is with us. At times, we're more like a bickering couple than siblings. Or maybe that's just how siblings who live together behave. "I woke up, and the house was freezing, and you're nowhere."

"Calm down, Saf. We're out of timber, so I drove up to the site. I'm on my way back down now."

She huffs, and I roll my eyes. "You know, you do own that place. You could just get it delivered. Then you wouldn't get busy, and we wouldn't run out. Or we could use something fancy and modern, like, I don't know, elec —"

"Enough!" I cut her off. "I like my house. I built it. I like my heating system. And I don't mind driving up to my own site to pick up some logs."

"Urgh," she groans. "You owe me pancakes. If the stove ever warms up, of course."

"Whatever, sis," I say, disconnecting the call before she can get another word in.

She's not wrong; I could get the logs delivered. It's my company, after all. But I'm used to doing things myself, relying on no one, which usually works out just fine. Except I have been so busy recently and didn't realize we were out of the biofuels the cabin runs on. So, I had to resort to good old logs today. I'll put in an extra-large winter order when the office opens, just to keep Saffy off my back.

I may complain, but I can't help but smile when I think of my sweet spitfire of a sister. She's gone from being a shell of a child when I'd gotten her back from our useless parents to a shy girl with a lot of potential. Now, she is blossoming into a young woman who's smarter than I ever imagined and loved by the whole damn town.

But she's still my little sister, and she can still drive me crazy. Considering the way she bosses me around my own house, I can't help but think she'll drive some poor guy just as crazy one day.

The thought of her living with some random guy makes my blood run a little cold. She may be eighteen, but that doesn't mean I want to start thinking about her dating. There were some high school boys she went out with, idiots Diego and I half-terrified. I laugh to myself at the memory of some of the poor boys' faces when they came by the house and were greeted by both their alpha and beta staring them down.

As funny as I find the memory, I can't help but consider that girl Tanya isn't that much older than Saffy. Was I completely crazy to ask her out? I mean, she *is* older than Saffy. She's a teacher. A graduate. It is different.

Isn't it?

Pulling off the mountain road onto my property, I feel the tension ease out of my body. This land was the first thing I bought when I got on my feet. I may have lived in an old trailer for the first couple of years, but gradually, the cabin took shape. It never fails to take my breath away as I turn the bend and see the stunning timber frame and glass structure. I built it with my own two hands and help from the community who stood by me in tough times. It's my place of peace.

I don't want to deal with Saffy's whining, so I unload the logs first and fire up the cylinders. My company was the first to bring biofuel technology to the mountains. At first glance, it probably doesn't make sense for a logging company to use renewables, but the fact is, I love the forest. I know timber can be better used than for fuel. That doesn't mean I won't still use the burner when needed, though.

It's a fast and efficient system, so I can already hear it roaring to life as I disengage the security system and head into the cabin. I find Saffy at the kitchen island, her laptop on and books scattered everywhere.

"Did I not give you a study all to yourself so I wouldn't have this mess?" I ask, removing my jacket and heading to the sink to clean up.

"I like the light in here." She shrugs and goes back to her screen.

"Teenagers," I mutter to myself as I rummage in the cupboard for the pancake pan. "What are you working on, anyway?"

"You wouldn't get it," she says absently, staring at the screen.

I bark an incredulous laugh. "I'm not a complete dinosaur, Saffy."

She looks at me dubiously for a moment but then seems to think better of calling me old. "I just mean it's technical. Basically, I'm running a

demo of what I'd do to hack into my own bank account."

My mouth drops open. "You can't do that!" I exclaim, almost tripping over my words. "Is this really what they're teaching you? Hacking? Isn't cyber-security supposed to be the opposite of that?"

Saffy rolls her eyes. "It's just a demo, silly. I just have to plan what I would do. Tanya says the best way to defend a system is to understand how and why it's vulnerable."

"I can see the sense in that, I guess." I allow, pausing as my thoughts turn to a certain blond teacher. "So your teacher, Tanya, she's showing you how to do all this?"

Saffy had returned her attention to the screen, furrowing her brow at something. "Um, yeah. She's pretty amazing. She was some cyber whiz kid back in San Fran. Rumor has it she lived in a fancy condo. Imagine swapping that for here."

Saffy's voice is laced with all the incredulity of a teenager who thinks her hometown has nothing to offer. Even though Saffy loves her pack, she's still a normal kid.

"How come she was in the Bay Area if her family is with Mateo's pack?"

"Apparently," Saffy says in her best gossip-laced voice, "her parents were disavowed. Something to do with stolen money or land. Matthew, a guy in my class who's from Saffy's pack, told me his parents said Tanya's been allowed to come back, but her parents are still banished. She's apparently no longer in touch with them, though I thought once you were out, you were out." She gives me a sharp look. "She's really lovely, though...weren't you talking to her at the fair? Are you fishing?"

I groan as I realize I now have Saffy's full attention, and her eyes are shining with mischief. I slide the plate of fresh pancakes and syrup over to her.

"We were just talking. She helped put the cakes out. That's it." I do not mention that I asked her out.

"Mmm," Saffy replies thoughtfully, suddenly looking older than her years. "You were talking to her for ages. Obviously, she's too young for you and not really your type..."

My fork clatters onto the plate. "I'm not that old. And she is my type, actually. I..."

I freeze mid-sentence as I realize my mistake. Sassy baited me, and I took it.

"I knew it! You like her!" Saffy cackles. "Honestly, I never thought I'd see the day."

I roll my eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means. When was the last time you dated? And I don't mean that woman from Henry's bar." She pulls a face.

"This is none of your business, Saf," I say, throwing my dishes into the sink.

"It is if she's my teacher. I'm not sure I see you two together, anyway." She smirks.

I know I should kill the conversation. She's pushing all my buttons, and I really don't want to talk to my kid sister about this. Still, I can't resist. "Why? Why don't you see us together? Not that we are."

Saffy regards me for a moment, frustrating me even more. "Well, she's just a lot cooler than you."

I open my mouth to reply, but she continues. "And really, really pretty. Like, all the boys in class are falling over themselves to impress her. Obviously, they're all too young for her, and I—"

"But I'm too old?" I say, glaring at my sister. "I know she's cool. I mean, I saw that when I met her. But I'm not, you know, uncool."

She flashes a smile at me. "I love you, Zack, and you have a lot going for you. Not sure about cool, though. Unless it's lumberjack-cool."

"Well, Tanya didn't seem to mind," I counter, then I grind out, "We're going for a drink."

Responding like this is childish, but sometimes my sister brings it out in me. She doesn't even look vaguely surprised at my admission, and that's when it dawns on me: she already suspected I asked Tanya out, and I just confirmed it for her.

"Mmm-hmm," she says with a chuckle.

"Very funny, Saf," I snarl. "You're too smart for your own good sometimes."

"I know," she chirps, jumping down from the stool and clearing the rest of our breakfast things away. "You're just too easy sometimes."

We work in silence for a moment while I stew on what she said. "Do you really think I'm too old?" I ask. My age gap with Saffy had definitely

been on my mind.

"No, not really. But I guess that's up to her," she replies.

"Yeah, that's true," I say, grateful for her words.

"You're definitely not cool enough, though." She laughs wickedly as she grabs her laptop and waltzes out of the room.

"I'm cooler than you!" I yell, knowing it's a complete lie and cringing because I should know better than to get sucked into my little sister's games at my age.

Saffy must have been a complete surprise to our parents because there are over twenty years between us. But whatever good may have existed in them had long since evaporated by the time she came along. I'm only glad she didn't have to spend more time with them.

Even so, the effects of their cruelty were evident for too long. I may not appreciate Saffy's teenage sass, but I'll take that over her silence during the first year she lived with me. No more than a pup, and she was too scared even to speak.

My hands ball into fists at the memories, my claws digging into my skin. I turn to the picture window that overlooks the decking and forest beyond, trying to calm my mind with the view that usually soothes my mind. The glass has auto-reflect technology, so it tints to deflect the light on a sunny day like today. The effect also means I can see myself more clearly in the reflection. I take in my appearance: checked flannel, workman boots, well-worn jeans with more rips than would be considered fashionable. My light brown hair is unbrushed and coupled with three-day stubble.

"Lumberjack-cool" indeed.

An image of Tanya at the fair flashes into my mind. Her sleek blond hair pulled up into a high pony, her flawless skin with a sexy hint of smudged eyeliner. The simple but stylish V-neck sweater that showed off her slim shoulders and a hint of enticing cleavage. The tight jeans tucked into boots that made her ass look great.

Dammit, she *is* way too cool for me. She seemed keen on the date, though, because she replied to my text that night. We're all set for the weekend.

Saffy's right about a lot of things. One is that I don't date. Ever. But something about Tanya feels different, and it's not just her sexy ass in those jeans. After only five minutes, my wolf was more interested in her than he'd



been in any of the women I'd taken to bed in the last decade.

Something about that really unsettles me. But it also means there's no way I'm going to miss this date.

## Chapter 3 - Tanya

Pulling onto the driveway to my rental, I kill the engine and lean back in my seat. Tears that threatened to fall ever since I stormed out of the store slid down my cheeks. I brush them away, frustrated, crushed, and pissed off all at once.

I'm not a crier, and I'll be damned if some stupid woman I went to kindergarten with a million years ago turns me into one.

"What a bitch," I mutter as I take a deep breath and get out of the car. After grabbing the groceries and slamming the door, I walk toward the cute little cottage-style cabin I'm renting from Billie and Mateo.

This house is the best thing about being back in this godforsaken town. I'd thought I would have to commute from the nearby city when the local bigots wouldn't rent to me because of my surname. But Billie had really come through with this place.

This cottage is usually a vacation home, so it's decorated to a much higher standard than I'm used to. Soft beige and taupe tones, beautiful soft furnishings, and high-end appliances make the small property feel so inviting. I've felt more at home here in the last month or so than in any of the temporary homes I inhabited over the last fifteen years.

Home has never really felt like home. Not since we were driven away from the house I grew up in and cast out by the very people who should have known and trusted my parents.

The street is quiet, with only a few houses. I don't want to be paranoid, but I always feel eyes on me whenever I come home. Probably just the usual small-town nosy neighbors checking out the controversial newcomer from behind their windows and perfectly manicured homesteads.

Closing the front door behind me, I lean back against it and allow myself a moment of respite, letting the calm of my cozy little house envelop me. I have the house for six months, which would give me time to find somewhere more permanent.

But I should be long gone by then.

I sigh before walking to the small kitchen island to unpack the groceries. Balanced on top of the bag is the sweet-looking pack of frosted cupcakes Saffy brought in from the bakery and offered me at the store.

Having tasted one at the fair last week, I knew these treats were special, and I was touched she'd brought them in during her shift.

She's a great student and seems like a genuinely nice person, too. That last part really stings, given that I'm here to destroy her and her brother's life. She's a gifted student, though, and I've reasoned more than once that I'm equipping her with skills she'll need later on. Skills that have helped me survive out in the world.

It's not lost on me that I'm about to do to Saffy exactly what was done to me. She's not entirely innocent, though. Her fancy laptop, the expensive truck, and her kind, carefree attitude don't come cheap. No, her wealth comes at the expense of my family. Even if she hasn't realized it yet.

I see so much of myself in Saffy, it's quite unnerving. Her hacking skills make me smile. Although I'm technically teaching cyber security, it's industry standard to look at the practice through the lens of the perpetrator, who also happens to be me.

I began my hacker life when I had no friends, no family except my parents, and no pack. My parents didn't want to out themselves as shifters, so we kept to ourselves, and I was homeschooled. My computer skills are entirely self-taught, the result of finding like-minded friends online—other shifters who were alone in the world for whatever reason.

We were a small group of kids online with nothing left to lose and very little oversight, figuring things out as we went along. Eventually, I got very good at figuring things out. I hid behind a carefully constructed online persona, but my hacker identity was well-known on the dark web. I diverted hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years, funded my own college degree, awarded my online friends scholarships, and changed our grades to lift us all up.

I was a virtual Robin Hood.

Until my hacker group started getting picked off one by one. We all knew the risks, and seeing Stan get taken down by MI6 in London was a sad day for all of us. Still, we felt protected by our firewalls and carefully constructed online identities.

But over the next six months, we lost two more hackers, and I knew the net was closing. When the FBI finally showed up at my door, it was all a lot less dramatic than I'd imagined. I'd envisioned some kind of raid with stun grenades and rifles in my face. Instead, I walked into my condo one day to

find Agent Barnes sitting on my sofa, drinking my coffee.

I still laugh at the memory because despite everything, I actually like Agent Barnes, a no-nonsense, craggy old agent. I was surprised he knew enough about computers to work cyber. It turns out you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. He's given me a run for my money more than once.

More than that, instead of throwing me in jail, Agent Barnes offered me a job. So now, I split my time pretending to be a college cyber-security teacher and freelancing for the government. I test their systems—most of which are seriously lacking—and keep hackers out. The irony isn't lost on me.

Over the last couple of years, I've gone from criminal to patriot. I've helped stop some of the biggest threats to the country in recent memory.

But to that miserable bitch in the grocery store, I'm no better than the dirt on her shoe.

It was stupid, really, thinking I could forget just for a moment. But she was so friendly when I started unpacking my shopping. She obviously thought I was just a visitor, but I recognized her straight away.

*"Emma, right?" I asked.*

*"Yeah, sorry, do I know you?" she replied, smiling.*

*"It's Tanya. We went to school together like a million years ago. Before my family, erm, moved away."*

*I instantly realized my mistake as her smile dropped and a frown replaced it.*

*"Wow. You've got some nerve showing up here." As I quickly bagged my groceries, she sneered, "I heard you were back. At the college. Didn't think you'd actually come near the town. Shameful."*

What was shameful was how I just froze. I should have told her where to go. Instead, I picked up my bag and rushed out of the store.

I was nearly at my truck when I heard someone shout my name. I tensed, thinking Emma was following me for round two, but when I turned, I saw Billie and McKenna rushing toward me.

*"Are you okay?" Billie asked. "I'm so sorry that happened. I'm going to get Mateo to address this. It's not right."*

Unable to talk due to the threatening tears, I managed to thank her but jumped into my truck and sped off before she got too close. I don't know how much Billie saw or heard, but I felt shame. So much shame. And a burning

rage that this is exactly how my parents must have felt.

They were good people before they were banished. Now, I'm not so sure.

Speak of the devil—my phone starts ringing deep inside my bag. I hunt for the device, already knowing who it will be.

"Hello, darling," my mom's sickly-sweet voice fills my ears. "Did you have a good day? How are you getting on?"

Feeling vulnerable, I start to tell her about the grocery store, but she cuts me off. "Well, what do you expect? They're all evil. You need to get this done and get out of there."

I nod, trying to fight the tears. "I know. I know. Billie's nice, she came out to che—"

"None of them are *nice*, Tanya," my mom snaps, the sweet tone gone from her voice. "Don't fall for it. I warned you about this."

"I know, Mom, I'm sorry. You're right. Where's Dad?"

"Oh, you know," she mutters. And unfortunately, I do.

"He's drunk, isn't he?" I ask sadly.

"He can't help it," she snaps, making me think she might also be partaking in shifter beer. She's almost as bad as he is. "That's why you're there. We can't put this right, but you can. We've stood by you."

I hear a crash in the background, and Mom shouts something, presumably at my dad, all but confirming they've both been drinking. Not much gets a shifter drunk or high except specially formulated brews. My parents have a couple of dealers who keep them well-stocked. The drinks make them essentially useless as parents.

I hate this town for doing this to my family. And I hate Zack's family most of all.

I get my mom off the phone as quickly as possible. I can't deal with either of my parents when they're like this.

I can't deal with them, full-stop. My mom is bitter, mean, and treats me like garbage. I've been nothing more than a burden to her for years. My dad is a difficult man, so crushed by his situation in life, he barely makes sense anymore.

But they're also all I have left.

Determined not to fall apart, I finish putting the groceries away. After making a fresh pot of coffee and taking out one of Saffy's cupcakes, I try to

shrug off my lingering sadness. I retrieve my encrypted laptop from the safe and settle on the sofa.

One of the best bits about my work with the FBI is my heightened access to encryption. With so much more computer power at my disposal, my systems run better than ever. I'm not sure the government even realizes how much more I can do now, piggybacking off their networks. Or maybe they just don't care as long as I help catch the bad guys. People way worse than me.

It's a win-win situation, really.

After a few weeks here, my plans are coming together. I bring up my most recent files and log into the fake back office I've created, which links me to the community accounts the two packs have created for their joint ventures. The accounts are looking pretty healthy after an apparent round of fundraising. Most of the money goes to projects like joint sports games, winter fairs, new college buildings and programs, and new infrastructure both packs can enjoy.

But the packs will never see any of this money; only one person is going to benefit from all this hard work. After today, I'm tempted to accelerate my plan and deliver one massive blow, but I pause, my fingers hovering over the keys.

No. First, I'm going to make Zack fully understand what his family did to mine. The accusations and whispers that built and built before we were finally cast out. I'm going to destroy his life bit by bit.

*And Saffy's*, I think, but immediately shrug that thought away.

I set up two wire transfers for smaller amounts that will trigger notifications. Enough to prompt questions, but not enough to look like grand theft. The money is heading to a very well-disguised account. It will require someone with a lot of know-how to discover who that account belongs to.

That person, of course, is Zack.

I close the laptop and take a bite of the cupcake, ignoring the fact that the frosting suddenly tastes like cardboard in my mouth. I swallow it down, fighting the voice in my head, whispering uneasy thoughts.

## Chapter 4 - Zack

"Are you kidding me?" I hear Saffy's incredulous laugh behind me. Spinning around, I see her in my bedroom doorway, doubled over in hysterics.

I turn back to the mirror. "What?" I demand.

"You cannot wear that shirt." She giggles, waving her hand in my direction. "You wear it every time you go out."

I look down at the blue and black plaid shirt. "And what's wrong with that? It's smart enough."

Saffy walks into the room and sighs. "Firstly, it's not—it has a hole in the side. And second, it's just a bit...basic hillbilly."

"Basic hi—" I start, but then I look down at the shirt and spot a hole in the side seam. How long has that been there?

Saffy walks over to my closet and disappears for a moment before returning with a black button-up. "Wear this and your other jeans. The good ones."

"It's just a casual thing, Saf," I say. "We're going to the fair and then maybe Henry's for a drink. That's it. That shirt's a bit fancy, don't you think?"

She looks from me to the shirt and rolls her eyes. "It's a black shirt you've had for years. It's not too fancy, just better than that one. Tanya grew up in the Bay Area. I'm sure she's used to a bit more style than the boys around here and their endless love of plaid."

I take the black button-up from her but make no move to change. "Tanya's from around here. I'm sure she likes plaid as much as the next wolf."

"Very funny," Saffy says dryly. "Anyway, she doesn't act like she's from around here."

I regard my sister for a moment. She's changed so much in the last couple of years. No longer a painfully shy, awkward teenager, she's blossomed recently, and it's really nice to see. A miracle, if I'm honest. The job at the store and now this college course have really helped bring her out of her shell.

"You really like Tanya, don't you?" I ask. "Is this weird for you, me taking her out? I don't have to, and it's just a drink."

The last thing I want is to make things weird for Saffy at college. Maybe this was a bad idea. Or maybe I'm just looking for excuses.

"Oh no! I'm not letting you back out of your first date in years over me." Saffy laughs, shaking her long red hair. "Yes, I like Tanya. I think she's having a hard time, too, so be nice to her, okay?"

My eyes flick up, my wolf stirring at the thought of Tanya going through difficulties. His reaction is bizarre, considering I don't even know this woman apart from a brief conversation and a couple of texts.

I try to play it cool but can't keep the interest out of my voice. "Why, what's wrong? Something I should know?"

Saffy sighs. "It's something to do with that thing with her parents. The mom of one of my college friends works at the store in her town. Apparently, Tanya went in, and his mom went off at her. He was really embarrassed about it and didn't even come in the next day. I guess folks over there *really* don't like her family."

I don't miss the look on Saffy's face. "Yeah, we know how that feels, right?" I say carefully. "Look, our pack's gonna care much less about whatever history she has. I'm sure she'll enjoy the fair."

Saffy nods briefly, but her eyes look far away, and I know she's thinking about our rotten parents. I wish she wouldn't waste a single thought on them. If Tanya's having issues with her own parents' history, Saffy and I could relate to that. Ours were the worst, and although the pack doesn't hold either of us responsible for our parents' actions, I still feel the stench of their actions around us from time to time.

"You going to the fair?" I ask, not really wanting to run into my little sister when I'm on a date with one of her teachers.

"No, I'm at the store," she says, checking the time. "In fact, I'm going to be late. Wear the black shirt."

She gives me the briefest of hugs before rushing from the room. She's always running late for something, and I don't see that changing anytime soon. Smiling, I pull on the black button-up.

I'd offered to pick Tanya up, and she'd taken me up on it. I climb into my truck and start the drive to her place.

Driving through Mateo's pack lands always makes me reflective. It seems like just yesterday, this place was my pack's battleground. Now, the pack members are friends and co-workers. Our kids are at college together.



I'm proud of Diego for doing the right thing and uniting our packs, but my wolf still feels on high alert. Pulling up in front of Tanya's house, I suspect it's because I can feel eyes on me. The proverbial curtain twitch of the neighborhood watch.

I get out of the truck and am about to walk up the driveway when the front door opens. Tanya steps out of the cottage-style property, and my mouth goes dry. She's wearing a tight cropped jacket, tights, and boots that hug her body in all the right places. Her blond hair is swept up into some kind of elaborate messy bun with a few loose strands framing her beautiful face, and her long legs seem to stretch on forever. She looks like she just stepped out of a magazine cover—sexy and sophisticated. All I can do is stare as she comes down the path toward me, looking absolutely stunning.

"Hi there," she says with a smile, giving me a look that could melt ice.

My wolf stirs at the sight of her, and I suddenly understand how much trouble I'm in. I've never felt this visceral reaction to a woman before. I've never been bothered about finding my mate, but now the thought rushes through my mind as I stand there dumbfounded, staring at her.

"Erm, yeah, hi," I say before coughing, trying to brush the nervous feelings away. "You look great, by the way. Ready?"

She blushes, sending a wave of heat through my body. "Yeah, yeah. Let's go."

We climb into my truck, and as soon as I turn the key in the ignition, the radio kicks in, and soft rock music fills the air from my favorite station. Tanya raises an eyebrow at me, clearly amused by my taste in music.

I'm about to defend myself when she starts singing along, swaying to the music. I struggle to keep my eyes on the road as she belts out the lyrics. She knows all the words, and I can't help but smile. She looks so sexy. Part of me wants to join in, but I'm too transfixed by her.

I suddenly find myself wanting to reach over and touch her soft skin. My wolf is restless. Lacking any human finesse, all he wants is to lay claim to the beautiful woman whose proximity is driving us wild.

Instead, I try to focus on driving and keeping my eyes on the road. It's not easy. My mind plays an image of me pulling over and hauling her body against mine, kissing her until neither of us can breathe.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, hoping she doesn't notice.

"So, you're a rock fan, then," I tease when there's a lull between

songs.

"I'm a music fan," she laughs, a little breathless from all her singing. "I like a bit of everything."

"I hope you like fairs, too," I say, grinning.

"What's not to like? All the sweet treats a person could possibly eat, mixed with rides that spin all around."

"You ever go to the Santa Clara Fair? You're from the Bay Area, right?"

"Sort of," she says, suddenly looking out the window. Feeling the mood shift, I wonder if I've said the wrong thing. "You ever been to Santa Clara?" she asks me.

"Yeah," I say quickly, trying to move the conversation on. "Diego and I went a few years ago. Nice area."

"Yeah, it is." But she's still a bit quiet, and I start to panic.

"Well, the fair here is probably smaller than you're used to," I say, "but I know for a fact there are plenty of spinning rides. Maybe we should eat *after* going on them."

She flashes me a beautiful smile at that, and I feel instantly relieved. "I'm gonna hold you to that," she says, holding my gaze seductively as we pull into the lot. "I've never met a ride I couldn't handle."

My heart races, and I can feel my face going red. I almost stall the truck in response to the sexy innuendo, but thankfully, I manage not to embarrass myself completely. Tanya's eyes sparkle with laughter as she sees me struggle, and I take a deep breath.

"Challenge accepted," I finally say, winking at her. "Let's see what you got."

I get out of the truck and walk around to her side. Opening the door, I help her climb down from the cab. I take her surprisingly small hand and feel a jolt of electricity as our fingers touch. I can't help but take in her long legs, encased in tights and a short skirt. Her cheeks are pink, and she smiles at me, making my heart race even more.

I take a step back from her, forcing myself to remain a gentleman despite my thoughts. We stare into each other's eyes for what feels like an eternity before I finally step back and offer her my hand.

"Ready to go?" I ask as she slips her hand into mine.

Tanya nods as if she knows exactly what I'm thinking about—and

given the mischievous twinkle in her eye, she seems to like it. Taking a deep breath, I give her hand a playful squeeze and pull her toward the fairground.

I love how her eyes go wide as we walk under the arch, and she sees the vast array of stalls. The sweet smell of caramel apples and cotton candy fills the air. I'd worried the fair might be a bit smaller than she's used to, having grown up in a city, but the wide smile on her face tells me I needn't be concerned.

"Hey, miss," a girl calls to us, waving excitedly at Tanya. She and her friends giggle when they see she's with me, and I groan. Small towns like this are rife with gossip.

Tanya waves back, not seeming affected the same way I am. Perhaps she's forgotten what small towns are like.

The group of girls is standing with some older women, some of whom are looking daggers at Tanya and me, which is a bit strange. "Friendly kids in your class, I presume?" I ask.

"Mmm," she replies casually.

"You want to go over, or is that not cool for a teacher?" I laugh.

Just then, I see one of the older women gesture toward us again. Tanya sees it, too, and I feel her tense next to me.

"Something I should know about?" I ask, my wolf rankled.

"No," she says, brushing it off. "The kids are friendlier than some of the parents. My family wasn't overly popular around here."

I squeeze her hand, not wanting a few ignorant women to ruin our date before it's even begun. "I know how that feels, believe me," I say, pulling her away from the entrance and toward the food stands. "I think it's time for donuts."

That seems to do the trick. Tanya's beautiful smile returns, and I squeeze her hand tighter as we head off.

## Chapter 5 - Tanya

*I know how that feels.*

His words took me by surprise. As I stand, waiting for him to return with the donuts, I struggle to get my head around it.

He can't possibly know how I feel. None of what I went through happened to him.

My cheeks burn with shame at being singled out by those women. It's true what I said—the young students at the college are pretty awesome, and the only problems have come from some of the parents. I thought I'd be safe at Zack's town fair, but the two packs mingle more than I realized.

As I understand it, there was nearly a full-scale war between the packs not long ago. Diego and Mateo managed to broker peace, an unusual move for alphas after there's already been bloodshed. Good for them, but that means I can't even get a day away from the whispers and stares.

Still, being here among Zack's pack is exactly what I wanted, right? Revenge served up close and personal. Here, I can finally put faces to the names in the stories my parents told me. All their bitter stories of betrayal.

I didn't grow up hearing shifter fairytales and folklore; I grew up listening to the story of how Zack's family framed mine and how all my parents' friends turned their backs on them. And how their alpha had driven them out. My parents had followed Zack's family for years and learned how rich they became after they took over the region's entire forestry operation. Our family's forestry company was swallowed up by theirs, so all that wealth must have been passed down to Zack and Saffy.

*He can't possibly know how I feel,* I dismiss.

Part of me wants to turn and run right now. I keep my expression carefully neutral but feel the lingering stares acutely.

The irony is that I almost forgot about it all when we were in the truck: Zack's family, why I'm here, all of it. As soon as I stepped out of my house and saw him standing there, my wolf grew engaged and restless, something I never felt from her before. If anything, I've spent most of my life suppressing my shifter side to blend into the human world. To feel my wolf rise to the surface so keenly—over Zack, of all people—is unnerving.

In the truck, I'd tried to distract myself with the music, but soon we

had both been singing along. It felt so...natural.

I remembered the rush of my wolf's happiness and the warmth of the instant connection I felt with Zack when I first met him at the pavilion. When he'd helped me down from his truck, placing his hand on my hip, I felt a surge of emotion I'd never felt before. Being a twenty-four-year-old virgin isn't something I'm either proud or ashamed of. I've simply never allowed myself to get close enough to anyone in the human world.

My disconcerting reactions toward Zack are problematic, but they won't deter me from my mission.

I plaster my best smile onto my face as I see him turning back from the stand, donuts in hand, and walking toward me. I can't deny he's hot. I know he's in his forties, but his tanned skin and light brown hair make him look younger. He has a five o'clock shadow, a muscular build, and an imposing presence that exudes confidence.

I can't help but notice other women checking him out as he moves through the crowd, but his eyes are trained on mine. I was flirting pretty hard with him in the truck, especially for someone with no experience to back it up. But I just couldn't help myself.

I feel my heart rate speeding up as he smiles at me, holding out the box of donuts. I take a deep breath before taking it from him, and I'm surprised to find my fingers brushing against his when I do. His touch is electric—like nothing I've ever felt before—and it sends an unexpected thrill through me.

My wolf senses something in Zack that she wants to explore further. Something I know could be dangerous if I allow him to get too close. But then again, danger is what drew me here in the first place.

I know exactly how this story is going to end, but I can't help wanting to dive in.

"Let's refuel with these, and then I'll try not to beat you too much in the batting cages." Zack winks as I take a bite from a mouthwateringly good donut.

I laugh. "I'll have you know I was never one for team sports, but I'm very good in the cages."

And it's true. Growing up, my family kept to themselves, so I never participated in teams or sports games. But my strike rate in the cages is exceptional.

We finish our donuts in record time, the warm, sugary treats easing the tension I felt earlier. Excited children run around the fair as the sun begins to set and the stall lights start to glow. We head to the batting cages, which are illuminated under floodlights and sectioned off by thick netting. We're shown to the cage at the end, and I don't waste time picking up a bat, eager to show Zack my skills.

"Well, damn." Zack lets out a low whistle as I step up to take the first swing.

Although my skirt is short, it's perfectly respectable with thick tights. Still, I can't help feeling exposed under his watchful gaze. He's quite a bit older than me, and obviously much more experienced. When I glance at him, leaning casually against the rack and waiting his turn, there's an unmistakable hunger in his eyes that sends a shiver through me.

I swing and hit, but with my thoughts firmly on Zack, the ball flies off to the side. "That was a warm-up," I laugh.

"We will see," he says, and proceeds to hit his ball right into the outer nets.

As he celebrates, I roll my eyes and step up for my second round. Just as I'm readying my bat, I feel his presence behind me.

"You know," he says, "if you turn your back leg out just a bit..."

Suddenly, I feel his hand resting on my hip and guiding my leg back. I gasp as that spark shoots through my body again. Instinctively, I lean into his touch, and I hear a low groan as my back hits his hard chest. His hand tightens on my hip possessively, and I'm almost scared to turn my head to look at him. Heat has pooled between my legs. I've never felt anything like this before.

"Tan—" Zack starts, but is interrupted by a loud cheer from the cage next door. The spell broken, I jump forward, gripping my bat.

I laugh nervously. "You trying to throw me off my game?"

Without waiting for a response, I take my shot. This time, I even surprise myself with the power behind it. The ball volleys to the end net with a satisfying thud, and I'm rewarded with cheers from Zack and the other cages.

"Okay, okay," he chuckles, high-fiving me. "You don't need any help from me."

The rest of the evening proves to be just as much fun. We ride on the

Ferris wheel, where we admire the changing colors of dusk, and wander around the stalls, trying our luck at winning some prizes. As the evening moves into night, I'm conscious of Zack's arm brushing mine as we walk, and my heart skips every time his fingers brush against mine when he hands me a plate of fried treats.

We end the evening by taking a seat before one of the stages, where a band is playing. It's a magical atmosphere, with the lights twinkling above us and the music playing. Zack hands me a boozy hot chocolate, and I warm my hands on the cup while we listen to the band.

"Look over there," Zack says, pointing to a group of teenagers messing around at the back. "They're my sister's friends. If she wasn't working at the store, she'd be with them."

I scan the group, noticing some familiar faces from college. When I catch them looking in my direction, I give them a quick wave. Smirking, Zack nudges me and starts doing hilarious impersonations of Saffy and her friends.

I can't help but burst out laughing. His impersonations are spot-on, and I'm amazed by how well he obviously knows and understands teenagers. His laughter is infectious as we watch the teenagers goof around in their own little world, and it suddenly hits me that he must have raised Saffy pretty much by himself because their parents died years ago.

"I can imagine how much Saffy must appreciate your humor," I say.

He scoffs. "Do teenagers appreciate anyone's humor when they're over the age of twenty?"

I nod. "Very true. Most of my students probably think I'm ancient, and I'm not even twenty-five."

He lets out a low breath. "And...now I feel really old."

"I wouldn't say you're *really* old," I tease.

"Oh, thanks!" He nudges me playfully on the shoulder before standing and pulling me to my feet. "Fair's wrapping up. I better get you home before it's too dark for my old eyes."

I giggle as he takes my hand in his, and we walk back through the fair. Zack waves to people as we go, and it occurs to me just how popular he is as the beta of his pack.

I don't want to dwell on what a perfect evening it's been; I can't allow myself to do that. But then, Zack leans in to whisper in my ear. "I had a great

time tonight, Tanya. I hope we can do it again soon."

The electric sensation returns, and I feel myself blushing. Lost for words, I simply nod at him in agreement.

We reach his car, and he opens the door for me, taking my hand once again as he helps me into it. As we drive through the darkened streets and then onto the country road, I steal glances at him, his strong profile illuminated by the soft glow of the dashboard lights.

When we pull up in front of my house, he kills the engine, and we sit in silence for a moment. The tension between us is palpable, but I don't know what to do. I feel my inexperience acutely.

I turn to face him, feeling a longing that I can't suppress. His eyes meet mine, and I realize we're both thinking the same thing.

Without a word, he leans in, capturing my lips in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless and instantly wanting more. Our tongues dance together, his hands roaming over my body as I melt into him. My wolf is practically clawing to the surface, wanting to be closer.

He slowly pulls away, resting his forehead against mine. His breathing is ragged and labored, mirroring my own. I suddenly hate the fact I'm a virgin and don't know what to do next. I don't even know if I can handle a grown man like Zack. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest as his hand strokes my thigh, drifting under my skirt and finding the delicate apex of my thighs. I gasp with pleasure, my cheeks burning as I realize how wet I am already.

His other hand travels up the curve of my waist before cupping the side of my face. He looks into my eyes, his own smoldering with desire. I open my mouth to say something, but his lips crash down on mine again, hungrily exploring every inch of mine as if I'm the only thing that matters right now.

My hands grip his body, tracing the contours of his hard chest and chiseled abs and slipping beneath his shirt. They tremble against his skin as I feel him react to each touch. We continue our passionate embrace until finally, he pulls away, leaving me breathless and wanting more.

"Wow," he whispers against my skin. "I-I think it's obvious I'd like to see you again."

I chuckle, his stubble grazing my cheek and sending fresh shockwaves to my core. "I think that's a yes."



I'm still smiling as I step into my house, close the door, and watch the lights from Zack's truck retreat down the dark street. Flicking the lights on, I notice my reflection in the hall mirror. I'm shocked to see how flushed my cheeks are, and the gentle swell of my thoroughly kissed lips. I've never seen myself like this before. Yes, I've been kissed before—I'm not entirely inexperienced. But I've never quite like this.

My phone beeps. I smile, pulling it out and wondering if it's Zack texting already.

But it's my mom.

*Is it done?*

My eyes flick to the clock—it's 11 p.m. The first transfer out of the pack accounts would have gone out half an hour ago while Zack was kissing the life out of me in his van and setting my whole body on fire.

My phone starts vibrating; she's calling me now, obviously eager for an update. I send the call straight to voicemail and head into the kitchen, splashing my face with water.

*This changes nothing*, I think over and over. Perhaps it's even better this way. If Zack is into me, then my family's revenge will hurt all the more. I'd be leaving town, anyway, so it really doesn't matter what happens with him.

My mom tries calling me again, but I switch off my phone. She's the last person I want to talk to right now.

## Chapter 6 - Zack

*Hi Tanya, I hope y-*

My fingers hover over the keys before deleting the message. Again. I put the phone down next to my coffee, picking up the cup to take a long sip while I run through possible messages in my head.

I don't want to sound too eager, even though that's exactly how I feel.

Damn. This woman has me tied up in knots, and I'm not used to it. Sure, I like dating, but prefer to keep things casual. For years, I've had Saffy to think of, and after everything she'd been through, it never felt right to bring someone home if it wasn't serious. And it never felt serious.

I've certainly never struggled to send a simple text before. But then, I've never driven away after a date as turned on and confused as the other night.

The moment just seemed right, and I'd taken a chance by kissing her. What I hadn't expected was the passion and primal urge that followed. My wolf was totally on board with the idea of taking her there and then in the truck, he was pushing and riding me to do it. To mark her as mine.

Those signs did not point to a casual hook-up. I'm not stupid; I know I'm in true mate territory. I've never been bothered about finding my mate—I'm not even fully sure I believe in the concept. However, after seeing Diego with Quinn, I'm slightly more open to the idea than I was before. After all, I've never seen my alpha and best friend happier.

I know I need to see Tanya again, but now I'm more nervous. What if she doesn't feel the same? I've never felt nervous over a woman.

I groan and pick up my phone, open our last text exchange, and try again.

A few minutes and three deleted drafts later, I'm almost ready to throw my phone across the kitchen when my security system alerts me to a vehicle approaching. There's only one person, other than Saffy, who has authorization to bypass the intercom at the gates and drive straight up. Diego.

*Thank God*, I think, grateful for the distraction. I toss my phone back on the kitchen island and head out to meet my friend as he pulls up in front of the cabin.

I step down and greet my best friend with a hug. Not many would

dare embrace their alpha, and although I know better than anyone not to risk his wrath, our friendship goes well beyond the alpha/beta relationship. Diego stood by me when everything went to shit, long before he became alpha. He never judged me for my parents' sins, even when I knew some in town did. I'm proud to be his beta.

He slaps me on the back in greeting. "Saffy had better have some of those breakfast rolls from the store today."

I laugh. "Don't tell me you're not well-fed at home, Diego. Quinn's the best cook around these days."

"I'll have you know I'm damn fine in the kitchen, too," Diego says but relents. "But she is something else. Can't pass up those breakfast rolls you always have here, though."

I nod. He's right, after all. Those breakfast rolls are amazing, and Saffy keeps us well-stocked after her shifts at the store. "Come on, there will be some in the kitchen," I say.

Grinning, Diego follows me back into the house. "So, what brings you out here this morning? Not just the rolls? Thought we were meeting at the gym?" I hand him a fresh coffee and look for the rolls.

Diego nods his thanks, taking the coffee. He hesitates, looking serious. I suddenly get the feeling this is more than a social call.

"I was doing the admin last night. Not my strong suit, you know," he says, rolling his eyes. "Quinn's on me to hire someone to free up more time, but we've always managed it between us. Anyway, and I don't know quite how to say this, but that money raised for the new stand? It's gone."

I practically spit my coffee out, my mind reeling. Of all the things I thought he was going to say, something like this is unimaginable. "What do you mean? Gone?" I sputter. "All of it? There was over twenty thousand dollars!"

Diego raises his hands to calm me. "I know, I know. I had exactly the same reaction. Honestly, if I wasn't trying to keep the baby asleep last night, I would have raised the roof." He stands and paces with the coffee still in his hand. "But Quinn put me right—she always does. It can't just be gone; it's got to be a mistake. Money doesn't vanish from accounts. We just need to figure it out."

I take a deep breath, knowing he's right. "We need to figure it out before anyone else realizes it's gone. Folks will be devastated. People worked

hard for that new stand."

It's true—the community fundraising and sponsorship deals have been months in the making. The new stand was poised to be the crowning glory of the new town pavilion.

I sigh, running a hand over my stubble. The only people with regular access to the account are Diego and me.

"Well, we haven't moved the money, so it must be a mistake with the bank," Diego mutters.

"Let's take a look," I say, grabbing my laptop from the side. "I'm sure it's fine."

I try to sound positive as I log in, struggling to dampen the nausea taking hold at the thought of telling the pack we've misplaced their money. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

Diego tucks into his breakfast roll and puts on another pot of coffee while I log into the pack business accounts. We have our own accounts, plus a new charity account linked to Silverstar pack. As part of our joint venture to ensure a lasting peace between the packs, several charities have been formed to help members of both packs. It's something we're all proud of.

I scan the main fundraising account, and my eyes can't believe what they're seeing. Diego is right. The account is twenty thousand dollars down, and I can see it's been transferred. I don't recognize the account it's been transferred to, but I flick through the other accounts just in case I've missed something.

"Anything?" Diego says, coming to stand behind me.

"I can see the transaction. I'm just trying to see where it's ended up. I'll check the other accounts." I reply before seeing something that makes my blood run cold. "Shit."

"What?" Diego snaps, and my eyes flick around to his.

"Did you check the joint pack account? The charity one?" I ask.

"No," Diego groans, obviously anticipating what I'm about to say.

"Another ten thousand," I confirm through gritted teeth. It's becoming clear this is no simple banking error.

Diego slams his cup down on the worktop. "Fuck!"

"Everything okay?" Saffy asks carefully from the doorway, looking a bit concerned.

Diego stops pacing and gives her a brief smile and a nod. She's half-

terrified of her alpha at the best of times. Diego loves her like family, but she's always been nervous around men, and he's an alpha through and through.

"Sure thing, kid. Just having some issues with the bank," he replies.

The screen freezes and won't go back to the main page. Frustrated, I slam my hand onto the keyboard.

Saffy rushes over. "Can you not break the laptop?" She moves it out of reach.

"It's *my* damn laptop," I mutter.

"With my videos for coursework on it," she says, checking it over and clicking on something to get me back to the main page. "What's the problem, anyway?"

I sigh. "Hell, you're good with these things. Some money has gone out of two accounts. I can see the transactions, but I can't find a name attached to them. You mind if she takes a look, Diego?" I'd never let anyone look at the pack accounts without my alpha's permission. Even Saffy.

"Sure thing," he replies. "You're doing that course on cyber stuff, aren't you, Saffy? You're already more qualified than us to figure this out."

Saffy nods and gives Diego a brief but grateful smile before sitting down. She flicks between the pages with ease and brings up information I've never seen before. Eventually, she writes a few numbers and letters on a notepad next to the laptop.

"Okay," she says, spinning around to face us. "These are the accounts accessed, and this is the account the money has been transferred to," she indicates the numbers she wrote on the notepad. "But I've never seen one without a name before. This account is just a series of random letters and numbers. I don't even see how a bank would allow an account like this. Do either of you recognize it?"

Diego and I lean over her shoulder to look at the notepad but shake our heads. Saffy's right, it's just a load of random digits. "Nothing to do with us," Diego mutters.

"Are we saying the money has been stolen? Is that what we're saying?" I ask no one in particular. "Only we have access to our accounts. And with the charity account, only Mateo and his beta have access."

"And the issue seems to be with our accounts. Unless they're missing money, too," Diego says thoughtfully. "I'm going to set up a meeting with

Mateo. This needs to be kept quiet and handled quietly until we know what we're dealing with."

"We seem to be dealing with a thief, either here or at the bank," I say, looking at Diego.

"Or online," Saffy adds. "We study this stuff. Loads of online fraud happen all the time. If the bank knows where the money is going, they might be able to help."

Diego runs a hand through his hair and sighs. "There's always something, isn't there? We'll sort it; we always do. I'll go see what Mateo has to say. Maybe he can shed some light on things."

Diego heads out, grabbing another breakfast roll as he leaves. As usual, Saffy looks visibly relieved when he's gone. "Do you think this is really bad?" she asks me, chewing her lip nervously.

"Yes and no," I say, clearing the breakfast things. "It's thirty thousand missing, but we've got to assume it's some kind of mistake. Or if someone's taken it, we'll damn well get it back."

Saffy looks pensive, like there's something she's not saying. I roll my eyes. "Out with it, Saf. What's up?"

"The transfers. They look legit, like they've been authorized. I'm sure the bank will know more, but it looks like they've just been done normally. Like they were done by someone who has access to the account."

I know what she's saying, but I refuse to believe it. It makes zero sense. "But neither Diego nor I would do this. And Mateo's pack can only access the charity account, so it wouldn't explain the money missing from ours. Don't worry about it, okay?"

She flashes me a quick smile, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Okay, sure. I'm heading out. You need me to get anything? Remember, I'm staying at Emily's tonight, so I'll be back in the morning."

"More rolls. Apparently, Diego's cleared us out." I chuckle. "See you tomorrow. Text me."

Saffy gives me an unexpected hug before leaving. Once the door shuts and I hear her drive away, I sit back down at the kitchen island, feeling in a bit of a daze. Diego didn't move the money, and it goes without saying that I didn't.

So who the hell did it?

My thoughts are interrupted by the chime of a message coming

through. I pick up my phone and can't help the smile spreading across my face when I see who it's from.

*Hey, I had a great time the other night. - T xx*

Suddenly, all the drama of the morning melts away, and all I can think about is seeing her again.

*Me too. Are you free tonight? Saffy's out. I could impress you with my cooking skills?*

It's an agonizing ten minutes before she confirms the date. Feeling better than I have all morning, I decide to push all concerns about the missing money to one side, at least until Diego has more information from Mateo. I turn my attention to making tonight a night to remember.

## Chapter 7 - Tanya

I turn up the stereo loud and then louder, trying to drown out the thoughts plaguing my mind. The ones telling me to text Zack back and cancel, a thousand potential excuses rattling through my brain.

*I could have a sudden headache.*

*I could remember some last-minute, vital teaching project.*

*I could just ghost him.*

Instead, I'm driving up the mountain road after spending over an hour getting ready. Looking in the rearview mirror, I can see the curls I styled are falling nicely into soft blond waves.

I can't help shaking my head at my reflection. What am I doing? I don't need to go tonight; my plans are already in action.

I'm kidding myself that having Zack want me somehow adds to the revenge.

Pulling on the tight red sweater dress earlier, I'd caught sight of myself in the mirror. I didn't need to wear the tiny black thong and matching balconette bra that pushes the girls up so far that my cleavage peeks above the dress's neckline. I didn't need to put on my favorite red lipstick, curl my hair, or add my chunky heeled boots that, although super-practical, make my legs look even longer.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel, frustrated with myself. I'm doing all these things because I want him to want me. He made me feel things I've never felt before when he kissed me the other night, and I want to feel that way again.

This whole thing is going to crash and burn, perhaps only in a matter of days, depending on how quickly the packs uncover what I've laid at Zack's door. I'll be long gone the moment the shit hits the fan. My family's revenge will be swift and complete.

But right now is a moment of calm. Right now, I can pretend, right? I'm almost twenty-five and a virgin. Sure, I've been on dates. I was even considering going out with that FBI tech guy who's always flirting with me online. But no one has made me feel even a tenth of what Zack did the other night. My whole body is on fire with anticipation at just the thought of seeing him again, my wolf clawing for a release I can't articulate.



I know there's only one way to scratch this itch. I need to see him again.

I pull off the mountain road, turning onto the trail to his house. Zack sent me his address, but he needn't have bothered. I already had all his information in my file on him.

What I wasn't expecting was the stunning cabin and backdrop coming into view as I drove down the long track to his house. Imposing security gates swing open as I approach, so he must already know I'm here. I park my truck next to his much larger model and can barely take my eyes off the beautiful cabin sitting in a clearing surrounded by the forest. The timber is beautiful and contrasts seamlessly with glass and steel elements. It's breathtaking.

Stepping out of the truck, I walk toward the front door. My heart is racing. Zack told me Saffy's not here tonight. That means I'll be alone with him. Not growing up with a pack, I still get nervous around other wolves, especially ones twice my size. Zack is the beta and exudes raw power.

My wolf also feels skittish, but she doesn't want to leave, either. It's a strange feeling of conflict.

I raise my hand to knock, but then I hear a noise to my side. Turning, I see Zack appear around the side of the property, carrying some logs. I freeze as his gaze finds mine. We simply stare at each other for a moment before his eyes sweep down my body, taking in my outfit before flicking back to my face. I'm shocked to see the raw interest burning in his eyes as a smile spreads across his face, making him look even more handsome.

"Well, don't you look nice," Zack says, grinning as he throws the logs into a large storage box.

I take in his appearance. He's wearing a plaid shirt over a tight gray t-shirt, the fabric hugging his strong muscles in a way I can't ignore. His light brown hair is cut short on the sides and slightly longer on top, and there's just enough stubble on his face to give him an air of danger. His large build speaks of a strength and power I can only imagine, and it makes me shudder.

We stand there for what feels like an eternity, sparks flying between us before he finally steps forward and pulls me into his arms, crushing me in a passionate kiss. Just like the other night, my body responds instantly, and I let myself be enveloped by his strong arms.

Pulling apart, we're both breathless, and he chuckles. "Sorry, I think I'm supposed to offer you a drink first. Come on round back."

I laugh, following him. "That was quite a welcome."

"What can I say? I love a woman in red," he says, his gaze slowly drifting back to my tight sweater dress, making me blush a matching shade of crimson.

We walk to the back of the property, and I'm wowed all over again by the landscaping. The backyard is luxurious, with a large fire pit in the center surrounded by solid timber seating. There's an outdoor kitchen with a grill, an eating area, and a bar attached to one side of the house, with steaks marinating on the countertop, ready to be cooked. The view from the back of the property is stunning, the pine trees stretching for miles into the mountains.

We take a seat by the fire pit, and Zack hands me an ice-cold beer. I take a long sip, grateful to have a moment to compose myself while he throws the steaks on the grill.

"It's really beautiful here," I say softly, taking in my surroundings. "Have you lived here long? Like, from when you were a kid?"

I think back to my old house before we were banished. It backed onto the forest, too. Nothing as grand as this, but I can remember snippets of it, so this place strangely feels familiar.

I feel that familiar sadness mixed with anger beginning to fester within me.

I'm surprised when Zack scoffs. "No. Not at all," he says emphatically. "I built this place. Not quite with my own two hands because I had plenty of help, but it's all mine. I even lived in a trailer on the driveway for a couple of years. It's still a work in progress."

Some of my tension evaporates. I'm glad this cabin hadn't belonged to his parents. It's not the home he got to keep while I lost mine.

I look out at the trees again, feeling a calmness wash over me. Then, looking back at the luxurious cabin, I ask, "What else could possibly need doing? This place is perfect. It's like a painting."

"Oh, there're always jobs to do," Zack says. "Some rooms to finish inside. After we eat, I can give you the grand tour if you'd like."

Something mischievous glints in his eyes as he grins at me. I look at him and then at the cabin. Something tells me if I go in there, he intends to give me a lot more than a tour. Just the thought of being with Zack makes my lower abdomen clench in anticipation.

Keeping my voice steady and ignoring the slight tremble in my hand, I grip the beer bottle and smile. "Sure, I'd love a tour."

I don't miss the wink he casually throws my way as he checks on the steaks. Admiring his sexy, broad shoulders as he walks away, I release the breath I wasn't aware I was holding and take another swig of beer. Shifters don't really get drunk because we metabolize alcohol much quicker than humans, but we can still enjoy the heady initial buzz, which I really need right now.

We eat dinner by the firepit. After the sun goes down, the whole area is lit by fairy lights, creating a magical and cozy environment. Zack tries to tell me the lights were all Saffy's idea, but I can see the work that has gone into making the space what it is, and it's clear he loves it.

I help him clear away the plates, carrying them into the cabin's enormous kitchen and transferring them to the dishwasher. If I thought the cabin's exterior was beautiful, its interior is even more impressive.

As if sensing my awe, Zack leans against the counter and watches me. "You like?" he asks, gesturing around him. "I always wondered if it was a bit too much timber."

I laugh. "Well, it is all timber, but it's beautiful. Why would you want anything else?"

"Exactly what I'm thinking right now," he says, pushing off the counter and stalking toward me. My breath catches in my throat as I realize he's not talking about the kitchen.

"I...um..." I stumble. Before I can formulate a sentence, his hand reaches to cup my cheek, tilting my face. The fire in his eyes temporarily stuns me.

"Tell me no, and I won't," he says, his voice barely a whisper.

I'm at a loss for words, so I don't even bother speaking. I lift my hands to rest on his hard chest, and I stand on my tiptoes to press my lips to his.

That's all it takes to unleash our combined passion. The next moment, I'm pressed against the counter and his hands are everywhere. He pushes down the neckline of my sweater dress, cupping my breasts as he kisses my neck. I moan in pleasure as he continues to explore my body, sending shivers of pleasure coursing through me.

We pause, resting our foreheads together as we try to regain our composure. I'm breathing heavily and trembling slightly as he smiles at me.

I'm struck by just how ruggedly handsome his face is. I've never been so turned on in all my life, and I can see that desire reflected in his eyes.

"We don't have to go too far," Zack murmurs against my hair.

But I shake my head, all sense of reason gone. "I want you, Zack. Right now."

That's all the permission he needs. Zack's lips return to mine, his tongue dancing with my own as he lifts me with one swift motion, my legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. He moves his hips against me, and I groan, pushing myself against him. I can feel his growing erection, and the thought alone makes me even wetter.

My hands travel down his back, squeezing the firm muscles I find there, and I pull him closer to me. I can feel him smiling against my lips and wonder what he's thinking.

He leans toward my ear and whispers, "Hold on." He begins to carry me through the house, and I know he's taking me to bed.

I don't even take in my surroundings beyond the large open window framing the moon outside and the huge soft bed Zack drops me onto. We laugh, and then we're kissing again, his hands all over me.

He easily peels the sweater dress from my body. "Damn," he whispers, the bra and thong set I put on earlier clearly meeting his approval.

I'm glad it's dark in here so he can't see me blushing. I'm not completely innocent, but I've never gone beyond this point with a man. I have a feeling Zack is about to break through all my barriers, but I don't want to hesitate.

He pulls away for a moment to remove his clothes, revealing an incredible body. His toned chest is lightly sprinkled with hair, and he's so hard. I feel my cheeks flush as I watch him, and then his hands are on me again, exploring every inch of my body while kissing me deeply. I'm almost dizzy with the onslaught of sensations.

He moves lower, pushing his hands beneath my panties and spreading me open. I nearly jump off the bed as his tongue suddenly circles my clitoris before he starts to suck on it softly. I cry out in pleasure, feeling my hips bucking against his mouth as arousal courses through my veins.

His fingers slide through my wet folds, dipping deep inside me. "Fuck, you're so tight," he groans against my inner thigh. "I'm going to have to stretch you first."

I don't know what he means by that until he starts scissoring his fingers inside me, making me see stars. He increases the suction on my clit as he continues to thrust his fingers in and out of me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge with each movement.

He finally slides a third finger inside of me, and I scream as I come hard, my entire body shaking violently. I've only ever made myself come alone before and wasn't expecting it to feel like this.

He keeps licking and sucking my clit until I beg him to stop. "I sure love the sound of you begging," he whispers against my lips. "Ready for more?"

He grabs a condom from the bedside table, and I watch him roll it on his enormous cock before settling between my thighs and starting to push inside me. My mind clearer after my orgasm, I suddenly panic at the intrusion and freeze.

He pauses with only his tip inside me, realizing how tense I am. "Tanya?" he says, tilting my face to look at him. "Have you done this before?"

I shake my head, embarrassed at the tears threatening to spill.

He groans, his hand possessively gripping my hip. "We can stop. You don't have to do this."

Instinctively, my legs tighten around him, wordlessly urging him on. "No, I want you. I want you to fuck me."

His wolfish grin returns. "God, I must be a real bastard because being your first is damn hot. I'm gonna make this real good."

His words only turn me on more, and I feel my walls clench around his tip, making him hiss as he battles for control.

I'm still tense as he pushes deeper, but he pauses, resting his forehead against mine and allowing me to get used to the sensation. His breath comes in short bursts, as if it's taking all his self-control not to take me hard.

"It'll get easier," he says softly, stroking my hair away from my face.

He pulls back slightly and looks into my eyes before pushing himself all the way inside my hot channel. His movements are slow and controlled at first, but soon, the rhythm increases until we're both lost in pleasure.

His thrusts become more intense when he grips my hips, pinning me in place. I can feel my body start to tremble, and I know I'm about to orgasm again. Sensing it, Zack increases the pace, pushing me toward a climax I

never knew was possible.

The sensation of being filled by his thick cock is almost too much to bear, and suddenly, I'm screaming his name as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me.

He follows shortly after, driving himself deep into my tight channel until he spills his hot cum inside me.

"You're incredible," he says, kissing me deeply while I continue to hold onto him, trying to ground myself. His hands roam my body possessively as he pulls me tight against him. "Stay here tonight. I need more of you."

I nod, my wolf demanding his presence and my body already craving more pleasure. I'll stay, but then I need to run.

I need to run far, far away from everything he's making me feel.

## Chapter 8 - Zack

*Running my hand along the curve of her back, I marvel at how soft and fragile she feels. Her ass is raised slightly, and my achingly hard cock slides between her cheeks, almost begging for entrance. I've already taken her once. Taken her virginity. I don't want to make her sore, but god, I need to fuck her again.*

*My hand snakes round to gently stroke her sensitive clit, causing her ass to sway tantalizingly against me. Her soft, mewling sounds drive me half-insane. My wolf is riding me hard to take her, and my fangs partially descend.*

*My cock nudges her entrance, and I instinctively grip the back of her neck, holding her in place as I sink into her tight channel. My other hand grabs the headboard to steady myself. She is so damn tight. It feels like heaven...*

The morning light infiltrates my mind. I stretch slightly, my arm sleepily reaching for Tanya's warm, naked body, but all I find are cold sheets. My eyes fly open, and I sit up, scanning the empty room. My shifter hearing doesn't pick up any sounds, and I reach for the security tablet, noting that the door was disabled at 3 a.m. How the hell did she do that?

Switching to the exterior cameras, I can also see that her truck is gone. How on earth did I sleep through her leaving? I rub my hand over my face, attempting to brush off my sleepiness. Did she regret what happened? Did I do something wrong? She was a virgin, and we fucked for five hours straight. As a shifter, she will have recovered physically much quicker, meaning she shouldn't have been hurt. But what if it was too much for her? Perhaps I went too hard.

She was just so damn perfect, though. I groan, burying my face in the pillow that still smells like her. My wolf feels edgy with her absence, giving me a clawing feeling of unfamiliar desperation.

This was no one-night stand for me. My suspicion about Tanya being my mate was all but confirmed when I took her virginity. I laid claim to her body and soul, and it took all my restraint not to unleash my wolf and mark her without asking for her consent.

However, in the cold light of day, I'm faced with reality. I've never

wanted a mate. Ever. I saw what my parents' relationship was like and swore I'd never shackle myself to someone who could bring out the worst in me. I've always lived with a nagging fear that I might become like my parents.

Looking at the empty space in my bed, I speculate that Tanya doesn't want this, either. Though, we both sure as hell wanted it last night.

I grab my phone from the nightstand, taking a deep breath as I decide what to text her.

*Let me know if you're okay. I had a good time last night. I'd like to see you again. - Z*

Throwing the phone on the bed, I get up and head to the shower, trying not to dwell on thoughts of the woman who seemingly ran from my bed.

The drive to the meeting hall does nothing to clear my head or put me in a better mood. Tanya still hasn't replied to my text. I almost sent her another one earlier but decided to hold off for now. I'm still not even sure what I want from her—though that's not entirely true because I can't stop thinking about her hot body, my cock sliding in and out of her vice-like channel.

*Goddammit.*

I grip the steering wheel as I pull into the lot and rearrange my pants, fighting my growing erection. I need to get it together. The sight of Mateo's and other pack members' trucks parked alongside Diego's brings me back to the moment. Hopefully, there will be some news about the missing funds at this meeting, and we can figure out who's responsible. And most importantly, find out how to get the money back.

Reaching for my coffee cup, I exit my truck and head inside. Looks like I'm the last one here, and as I walk in, I feel all eyes turn to me. The room holds an unmistakably tense atmosphere reminiscent of our packs' previous bad blood.

My wolf immediately feels on edge. I look at Diego, who looks pensive but not aggressive. Something weird is going on. I discard my coffee and take a seat next to Diego, ensuring I keep an outwardly calm demeanor.

"Am I late?" I ask, breaking the silence.

Diego shakes his head. "Nah, we're just getting started. Mateo, why don't you go back over everything you just told me? Real carefully."

There's an edge to Diego's tone that treads a fine line between respect



toward Mateo and the glimmer of a threat. Mateo nods, clearly not fazed by the other alpha's tone.

"Better that the expert explains," Mateo says. "I've no interest in pointing fingers, Diego. I just want to get to the truth." He gestures for a man to step forward. "This is Gerard. Full disclosure: he used to work for one of my companies, but he's human and not linked to my pack. He'll send over all the info so you can verify it yourselves."

Everyone remains grim as Gerard brings up the pack's joint accounts on a large screen and begins running through them. He only has access to the general accounts but explains that he'll work with the packs individually if they want to check their own. Most of the information goes over my head as Gerard explains the technicalities of what appears to be a very sophisticated hack.

As he moves through the screens, something catches my eye. It appears more money has left the charity account. There's also an account number highlighted that looks familiar. I reach for my phone and bring up my online banking app, opening my business account details.

My blood runs cold as I see the numbers match. Gerard is still talking, but I notice Mateo and a couple of others watching me carefully. Suddenly, I understand.

"...the account belongs to Liberty Forestry," Gerard says.

"What the fuck?" I yell, jumping to my feet and approaching a terrified-looking Gerard. "This is utter bullshit."

Mateo is on his feet, blocking me from getting to Gerard within seconds. I can smell the fear radiating off the human as Diego grabs my arm.

"I know there's an explanation for all this," Diego says, turning to the group. "This is not on Zack. There has to be another explanation."

I can hear them talking, but it sounds like I'm in an echo chamber. I can't believe this is happening. I would never steal from my pack or theirs. There has to be another explanation.

The argument rages on around me, but I'm snapped back into focus when I hear Mason mention Saffy's name.

"She's good with computers and doing that cyber security course. Could she have done this? Maybe sh—"

I don't even wait for him to finish speaking. I launch myself across the hall and grab him by the throat. "She's a kid!" I snarl. "She's a fucking good

kid."

I feel Diego pulling me back. I know it's him because only my alpha would dare try and stop me. "Zack, no. I know you're angry, but this isn't the way."

I release Mason's neck, shoving him backward so he lands on his ass. "Keep my sister's name out of your mouth."

Mason holds his hands up in conciliation. "Okay, okay, I get it. I'm just trying to look at all the angles." He looks at me intently. "We've known you a while now. I don't want to believe this, either."

"Look," Diego says, his voice calm but full of authority, "I vouch for Zack. He didn't do this. We can all see how it looks, but we're going to dig deeper."

Mateo steps forward. "What do you propose, Diego?"

"Gerard, freeze Zack out of all the pack accounts," Diego says.

I spin around to face him, enraged because it doesn't sound like he's on my side at all, but he turns back to me. "Easy, Zack, this is for your own good. We need time to investigate, and everyone here needs to know it can't be you taking more money from these accounts. This is a sign of good faith."

"Will you let Gerard have access to your business accounts?" Mateo asks me, and I try to temper my response.

"He can meet with my accountant and look through things together," I say. "I'm not just handing over my passwords, though. My business security still matters."

Mateo nods gravely. "That works. Set it up with Gerard. I hope to god it's not you, Zack."

There's an undercurrent of threat in the other alpha's words, but I also see sincerity in his eyes. Mateo truly hopes it's not me. I feel slightly more hopeful.

Looking around at the other members from both packs, I'm aware that not everyone looks so inclined to give me a chance. Lucca is standing next to Marcus, looking openly hostile. He scoffs as I hand my card to Gerard so we can set up the meeting.

Lucca isn't my concern, though. He's not part of my pack, and he can think whatever he likes. It's the others standing behind Diego, men I've known all my life, who, while not looking as aggressive as Lucca, can't seem to look me in the eye. I know they're doubting me, and it's making my skin

crawl.

"We done here?" I ask Diego. He's my alpha, and right now, I don't give a damn what anyone else here thinks.

"Sure thing, Zack," he says. "I'll call in later." He claps my back as I walk by him in a sign of solidarity that I appreciate, but I don't stop or look back.

Walking back toward my truck, I'm in a daze. My mind is racing with a thousand thoughts, yet none feels coherent. How is this possible? It makes no sense. Why would I steal money from my pack? They're my family. Besides, I own a successful business and make more than enough money of my own. I built everything I have from scratch after disavowing my parents as a teenager.

Liberty Forestry is the company that once belonged to my parents. I bought it back from them after they sold off assets. It's thriving and doesn't need any stolen money.

I'm fuming by the time I climb into the truck, slamming my fists on the steering wheel. I was shocked at first, but now I'm just pissed. My phone beeps, and I look down to see a message from Diego.

*It will be okay, Zack. No one believes this BS.*

Though I appreciate his text, I don't reply. I'm sure we both know that not everyone's got my back—the looks I was getting in there were unmistakable. But I know I need to keep a cool head and trust that my alpha is looking out for me. Hell, I don't doubt that. Diego isn't just my alpha; he's my best friend, and I need to trust him.

I just need him to trust me, too.

When I pull up outside my cabin, my phone buzzes again. I expect it's another update from Diego, but then I see Tanya's name flash on the screen. Just seeing her name sends my mind straight back to last night.

I shake my head, wondering how I could have gone from being so damn satisfied last night to disappointed when I woke up with her gone. Now, I'm reeling from the revelations at the meeting.

*I'm so sorry for leaving early. I had a great night, I just felt overwhelmed. It's embarrassing. I shouldn't have left without saying something. - T x*

I sigh. I must be a real bastard, taking her virginity like that. Who am I kidding? I didn't just sleep with her; I fucked her hard. She's also a lot

younger than me. Maybe I should have been gentler.

*I'm sorry if I upset you. We should have taken things slower. Can I buy you a coffee? - Z*

There's a pause before I see she's typing again. I sit in my truck, almost holding my breath in anticipation of what she's going to say.

*No, don't apologize. Last night was amazing. I feel silly for running out on you, and coffee sounds good. - T x*

I lean back in my seat and take a deep breath. Thank God. I hadn't wanted to admit to myself how much I wanted to see her again until I thought I'd blown it.

I still can't shake the feeling she'll think I'm too old for her. She's way out of my league in so many ways: young, tech guru, cool-girl background from the Bay Area. We don't exactly fit on paper.

But none of that mattered last night.

I'm amazed at how quickly my anger from the meeting has dissipated. I climb down from the truck while replying and sorting out a time to see her again.

She's like a damn drug.

## Chapter 9 - Tanya

I'm such an idiot. I could have left it there and not replied to Zack's message. I don't think he would have pursued me if I'd made it clear I just wanted to forget the whole thing ever happened.

But the truth is, I can't forget. I'm not sure I even want to. The things Zack did to my body feel like brands. I don't think my body will ever forget what his hands felt like as he gripped my hips, thrusting in and out of me. My inner walls clench at just the thought.

I ignored his text most of the day, trying desperately to distract myself. My mom kept calling and texting, but I sent her straight to voicemail, convinced she'd be able to tell something was different about me if we spoke. She's always had an unnerving way of getting me to tell her things, and this is something I can't possibly admit to her.

I no longer believe my own bullshit about making my revenge sweeter by getting Zack to like me. I slept with my family's enemy because I wanted to. So, I'm basically betraying both him and my parents now.

I strip out of my work clothes and walk toward the shower. I hear my mom's ringtone in the background again and take a deep, calming breath before ignoring it and stepping into the steam. I know she wants an update. She's practically salivating at the thought of destroying Zack and Saffy. I'm sure if my dad is sober, he is, too, though it's more likely he doesn't know what's going on.

Everything is working perfectly. Another two transactions will leave the pack accounts this week. This time, they won't go into Zack's business account but into a new offshore account I've set up in his name. The account is hidden, of course, but still traceable if they have the bank really look into it, which I'm sure they will.

So why do I feel no satisfaction? As my parents deteriorated over the last couple of years and talked more about revenge, I thought helping them achieve it would give them a renewed focus in life. But that doesn't seem to be happening; they've only become more obsessed and bitter. Any concerns I voice to them are immediately squashed. I want to give them what they want, but now that I'm here doing it, it doesn't feel like how I thought it would.

After my shower, I change for bed and send a quick text to my mom

that I'll speak to her tomorrow. Her bitterness is exhausting, and as I sink into bed, I try to ignore her voice in my head. I also try not to dwell on the bubbling anticipation in my belly at the thought of seeing Zack tomorrow. My cheeks blush as I imagine his strong hands on me again.

The next day, Zack picks me up early, and we drive to his town. Apart from a brief kiss when I got in the truck, we keep our distance as we park along the main street. As there's a market setting up for the weekend, we head into the store to grab coffees to go so we can wander around.

Just when I start to think Zack might not be interested in me anymore, he reaches over and takes my hand as we walk toward the market. The contact sends a tingle of electricity up my arm, and I jump. He turns to me and grins. I'm almost certain he feels it, too.

We walk hand in hand around the market. "I love how wholesome these local markets are," I say. "It's just not what I grew up with."

He chuckles. "You don't have markets in San Francisco?"

"Very funny," I say. "We do, but they're not the same. These are all families and local businesses. It just feels less corporate."

"I'll have to take your word for it. Not sure I've ever seen a corporate market stall before." He's teasing me, and I playfully punch his shoulder.

As we approach the second row of stalls, I notice a few men standing nearby, whispering and looking at us. I try to ignore them, but then one of them points right at us.

"That's weird," I murmur, and Zack glances at the men. I don't recognize them from my pack, and I can't imagine why anyone from Zack's would be hostile toward me, too.

Zack seems to read my mind, probably remembering the women at the fair. He squeezes my hand. "It's not you," he says, pulling me along the path to some outdoor seating in the center of the market. We sit down, and I warm my hands on my coffee cup, waiting for him to explain.

"There've been some issues with some charity funds I help manage," he begins, and I try to keep my face neutral. "Some money's gone missing, and I'm having to clear my name. To be honest, I didn't think it was common knowledge yet. But after getting a few dirty looks today, I guess it's gotten out."

I can feel my face begin to burn, and I'm not sure if it's from trying to look shocked or from being embarrassed. I take a sip of my coffee to buy a

little time before replying.

"Well, that doesn't seem like something you'd do," I say evenly. "I know a thing or two about ignoring the haters, so you should do just that—ignore them."

Some kids run by and wave to Zack. He tries to look cheerful as their parents mutter lackluster greetings, clearly not wanting to stop and talk to him.

I stand and pull him to his feet. "Come on. You can give me a walking tour of your town."

He flashes me a genuine smile before leading me on a tour around his small town, showing me the landmarks and local parks. He laughs at my enthusiasm for small-town life, but the more time I spend in these little towns, the less I miss the city I grew up in.

Driving back to my place, we put on the soft rock station we listened to last time and sing along to the cheesy songs. He's laughing at something the DJ said when I look at him, and a twinge of profound guilt surges through me. He looked so sad at the market, so embarrassed and confused. Not unlike how I've felt at times since coming back. And I'm sure how my parents felt when they were first accused.

I should be loving this ringside view of my plan working, but I'm not. Instead, I feel sick.

We pull up outside my house, and Zack seems to notice I've gone quiet. "I completely understand if you want to leave things with us while I clear my name," he says, looking straight ahead as though he doesn't want to witness my reaction.

This is it. This is the moment I can extract myself from this situation. I can get some distance, set up the final transfers, and be gone. I just need to tell him to give me some space.

One moment passes, then another. The words don't come, and the sound of my heart beating fills my ears. The next moment, I'm sliding across the bench seat and straddling his lap. He grips my hips to keep me steady.

"I—" he begins, but I cut him off by kissing him.

There is so much passion in my kiss that it takes my own breath away. My core instinctively grinds into his groin as his hand travels up to my hair and pushes me down further, making us both groan. He's hard, and I can feel myself getting wet as I grind back and forth across his lap.

After a minute, we break apart breathlessly, and I rest my head against his.

"We're giving those nosy neighbors quite an eyeful," he mutters, his voice husky with desire. "Let me come inside."

I nod, grabbing my purse and exiting the truck. We walk up my driveway calmly, but as soon as we're through the door, Zack slams it shut and pushes me up against it. His mouth claims mine as his hands tear at my clothes. It's a passion and excitement I've never known. My fingers fly to his shirt, shrugging it from his shoulders so I can run my hands over his firm muscles.

He grabs my wrists and pins them to the door above my head before his mouth moves down to my neck. His tongue nips and teases me as I pant with pleasure. He takes his time, exploring every inch of me until I'm a quivering mess.

His hands slide down to my waist, opening the buttons on my jeans before tugging them down. My breathing is coming in shallow gasps now as Zack drops to his knees in front of me, quickly discarding my underwear. His hands firmly spread my legs apart, and he runs his tongue along the inside of my thigh before gently flicking around my already wet clit. I moan in pleasure as he moves his tongue in circles around the sensitive area before plunging it deep inside me. He sinks one finger inside me and then another as I groan louder, gripping his hair for support.

I freeze as he pushes one wet finger against my delicate back hole. "Trust me, okay?" he murmurs against my clit before sucking it into his mouth, causing me to buck against his face. As I do, he slides the finger into my back passage, making me gasp as I struggle to accommodate the new intrusion.

With his fingers buried in both holes, he sucks my clit into his mouth, and I see stars. I orgasm with an intensity I've never felt, screaming my release and shocking myself by gushing juices onto his face. "Oh my god, oh my god," I moan through my orgasm.

Zack's on his feet in seconds, pulling his cock free. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," he murmurs, kissing me deeply. I can taste myself on his mouth, which almost pushes me over the edge again.

He lifts me effortlessly, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he lowers me onto his cock. He feels huge like this, and I'm being stretched



wide. I grip his shoulders as he wedges me against the door and begins to piston in and out of me.

The feeling is incredible, and I begin to shake uncontrollably as I orgasm on his cock. I can feel his movements become unsteady, and suddenly, he forces my body down hard. He feels so incredible as he grunts his release, shooting cum deep inside me.

I clutch the door for support as he lowers me down. "I hope the neighbors didn't hear all that," I giggle.

He pants, stroking his still-hard erection. "If they didn't, let's try again," he suggests lasciviously.

My eyes go wide as I realize he's not done with me yet, my whole body humming with desire once more. I don't even bother picking up my clothes as I walk toward the stairs and beckon him to follow. His eyes look feral as he watches my naked body before following me up the stairs. He's inside me again by the time I reach the bed, entering me from behind and pinning me to the mattress.

After taking me three more times, we lie in bed, our limbs tangled together. "Stay," I tell him, more than ready for him to fuck me all night long.

He leans over and kisses my forehead. "I wish I could, but I've got to get back to the house for the end of Saffy's shift." I move my arm so he can get up. "She's been a bit upset," he says. "She got some texts last night asking about me. I've got to be there for her."

His words immediately burst my desire-clouded bubble. I'd almost forgotten about everything. I stumble over my words, not knowing what to say. "Um, yes, of course. Poor Saffy."

He kisses me goodbye, and I watch his truck drive away. Poor Saffy. Poor me. I can't help feeling like I've become the villain of my own story now.

## Chapter 10 - Zack

I can't keep the smile from my face as I put my phone back on the counter and flip the bacon in the pan again. With the ongoing investigation, I don't have much to smile about at the moment except for one thing. One person. Tanya.

After the night at her house the other day, we've been texting almost constantly. Just little things, sharing jokes and snippets about our days. Still, I can't quite gauge if she sees us as anything serious.

I asked Tanya to keep an eye on Saffy at the college because she's taken the accusations about me quite badly. Although most of her friends seem nice about it, some parents have apparently made comments that have filtered to other kids in her classes. Tanya's reassured me that although Saffy's been a bit quiet, she's still going to her lessons.

The sooner this is over, the better.

My phone beeps again, and I reach for it eagerly, assuming it's Tanya. I frown when I see Diego's name on the screen and pause before opening the message. It's not that I'm strictly avoiding my alpha and friend; I just don't want to see or talk to him at the moment. He's been checking in on me multiple times a day, and though I appreciate the sentiment, what I really need is for my name to be cleared.

I also know he's texting to hassle me about the upcoming sports tournament. We're supposed to be training together, but I have zero desire to get out there and train with my team. They're all good guys, but apart from Diego, none of them have reached out to me since the stolen money became common knowledge. How am I supposed to take that?

I skim the message. Just as I thought, he wants me to train. I don't even reply, dumping my phone back on the side and sitting to eat my breakfast. I'm just finishing up when my security system signals someone driving through my gates without needing the code. I shake my head, throwing the plate in the basin as I head out to meet the only person it could be. Diego.

He's obviously not happy with my lack of reply, because I see his truck approaching the cabin. I step outside, exasperated.

"No need to come out here, Diego. I'm fine," I snap as he steps down

from the truck.

He chuckles darkly and raises his eyebrows. "Well, hello to you, too."

I sigh, knowing full well I should engage my brain before my mouth. No one talks to their alpha like that, but he's giving me a free pass. I rub the back of my neck. "Yeah, sorry, Diego. You know what I mean."

"I do. And you can make it up to me with a coffee."

I nod and step aside as he walks into the cabin.

This place was practically his second home as he spent months helping me build the frame and make the place habitable. He can, and often does, make his own damn coffee. But I indulge him rather than being an even bigger ass. I pour us coffee from the fresh pot and take a seat across from him on the kitchen island. I don't want to talk, but I know he will say whatever he's come to say.

"You need to get out and about, Zack," he sighs, putting the coffee down. "You know, hiding away doesn't exactly make you look more innocent."

My eyes burn with indignation as I stare at him. "So, you're doubting me now?"

He raises his hand. "God, no. Never. I'm just saying you need to get back out there and show everyone you're not hiding. The sports tou—"

"I don't give a damn about the tournament or what anyone thinks," I bark, slamming my fist onto the table.

"No?" Diego chuckles. "Yeah, you seem completely unbothered."

I shake my head. "You know what I mean. I need news, Diego. I need to know what's happening."

Diego stands and wanders over to the window, taking his coffee with him. "There is a bit of news," he starts but pauses as Saffy walks into the kitchen.

"What's the news?" she asks, and I wonder how much of our conversation she's heard so far. Diego looks at me, and I nod before he continues.

"Hey, Saf," he says in greeting. She nods, clearly wanting him to continue, "Sadly, some more money left the charity account yesterday. Personally, I think it's crazy not to move it, but Gerard says it's our only way of tracing who's behind it and hopefully getting it back."

"Well, that's not good news," Saffy groans.

"No. No, it is, right?" I say, looking at Diego and feeling hope begin to rise within me, "I gave up all my access to the accounts, so they must know it's not me now."

Diego doesn't look quite as enthusiastic. "Yes and no." Seeing Saffy's face drop, he walks over and puts a tentative hand on her shoulder. "This is good for Zack. I spoke to Mateo this morning, and he's much more open to the fact it's not Zack."

"I don't get it," Saffy says, frowning. "Why doesn't this clear Zack completely? It can't be him if he didn't have access to the accounts."

"The transaction codes are weird, so they could, in theory, have been set up before Zack gave up his access," Diego explains.

"So, let me get this straight," I say, exasperated. "Even though I have no access, people will still say it's me."

"The money went into another account with your name on it," Diego says quietly. "Some offshore thing."

"I don't have an offshore account!" I yell, now outraged. "I wouldn't even know how to set one up, for god's sake."

"I know, I know," Diego says, trying to calm me. "You don't need to tell me, Zack. Look, this is good news. Gerard has put in some kind of pin or code or something so any new transactions will show a date stamp."

Saffy looks at me with tears in her eyes. "So if no more money is stolen, everyone's still going to think that it's Zack? That it's us?"

I step toward her, but she backs away, grabbing her bag from the sofa. "I'm going to go study," she says.

I want to stop her and tell her it's all going to be fine, but I'm at a loss for words. I nod, but she's already turned her back to us and fled the room.

I face away from Diego as I regain my composure. I pride myself on giving Saffy the calm and happy childhood my parents denied her for so many years. Never in my wildest dreams did I see something like this happening.

"How's she doing?" Diego asks. He knows better than anyone what a difficult start Saffy had in life and how much I want to protect her.

"How do you think?" I mutter. "In some ways, she's more exposed than I am. I don't want her to fall behind in her studies, not when she's finally getting out there. She doesn't say much, but I know there have been comments."

"Kids are the worst," Diego sighs. "You know how folks are, they love to gossip. Even when they don't mean it."

"They fucking mean it, Diego," I snarl. "They think I'm stealing from the pack. People I've known all my life, they think I'm just like my—"

"Your parents?" Diego scoffs. "No, they don't. Honestly, Zack, they haven't turned as much as you think. They're concerned and asking questions, yes. But they don't want it to be you."

"And Mateo?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"Like I said, he sounded more positive during our call this morning. He knows it's unlikely you'd know how to disguise transaction dates." Diego laughs. "Hell, I had to get Gerard to explain offshore accounts to me. Give it more time, okay?"

I nod, pouring yet another cup of coffee. Lately, I was going through several pots a day as I pored over my accounts and hounded my accountant with questions, trying to understand the situation. Diego's right, though—I don't understand this stuff. My accounts have always been simple and transparent, with my accountant handling anything more complicated than day-to-day transactions.

"You know," Diego starts, "training for the tournament would help take your mind off things. Blow off some steam."

I sigh. Part of me thinks he's right, and I should get some exercise. My wolf has been stressed after staying cooped up on the property for so long. However much work there is to occupy me here, it's not the same as running across our pack lands or spending time with my fellow wolves.

"I'm not training with the team. Not until there's more news from Gerard. I don't want to say something I'll regret to anyone," I say honestly. "I could do with a run, though. I could do with getting out."

"Done." Diego grins. "Go get ready, and we'll head out. See if you can still keep up after hanging out here all week. You can tell me about that girl you've been seen with, too."

I don't miss Diego's smirk as I head upstairs to get changed. We have a well-worn route that sees us jog in our human forms out to the hills, where I have an old shack on the far edge of the forestry land. We change there and run as wolves right up into the mountains. Again, Diego's right. Running in the woods is probably just what I need.

I knock on Saffy's door. "Come in," she calls.

"I'm heading out for a run with Diego. You okay here?"

She looks up, and the dejected look on her face pierces me like a knife to the heart. "Is this going to stop, Zack? Be honest with me."

I sit on the bed, careful not to scatter all her college notes and books. "Yes, of course it is. Diego was actually a lot more positive after you left. It's going to be okay, Saf. I promise."

"You shouldn't promise things you can't control, Zack," she says.

"I can guarantee this, Saf, because I'm not going to stop until my name is cleared. So it *will* happen," I say with conviction, and her expression softens.

"You shouldn't have to fight this so hard," she mutters. "People around here should know it wasn't you. They're your friends."

I groan. "There's a lot of *evidence*, Saf. I'm not sure I wouldn't wonder if someone else was in my position. Especially with our parents."

"Bullshit," Saffy cries. "We're nothing like them. If people don't already know that, then screw them."

"Give them and us more time, Saffy, okay?" I stand and put my hand on her shoulder. "It's going to be fine. Do you want me to stay?"

"No, you need to get out of here," she says with a little laugh. "Diego's right to drag you out."

"Strange to hear you both in agreement for once," I say with a laugh, kissing the top of her head before heading back down to Diego, who's waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

We head down the long trail that leads away from my property. The track crisscrosses one of the main roads into town, and we begin to jog at a pace that allows us to talk. Diego tries to drill me about Tanya, but I infuriate him by giving as little information as possible. Deep down, I'm not sure how she feels about us, and I'm not ready to pour out my heart to Diego before I'm certain myself.

"Really? That's all I'm getting?" Diego laughs as we let a few cars pass us.

One of the drivers stops alongside us, lowers the window, and talks to Diego about the construction work at the stadium. He asks about the stadium's date of completion. As I'm the one supplying the timber, I answer his question, but he doesn't even look at me.

*What the hell?*

I feel Diego bristle. "Todd, if you're not interested in being civil, you can get lost," he snaps, causing the man to flinch.

"Come on, Diego, we're talking about the stadium *he's* stealing the funds for." Todd jerks his head toward me.

"There is an investigation, but it's becoming more and more clear it's not what it looks like, Todd. Don't jump to fucking conclusions," Diego grits out.

"But you will punish whoever's responsible, yeah? Whoever it is?" he asks, looking at me for the first time.

"Get out of here, Todd," Diego tells him and strides away.

I follow him, grateful for his stance on the situation but also fighting the urge to go back there and smash Todd's face in. As if reading my mind, Diego slaps me on the back. "When this is done, I'll make him fucking apologize to you in front of the whole pack. For now, keep your head."

My wolf rages within me, and suddenly, I don't care about making it to the cabin or my clothes. "I need to run now," I say before the shift begins, destroying my clothes. Leaving them by the road, I'm careful not to turn back to town, knowing I can't trust myself near the likes of Todd.

I feel Diego shift behind me, ruining his own clothes. He follows me along the trail heading into the mountains.

## Chapter 11 - Tanya

I've never been more relieved to hear the classroom door shut. Dropping the book I was holding on my desk, I sink into my chair, shutting my eyes and the whole world out.

I really don't know how I got through today. Every single bone in my body seems to ache from tension. My neck is so stiff that when I rub my shoulders, trying to get them to relax, they simply won't.

I've been feeling like this since I dragged myself out of bed this morning after an awful night's sleep. Most of last night, I replayed that evening's events on repeat.

I should be angry. I've always been good at fueling my indignation to fight back. Through sheer determination, I built an entire online empire to hit back at a life that treated me unfairly. I thought I was better than this. Stronger.

But last night was different. There was no hiding behind a screen. I thought I was over the worst of the whispers, nasty comments, and openly hostile stares that had plagued me ever since returning to Silverstar. I've been here nearly three months now, and things were settling down. One would think my teaching the packs' kids would garner some respect.

But I couldn't have been more wrong.

Yesterday, Billie and her friends Gina and McKenna insisted I join them at the Roadhouse Bar for drinks. Deep down, I suspected it wasn't a good idea. My first instinct was to say no, but when I bumped into Billie coming out of the library, it was too damn hard to say no to her face. She and her friends have been so welcoming to me. I find it difficult not to put walls up with everyone, but they've made it pretty difficult.

I was so nervous walking into the bar, but my fears melted away as soon as I saw the women waving and beckoning me over to their table. They already had a pitcher of drinks and poured me a glass before I even sat down.

The evening turned out to be far funnier and livelier than I could have imagined. I was genuinely having a good time, even if I had to deflect lots of gossip about being seen out with Zack.

I think that's what made what happened next even more upsetting.

The pitcher was empty, so I took it up to the bar to get a refill. A



couple of people were already waiting for drinks, so I waited my turn. But I noticed others in line behind me getting served before I did.

The first time, I thought it was an honest mistake. The second and third, I began to suspect the truth. The bartender was older, likely a wolf from my parents' time. The more I tried to catch his eye, the more obvious it was that he was pointedly ignoring me.

My mind raced with ways to get out of the situation. I was about to head back to the table, give the women some money for the drinks, and fake a sudden migraine when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see McKenna, looking confused.

*"Hey," she says. "How have you not been served yet?"*

*I fake a laugh and shrug. "You know—"*

*I'm about to say my excuse when she waves her hand. "Hey, Rick! Can we get some drinks? What's the holdup?"*

*The man flicks his towel, clearly agitated. He reluctantly heads down the bar toward us, holding his hands up. "Now, McKenna, you know I've no trouble with you fine women. I'll get you whatever you want. But I ain't serving her."*

*I feel McKenna bristle next to me. I turn to talk to her, but she puts her hand on my shoulder. "What the hell, Rick? This is ridiculous."*

*"Please, it's okay," I say, suddenly self-conscious of the wolves around us, listening intently. "I'm just going to go."*

*"You can't just go, sweetie," McKenna insists. "We're getting this straightened out right now."*

*I look at Rick, who is glaring at me. Billie and Gina join us, and McKenna explains to them what's going on.*

*Billie approaches the bar. "Mateo won't stand for this, Rick. It's not how we do things here. Tanya is a teacher and a valued member of our pack."*

*Rick straightens. "Mateo can say all he wants, but this is my bar, and I'm not serving anyone from her thieving family. It's just not happening. End of story."*

The women continued arguing with Rick. Though I appreciated their support, I didn't wait to hear the rest.

I turned and fled the bar with what felt like a million eyes on me. I'd only had two small drinks, so I headed straight to my truck. The women

caught up, trying to get me to stay or go with them somewhere else, but I just wanted to get out of there. I insisted I was fine as Billie told me she was going to speak to Mateo and have him put a stop to this kind of persecution.

But how can Mateo police people's minds?

I groan as I remember how I managed to hold it together until I walked into my house, shut the door, and proceeded to cry all night.

Shutting down my computer, I down the cold remnants of the extra-strong coffee I've been drinking all day to stay awake. Earlier, some of my students made jokes about my supposed "big night out," picking up on the fact that I looked like death. It was easier to let them assume I'd been out partying than the sad truth.

I'll never belong here, and these sick people will never understand the damage they did to my family.

Feeling down this morning, I called my parents. Unfortunately, the conversation didn't have the soothing effect I'd hoped for. And really, what did I expect? My parents aren't able to help themselves, never mind me.

My dad answered, but as usual, he was too out of it to talk to me. My mom came on the line. When I told her what happened, she immediately blamed me for trying to make friends with *those people*. I tried to explain that Billie and her friends weren't like that, but that just made my mom angrier. The conversation ended abruptly with a reminder from my mom to keep to the plan and then come home to look after them.

I hung up without answering her. After that call, the only thing I was certain of was that having tasted proper freedom recently, I intended to put some space between myself and my parents.

My phone beeped again almost immediately, and I answered, thinking perhaps my mom had something else to say. Instead, it was Agent Barnes with an update on our latest case.

I was risking everything with the FBI. If they found out about my vendetta here, I knew they might revoke my clearance. Despite how my role with the FBI started, I truly enjoy bringing down the bad guys.

It's not lost on me that I'm one of them now.

I sit at my desk, rubbing my eyes and trying to steel myself to head home. I'm trapped in the middle of my parents, Zack, my pack, and the FBI. What a fucking mess. No wonder I have a headache.

Finally, I push back my chair, grab my bag and head out. The college

is pretty quiet today, so I don't bump into many people as I head out to my truck. The less small talk, the better. I put my cup and laptop case on the hood and searched for my keys before glancing up and seeing someone I didn't expect. Saffy wasn't in class today, so I assumed she was sick. But here she is, sitting alone on a bench and not looking well. Her hair is tied up, and she looks much paler than normal.

I know I should just get in my car and head home, but I waver. I never thought I'd be a natural at teaching, but I've really surprised myself by how much I care about my students. They're so enthusiastic to learn, recognizing that this region desperately needs technology to compete in the future. They're a joy, and Saffy's no different—maybe even more enthusiastic than the others. Certainly more gifted.

She also reminds me of myself, which is exactly why I should stay away from her.

"Hey, Saffy, you okay?" I ask, walking over to where she's sitting.

She looks up in surprise, then plasters on an obviously fake smile. "Yeah, um, hi," she says. "Sorry I missed class today. Um, just came to pick up an assignment."

"Everything okay?" I ask, knowing it's not.

She nods a few times, seemingly trying to stop the inevitable tears, then fails and lets them fall.

"Shush, come here," I say, sitting down beside her and putting my arm around her shoulder.

"Sorry," she says, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. "I'm being silly."

I shake my head. "No, it's fine. Has something happened?"

"This stuff with Zack...I've been getting some messages," she says, and I immediately bristle. "I wasn't sure who sent them at first, but then I figured out they're from people in my class. So I didn't want to come in today, but I don't want to fall behind, either."

God, kids can be so cruel. "Give me their names, and I'll put a stop to it," I say.

She shakes her head. "No, I don't want to make things worse. Zack says it will be over soon."

I nod, not knowing how to handle this. After a moment, I clear my throat. "You know the situation with my parents," I begin, and Saffy looks at me in surprise. "Well, last night, I was reminded just how much some folks in

my pack still hate them for what they think they did. Between you and me, I kind of hate them for that. They shouldn't be blaming me, and no one here should be blaming you for anything Zack does."

Saffy's expression flares. "But he didn't do anything!"

"No, no, I know," I say quickly. "I just mean they shouldn't even be talking to you about it."

"Sorry, yes, I know what you mean," she says, shaking her head. "I know you like Zack. I know you didn't mean that."

Cold dread ices my veins even more as she continues. "Stupid thing is, the messages seem to say I helped him. I'm doing this course, so they're saying everyone thinks it's both of us. So they're not just talking about him."

I run a hand through my hair, trying to find the words. "They'll see, Saf. They'll see it's not you."

My words feel hollow. I'm about to destroy this girl and the life she knows. My memories from the night before are still so fresh, I don't know how to process my emotions right now.

"Where's your car?" I ask.

"It's in the garage. I got a lift with Em, but she's in classes until six, so I'm waiting for her."

"It's freezing, Saf. Let me drive you home. Just tell Em you got a lift back."

She smiles and nods, and we walk to my truck in silence as she fires off a text, presumably to her friend. I turn up the heat and the stereo as we drive, feeling like I'm going to shatter into a million pieces.

## Chapter 12 - Zack

I swing the axe down repeatedly, setting a punishing rhythm as I work my way through the pile of timber. I expertly chop and stack, chop and stack until the pile of logs begins to fill my winter fuel stash. Every time I swing my shoulder back, my work shirt stretches until I think it might rip. Frustrated, I put the axe down at my side and pull the shirt over my head.

The morning frost is starting to last later into the day as the seasons shift, but I'm too busy and angry to care about the cold air hitting my skin. No one seems to care enough about clearing my name. Even Diego just keeps telling me to wait. All the while, the investigation moves at a snail's pace.

I don't understand why it's taking so long. I know I'm innocent, so how hard can it be to prove it? The thought of all that stolen money flowing into my account makes me feel sick. That people I've known all my life would think I'd do it for even a second makes me feel even worse.

I haven't even seen Tanya for a few days. A few texts here and there, but she seems distant, and who could blame her? She doesn't seem as easily led by her pack. She clearly still has some issues with them and doesn't follow the crowd, and she says she doesn't care about the rumors. But something is going on with her. With us.

Maybe I'm overthinking things. Maybe she's just not that into me, or she thinks I'm too old. Hell, perhaps I am.

Now probably couldn't be a worse time to start a relationship, anyway. What happens if they decide I'm guilty? What if I can't prove my innocence?

The thought pulls me up, and I stop swinging my axe for a second as cold dread seeps through my veins. I already know what would happen. At best, I'd be banished. Alphas have been known to do far worse to traitors.

I resume my work, harder and faster than before. I smash the logs one after another, not wanting them to run out because I need to do something to release all of this frustration before I actually explode.

I pause as the security system beeps to alert me to a vehicle at the main gates, but then the system deactivates. Saffy must be back, though I wasn't expecting her until later.

I resume chopping the last few logs, almost disappointed that I've

nearly filled the winter store. Keeping myself hidden away on the property these last few weeks has meant I've completed most of the season's preparations ahead of schedule. I need to keep myself busy at all times.

I'm about to swing my axe again when I see Tanya's truck coming around the bend. My brow furrows in confusion. There's no way she could have driven through the gates, but then my eyes focus on the passenger seat, where I see Saffy.

Confused, I throw my axe down and stroll to the front of the house to meet them. My heart rate picks up at the thought of seeing Tanya again.

The truck stops, and I can see them talking in the cabin. I can also see that Saffy's upset about something.

*What the hell?*

"Saf, what's up? Where's Em?" I call to her as she rushes to the front door, barely looking at me.

"I don't want to talk about it," she says, opening the door. "I'm fine, I just don't want to talk."

I open my mouth to say something, but she slams the door behind her. I spin around to see Tanya standing by her truck, looking concerned.

"She doesn't look fucking fine," I snap, pausing when I see her flinch. "Sorry," I say quickly. "Thank you for bringing her back, I guess. What happened?"

Tanya hesitates. "I think Saffy should tell you about it. I can't—I mean, I shouldn't divulge things from a student's conversation without asking them first. You understand?"

I want to yell at her and tell her to hell with that, but I just nod once, not wanting to say something I can't take back.

Tanya stands awkwardly by the truck, clearly unnerved by the anger and frustration rolling off me. "Are you okay?" she asks gently.

"No," I say tersely. "No, I'm really not. And neither is Saffy." I walk back to the timber store, picking up my axe and putting it back on the rack. I start throwing the prepared logs into the store, aware that Tanya has followed me, but unable to turn around and let her see me in so much turmoil.

"She'll be okay, Zack," Tanya says quietly. "Kids can be cruel, but Saffy's a bright girl, and she's got you."

"I'm the problem, though, aren't I?" I snap. "At least, that's what everyone thinks."

She hesitates, and I sense there's something she wants to say.

"What is it? Something about Saffy?" I ask, even more concerned.

"You need to talk to Saffy," Tanya finally says. "But I think you should know it's not just you people are pointing the finger at."

My gaze snaps to hers as her words settle on me like a red mist. "Are you saying they think Saffy's involved with this disaster? Who the fuck is saying that?!"

She steps back, physically shrinking from me. I put my hands up to calm both her and myself. "Sorry, you're the last person I should be yelling at," I say. "But who is saying it?"

She shakes her head, still wary of me. "I really don't know; she didn't say. But the kids at college are obviously getting it from their parents. People here love to gossip."

I sigh, running my hand through my stubble and trying to calm myself. The last thing I want is for her to be scared. "Thank you for bringing her home," I say again. "I hate to think of her being upset."

"You're a good brother." She smiles sadly, "We had a chat. I know something about being gossiped about because of my family."

I nod thoughtfully, remembering the looks she got at the fair and the local gossip about her parents being banished. "Yeah, you sure do. How do you cope with it?"

She laughs darkly. "I was gone for twenty years, so I guess I didn't have to cope with hearing it until recently." She pauses as if she's about to say more.

"But you're hearing it now?" I probe, suddenly concerned about her, too.

She looks at the ground and sighs, placing her hands on her hips and seemingly searching for the right words. "The specifics don't matter," she finally says, "It's just weird how it seems to be the people who knew us best are the worst."

"I guess friends feel the betrayal worse," I say, stepping toward her.

"Perhaps it's my parents who are right in feeling betrayed by them," she replies quietly.

Despite how close we were getting, at least until recently, we haven't properly discussed the situation with her parents. It begins to dawn on me that she must think they're innocent. I don't know the full facts, but it's

unusual for wolves to be banished if it's not absolutely certain they're guilty. I can't blame her for standing by her parents, though.

"It must be hard coming back here," I say, putting my hand on her shoulder. It's weird, but I feel a deeper connection to her. There are not many people who could possibly understand what Saffy and I are dealing with right now. But I have the feeling Tanya gets it. Gets me.

She looks smaller than ever, standing out here in the cold. Her wavy blond hair is partially tucked into her coat, and she rubs her hands together to keep them warm.

I reach out and take her hands in mine. My large, worn hands dwarf her soft, delicate fingers, and I feel a jolt of electricity race up my arms at the contact. She looks so achingly beautiful, and I can't tear my eyes away from her pink lips. I already know how amazing she tastes, and I feel my wolf blaze through my eyes as I release her hand and wrap my own around the back of her head, crashing my mouth down to hers and pulling her body against my bare chest.

It's not a gentle kiss; it's full of frustration and anger at the situation I'm in. Yet, it also has gratitude for the woman in my arms.

I walk Tanya backward until her back is against the storage unit door. We tumble through the door, kissing, my hands roaming her body and her hands gripping my shoulders.

We break apart for a moment, both breathless. I wait for a sign to continue, and as she slides her hands down my bare chest, I begin to trail kisses down her neck as I unbutton her coat, pushing it off her shoulders. She gasps as my fingers find the hem of her shirt and lift it slightly so I can stroke the incredibly soft skin underneath.

My hands travel lower, tugging at the top buttons of her jeans until there's enough space for my hand to slip into her underwear. I groan into her mouth as I feel her folds, my fingers slipping easily across her wet, sensitive skin.

She grips my arms, digging her nails in almost painfully as I finally slip a finger inside her, moaning as I use my thumb to massage her clit. I add a second and then third finger, feeling her tight channel convulsing against my hand, turning me on even more. I know I'm a large man, so she has to wrap her thigh around my body to grant me better access as I pump my fingers in and out of her wet core.



She quivers beneath me, and I can feel the heat radiating between us. I kiss along the curve of her shoulder before standing up straight and pulling away from her slightly so we're looking into each other's eyes.

"I'm going to make you come," I whisper before burying my fingers deep inside her again, flicking her clit with my thumb.

She lets out a strangled cry as she finally releases all over my hand. I can still feel her body trembling against me as she reaches between us and palms my hard length through my jeans. My hips begin to grind against her, and I want nothing more than to bury myself deep inside her.

Instead, I still her hand. "Not here, not like this. I'm not sure I've got it in me to be as gentle as you deserve." I look around the storeroom. "I'm also sure you deserve better than my store."

She laughs against my lips. "What if I don't want gentle?"

She nearly unmans me with those words, and her hand runs firmly up and down the length of my cock. The man within me is practically hypnotized, but my wolf demands more. He wants to mark every part of her, to take her and make her his. There would be nothing gentle or quiet about it.

I groan, stepping back. She looks so incredibly sexy and disheveled, I'm fighting hard not to throw her down on the floor and take her completely.

"There's be nothing gentle about what I have in mind, that's for sure," I say, watching her eyes flash with desire. "But I don't think we'd be quiet, either, and I don't fancy Saf walking in."

"Oh my god." Tanya laughs, nodding as her cheeks turn pink. "No, we don't want that."

I watch as she rearranges her clothes, and I step outside to grab my shirt from where I discarded it earlier. "Stay," I say to her. "Stay for dinner with us. I don't want you to go."

I don't know where the words are coming from, but I suddenly want her in my home, by my side. It's unnerving. I've never been bothered about having a woman hang around for very long. First, my wolf wants to claim Tanya, and now I want to make her dinner. I could almost laugh at myself, but I hold my breath instead, waiting for her answer.

"I should really get back," she says, and I try to mask my disappointment. "You and Saffy should catch up."

She's right, of course, but I don't miss how she turns away from me. I wonder if she just got carried away, and now that we're back to reality, she's

still nursing the same doubts about me. Maybe even more so after today.

I watch as she drives away until she's out of sight. Her scent is still on me and driving me crazy. If I'm confused about this situation with the stolen money, I'm probably even more confused about where things are going with Tanya. I can't shake the feeling something is holding her back.

I worry that something is me.

## Chapter 13 - Tanya

I sit down on the sofa with what must be my fifth large cup of coffee and pick up the laptop from where I discarded it on the cushions. I click through to my college emails. I should be at the school today, and I feel guilty for calling in and pretending to be sick. I had no choice, though. Agent Barnes set up a series of calls for me to help with an overseas op. I was up at 5 a.m., talking to teams on the other side of the world. Coffee is the only thing keeping me going right now.

I flick back to the college emails and check today's attendance file. When I see Saffy's name there, I feel satisfied and click back to my work.

*Good for her, going in today.*

I almost feel bad for not being there in case anyone says anything to her. But who am I to play protector when I'm the one causing her problems?

I try to shake off those thoughts. I'm not the one who caused all this. Her parents did this. The blame is all theirs. And everyone else in this town who didn't bother fighting for my family.

I fire off some questions to the teams and take a long sip of my coffee. I need to concentrate—Agent Barnes laid it on thick how important this op is. Even though my role is minor in comparison to the men and women on the ground, I still need to focus. I definitely shouldn't be thinking about one of my students, or her sexy older brother, or...revenge.

As if on cue, my phone lights up. I set it to silent so I wouldn't be disturbed, but one glance at the screen confirms it's my mom. I'm used to her calling at all times of the day, and it doesn't seem to register with her that I have a job. I should be teaching right now, and she doesn't know I'm at home.

I let her call ring off. Neither she nor my dad have worked properly since being banished, preferring to get by on disability and the occasional cash-in-hand job. Obviously, once I started really making bank from my hacking, I was able to support them. That's when they stopped trying to make a go of things at all.

I sometimes wonder if I'm doing the right thing by enabling them. I also wonder what it would be like to have parents who looked after me rather than the other way around. I jump slightly, almost spilling my coffee as I feel a tear sliding down my cheek. I put the cup down and quickly wipe my face.

This is ridiculous. I'm sitting here, helping a high-profile FBI task force and crying over my parents.

I'm not a crier. I've been looking after myself for a very long time, and I'm here to take control of my life and my history. I'll fix everything that happened to my parents, they'll get themselves back on track, and hopefully, we can be a happier family.

My thoughts return to Saffy. I conducted many hacking campaigns both before Agent Barnes found me and after I started working for the FBI. Arguably, many of them had victims. However, I was focused on corporations or extremely rich individuals. My campaign against Zack's family is personal, and for the first time, I'm seeing the fallout up close and personal.

Not for the first time, I think about how Saffy reminds me a lot of myself. It's not just the interest in computers, though she's showing a lot of promise in that department. It's her quiet resilience and humor. I honestly wish I didn't like her so damn much.

And Zack...I can't even think about Zack.

When he asked me to stay for dinner with him and Saffy the other night, I had this sudden image of the three of us sitting together like some kind of family. My stomach roiled. All the way home, I convinced myself it was because I've been sleeping with the enemy and was just ashamed of myself for getting into this situation. But in the cold light of day, as I sat waiting for the teams to come online at 5 a.m., Zack was all I could think about. I'm seriously beginning to doubt what my heart really wants.

My parents have been so much more engaged since I first explained my plans for revenge to them. My mom, especially, sees it as their route to redemption. She's never called me so much or seemed so interested in what I'm doing. Not since I was a little kid, anyway. We were happy back then.

I know my parents aren't bad people. They've just given up and let bitterness consume them. If I can free them from it, they might return to being who they really are.

That was the idea, anyway. In reality, I feel the weight of their bitterness every time they call. You'd think it would be easier, living far away from them. But if anything, it feels more stifling.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by an alert on my screen from Agent Barnes.

*Thanks, everyone. Teams are all back on base. Debrief at 2 pm.*

I give a thumbs-up emoji—which I know Barnes hates on official comms—and shut down my secure company servers. I'm glad the mission went well and everyone's back safely. I'm never privy to all the intel; I just provide background support by hacking security systems and running interference. Still, I feel part of the team.

For once, though, I'm just grateful this mission is over so I can set aside one of the many loads on my mind. I take a sip of my now-cold coffee, nearly gagging on it, and head back to the kitchen for yet another cup.

*I'll be buzzing tonight.*

My thoughts return to Saffy. I can't shake how worried I am about her—she even looked like she'd lost weight. At least she'll have Zack, though, if they get banished. He doesn't strike me as the type to fall apart, so she'll have more going for her than I did.

Suddenly, a thought strikes me. What if I could make sure she's okay after the dust settles? I won't feel as guilty if I know she'll be fine, whatever happens.

I rush back to my secure laptop and bring up the back-office files I'm working on to access the pack's banking systems. Something immediately catches my eye. I smile as I see some minor obstacles and adjustments within the system—another hacker has been in here. I can't help myself; I love the challenge.

The hacker isn't bad; they're just nowhere near as good as me. I dance around their code, deliberately throwing them off at points and setting traps to trip them up occasionally. I can't keep the smirk from my face as I see their hacker has ringfenced some funds, thinking I won't be able to touch them—but I can.

I also note that Zack's access has been revoked. I pause for a moment until I spot an old account that isn't used anymore. It appears to be an old savings account with a terrible return. The account still has Zack's name on it, and access to it is through his business account.

I check the name of the other person who has access—Diego. By freezing him out, I can siphon funds into the old account and ensure Zack is the only one with access to them.

I check the ringfenced funds, noting that the amount has increased significantly in the last few days—no doubt due to the fundraising ahead of

the sports tournament. My fingers are flying over the keyboard now. I'm in my element, pulling together the fragments of an elaborate heist. It's no wonder the FBI preferred to put me to work rather than lock me up.

I schedule a hidden transfer for the day of the tournament when the fundraiser should hit its maximum. It'll go straight into Zack's account. This will be the final nail in the coffin.

I don't hesitate to set the transfer, but afterward, my fingers hover over the keyboard for a second. I was so lost in the magic of hacking that I hadn't even second-guessed myself.

Maybe that's for the best. I came here to execute my plan, one I'd been working on for over a year. And I'm going to carry it out. For my family.

But there is something I can do to soften the guilt building within me. I open up one of my favorite untraceable offshore accounts and go through the process of setting up a brand-new account. In Saffy's name.

In a throwback to my days of running the hacking group that put us all through college and bought my condo back in the Bay, I start siphoning money from the pack accounts, major corporations, and other offshore funds to build an almost untraceable fund for Saffy. The fund amounts to just over five million dollars.

Satisfied I've done enough without compromising Saffy or myself, I finalize the account details. Then, I set up an anonymous email account to send her the details a month after the final transfer that will confirm Zack's guilt. I'll be out of their lives by then, and long gone by the time the accusations really start to fly.

Am I being a coward, not staying to watch? Maybe.

I think about the man in the bar the other night, the gossip at the fair, and the nasty comments from people when I first arrived and tried to rent somewhere. The thought of all that being levied at Zack and Saffy doesn't sit well, despite what I'm doing for Saffy. My bravado as I worked against the pack hacker—flexing my skills as I overrode all their failsafes, laughing off their attempts to trap me—suddenly fades.

I check my messages to see three missed calls and five messages from my mom. She wants an update, and I know she'll love to hear how my plan is coming to fruition. By any hacker's standards, I've pulled this off to perfection. But I can't bring myself to reply and hear her gloating about Zack and Saffy's downfall. She doesn't even know them.

Agent Barnes will be expecting me to log on for the debrief soon. I feel like I'm treading a thin line between being the villain and a hero. The FBI loves my work, and I've no doubt this debrief will be another glowing one. But I feel like the worst of the worst right now.

Just as I'm about to log on, my phone buzzes again. The familiar feelings of stress wash over me as I check to see if it's my mom again. Instead, Zack's name flashes on the screen. My heart sinks as I look at his message.

*I really want to see you. Let me know if you're free. - Z x*

What can I do? The only thing I can do.

Ignore him and leave town as soon as possible.

## Chapter 14 - Zack

I finally put the tools down in the back room. The dust in the air is so thick now, it's managed to infiltrate the mask I'm wearing. I can feel it coating every exposed part of my skin. As the air starts to clear, I look around at my handiwork. This section of the house has been pretty much unfinished since I moved in; I've been too busy to complete the drywall. Now that I'm practically a recluse, it's given me a focus. I'm almost disappointed this is the final section.

What the hell am I going to do next?

I go from the house to the forestry office and back again—that's it. I haven't been near town in over three weeks. Saffy's not even working at the store at the moment. Diego and Quinn bring food and supplies to us and pretend everything is going to be okay.

Saffy's still going to college occasionally, but she's mainly completing assignments at home now. I'm damn proud of her for attending all. It's more than I could do.

Diego came by last night in one last attempt to convince me to participate in the sports tournament today. I get it—it's a big deal to have the alpha stand by me like that, and so publicly. But there's no way I was ever going to go. I was supposed to head up the relay team, and not one of those men has bothered to reach out to me since I stopped going into town. How could I possibly lead a whole team of them?

I think deep down, Diego knows that, too, but he didn't want to admit it to me. He told me that he nearly canceled the sports tournament altogether but decided that might not be the best thing for the pack. The pack comes first, of course.

I wander into the kitchen, not even caring that dust is now falling all over the floor, and pour myself a drink to try and clear my throat. Saffy would go mad if she saw the mess, but she's with her friend Emily. I'm so grateful that she has one friend who has been brave enough to stand with her. The girl's parents have been great, too. In solidarity for Saffy missing the sports tournament, Emily offered to skip it, too, so they're having a sleepover instead. I know Saffy will never forget that kindness.

I don't think she wanted to leave me here alone, but I insisted. All I



want is a breakthrough or some kind of development. Anything.

Diego mentioned that Mateo's hacker had noticed new activity on the accounts, but no money was moved. The hacker also said that whoever's doing it has serious skills—the sorts of skills he'd only seen in government-level attacks. That should only make it less likely that I would be the culprit, given I'm just a forestry owner living in the mountains.

I vented at Diego the night before, but we got nowhere.

*"Everyone must see that I'm not Batman, breaking into banks like a foreign spy?" I snap.*

*"I'm not sure Batman ever broke into a bank, and he definitely wasn't a foreign spy," Diego replies, attempting some humor, but it falls flat when I glare at him. "Look, even Lucca said he can't see how this is you. This is next-level stuff, not like what the kids are learning at college. And it's not just someone who's good with computers. Mateo's guy pulled in other tech experts, and even they couldn't keep up. "*

*That did pull me up. Lucca was the one who instantly seemed to believe the accusations against me, which pissed me off because although we're from different packs, we'd always gotten along fine.*

*"And Mateo?" I ask.*

*"I don't think he's ever thought you did this, Zack. That's the truth. But no one can deny that there is simply no one else who benefits from all this except you."*

*"But what the hell do they think I was going to do?" I yell. "Just steal all their money and then somehow get away with it and carry on as normal?"*

*My outbursts never ruffle Diego, who simply gives me time to calm down. "The transactions were well disguised. If it weren't for Mateo's guy, we'd never have known the money was going into your account."*

*"I'm sure I would have noticed," I reply dryly.*

*"The point is, someone must really hate you to do this," Diego says somberly. "Any idea who?"*

*I think for a moment. "The only people who'd hate me that much are my parents, and they're dead."*

I down my drink and slam the glass on the counter. My throat feels better, but the dust is still irritating my skin and eyes. I strip off the dust suit and discard it on the usually spotless floor, heading straight for the shower.

I turn the water from hot to scorching, my hand resting on the cool

wall as I watch the dirt and dust mix with the soap and pool at my feet before swirling down the drain. I wish it were as easy to wash away the rage and bitterness threatening to consume me.

I could almost believe that this would all get sorted out, that I'd ultimately be found not guilty. But I'm not sure I can forgive the people who so readily believed the gossip and lies, turning their backs on me and even pointing fingers at Saffy.

I haven't even heard back from Tanya in days and have to assume she's distancing herself from me, too. Who could blame her? This pack is my home, but I'm starting to think the unthinkable.

Can I actually stay here?

After throwing on some sweatpants and leaving my hair wet, I head back into the kitchen. I need to leave the drywall overnight, so I'm painfully aware I have very little to distract me. Deciding on a late lunch and then a second workout, I start pulling out the things Quinn kindly dropped off for me, even though I have no appetite at all.

The security system alerts me to a vehicle at the gates, and I pull up the screen. Everyone will be at the tournament by now, and Saffy would just drive straight through. I'm at a loss as to who would be out here.

I'm stunned to see Tanya's truck, and my fingers hover over the keypad. It's not that I don't want to see her; I don't want to see anyone. I sigh as my finger hits the entry button and the gates begin to open. Glancing around, I groan at the mess I've made and quickly pick up a few discarded items from the floor. I throw my dishes into the sink and grab a shirt just as she pulls up outside.

I walk out to greet her, feeling uncharacteristically self-conscious. "What brings you out here today?" I ask, trying to keep my voice light. "Figured you'd be at the tournament like everyone else."

She smiles, looking absolutely stunning in the winter sunlight. "I thought about it, but then I heard you and Saffy weren't there. Just thought I'd stop by."

Something feels a bit different about her, and as I step closer, I notice a few bags in her backseat. "You going somewhere?" I ask.

She looks from the backseat to me and awkwardly shuffles on her feet, confirming my suspicions. Something is definitely off with her. "Just visiting my parents," she says.

I decided not to push it for now, but all those bags look like more than a quick visit. I know she doesn't owe me an explanation, and she made the effort to come out here.

I find myself suddenly wanting some company after all. Or perhaps I just want her company.

"Sure thing," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "You want a coffee?"

She nods, looking relieved I haven't asked any more questions. That doesn't mean I won't try again, though. Here's me wondering if I should leave the pack, yet the thought of Tanya leaving unnerves me. For someone who doesn't think she belongs here, I think she fits right in.

As we walk into the kitchen, her eyes go wide, and I wince a little as I take in the mess. Picking a few things up didn't exactly put a dent in the days of neglect. "Sorry. Erm, Saffy's been on at me to sort this out."

Tanya waves her hand. "It's your place," she laughs, looking around. "Is Saffy here?"

"Um, no. She's with her friend Emily," I reply. "I'm glad she's got one good friend."

Tanya chews her bottom lip, and I can't help wondering why she looks so nervous. Perhaps because of my outburst the other day, and now she's here alone with me again.

"Seems like you've got good friends, too," she states, and I scoff before I can help it.

"Diego, yes, and I'm grateful for him and Quinn. The others? No chance."

Her eyes turn sympathetic. I hate that; I don't want anyone's sympathy. Especially hers. It makes me feel weak, and my wolf can't bear it.

"Please don't," I snap.

"Don't what?" she asks, surprised.

"Don't pity me."

"I don't pity you, okay?" She sighs. "Your situation isn't that different from mine, you know?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm innocent, Tanya!"

She sighs, turning her back on me, and I feel like I've totally blown it.

"Sorry, I shouldn't yell," I say. "I'm doing that a lot recently."

"My parents were innocent, Zack," she says, her back still turned. "Everyone turned on them, and they were innocent. So I do know."

I don't want to be rude or say the wrong thing. Maybe she just wants to believe they were innocent, or perhaps they were. I don't know anything about the case. She seems pretty sure about it, though. And I've seen for myself how poorly she's been treated by some members of Silverstar.

"I'm sorry," I say. "You're right, and I don't know enough about their situation to say whether they were innocent or not. I'm just frustrated, and I'm taking it out on everyone around me."

"I think that's normal," she says with a small smile. "They were innocent, though. I have proof."

"Have you shown Mateo?"

"Why? It won't change anything now. It can't bring back my childhood home, their business, or friends. It can't make my dad sober, and I doubt it can heal my mom's bitterness."

Although she's touched on it before, I see for the first time the depths of her sadness, and my heart breaks for her. I step forward without hesitation and pull her into my arms. For a moment, I think she's going to resist the contact, but then her whole body softens, and she melts against me.

"I'm so sorry you went through that," I whisper into her hair. "That you're still going through that."

We stand like that for a few minutes in silence, just holding each other. I can't help wondering if Tanya's situation is what the future has in store for me. I've always thought banishment or losing your pack was reserved for only the worst of the worst. But what if it could happen to the innocent? It sounds like Tanya's parents have fallen apart since losing their pack—it is almost unthinkable for a wolf to live alone.

It must have been dreadful for Tanya. No wonder she appears skittish around fellow wolves. She probably hasn't even been able to embrace that side of herself.

"I'm sure your parents did their best to help you, though?" I ask finally.

She laughs ruefully against my chest. "I'm sure they did, but their best wasn't good enough."

I kiss the top of her head. My thoughts turn to Saffy and what it would be like for her to give up our pack. Would they force her out? Would Emily's parents take her in?

I can't believe I'm even thinking like this. Bile rises in my throat, and I

suddenly take a step back.

"Are you okay?" Tanya asks, her eyes flashing with concern.

"No," I reply honestly, all bravado gone from my heart and mind.

"No, I'm really not."

## Chapter 15 - Tanya

I stand there frozen, Zack's arms wrapped around my body again. He's whispering how sorry he is, and I feel him kiss the top of my head. His emotion is genuine, and I feel the lump forming in my throat, tears trickling down my face.

When I came back here, I felt so sure in my conviction that revenge was the right thing to do. It felt like a quest to avenge my parents and childhood. I had toyed with waiting a year or two before revealing the evidence that my parents were innocent and how I'd framed Zack. I wanted to highlight how cruel everyone in the town was to turn their backs on my family.

I wanted to be some kind of avenging dark angel, showing them how fucked up they were.

But standing here, I feel like the lines are all blurred. Zack's my enemy. I'm his enemy, but he doesn't even know it.

And Saffy? Is she my enemy?

My parents would say they're all equally guilty. I can hear them now, their bitterness a constant refrain since I was a child. I just wanted them to get better, for my dad to stop drinking and for my mom to be the kind, sweet mom I knew as a small child. But standing here, that doesn't feel any closer to happening than when I started.

None of this feels how I thought it would, and I'm not sure when it all started unraveling. When I arrived, everything was as I'd expected. I met Saffy first, and although I thought she was a sweet girl, I also noted the expensive Jeep she drove to college, the top-of-the-range laptop she used, and how, although quiet, she was secure and popular within the pack.

Then I met Zack, who was every bit the cocksure, wealthy, and successful businessman I'd expected. A beta, too. His family had obviously made a success of the land they acquired after framing my parents, expanding their operation across the whole mountain. Zack and Saffy were rich and happy because of my family's downfall.

I'd seen nothing to deter me from my plan, though I couldn't deny I was attracted to Zack from the start. My damn wolf didn't seem to understand he was our enemy; instead, she wanted him. I'd sensed his interest in me

right away, too. But I knew the truth. He didn't, and I thought I could use that to make my revenge even sweeter.

However, standing here in his arms, I'm forced to admit that was a load of rubbish. I simply wanted him, and far away from my parents' prying eyes.

For a moment, I thought I could have it all. I've always had a tough, no-nonsense persona. I had to, growing up in the roughest part of the city with no pack and my parents falling apart.

Not many people saw through my act, though Agent Barnes was one of them. He saw the real me right away. I cringe to myself, thinking about what he'd make my current situation.

I wipe my tears and step back, feeling suffocated by my own decisions. I look at Zack, who looks exactly how I feel. How did we get here? I have become so used to creating fake identities online, it suddenly occurs to me that's what I've done in real life, too. Who am I? My parents' daughter looking for revenge? A college lecturer? Zack's lover? FBI hero?

Or am I just a real-life villain?

A hacker friend once told me that they thought it was too easy to get wrapped up in lies and lose sight of right and wrong. I thought they were crazy—my life always seemed pretty simple to me. Hacking wealthy or corrupt businesses for the greater good, bringing down foreign or illegal operations for the FBI, emptying a cartel's bank account to pay an asset.

Bringing down Zack to avenge my parents.

It had all felt so simple. Until I was in his arms. Until I saw the damage to Saffy unfold in front of my eyes.

But the truth still stands: Zack's family is responsible for mine's downfall. My parents will settle for nothing less than the revenge I promised to deliver.

It's too late to turn back the clock now, anyway.

I know I should go. I'm trying to find the words when I hear a klaxon sound in the distance and the echo of a crowd's roar.

"I guess they're getting started," Zack says, glancing out the window.

"I'm surprised you can hear it from up here," I remark, knowing he's referring to the tournament he should be at the center of right now.

"The mountains create a slight amphitheater effect," he explains. "With the sports grounds right at the bottom, you hear the big games echo all

around. No escaping it, really. Not here, anyway." He looks back at me, his expression unreadable.

"I...um..." I start to speak, not sure how to find the right words, but knowing this is probably goodbye.

"Do you want to get out of here? Now, with me?" he suddenly asks.

"You mean, go to the tournament?" I ask in surprise.

He shakes his head ruefully. "No, the opposite, actually. Saffy's at her friend's until tomorrow, maybe even the day after. I've got a cabin in the next valley, far away from all this noise. Come with me, unless you're heading out today?" He leaves the question hanging in the air, as if suspecting I'm not really just taking a short trip.

I open my mouth to say no, to give some kind of excuse. But at the last moment, my heart engages and I find myself nodding. "Sure, I'm in no rush," I lie.

As I already have my things in the truck, I agree to leave my vehicle here and pick it back up tomorrow. I grab my overnight bag while Zack gets his things. He clearly doesn't need much, as he's ready to go in five minutes.

"I have a lot of things at the cabin," he says. "I've just packed some fresh food and a bottle of wine."

I smile. I can almost kid myself that this is a romantic trip, that we're just like any other new couple heading out to a mountain cabin to get to know each other better.

I hand Zack my bag and walk around to the passenger side of his truck, thinking maybe that's how I can view tonight. I can just pretend everything is fine for the night. Pretend I'm not leaving tomorrow. Pretend the final transfer won't go out in the morning and condemn Zack. Pretend we have an actual chance of happiness together.

Resolved, I glance at Zack as he turns over the engine. He's so handsome when he turns to smile at me. I feel a rush of electricity between us, and my wolf is both calmed and excited by his presence. I feel the familiar pangs of guilt but push them down. I can enjoy tonight, for tonight's sake. I can dance the fine line between my parents, my hunger for revenge, and my feelings for Zack one last time.

We drive along the town's smaller roads, the stereo turned up to drown out the occasional roar of the crowd in the valley below. I love these smaller mountain roads—the scenery is spectacular up here. The snow has



settled more here, given the higher ground, and I'm glad we're driving in Zack's truck when I notice the roads becoming more perilous.

"Will we get snowed in?" I ask.

Zack turns to me, a mischievous glint in his eye as he winks at me. "Only if we're lucky."

I laugh, but deep down, I think I'd take getting snowed in if it meant not having to face reality again for a while.

The light is starting to dim as we drop a bit into the next valley and take a smaller track off the main road. It's easy to forget how vast these ranges are, and we've been driving for a couple of hours. I'm about to ask Zack how much longer when I see a cabin in the distance. We drive between two enormous cedars that stand like centurions guarding a gate, pulling up in front of a one-story timber cabin with a wraparound porch.

"This is like a picture!" I exclaim, jumping down from the truck. The cabin sits in a clearing overlooking the valley. Everything is carpeted in a dusting of snow, with more flakes falling like we're in our own little snow globe.

Zack chuckles, coming around with our bags. "It sure is something, isn't it? Diego and I used to come out here hunting all the time when we were younger, then I ended up doing it up because Saffy loved it so much. I promise it's a lot warmer inside."

He's not kidding. When we walk in, he fires up the heating system, and by the time we've put our bags down and made some warm drinks, it's warm enough to take off our jackets. The cabin is secured with electric shutters and a high-tech security system to keep things safe when not in use.

Zack presses some buttons, and the shutters at the front of the property go up at the same time, revealing a large picture window overlooking the valley. The snow is falling heavily now, and the view is simply stunning.

I wander over to the window, holding my hot chocolate. "You're very lucky to have this, you and Saffy. Was it your parents? Did they leave it to you?" I should leave it alone, but I can't help myself. Maybe I want to hear about how lucky he's been so I don't feel as guilty.

I wait for him to confirm the property belonged to his parents, but he simply laughs. "God, no. They'd have torched something like this before ever letting me have it."

I can't keep the shock from my face, and he must notice because he continues. "I know you've had a rough time with your folks. I'm glad they loved you, though. Mine couldn't even say that much."

"I-I...I don't understand," I splutter. "I know your parents passed away. I just assumed, you know, you got along with them. Didn't you?"

My mind is reeling, but I try to keep my face neutral, hoping he'll explain. I need to know what happened.

He sighs. "I don't want to put a downer on our night. God knows I've got enough to worry about." But then he says, "Let's just say my parents were not very nice people, and I'm not sorry they're gone. In fact, I'm only sorry it took me a while to get Saffy away from them, too. Everyone in town hated them, but no one more than me."

"But they left you the forestry business? Right?" I ask, desperately wanting to hang onto what I've been told by my parents.

"Nah. I moved out. Or rather, I was thrown out long before my dad died and my mom sold the forestry business to some out-of-town corporation." I can hear the sadness in his voice. "It took me another five years to build up the capital and bring on enough local investors to buy it back. I would never have achieved it without Diego's help. Still, I'm glad I did it before my mother died, too, if only to see the look on her miserable face when she realized Saffy and I had made it. I was giving her the life they denied us."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. I hadn't researched anything beyond the fact that Zack owned his family's forestry business, which still owned the land bought out from my parents after they were banished. I didn't look into any timelines or Zack's relationship with his parents; there didn't seem to be any need. Families in wolf packs are usually very close. It's extremely rare for a family to disown a son who remains at the heart of the pack, as Zack has done.

"I'm so sorry, Zack," I say quietly, still trying to process how this information has upended my entire worldview of Zack and Saffy.

They're not the enemy. They never were.

The only villain left standing is me.

## Chapter 16 - Zack

I take another sip of the sweet hot chocolate, trying to stuff down the emotions that always surge whenever I talk about my parents.

Tanya looks genuinely distressed to hear about my relationship with my parents, and I almost regret telling her. I hate when people pity me. I had enough of that when I was younger. Having been finally thrown out by my father after years of physical and mental abuse, Diego and his family took me in. Everyone in town knew what my parents were like. The alpha at the time had sanctioned them before for various scams and how they treated people in general.

When it came to family, it was a different time then. Other adults didn't like to interfere too much in how parents raised or treated their children. The older I got, though, and the more bruises appeared on me, the harder it was for people in town to ignore what was happening. When I couldn't even compete in my college football final because my dad had broken my leg over some perceived misdemeanor, the alpha couldn't ignore it anymore. I remember him coming to the house, tearing into my dad. He probably thought that would scare my father straight, but it only made things worse. I spent two nights in the hospital before Diego showed up with his parents, and they took me back to their house.

I appreciate every single member of our pack who stood by me, gave me my first job, refused to believe the lies my parents told about me, helped me when I first bought my land and was living in a freezing trailer, and, most crucially, gave me a fresh slate by not thinking Saffy or I were anything like our parents.

It took a hell of a lot of people siding with me and providing testimony to finally get custody of Saffy. She'd already suffered a lot by then, and I'm so proud of who she's become.

I think that's what makes this whole situation even worse. The one thing I always had was my good character and standing within the pack. I can stand losing almost anything but that.

For the first time in my life, I feel like the pack truly thinks I'm like my parents.

Tanya's fallen very quiet. I can tell she's pretending to watch the

snow fall and drink her hot chocolate, but my wolf can feel the stress rolling off her in waves. I know she's had a hard time, too. Maybe she finds it difficult to talk about family in general. She says she loves hers, but it's clearly not been easy.

"I guess we both had a rough run, eh?" I say lightly.

She jumps a little at my words, almost as if she was so lost in her thoughts that she forgot I was here. Her eyes look so sad, it pulls at my heart.

"Hey," I say, pulling her against my body and loving the way she melts against me. "I told you I didn't want to be a downer. But now you've heard my sorry story, why don't you tell me about the Bay Area? What was it like growing up there?"

That seems to bring her back around, and she smiles up at me. "I think we need a refill. These are a little cold," she says, taking the drink from me and heading over to the pot. "Perhaps we should add a little kick?"

She pours a dash of bourbon into each hot chocolate, and I pull the blankets out on the sofa opposite the fire that's taken hold now. Once we're settled, I throw a blanket over us, drawing her legs over mine. She looks so beautiful, with a halo of soft blond waves spilling over her shoulders, porcelain skin with flushed cheeks from the fire, and blue eyes that seem to see straight through me. Despite the mess I'm in, my wolf feels so much calmer now that we're alone here.

I think back to the bags in her car. Is it really possible she's leaving?

"So, tell me about growing up," I prompt gently, wanting to understand her history better. Or maybe I just want to distract myself from my own problems for a moment.

She sighs, settling her drink on her lap. "The Bay Area is really lovely." She pauses. "If you live in the right area, which we did not. You've heard of the Jameson pack?"

I nod. "They're a big pack over on the west coast."

"Yeah, well, they didn't take too kindly to so-called thieves living on their doorstep, so we had to move a ton in those first couple of years." She looks into the fire as she talks, taking an occasional sip of her drink. "Eventually, we settled in a little town right across the Bay. I'd go to the city with my mom sometimes in the early days, but I don't think she's traveled further than the bar and supermarket in years."

"And your dad?" I ask, though I'm getting the feeling this is a more

depressing story than I'd bargained for.

"He tried to work in the beginning, but it was all half-hearted. The fire had gone out in him. I think he just really missed his pack. He started drinking shifter brew, and that was that."

I blow out a breath, so impressed Tanya is who she is today after such a rough start. She clearly believes her parents are innocent of whatever theft they were accused of. If that's true, it must have been devastating all around.

"So, what were you doing when all this was going on?" I ask. "How did you end up becoming a teacher back here?"

"I guess I just wanted to come home and see what it was like," she says quietly. "I was homeschooled. Or rather, I just taught myself. My parents were wary of outing us as shifters to humans, and we moved around a lot, anyway. I made friends online, and we helped each other. You find people in similar situations."

"Well, I think it's remarkable you are who you are after all this," I say, stroking her leg and enjoying how she trembles slightly under my hand. "Did you find what you were looking for by coming back?"

She chuckles slightly as my hand drifts higher, unable to stop myself. "I'd say I found a lot more than I was looking for."

"Me too," I say before leaning over and kissing her gently. I meant it to be a gentle kiss, but it quickly deepens. I pull her closer, and then she gasps as her hot chocolate nearly spills. We laugh, and she stands slightly to put it on the table. As she turns to sit back down, I haul her onto my lap so her legs are straddling me.

"Smooth move," she laughs. After such a heavy conversation, I love the sound of her laughter even more.

"You ever doubt I had moves?" I chuckle, noticing how she moves her hips slightly, settling on my hardening cock. "I'm not that old, you know."

"Not *that* old, no." She giggles, leaning down to kiss me again. I slap her ass playfully, causing her to grind against me even more. I groan into her mouth as I lift my hips, seeking more of the delicious friction.

Soon, we've built a rhythm that's driving me half-insane. She moans as I pull her closer to me, and I can feel her heat radiating against my body. Moving one hand to the small of her back and the other to cup her face, I deepen the kiss even further.

Suddenly, I push up, still holding her against me until I lower her

down, stripping her jeans from her as we go. She kicks them off and then pulls her sweatshirt over her head, discarding it on the floor. The orange firelight flickers and dances across her perfect skin, contrasting with her black thong that leaves little to the imagination.

My mouth goes dry as I take her in. She giggles again, obviously aware of the effect she's having on me as she shrugs the shirt from my shoulders and runs her nails across my bare chest, leaving jolts of electricity in their wake.

I growl in satisfaction, barely unable to restrain my wolf any longer. Her laughter ceases when she notices my fangs have descended slightly.

"I won't hurt you, okay?" I promise.

She nods. "I know you won't. I want this."

Satisfied with her answer and unable to wait a moment longer, I spin her around so she's kneeling on the sofa, her arms on the backrest.

I swear, I've never seen a sexier sight in all my long life.

She looks over her shoulder at me, her sexy blond hair cascading down her back as I drink in the sight of her, from the tiny black thong she's wearing that accentuates her curves to the way she's arching her back.

My heart beats faster as I reach around and cup one of her breasts, feeling her nipples tighten beneath my touch. Her breath catches, and I lean forward and trace a path of open-mouthed kisses down her spine until I reach the base of it. She moans, gripping the sofa tightly as I continue to tease her skin, leaving goosebumps everywhere I touch.

I pull her thong down slowly, deliberately opening her legs wider as I pull it free. I smile as I touch the fabric and feel how wet she is already.

Falling to my knees behind her, I nip at the delicate skin on her ass, massaging her cheeks and pulling them apart slightly so I can run my tongue down from her ass to her clit, causing her to startle slightly as I dance over her most sensitive areas. She buries her head in the cushions, groaning as her hips sway. I know I need to go slowly with her and can't take her in every way I'd like to. So for now, I use my tongue and fingers to show her how good it can be, dipping the tip of my finger into her tight, puckered hole and stroking her clit until she's panting with desire.

Lifting one of her legs slightly to give me better access, I slide one finger into her wet channel, then add a second. I watch my fingers glide in and out of her body before gently adding a third. She whimpers slightly at the

intrusion, and I stroke her back soothingly before dipping my head to tease her puckered hole again with my tongue until she's quivering and begging for release. I add a fourth finger, twisting and curling my digits inside her until I feel her inner walls clenching and know that her release is imminent. I start pumping my hand, and I nearly come apart as I feel the moment her orgasm hits. She's riding my hand now, and her sweet juices pour over it as she bounces up and down on my fist.

I pull my cock free. It's already dripping with pre-cum, and I don't think I've ever been so hard. After I pull my fingers from her hot channel, she cries out in disappointment, looking over her shoulder just as I slam my cock deep inside her.

She arches her back, crying out again as another orgasm takes over her body.

From the moment I sink into her tight body, I know this isn't simply sex. I'm not just claiming her—I'm keeping her. She's mine now, and nothing can take her away from me. Nothing can break the bond we have, no matter how hard we fight it.

My wolf wants her. My fangs have fully descended, aching to mark her so everyone knows we belong together.

I grip the back of her neck, holding her still as I fuck her harder and faster. She seems to understand as she cries out for more with each thrust.

"Do it," she begs as her body trembles.

Without thinking any further, I sink my teeth into the soft skin between her neck and shoulder, marking her in the most primal way possible as I come hard inside her. I continue fucking her through my orgasm until there's nothing left.

We collapse onto the sofa, and I pull her against me, panting heavily. I'm completely spent but strangely contented in a way that is entirely new to me. We lay there quietly for a few moments until she finally turns to me with tears in her eyes.

"You are mine now," I whisper against her lips before kissing them gently.

"That was...something else. I never..." she says, trailing off.

"Me neither," I admit. "But I know what it means. I want you, Tanya. I want all of you."

She nods, clearly as overwhelmed as I am. "I want you, too, Zack.

More than anything."

I smile against her lips, already feeling my cock harden again. Her body responds immediately, her legs opening for me to nestle between them as I slide deep inside her.

I fuck her gently this time, nuzzling her neck where my mark remains. Even though my life is falling apart, I've never felt more complete than I do at this moment.



## Chapter 17 - Tanya

I never imagined everything could be so perfect and utterly ruined all at the same time.

My fingers lightly trace the already fading lines of Zack's mark on my neck. Although the mark itself will fade, it will leave an indelible impression on other shifters that Zack and I are mates. That we have accepted our mating.

But I know we can never really be mates. We have no future.

I look over at Zack. He's sleeping so peacefully. All the stress and frustration that marred his face yesterday is gone. Perhaps it's simply because he's asleep, but deep down, I think it's because of the mating. I'd never expected to feel the power of it, the raw emotion of our wolves connecting. And it's that connection that is now tearing at my soul.

By the time we return to town, the final transfers will have gone out. I know they've got a decent expert on board. I deliberately made the trail murky, but I'm sure it won't take too long for the hacker to find the back door left open for me to link one of Zack's dormant accounts. If anything, it makes Zack look even more guilty because it will seem like he tried to sneak in an account they thought wasn't being used, circumventing the need for his official access.

As a hacker, the move was gold. But lying here, Zack's strong arm draped across my naked body, I know I can't let this happen.

I think about my laptop sitting in the back of my truck. Agent Barnes taught me a trick that involves disabling it and hiding it under the spare wheel. I have the memory stick with me, so the laptop is useless without it, but I can't do anything without the laptop, either.

I kick myself. I'd wavered about pulling out the laptop and taking it with me here, but that would have meant emptying all my bags. Instead, I'd just grabbed my overnight bag from the front seat.

I lie in the dark, watching the snow fall through the open blinds. It's lighter than before but still coming down quite hard. I check the time on the bedside clock: 4 a.m. By the time Zack wakes up and I suggest heading back down the mountain, the transfer will have long since gone out.

Resolve builds within me. If I set off now, I can get down the

mountain, retrieve the laptop, stop the transfer, and reverse all the others. I mentally draft the email I'll send that exonerates Zack and Saffy. It will mean admitting everything, but I'll be long gone by the time Zack manages to get back to town without his truck.

For a second, I wonder if I can cover my tracks and absolve Zack without implicating myself. I suppose I could, but I don't think it would ever fully clear his name. The rumors would linger. People might assume he tried to wriggle out of it and put the money back. I either need to pin it on someone else or own up. And I've done enough damage to the packs.

Zack is dead to the world, and it's no wonder, given how hard and long he fucked me last night. I shiver, thinking of how many different ways he'd taken me. The thought of never being with him again physically hurts. I've never gone all the way with a man before Zack, and I'm not sure I'll ever want anyone else. However, my feelings for him only intensify my burning desire to do the right thing.

I slide out of bed slowly and gently so as not to wake him. I freeze when he murmurs, then I whisper to him that I'm going to get some water. He nods sleepily and then strokes my arm. I fight the tears threatening to fall as I move through the cabin. Thankfully, my clothes remain where they fell last night, and I quickly dress, disabling his security system with one hand as I do.

His truck is parked in the bay, slightly away from the house, but turning the engine will still wake him up. Luckily, the truck is on a slight hill. I climb in and release the brake, letting the vehicle roll gently away from the cabin. The slope eventually levels off at the track junction, and I'm forced to turn the engine over, but I keep the lights off until I've turned the bend and am far enough away from the cabin.

I mentally thank Zack for insisting we bring his truck, which is already set up for all this snow. My smaller vehicle would have skidded down that hill. Even with the headlights on, the visibility is awful. I have to concentrate to stop the truck from sliding around on the icy roads.

I can just make out a junction in the distance. *Which way did we come up? I should have paid more attention.*

I make an educated guess and turn left, going further up the mountain because I remember we went up to come back down again. I begin to doubt my decision, though, when the track becomes bumpier; I don't remember it

feeling this off-road. I see another junction coming up with a road sign covered in snow.

Stopping the truck, I get out to wipe the snow away. I'm immediately hit by the full force of the icy wind, which almost takes my breath away. Growing up on the coast, I'm not used to the extremes of weather. I pull my jacket around me and stumble over to the sign, hoping it'll help me get my bearings. I don't have time to panic if I'm going to make it back before the transfer.

*Rosewood 26.*

I've heard of Rosewood, but it's not close to Zack's house. At least, I've never driven through it. Realizing I'm probably on the wrong road, I decide to turn the truck around and head back the other way.

I get back in, turning the heat up as high as it will go. I may be a shifter and able to handle more extreme temperatures, but I still hate the damn cold.

Feeling slightly more confident now, I put on some music to drown out the constant chatter in my head. I wonder if Zack is awake yet, if he knows I'm gone. This isn't the first time I've run out on him after having sex, so he must think I'm crazy. I certainly feel crazy right now. My wolf is also going crazy. This isn't like last time. I'm deliberately running away from my mate, and my wolf knows I'm never going back. The clawing feeling racing up my spine is becoming increasingly intense.

Growing up without a pack, I don't have much real-life experience of true mates. My parents are certainly committed and call themselves mates, but I never saw them as much inspiration for the concept. Perhaps that's unfair, though, as they have stuck together despite everything that's been thrown at them.

I'm doing the exact opposite. I've betrayed my mate, and now I'm abandoning him. I shake that thought away. I'm not abandoning him; I'm doing the right thing. After he learns what I've done, he won't want me to stay, anyway. And there's zero chance of the pack accepting me once my crimes are revealed.

I'll head back to San Francisco and try to appease my parents by explaining how I convinced Zack we were mates and then broke his heart. Maybe I'll send over the file detailing my parents' innocence to both packs. Perhaps that will be enough for them.

Even if it's not enough, I'm done being at the center of my parents' bitterness. I can appreciate why they're resentful without internalizing it myself. If being here has taught me anything, it's that. I have to forge a good life, or I'll end up just like them.

I have enough money to move back to the city so I can still look after them, still try to talk my dad into rehab. But I know I have to create some proper distance first. They probably won't even care that I'm back home since I didn't carry out the plan.

I can either destroy Zack and Saffy or make my parents happy. I've made my choice. What happened to my family wasn't Zack and Saffy's fault. Punishing them shouldn't make my parents happy.

The snow is falling harder again, and I'm torn between driving faster and going slow enough to be able to see. There should be another road soon to take me up and over the ridge into the next valley, but I can't see anything. I lean forward slightly, trying to see better, when something runs in front of the truck. I can't even see what it is, but I instinctively move to avoid it, breaking hard to the right. I lose sight of the road as the snow whips around me, and then suddenly, I realize I've left the road altogether.

The truck bounces over rough ground. I try desperately to make it stop, but I'm going too fast, and the road is too icy. I scream as the truck tips over onto its side, and I'm powerless to stop it as it slides down a hill, metal scraping against tree branches and tearing off the doors. I can feel my body bouncing in the cabin as it slams into one tree after another, all my efforts to slow or stop it failing.

Finally, it comes to a stop at the bottom of what I assume is a hillside. Half the truck is in a shallow ditch. The front of it is crumpled against an oak tree, and the doors have been ripped off completely. I can see wisps of steam rising from the destroyed engine.

I'm covered in snow and ice and shocked by what just happened. I try to move, but pain instantly shoots through my leg when I do. Looking down, I see a branch has impaled me through the thigh, pinning me to the seat.

I try to stay calm. I wipe snow from my face, only to realize it's mixed with blood. I have a large gash on my head.

I know I need to shift in order to heal quicker, but I can't do that with this branch in my leg. Testing my resolve, I tug at the branch, the searing pain making me want to vomit. Looking up the hillside, I know there's no

way anyone is coming to help me, and the snow will already be covering any tracks.

I can't stay here.

I see my abandoned scarf in the footwell and reach for it, tying it around my leg to soak up some of the blood. Then, slowly, I pull out the branch, pausing occasionally to let the feelings of nausea pass. I consider it might be better to pull it out quickly, but I think I might pass out. I'm a hacker, not some kind of wilderness expert.

As I finally pull the branch free, I almost cry with relief. My whole leg burns, and I can barely bring myself to look at the amount of blood I'm losing.

I drag myself backward until I'm leaning against the tree. I pull my phone from my pocket, completely unsurprised that I have no signal. Coverage is intermittent at best in the mountain, and I hadn't had any since leaving the cabin. The truck is balanced precariously against two trees, but looking beyond it is a deeper drop. I can hear the metal groaning and shifting, so as much as I'd prefer to shelter in the truck, I can't trust it won't move again.

Shifting is my only option, but as I try, the bones in my leg twist and flex. I don't know what's wrong. Even if it's broken, it should still work. I pull the scarf from my leg, and despite my nausea, I check the wound. I can see debris inside and something sharp—a bone, maybe glass. I try to pull it out but almost black out from the pain.

I need help. My parents always told me if I was injured, shifting was the answer. But if I can't shift, I don't know what to do.

My panic building, I tightly redress my wound with the scarf. I need to get out of here. I look up toward the road, but I can't even see how far I fell because of the snow. Looking down, I think I can see a lower road, but it could also be a stream. I just need to find someone who can help me.

I decide to head down as it's not as far. Hopefully, there will be a road. The sun is starting to rise now, and there might be traffic. If it's a stream, I'll follow it. Cabins are dotted all along the rivers here.

My whole body screams in protest as I struggle to stand. I grab the smaller branch that impaled my leg and use it as a stick to support my weight, shuffling and sliding carefully down the hill with tears in my eyes.

All I can think about is Zack and my wolf, crying out for her mate.



## Chapter 18 - Zack

The first tendrils of sunlight are creeping through the open blinds as I stretch my arms, instinctively reaching for Tanya's warm, soft body. I'm eager to have her close to me, even when I'm half-asleep.

The feel of freezing cold sheets instantly wakes me, and I bolt upright, scanning the room.

I know instantly that she's gone. Not just from the room but the cabin, too. My wolf senses the distance from our bond and paces irrationally within.

*Not again. Has she seriously run off again? Why?*

So many thoughts run through my mind, but one overtakes them all. How did she leave? We're in the middle of nowhere.

Without bothering to dress, I race through the cabin to look out the front windows. Just as I feared, my truck is gone. *Fuck.*

I stand there, dumbstruck for a moment. I can't understand why Tanya would change her mind to the point that she would steal my truck and leave me stranded on the mountain just to get away from me. It makes no sense. We could have traveled back today and talked about whatever's bothering her.

I reel from the shock and confusion assaulting our new bond. It's disorientating, and I can't shake the feeling that something really bad is happening.

I start looking for my phone through the bags and clothes we shed yesterday, noting that she hasn't even taken all her things. She must have been in a real rush to get out. I remember her saying she was getting a glass of water early in the morning. She must have slipped out then.

I find my phone on the counter, and next to it, a note.

*I'm sorry, Zack. For everything. —T x*

Sorry for leaving me, I guess. I know she feels the mating bond, too. How can she just walk away from that? How can her wolf let her? Mine is going crazy at being separated now. I just don't understand.

Right now, I need to get off this mountain. My truck has GPS, and I know Saf tracks it sometimes, so she knows where I am and when I'll be back when I'm out hunting. It works better than any phone signal out here.

It's early, but I call her anyway.

"Yeah?" she answers sleepily. I haven't even checked the time, but since the sun's up now, it must be after 6 a.m.

"Saf, I need you to check something for me," I say, trying to keep my voice neutral so I don't worry her. I also don't want to deal with too many questions. "I'm at the cabin, and my truck is gone. Can you track it?"

"Gone?" she exclaims, suddenly more awake. "How? Hang on."

She goes quiet for a minute, presumably checking her app. "It's not online. There's no signal since the lower mountain road. Is it stolen?"

"Sort of," I say noncommittally. "I'm going to go check the lower road. I'll call you back."

"Be careful, Zack. It's been snowing like crazy," she says, sounding concerned.

I smile. The last thing Saffy needs to worry about is me on the mountain, but I don't say that. Instead, I say, "Of course."

We hang up, and I bring up my home security to check the outside cameras. Tanya's truck is still there, and the main gate hasn't been opened. The feeling that something is very wrong starts to grow. Whatever the reason for her leaving, the roads are treacherous, the GPS is offline, and she hasn't made it back to town. I try her number, not surprised when it doesn't connect. She won't have a signal if she hasn't made it off the mountain yet.

I remember it was still dark when she said she was getting some water. If she left then, she should be in range now.

My wolf is riding me hard to find my mate. I don't know why she left, but we can talk about that later. Right now, I just need to know she's safe.

Stepping outside, glad I didn't waste time dressing, I shift into my wolf. I let him break free and race down the track away from the cabin. The snow has slowed, but it's obviously been heavy, as I can barely make out any tracks at all. At the junction, it appears a vehicle went both up and down. Did she double back on herself, or is someone else out here?

I look out over the mountainside through a break in the trees, feeling completely overwhelmed. If I can't figure out which way she went, I might end up searching all over the mountain for nothing. I sniff the air, check the tracks, and listen for any sign of a vehicle, but there's nothing. I need help.

Reluctantly, I turn back for the cabin. I shift and race in, grabbing my phone to check the security cameras at my place again. Still no sign of her. I know she wouldn't leave town without her truck and all her possessions, so



she'd have to be heading back there. I'm beginning to doubt she's made it off the mountain, and she should have by now. Something must have happened.

I pick up the phone, calling Diego, who answers almost immediately. I don't even let him speak before I launch into the situation. "I don't have time to explain, but I need you to get some men and start heading to my mountain place. If one group can take the lower valley road and the other, the ridge, that would be best. I need to find my truck."

"Your truck?" Diego asks. "What the hell is going on, Zack? Are you in trouble?"

I shake my head, pacing the length of the room. "Not me—Tanya. I don't know what happened, but she took off in my truck. I didn't even know she was gone, and the GPS is off. It's been at least two, maybe three hours. I have to find her, Diego. I have to."

I know I'm rambling, and I'd be surprised if Diego can even follow what I'm saying. "Whoa, calm down, Zack," he says. "We'll find her, and then you can tell me what the hell's going on. Are you sure you didn't just piss her off, and she'll be back before I drag everyone up there?"

"She's my mate, okay? She left a note saying she's sorry, but the GPS is off, and her truck is still at mine with all her things in it. I ca—" I say, getting increasingly frustrated.

Diego must sense my tone. "Okay, okay. Your mate? As in mated? You can explain all this later, but I'll get the guys up there."

I pause for a moment to catch my breath. "Do you think they'll come? For me?"

"Of course, they damn well will. And for her. I'll call Mateo—he's her alpha, after all. If she's in trouble, he'll want to help, too," Diego says, his steely voice never wavering.

"Thank you, Diego." I say, meaning every word. "I'll head down the lower road. It was snowing pretty hard last night, and of the two tracks, I think the lower one might have seemed the safer bet. She doesn't know any of these roads very well, though."

"We'll meet on the road. Don't worry, Zack. She's probably just lost, okay?"

I hang up, unable to find the words to express that I know something has happened. My wolf knows it, too. I'd never really understood the mating bond fully. I'd heard of it and listened to the stories, but I couldn't have

understood the depth of the connection until now.

I think that's the hardest part of all this. If Tanya feels the same connection, I don't understand how she could have run away this morning. I don't think I could have physically left her. The bond burns with her absence, even now.

Deep down, I know there's more going on. But right now, the only thing that matters is finding her.

I dress quickly, pulling on my mountain gear and grabbing a bag full of supplies. The conditions outside have improved but are still harsh. I know I'd be quicker in wolf form, but I need to be able to coordinate with the rescue.

I text Saffy, briefly explaining the situation and asking her to head back to our house and wait there in case Tanya shows up. I tell her I'm switching to the satellite phone I keep up here for emergencies. I forward those details to Diego, too.

I take the charged phone from its cradle and head out, starting the descent back down the mountain. I pause at the junction, where I see tracks heading upward. The snow has covered most of them, but they're still there. I waver for a moment, second-guessing myself, but continue to follow the road into the valley.

The snow makes progress slower than I'd like, and I've been trekking for about an hour when I finally hear something in the distance. I speed up, praying it's Tanya. I hear an alert from the satellite phone and see a message from Saffy saying she's back home and Tanya's truck is still there. Pushing on, I round the steep bend and see two vehicles in the distance. I instantly recognize one as Diego's. They've parked across the road, effectively blocking it. I know they've found something and break into a run, practically sliding down the hill toward them.

"What is it?" I demand, rushing to the scene.

Diego steps out into the road to stop me. "We're not sure yet—we literally just pulled up. It looks like a vehicle skidded here, but we're not sure about anything right now."

I look beyond him to where, despite the fresh snowfall, deep tracks remain on the road. A couple of trees to the side look as though they've been hit by something heavy enough to smash clean through the ancient timber. "Oh my god," I say.

I try to push past Diego, but he holds me steady. "Mason's already on his way down. No need for us to shift just yet. Let's wait for him to see if it's anything."

I know he's right. It would take a human too long to set up ropes and scale the perilous drop. A wolf can do it faster and safer, but there's no point in us shifting if it's not her.

Painfully long minutes pass, and I try to ignore the looks of the other men gathered. I nod once at Mateo, who looks equally tense as we wait to find out if this is indeed a crash site. I'm grateful these men have come out to help in the search, but I still feel their eyes on me. I've been avoiding town for weeks now for this very reason. In the eyes of both packs, question marks have hung over my character, and now, all eyes are trained on me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mateo walking toward Diego and me. He's almost in front of us and about to speak when we all hear Mason scrambling back up the ridge. He shifts as he reaches the road, and someone throws him a blanket, followed by his clothes. He's panting and struggling to talk as he dresses quickly.

"It's her," he says. "The whole truck is smashed to bits."

My blood runs cold. "Tanya?" My voice comes out shakier than I've ever heard it before, and I brace myself for his reply.

Mason shakes his head. "No sign of her. Her scent is strong in what's left of the truck's cabin, but it's faded quickly because of the snow. Tracks indicate she moved down the hill toward the river."

"So she's able to move," Diego says reassuringly.

Mason nods but then looks back at me. "She's moving, but there's quite a lot of blood. It looks like she rested next to a tree and perhaps treated her injuries because that's where most of the blood is located."

"We need to get down there," I say, preparing to shift.

"Agreed," Diego says. "Half of us will go down, and the other half will take the trucks back down and follow the trail toward the old Johnson place where the river passes. She might have made it that far. I bet she'd look for shelter there."

I don't even wait for Diego to finish speaking before I shift and begin my descent. Whatever led Tanya out here, none of it matters right now. My wolf's only mission is to find his mate.



## Chapter 19 - Tanya

*I've got to keep going. I've got to keep going.*

I repeat the words to myself over and over, muttering them to myself as my teeth chatter from the cold. I don't think I've ever felt such crushing disappointment than when I realized the road I'd been hoping to find was, in fact, a wide stream. Looking back up the embankment, I know there's no way I can climb it with my injuries. My only hope is to follow the stream and try to find a house or road further up.

At least the ground is flatter here and slightly easier to maneuver using the stick as leverage for my leg. Shifters have a higher pain threshold, but I know my injury is bad. I can feel the broken bone twisting beneath my skin with each step, and the sensation makes my stomach roil.

I stop for a moment, leaning against a tree trunk so I can readjust the scarf tied around my leg. Perhaps if I can make it tighter, it will stop the bone from moving. I yank hard on the ends of the scarf. The pain burns, and I see stars for a moment, the whole world shifting around me as I try to stay conscious.

It's no use. Blood continues to seep from the wound, and if anything, I think I've made it worse. I'm no medic, and I'm completely unequipped to deal with this. The only thing I can think of is to try shifting again. Maybe if I can just cope with the pain, my body will complete the shift and speed up the healing. From what I can tell, the wound has too much debris and glass in it to allow me to shift. I consider trying to wash some out, but I don't think the water from the stream would be clean enough. The last thing I need is an infection.

Still propped up against the tree, I try to shift again, this time fighting to push through the pain. I scream, struggling to continue the shift. Suddenly, I'm falling, and the last thing I remember is feeling wet snow on my face before everything goes black.

I don't know how long I'm out for, but when I come to, I'm lying on my side, my face frozen as snow falls on me. My legs are practically covered in fresh powder, and it's turning red with my blood.

I know I can't stay here. I've got to get up, got to keep going. I pull my phone from my pocket. Still no signal.

I hoist myself back up, using the fallen stick to help me stumble over the uneven ground. As far as I can tell, the forest stretches on forever. I can't see any sign of civilization anywhere, and I'm not sure how much longer I can continue. The blood rushes in my ears, and I'm starting to panic. I know it takes a lot for a shifter to die from the elements, but we're not completely invincible. How long can I last out here if I'm not found and don't heal?

My thoughts turn to Zack. I've been gone for hours now. He'll obviously know I've taken his truck. He probably thinks I changed my mind and ran out on him. He's probably angry. He should be.

What will he think when I don't make it back to town with his truck or pick my things up? Surely, he'll come looking for me at some point. But do I even want him to find me if I can't fix this? Do I even deserve to be found? There are only a few more hours before the final transfer will be complete. I can't stop it if I don't get out of here.

With renewed determination, I begin to move faster. I think I can make out a roof or some kind of structure through the trees ahead. I'm so busy trying to determine what it is that I lose my footing and scream in pain as the loose rocks give way beneath my feet. I instinctively put my hands out to break my fall, but my head hits something hard, and everything fades to black again.

My last thought is of Zack as I fight and fail to stay conscious, my body completely broken.

*Tanya.*

*Tanya.*

*Tanya.*

Something is touching my hair and face, though my skin is so numb, I almost can't feel it. There's a sound—someone saying my name. They sound more and more urgent, and then I feel someone shaking me.

"Tanya, wake up. Please wake up." A man's voice becomes more distinct now, and I try to open my eyes. They feel frozen shut.

Recognizing the voice, my wolf seems to drag me to the point of consciousness by sheer willpower alone. I open one eye, dazed and nauseous. My eye tries to focus.

"Thank god," the man says. "Tanya, can you hear me?"

I focus on his words and his face, my one open eye, fighting to see clearly.

"Z-Zack?" I say, my voice barely a whisper.

"She's here!" I hear him yell, to whom I'm not sure, but I hear a commotion in the distance. "I need help! We need a stretcher."

He's yelling instructions, and I hear the sound of others approaching, but the pain is making it difficult to focus.

"Zack?" I say again, gripping his jacket tightly with my fingers.

"You're going to be okay," he replies, cupping my face.

"What time is it?" I ask, needing to know.

I see confusion cross his handsome face. "I think it's just after eleven. Why?"

"No!" I cry out, suddenly fighting to stand. My leg gives way, and the nausea rises again. I scream and fall back, Zack catching me in his arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I sob as the pain becomes too much, as I fight the nausea before passing out. The last thing I remember is the confusion and worry on Zack's face.

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"She's pretty out of it," a man's voice says quietly, almost too quietly. "But we've got her, man. She'll be okay."

I hear the shuffling of footsteps, doors opening and closing, a chair being moved. I'm awake, not out of it, but I'm taking time to figure out what to do. The pain has subsided, but I don't dare try to move my leg just yet. I don't know if it's been fixed or if I'm just on some really good painkillers.

I know I'm in a bed, and I've never been so grateful for a warm blanket. I thought I was going to die out there. My heart clenches as I remember it was Zack who saved me. I try to fight the tears threatening to escape my eyes as I consider the depth of my betrayal.

The transfer was complete before he even found me. I have no idea if it's already been discovered. Presumably, the security team or hacker they were using will be monitoring the accounts. They're probably tracing it right now, if they haven't already.

It's over.

I can feel Zack's presence in the room. Or rather, my wolf can. I was so driven to stop the transfer this morning that I could ignore the burn and

pull of our bond. I wanted to save him more than I wanted to stay with him. But now, in the calm of this room, the gentle beep of some sort of machine in the background, all I can think about is the depth of our bond.

My desire to be with my mate feels like an anchor I can't bear to pull away from. I know that as soon as I open my eyes, reality will come pouring in, and I'll be unable to stop what happens next.

I hear a phone ring. "Hey," Zack answers. "She still hasn't woken up."

There's silence as he listens to what's being said on the other end of the line. My wolf becomes increasingly distressed, as if she can pick up on his emotions. Whatever he's hearing, he doesn't like it.

"Can you at least tell me what it's about?" he asks. "I can't leave Tanya right now. Tell Mateo I'll be there as soon as I can."

As soon as he mentions Mateo, I know what it's about. They must have traced the transfer and told him to come in. He'll probably be arrested or challenged as soon as he does. How will Diego be able to stand with him at that point?

As he hangs up, I finally test moving my leg. I can't flex it, but it doesn't hurt as much as before. My hands are by my sides, and I slowly reach with my fingers to touch the side of my thigh. I can feel some kind of dressing, but no sharp bone.

I open my eyes a fraction to see Zack standing with his back to me, sending a message on his phone. His body looks wrecked with tension, and he runs an exasperated hand through his hair.

I know what I have to do.

A tear falls from my eye as he turns back to me. His face transforms when he sees that I'm awake, and he rushes to my side.

"Thank god," he says, taking my hand. "How are you feeling? I-I just..." He trails off, clearly not knowing what to say.

My tears begin to fall freely as I grip his hand. How do I find the words to explain my betrayal? I can't believe how everything was when I arrived in town. I thought I was the avenging victim, but in reality, I became the worst kind of perpetrator.

I'm about to break his heart. And in the process, destroy my own.

"I'm so sorry, Zack. I'm so sorry." I sob. "And I'm sorry about your truck."

I start to ramble, but he stops me, wiping away my tears. "I don't care



about the damn truck, Tanya. I'm just glad you're okay. If we hadn't found you..."

"I didn't deserve to be found," I weep.

"What are you talking about? Because you left?" Zack asks, gently cupping my face. "I get it, okay? You don't want to be with me. Why would you, with all this going on? I think there's even more happening now, so you probably shouldn't be with me, anyway. You deserve so much better."

With that, I completely break down. I try to sit up and move away from him, but he holds me close as I cry. I can feel the confusion coming off him in waves, our mating bond only growing stronger despite our words. I brace myself for what is to come and try to slow my tears so I can speak properly.

"You have to get Diego," I say, and Zack looks at me questioningly. "And Mateo. Both packs. I have to speak to both packs."

"Why?" he asks.

"I'll tell you everything when they get here, Zack," I say, more tears threatening to fall. "I think I'm only going to be able to explain everything once, so I want everyone who needs to hear it to be here."

Just then, a doctor and nurse enter the room. They look between us and realize they're interrupting something.

Zack nods at them to come in. "It's okay," he says to them. "I've got to make a call."

Before he steps out of the room, he leans down and kisses my cheek. "Whatever's going on, I'm with you all the way," he whispers to me.

Before I can reply, he's heading out of the room, presumably to call Diego and Mateo. I want to call after him, to tell him over and over again that I'm sorry.

But I know there's no point. Once I make my confession, even the bond we now share won't stop him from hating me.

## Chapter 20 - Zack

I lean against the clinic wall, waiting for Dr. Soren and his nurse to finish checking on Tanya. I know they've cleaned out her nasty wound and given her some steroids specially designed to aid shifter healing. With her advanced DNA able to work better now, Tanya's wound should already be healing.

Honestly, I can't believe she made it down that hill with the bone almost coming through her leg. She's unusual in that she's a shifter who hasn't grown up with much access to nature, the wilderness, or even the unique ways of shifter medicine. She could have died out there, and just the thought of losing her makes my wolf grow agitated again.

*But have I lost her, anyway?*

She was leaving me. This whole rescue mission has served as a distraction from the central issue. She was so desperate to get away from me that she stole my truck in the middle of the night and crashed it, trying to get off the mountain.

But one thing I know for sure is when she regained consciousness and I looked into her eyes, the bond felt as real as ever. My wolf felt it, and I could feel her emotions pouring into me. I know it's the mating bond because I've never felt anything like it before.

And the strongest emotion I could feel from her was...shame. Which makes no sense at all. Shame for leaving me? We could have just talked about it.

Then she asked me to summon Diego and Mateo, and now I don't know what to think. I guess it makes sense she'd want to see Mateo—he's her alpha. If something important is going on, she'd want her alpha to advocate for her. But I don't understand why she thinks she needs that support.

I'm not going to deny her anything, though, so I make the calls.

After Diego's call earlier, I already suspected there was a new development with my current problems. Therefore, it's no surprise when I discover the two alphas were on their way to a meeting and are rerouting to meet me at the hospital. They sound as perplexed as I am when I tell them Tanya wants to discuss something with them.

As I wait for them, I pace the corridor and reply to a text from Saffy.

She's going to stay with her friend for the rest of the weekend while I sort things out with Tanya. My sister clearly idolizes Tanya and is worried sick about her after the accident. I try to reassure her, but in the back of my mind, I'm reminded of my conversation with Tanya when I learned how badly being banished affected her. If that happens to me, too, I'll have to consider if it's best to leave Saffy with the pack. Where she belongs.

That thought still weighs heavily on me as I see Diego and Mateo enter the clinic. They greet the receptionist and then push through the double doors leading into the corridor. I know immediately that something is very, very wrong when neither of them makes eye contact with me. Mateo's face is hardened, set in a firm countenance. But it's Diego's expression that confirms what I already know: something has happened, and I'm in the firing line.

I push down the frustration and sadness threatening to overwhelm me as I feel my entire life slipping through my fingers. I simply nod at them in greeting.

"You know what this is about?" Diego asks, and I shake my head.

"You do something to her, Zack? Something that made her take off in the middle of the night and crash that truck? Hmm?" Mateo snaps, glaring at me. "Seems strange she'd run out like that with everything else going on with you."

I immediately bristle, not believing the words I'm hearing. Mateo's complete change in demeanor toward me confirms my suspicions that I'm being blamed for something again. But I won't be accused of hurting Tanya, even from an alpha.

I step toward Mateo, but Diego holds me back.

"Shut the fuck up, Mateo," Diego snaps. "Whatever happens next, the one thing I know above all else is that Zack would never hurt that girl. Okay?"

Mateo's eyes burn with rage, but he shrugs it off. He starts pacing the corridor, unable to even look at me.

I don't bother asking Diego what's happened since I saw them on the mountain earlier today. Part of me doesn't want to know.

After a few minutes of painful silence, Tanya's door opens, and the doctor steps out with the nurse. They acknowledge us, but sensing the tension in the corridor, they don't stick around. I don't even wait for Diego and Mateo; I simply knock on Tanya's door and enter.

She's sitting up now, propped up on some pillows. "You look a bit better," I say, but I don't miss how her eyes are still glazed with tears. I instinctively reach out to touch her hand. "Hey, whatever it is, it's going to be okay."

I feel Diego and Mateo's presence behind me and turn slightly so I'm standing beside Tanya. I have no idea what she's about to say or if she even still wants me, but my wolf won't allow me to do anything other than stand by her side. For as long as she'll let me.

"How are you feeling now?" Mateo asks her solemnly. "You gave us quite a scare out there."

Tanya nods, fighting the emotions I can feel coursing through her. "I can't thank you all enough. I honestly thought I was done for out there."

The two alphas nod, then wait expectantly as she gathers her thoughts. It's Diego who speaks up. "How can we help, Tanya? I hear you wanted to talk about something?"

Tanya's tears begin to fall before she even gets her first words out, but she fights through it, keeping her voice steady. "I am so sorry. I'm so sorry, Zack. But you all deserve to hear the truth."

There's a long pause before she begins. "It's me. I'm the one emptying the pack accounts. Not Zack; he knows nothing about it. I came here to take revenge on Zack and his family for destroying mine..."

We fall utterly silent as she tells us about growing up with her parents' stories about how my parents set hers up and how they were banished. How she came up with a plan for revenge and thought I'd profited from my parents' theft. How she wanted me and Saffy to suffer as she had. And finally, how she came to realize the truth of my relationship with my parents and that none of her suffering was my and my sister's fault.

We all stand there, completely stunned, as she turns to me. "I took the truck so I could get back to my truck, retrieve my laptop, and stop the transfer this morning. But I didn't make it in time."

So, there had been another transfer, which explains Mateo and Diego's change in attitude toward me today.

Diego runs his hand through his hair and releases a deep breath. "I just don't understand. Or rather, I don't understand how." His voice is full of confusion. "Mateo's guy said he'd never seen hacking like it, like top-level stuff. They couldn't even keep up. Now, I know you teach cybersecurity stuff,

but this seems a bit out of your reach. Is someone else involved?"

Tanya chuckles darkly. "I'm less of a college teacher and more the FBI's top black-hat hacker. I mean, I teach *them*. I love my students, but it's, um, not my real day job."

"Sweet Jesus," Mateo says. "Do you have proof about Zack's parents? I know you want to believe in your parents' innocence, but in my experience, banishments don't happen unless the pack is sure."

"I have ironclad proof," she says. "I'll send you the file."

I stare at her, trying to process everything I've heard as the conversation continues around me.

"Why didn't you just approach the pack with the proof?" Mateo asks.

"Because simply exonerating them doesn't bring back all the years they lost. It won't make my once proud father sober again or make my mom any less bitter over what's happened. The damage is done. I wanted revenge. But now, I understand that I was wrong. I'm more sorry than you could ever imagine."

Diego steps toward the bed. "Knowing Zack's parents and everything he went through, I don't even need to see the proof that you're telling the truth about your parents' innocence. They were just that sort." He turns to face me. "And nothing like Zack or Saffy. Forgive me for ever doubting you, Zack. The transfer today seemed to confirm everything, and I'm ashamed to say that for a moment, I believed it."

"Accept my apologies, too, Zack," Mateo says from across the room. "I should have listened to my gut and never doubted you. I should have listened to Diego; he knew his man. I'll get the word out immediately to let everyone know."

I nod in thanks to them, but then something occurs to me. "What about Tanya?"

Mateo steps closer. "Well, I can say this. I've recently learned some valuable lessons about forgiveness." He nods at Diego in emphasis, then looks back at Tanya. "What you do next, Tanya, is up to you. But you won't be banished a second time, and your parents will be officially pardoned. I'll reach out to them personally and see if we can help put things right. I know that's a stretch, but we'll try. I'm not condoning what you did here, and I think you've got a lot to think about. But we'll talk about it later, okay?"

Tanya looks at her alpha, wide-eyed. "I thought you'd tell me to go,"

she says, her body shaking.

"I have no appetite to punish your family further," Mateo says. "I'll wait outside, Diego."

As Mateo leaves, I look at Diego, wondering what his take on the situation will be. He sighs, seemingly looking for the right words.

"I'm not going to lie, Tanya. I'm pissed as hell. Zack's been through enough with his parents to be put through all this, too. It's not right. But it sounds like you already know that. Mateo's your alpha, and he's spoken. Where you're concerned, I'll defer to Zack. I can see your remorse, and I know it takes a lot to admit when you're wrong. Hell, I'm probably no one to judge. Zack knows better than almost anyone how much I struggled with forgiveness, but in the end, it's been the making of me and my pack."

With that, he claps me on the shoulder and heads out, too. I hear the two alphas chat in the corridor for a moment, and then there's silence.

I stand there, trying to process everything I've heard. Then a thought occurs to me, and I can't help the mirthless chuckle that erupts from nowhere.

Tanya looks at me, shocked.

"Sorry," I laugh. "It just occurred to me how typical it is of my parents to manage to shit on me from even beyond the grave."

Tanya looks so achingly small and broken in the bed, my laughter dies as I look at her. "How could you do it to Saffy?" I ask. "That's the bit I don't understand."

"I, um, set up an account for her. Offshore. It has over six million dollars in it. And I knew she'd have you, too. But I am so sorry. She's a big part of the reason I've confessed. I couldn't do it. To her or you. I'm so sorry." She sobs.

I catch on to something she said. "Six million dollars?" I ask incredulously. "Where from? There was nowhere near that much in the pack accounts."

"Oh no, not from the packs," Tanya corrects. "Mainly from rogue regimes, the Syrian government, some gun runners, and profits from a corporate oil spill. All over, really."

I didn't think it was possible to be even more shocked. "You weren't kidding about being a super-spy hacker, were you? Who are you really?"

"I'm an idiot," she whispers. "I didn't expect to fall in love with you. I didn't expect my wolf to bond with you. And I definitely didn't expect to

discover that you and Saffy were as much victims in all this as I was. I know you'll never forgive me. You shouldn't. But I want you to know that I love you. And I'm sorry."

I'm fighting tears of my own as I watch hers fall. "Was it real? With us?" I choke out.

She nods, crying heavily now. "Y-yes. All of it. I tried to stay away, but I couldn't. I wanted you."

"And now?" I ask, needing to hear the words.

"I know it's over and you must hate me, but I'll always love you, Zack. This will always be the biggest mistake of my life."

"I love you, too," I say, the words tumbling from my lips before I cross to her bedside and pull her against my chest. I don't want to hurt her, but I need to feel her close to me.

"How can you ever forgive me?" she asks, gripping my shirt.

"I already have, Tanya. We are both victims of my parents. Yours weren't the only people my parents hurt and destroyed along the way, and I'm so sorry you've suffered. The greatest revenge I can think of is being together and loving each other." I say honestly.

I know why she did what she did, and her actions today have proven her love for me in ways I don't even think she realizes. She nearly died trying to stop the transfer today, and she just confessed everything to both alphas, knowing the consequences could have been dire for her. Now that I know what my parents did to her family, I can understand her motivation for coming here.

"What about Saffy? What about the packs?" she asks.

"We'll stand together. We'll tell your story. Besides, it's *our* story now." I lean down and gently capture her lips with mine. My wolf confirms what I already know.

I'm never letting her go.

## Chapter 21 - Tanya

I'm so grateful for the warm sun on my face as I stack the last of the boxes that are ready to be taken away. It's been a long winter, my first in the mountains since I was a child. I'm still wary of the roads after the accident, so I'm quite glad to see the snow melting even at the cabin now.

Not that there haven't been some advantages to hunkering down with Zack over winter. Thoughts of long, cold evenings under the covers with him, exploring each other's bodies, flit through my mind, distracting me. My hand slips, sending two boxes crashing to the floor. I bend down, laughing to myself as I pick them up.

"What are you smirking about? Or do I really want to know?" Quinn, Diego's mate, asks me.

I blush furiously and lose my grip on the boxes again. Laughing, we pick them up. "I couldn't possibly say," I mutter, trying to get my fiery cheeks under control as more people arrive to help.

Quinn snorts knowingly. "I bet you're looking forward to seeing Zack out there. It's all he and Diego have been talking about for weeks now."

I look to the tournament ground, where a few teams are already warming up for the Spring Games. I nod to Quinn. The truth is, I can't wait to see Zack out there participating in the games he loves with his pack. It's such a contrast to where we were during the last games.

It took some time for Zack to fully let go of how some of the pack treated him. He was hurt that so many hadn't even reached out during the time he isolated himself, even more so by the whispers when he did venture out. But gradually, those bonds returned, and men found the courage to admit their mistakes and apologize to his face. After I'd laid out my plan enough times, everyone could see the evidence against Zack had looked pretty damning for a while. Even he admitted he would have doubted many in the face of such evidence. It's been a process, but I'm so relieved Zack found a way back to the friends that mean so much to him.

Honestly, it's a dream come true that I'm here to witness it. It's a miracle these people forgave me, but even more of a miracle that Zack and Saffy did.

More college students arrive with Gina and Lucca, carrying the final



bakery items for the bake sale. I offered to man the booth during the tournament, mainly to give myself something to do. And if I'm honest, it feels a bit like coming full circle, seeing as this is where I first met Zack. I must be feeling sentimental, but I find myself remembering that day and marveling at how far we've come.

The students are all from the food tech department and rightly proud of their creations, insisting I try a bit of everything so I know what they taste like before the sale begins.

"I'm going to be stuffed!" I protest, but I still can't help myself as I try one delicious treat after another.

I can already see that some of these students are going to do great things in the area. The college is setting up a restaurant in town to showcase all the upcoming talent, and I couldn't be happier for them. It's hard to believe that these two packs were at war until only a couple of years ago. My own story of revenge and redemption seems to fit right in here.

While the students finish dressing the stand in the college colors, I step away for a moment and fish out my phone. I've been waiting all morning for a message from my mom confirming that she's picked up my dad for his day-long release from rehab. These outings are part of his reintegration into society, and they're becoming more frequent now that he's doing so much better. My mom was so excited about their plans today.

I turn on the screen and immediately see a photo of them with beaming smiles at Fisherman's Wharf. My eyes get a little misty as I take in their happy faces. Mateo insisted on paying for my dad's rehab. I told him it wasn't necessary, as I had plenty of money set aside, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. It was never the money that stopped my dad from entering rehab. It was the motivation to quit.

Once Mateo and the pack reached out to them and exonerated them, my parents gradually reconsidered their path. It hasn't been easy, and there's still a long way to go. But I feel more hopeful than ever for their future. Mateo and Billie have offered the cottage I once lived in as a place for my parents to stay if and when they're ready to visit Silverstar. It's there for as long as they want it.

I think my dad needs to become stronger in his recovery first, but everyone in the pack wants him and my mom to come home. I hope it happens eventually.

After replying to my mom's picture with a heart emoji, I return to the stall and find it's almost ready for our first customers. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Emma, my old friend from school, heading my way. While I'm settled here and comfortable with most wolves now, Emma's initial hostility when I returned still stings a little. She's not the only one. I still feel more comfortable within Diego's pack, but that's starting to get better now. Considering my own actions, I try to bury those feelings and greet her with a smile, which she returns warily.

She's with a man who looks familiar, but I'm not sure I've ever met him. Behind them is an adorable little girl who runs straight up to the rows of frosted buns, her eyes wide.

"Don't touch, Annie!" the man calls out, and she dances back to him.

"Hey, Tanya," Emma greets. "Do you remember my brother Cole? Cole, this is Tanya, who I was telling you about."

I'd completely forgotten that Emma had a much older brother, but looking at them, I can see the similarities. "Sorry, no. But it's lovely to meet you, Cole. Is this your daughter?"

The man smiles down at his little girl. "Yes, this is Annie. We'd better get her one of these cakes before she helps herself."

I laugh as we watch Annie choose a cake, and I put it in a paper bag for her with some napkins.

"Emma tells me you're the cybersecurity expert at the college?" he asks.

"Yes, that's right," I reply.

"I've just moved back to the area. We've set up over on Brites Mountain, the new microchip plant."

Now I know why I recognize him. I've seen all the press releases about the new plant, and his face has been all over them. He's been in California for years, launching tech start-ups. It's a big deal for the local economy that he's brought the plant here. My students, in particular, have been very interested. There aren't many tech opportunities around here at the moment.

"Oh, right, it's lovely to meet you," I say. "I've heard good things."

"I've heard good things about your work, too," he says, and I nod. My work with the FBI is widely known now, as is my international profile. "I'm hoping to run an internship program. Obviously, your students would be an

excellent fit."

I smile. This is amazing news for my students. I'm about to reply when I see Saffy approaching us. Annie runs up to her, showing her the bun she's just taken a giant bite out of.

"Ooh, those are my favorites!" Saffy exclaims. "Are there any left?"

Annie jumps up and down and points excitedly to the mountain of blue-frosted cakes.

"Thank goodness," Saffy laughs.

"Speaking of students, this is Saffy," I say with pride. "She's definitely one to watch." I mean every word as Saffy's skills only continue to impress me. "Saf, this is Cole. He's just moved back to the area to open the plant on Brites Mountain."

Saffy's eyes widen as she realizes who I'm talking about, and she smiles at Cole in greeting. Emma occupies me for a moment, buying some more cakes and baked items, but I keep glancing over at Saffy and Cole. I don't miss the slight blush on Saffy's cheeks and the intense way Cole is looking at her. Annie offers Saffy a little piece of her cake that she's broken off, and Saffy accepts it graciously. She's such a natural with kids, and it's lovely to see.

Cole apparently agrees as he can't seem to take his eyes off her.

*It's a good thing Zack's not here*, I think with a chuckle. Saffy is stunning, and nineteen now. It's only a matter of time before she catches someone's eye.

Once Emma has her purchases, she takes Annie's hand, and Cole turns back to me and Saffy. "It's a pleasure to meet you both," he says, more to Saffy than me. "Tanya, I'll contact the college so we can sit down to discuss the opportunity?"

"That sounds perfect, Cole," I reply. "Enjoy the day."

Saffy and I wave goodbye to Annie, who continues to run rings around Emma and Cole.

"Well, he seems...nice," I say to Saffy, raising an eyebrow.

She's still blushing as she turns to me. "I wonder where Annie's mom is?" she asks, making me chuckle.

"Mmm, I wonder," I reply innocently. Saffy's clearly nursing a crush on Cole, though I'm sure he must have a wife. I don't want to crush her dreams. Besides, the opportunity of the internship is more than exciting

enough.

I'm about to mention the internship to Saffy when the loudspeakers announce that the first of the games are about to start. A flurry of customers approach our booth, racing to get their snacks, and Saffy and I are soon too busy to talk.

When the rush finally dies down, we grab hot drinks and wander to the stadium to see the games already underway. They're a mix of endurance and strength events. I can't take my eyes off Zack throughout. He's been training hard throughout the winter, and it shows. He looks incredible on the pitch, and his team works effortlessly together under his leadership. Tears spring to my eyes to see him at the heart of his pack, where he belongs.

The crowd goes wild, chanting his name as his team edges ahead of Mason's team in points. With only one more win needed to claim victory in this round, Zack and Mason go head to head in the final heat of a relay.

Zack pushes forward in a remarkable display of strength and power that almost takes my breath away. He storms across the finish line, and the crowd goes wild. Diego runs onto the pitch and, along with the whole team, lifts Zack in the air to celebrate. Saffy cheers beside me, and then we embrace.

Zack's eyes seem to home in on mine as the team puts him back down. Instead of waiting on the pitch, he jogs over to me, climbing over the barrier and making his way through the crowd. I grin as he approaches, thinking he's going to kiss me. Instead, he pauses directly in front of me.

Saffy steps away, smiling knowingly as Zack gets down on one knee. My heart thunders in my chest as the crowd around us starts to clap and whistle.

Zack's out of breath, but he doesn't let that stop him. "I was going to do this tonight, but I saw you standing here, and I couldn't wait a moment longer. Tanya, you're already my mate. Now would you be my wife?"

My tears are already falling as I collapse into his arms. "Yes, yes, yes. Of course I will."

I distantly hear whoops and cheers around us, but all I can focus on is the man in my arms.

Hours later, happy and exhausted, we leave Saffy with some friends and head home. Zack insists on carrying me over the threshold of the house, making me laugh.

"I think we're supposed to do that after the wedding," I point out.

"I'm just practicing," he says. "I want everything to be perfect."

"I'm so happy," I gush, turning in his arms to kiss him.

"Me too," he says against my lips. "Do you know what would make me even happier? A Christmas wedding. What do you think?"

I tense in his arms. "Uh, well..."

"Is something wrong?" he asks, searching my face for answers.

I laugh, burying my face against his chest as I try to find the words. "No, nothing's wrong. Though it might be easier to show you."

I reach into my bag and pull out the little brown envelope the clinic gave me this morning. I hand it to him, and he pulls out the ultrasound picture of our baby.

"We're having a baby at Christmas, so we might be a bit too busy for a wedding then," I say.

A range of emotions flickers across Zack's face all at once: shock, confusion, trepidation, and joy.

"I can't believe it!" he finally shouts. "This is the best news ever." He kisses me deeply, tears of happiness in his eyes. "I love you so much, Tanya."

"I love you, too, Zack. You are so much more than I ever imagined," I say, my voice choking with emotion as we stand there looking at the picture, all our love reflected in that one little image.

## Epilogue - Tanya

"Stunning," my mom whispers to me as she scoops up the last tendrils of my hair.

With a final flourish of the curling wand, she releases the soft waves now framing my face. The finishing touches complete, we stand and check my reflection in the mirror. The soft, sweeping eyeshadow and simple pink palette make my eyes pop. Lots of concealer masks my recent lack of sleep, and a hint of blush makes me feel as beautiful as a princess.

We laugh as I twirl in my dress, the soft tulle dancing around me. I check my hair again in wonder. "How did I not know you used to be a hairdresser?" I ask my mom, taking her hand. "You're incredible. Thank you."

My mom snuffles slightly, reaching for a tissue she's keeping up her sleeve. "I guess I haven't lost my touch," she laughs, taming one of my curls affectionately.

"I'm so glad you're here, Mom," I say, getting emotional, too. She gently pulls me into her arms, trying not to smudge my makeup.

"We can't stand here crying, love," she says. "I haven't worn makeup in years; I can't ruin it now. And you certainly can't today." Despite her words, I think she's saying it more for her benefit than mine.

We hear a commotion downstairs and turn to listen. "I'll go see what that's about," she says. "You stay here, and don't fiddle with your hair. We need to get pictures first!"

"Okay, okay," I laugh as she dashes out.

I can hear more voices, and I think I can just make out Zack giving out instructions. He's taken wedding planning very seriously, wanting everything to be perfect. I've told him a thousand times that it's already perfect, but he insisted on installing a new pergola outside for today.

The structure is beautiful, sourced with timber from my parents' old forestry operation. My dad went out and helped cut it down himself. Now it's a piece of art, built to last forever. I find myself getting emotional again as I think of our children running around the structure for generations to come.

*Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.*

I mutter the words to myself as I blink furiously and dab the corners

of my eyes with a spare tissue.

I steal a glance out the bedroom window that overlooks the backyard. Diego came around with a few men last night and helped put the marquee up while Gina, Saffy, and I hung more lighting. Saffy thinks we can never have enough, and today, I'm inclined to agree. I was just glad to spend some proper time with Saffy. She's been so busy recently, finishing her final college projects and juggling the internship with Cole's company. Zack and I are so proud of her. I may be a black-hat hacker, but she's going to be more than capable of building systems that keep people like me out.

I smile at the thought. We're like two sides of the same coin.

The door opens again, and I turn to see my mom and Saffy enter, holding my son Dylan. I can't stop the rush of emotion as I take in his adorable outfit of soft dark trousers and a cardigan. He looks so dapper. At only five months old, he's not going to remember any of this, but I'll still treasure every single moment.

"He looks so sweet," I gush, rushing over to take him from Saffy, who looks stunning in her navy blue full-length gown.

"There was nothing sweet about the diaper change I just witnessed Zack do," she says with a smirk. "You've got my nephew at his very best now."

I giggle and kiss the top of my son's head, his blond curls tickling my face as his chubby hands bury themselves in my hair.

"As it should be today," my mom says with a laugh, fussing over her grandson.

Dylan's arrival seems to have healed so many wounds. As my pregnancy progressed and my dad finally came out of rehab, I took Zack to the Bay to meet them. Mateo had already visited my parents a couple of times, including one with my dad in rehab, so I knew my parents' attitude toward the pack had shifted. Still, I wasn't sure how well Zack would be received by my parents in person.

Despite all my concerns, their first meeting went well. Zack talked about his and Saffy's experiences with his parents, and when he tried to apologize for their actions, my parents told him not to. They accepted that it wasn't his fault. It was something of a turning point for them, and when Dylan was born that Christmas, they spent their first time back on pack land. They stayed with us rather than on Mateo's land, but gradually, they met up

with old friends. Though emotional, bonds were slowly reformed. There was genuine remorse toward my parents and me, but I found that my parents didn't want to dwell on the past anymore, and I've been surprised at how quickly they've developed friendships within both packs. For all their desire for revenge, I think they just really wanted to come home.

Zack surprised my parents by breaking ground on a cabin just for them. He owns most of the forestry land in the area and chose a site that borders their old land. My mom was awestruck when she saw the forests again, and my dad says it felt like a proper homecoming. Zack wanted to give them some of the company back, but my dad declined because he's older now, and while still in recovery, his health isn't good. But Zack was so impressed with my father's forestry knowledge that he convinced him to help train some of the new apprentices. Between their renewed purpose and beautiful cabin, my parents feel part of the pack again.

In some ways, I think bridging a family with my parents has healed some of Zack and Saffy's wounds. My mom, in particular, has become very close with Saffy. They've spent hours together baking for the wedding, and I can see there's a true bond between them. As I juggle a wriggling Dylan in my arms and watch Zack prepare for our wedding with my dad at his side, I'm struck by just how much our fractured family has united.

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## Zack

Tanya's dad, Thomas, laughs as I step back outside in a fresh shirt. The old one was discarded, courtesy of my son's diaper explosion.

"That's a wedding story you won't forget," he laughs, handing me some of the folding chairs we're setting up for the guests. "Let's hope he got it all out of his system."

"Especially as I think Saf's just taken him up to Tanya," I say.

We both wince and then laugh again.

"That boy can do no wrong in her eyes, so I think we're good," he says.

"That's true," I reply just as Diego comes over, looking worried. "What's wrong?" I ask him.

"Your guests are arriving, and you're still putting out chairs!" he exclaims.

Thomas and I laugh again. "There was a diaper incident," he explains.

Diego winces, then looks over his shoulder at some of the guests who have arrived. "Come on, everyone. Let's get this show on the road."

With everyone's help, it only takes a few minutes to finish setting up. Mateo arrives with Billie and a whole stream of guests from their pack. He immediately starts manning the bar, handing out champagne. When the music begins, reality sets in. This is actually happening.

I'm not scared, though. Just excited.

There's not even a fraction of nerves or trepidation as I wait for Tanya to appear. If I had my way, I'd have married her months ago, but I understood that she wanted to wait and enjoy the festivities properly after giving birth. Now that the day is here, I'm glad we waited so I could see my little guy share our special day with us, too.

I watch Saffy walk down the aisle with Tanya's mom. Radiating happiness and confidence, she's no longer a little girl or an awkward teenager. As I watch my sister stroll confidently down the aisle in her beautiful gown, I'm forced to admit something I've long tried to deny: she is a grown, beautiful woman.

She greets me with an enthusiastic hug. I return it, surprised by my tears that seem to come from nowhere.

A hush falls over the crowd as the traditional bridal march starts. I turn to see Tanya, walking with Thomas and holding Dylan, coming down the aisle toward me.

She looks absolutely stunning in her dress, the lace and tulle skimming her body and highlighting her sexy curves. Her hair is loose, with soft curls cascading around her beautiful face. Her eyes sparkle as she smiles at me, Dylan wriggling in her arms and clearly enjoying the limelight as the guests coo over him.

It's not until she reaches me that I realize I'm holding my breath in anticipation and awe. As I take Dylan from her and hold him in one arm, Tanya takes my free hand. We stand there, smiling at each other.

Nothing has ever felt more perfect than this moment. This is us, together forever.

The ceremony is a blur, and I'm glad I arranged to have it filmed so I can watch it later. All I can focus on is Tanya and Dylan, everything else blurring into the background.

The wedding party lasts all afternoon, and we dance in the warm sunshine of early spring. At one point, the guests form a guard of honor to lead us onto the dance floor for our first dance as husband and wife. I take Tanya in my arms, and we sway together, lost in each other's eyes. Dylan starts to fuss in his grandparents' arms, so we dance over to him and scoop him up. We hold him close, swaying to the music as the crowd cheers. There are smiles all around us as everyone joins us on the dance floor.

As I gently spin Tanya and Dylan around, I do a double take when I notice Saffy dancing with Cole, that billionaire she's been interning for. I'm taken aback for a moment; I hadn't realized she actually knew him. He's here because Tanya has been doing some freelance security work for his company. He seems like a stand-up guy, but watching him dance with Saffy makes my protective instincts roar to life.

Tanya seems to notice where my attention has shifted. "Don't worry," she reassures me. "He's a good guy. I saw Saffy talking to Annie, his daughter, earlier. They get on."

"Mmm," I mutter, unconvinced.

Still, I'm not letting anything distract me from my bride today. I lean down to kiss her soft lips, and time stands still for a moment until Dylan starts swatting me away.

I laugh. "He knows exactly what he's doing."

"That's why my parents and Saffy are having him stay here tonight while we escape to the cabin," Tanya chuckles.

As the afternoon turns into early evening and the light starts to dim, we start making the rounds to say goodbye to our guests. Tanya holds Dylan close, and I know she's thinking that this is the first time we're leaving him overnight. However, when it comes time to hand him over to her parents and Saffy, we know he's in good hands with so much family around him.

As we pull away from the cabin in my truck, we see our guests waving and hollering at us in the rearview mirror. It's an emotional send-off after we've been through so much. I steal a glance at Tanya, and I know she feels it, too. The sense of community and love between the packs and our family is something to cherish.

As we approach the door of my mountain cabin, I turn to her. "Don't move, okay?"

Tanya looks confused but nods as I take the bags inside and press a couple of buttons on the panel before returning to her.

"What are you up to?" she asks, laughing as I scoop her into my arms and carry her over the threshold.

"It's tradition," I say simply, stepping inside to reveal the roaring fire sprung to life, the fairy lights adorning the fireplace, and the soft music playing. I'd already been up to the cabin yesterday to lay out a bottle of champagne and fluffy blankets.

"I can't believe you did all this, Zack," she says, kissing me as I place her back on the floor.

What begins as a gentle embrace quickly deepens. I feel like I've been fighting to keep my hands off her all day, sharing her with all our guests, and now I finally have her to myself. I kick the cabin door shut and walk her backward toward the waiting bed of blankets in front of the fire.

"Zack," she whispers, her lips just a breath away from mine. I can feel the warmth of her skin and smell the delicate perfume lingering in her hair.

I break away for a moment, pulling her closer so I can reach around and tug at the intricate buttons holding her dress together. I tear some off in my rush to reach her skin. I finally pull the dress down, and my mouth goes dry as my eyes feast upon her sexy lingerie: a white basque with suspenders. Her breasts are pushed high, begging to be touched.

I kiss her again, laying her back on the blankets before leaning down to kiss every inch of exposed skin. Starting at her lips, I travel down her body, along her neck and chest, until I reach her breasts. I yank at the cups of the basque until her nipples spring free, taking each one in my mouth, sucking gently as I know they're still sensitive from pregnancy.

She gasps, and the gentle moans only spur me on. I continue further, kissing my way toward the apex between her thighs and rubbing her clit through the soaking wet fabric of her silk underwear.

She gasps again as her body reacts, trembling with anticipation as I trail my tongue around the edges of her underwear, teasing her as I savor the taste of her arousal. She pulls me closer, and I can feel her hips bucking against me. I know she wants more.

"Please," she whispers, desire heavy in the air between us.

I take that as an invitation and slide my hands down, tearing the fabric and finally freeing her from those damp panties. I run my fingers along the wetness of her skin before leaning down to lick and suck on her clit, pushing her underwear aside to plunge two fingers into her wet channel. She grips me like a vice, and I fist my hard cock in preparation. She starts to orgasm on my fingers, arching up toward me in pure pleasure and screaming her release as wave after wave of pleasure courses through her body.

I can't help admiring how much she looks like a goddess in the firelight, her blond hair reflecting the dancing flames, the light flickering off her pale, soft skin. I can't wait any longer. Nudging her thighs apart with one hand, I slam my cock deep inside until I'm fully seated within her tight warmth. It feels like coming home.

We move together with increasing intensity until I grip her hips, pinning her down and riding her hard. One of my hands reaches up to gather her soft hair in my fist and pull her closer as I chase my orgasm.

I feel her stiffen beneath me, and she cries out. That's all it takes to push me over the edge. As I start to come, she grips my back, her sharp claws leaving marks that make me smile. I continue fucking her through another orgasm until her body goes limp.

When I push the hair out of her eyes and look down at her, she's smiling up at me. Her beauty almost takes my breath away.

"You ready?" I say, kissing her deeply. "We're just getting started."

And I mean it in every way, not just tonight. We really are just getting

started.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE END

## About the Author

Ruby lives on a farm with her two daughters and husband. Besides horses, chickens, and a donkey, she sometimes imagines that there are other types of animals on her farm, too... Animals that turn into Very Hot Men at night to look for their mates... Whenever that happens, she turns to her computer and writes down the paranormal love stories of these rough Wolf, Bear, and Dragon shifters who will destroy any obstacle to protect their mate. Come and enjoy the steamy, suspenseful, and slightly sweaty adventures of Ruby's shifter romance world.

Check out my author page on Amazon and click “Follow” to get updates on new releases.

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## **Books by Ruby Knox**

### **“Silverstar Wolves” Series**

The she-wolves of the Silverstar pack would make every woman jealous. They live in a beautiful small town and are surrounded by hot alpha wolves who will fight for them to get the ultimate prize: their mate’s true love. Come and visit, but don’t stay too long, or you might not want to leave...

[Cruel Alpha Wolf](#)

[Arranged Wolf Bride](#)

[Mail Order Wolf](#)

[Forced Wolf Bride](#)

**Forbidden Virgin Mate**

### **“Silver Wolves Black Ops” Series**

The Silver Wolves Black Ops have only three rules to live by: find a mate, protect her no matter the cost, and create babies. They don’t compromise, they don’t get distracted, and they never, ever give up, even when you beg them to.

[Bully Alpha Wolf](#)

[Pregnant Curvy Mate](#)

[Hostage Wolf Bride](#)

### **“Silvercoast Wolves” Series**

The women of the Silvercoast Wolves pack have envy-provoking lives. They live in a beautiful small town, are surrounded by the hottest guys on the coast, and once they’ve found true love, their mates will stop at nothing to please them. Want to come and visit?

[Alpha Wolf](#)

[Rejected Wolf](#)

[Daddy Wolf](#)

[Midlife Wolf](#)

[Secret Baby Wolf](#)

[Kidnapped Wolf](#)

[Auctioned Wolf](#)

### **“Bruno Bears Crime Family” Series**

The Bruno Bears Crime Family is ruled by the traditional values of the Italian mafia. Blood, torture, and darkness rule the lives of its members. But light comes in the form of the primal needs and desires that bear shifters cannot escape...to find a mate, to protect them and keep them safe at all costs.

[Married Off to the Bear](#)

[Sold to the Bear](#)

[Protected by the Bear](#)

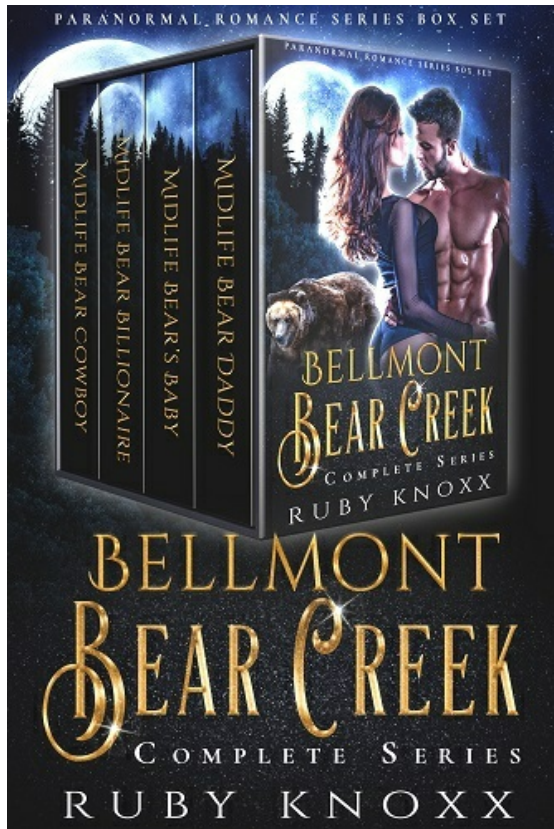
[Rejected by the Bear](#)

[Kidnapped by the Bear](#)

### **“Bellmont Bear Creek” Series**

Bellmont Bear Creek is the small town of your dreams. Gorgeous, possessive, and protective bear shifters to cuddle with, play with, and keep you safe whenever you need it... Come and stay, if only for one night...





Books in the series:

[Midlife Bear Daddy](#)

[Midlife Bear's Baby](#)

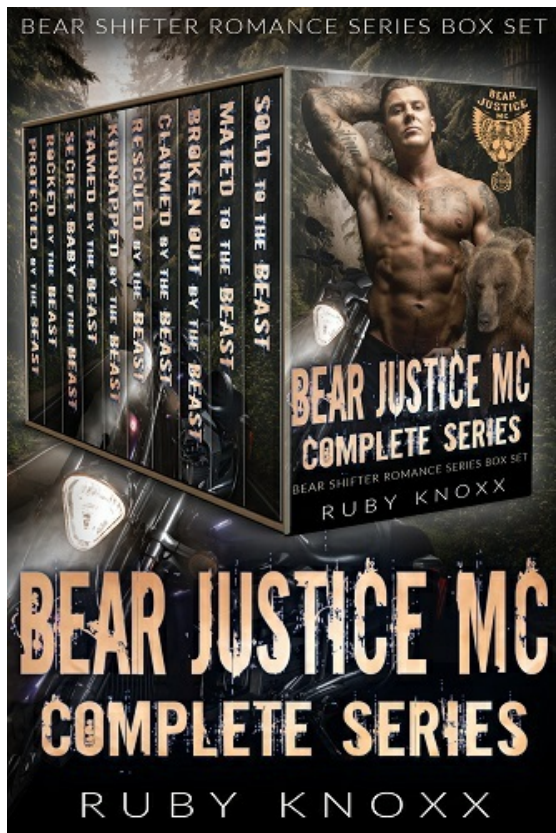
[Midlife Bear Billionaire](#)

[Midlife Bear Cowboy](#)

### **“Bear Justice MC” Series**

We're the Bear Justice MC. We're like paid vigilantes, on the hush-hush end of things, making sure that justice is served in this world. We're kept off the books, off the radar, and if we ever get caught doing what we do... things won't be pretty. But there's no rest for the wicked. So let's get the engine roaring. Duty calls.

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[Tamed by the Beast](#)

[Secret Baby of the Beast](#)

[Rocked by the Beast](#)

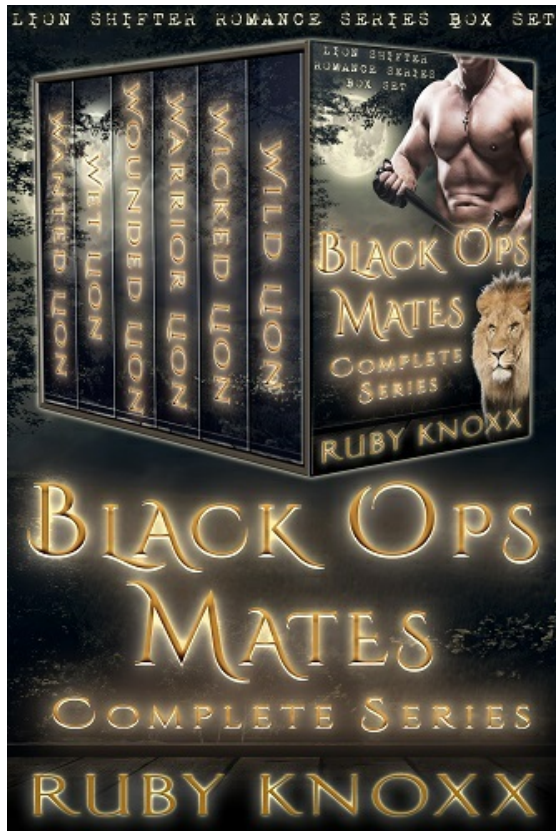
[Protected by the Beast](#)

**“Black Ops Mates” Series**

Black Ops Mates is a series about a bunch of seriously hot lion shifters who

always keep their cool. Except when they run into that one delicious woman that will turn their world upside down. And when that happens, they'll obey the hungry cat within and devour what is theirs and theirs alone...

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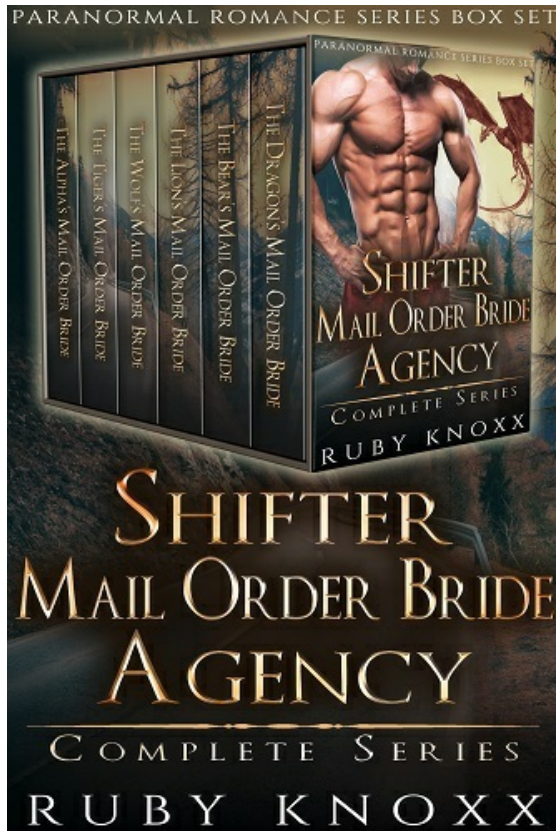
[Wanted Lion](#)

**“Shifter Mail Order Bride Agency” Series**

The paranormal Mail Order Mates Agency has one aim and one aim only: to

match hot shifters with their destined brides and mates. To find matches with a chemistry that burns so hot that it melts down the agency's computers and algorithms. To enable eternal love... with just a touch of magic...

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[\*\*The Bear's Mail Order Bride\*\*](#)

[\*\*The Lion's Mail Order Bride\*\*](#)

[\*\*The Wolf's Mail Order Bride\*\*](#)

[\*\*The Tiger's Mail Order Bride\*\*](#)

[\*\*The Alpha's Mail Order Bride\*\*](#)