

A muscular man with a dark complexion and a dark tank top is shown from the waist up, looking down and to the left. He is holding a large, curved blade. In the background, a wolf is visible on the left, and a large, glowing blue moon is in the upper left corner. The scene is set in a dark, misty forest with blue lighting.

SHADOW  
SHIFTERS

HUNTED  
BY THE  
WOLF

MILA YOUNG

# HUNTED BY THE WOLF

SHADOW SHIFTERS SERIES

MILA YOUNG

Hunted By The Wolf © Copyright 2019 Mila Young

Cover art by Jacqueline Sweet Design

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher/author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

✿ Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[What's New](#)

[Shadow Shifters Series](#)

[Hunted By The Wolf](#)

[GLOSSARY](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

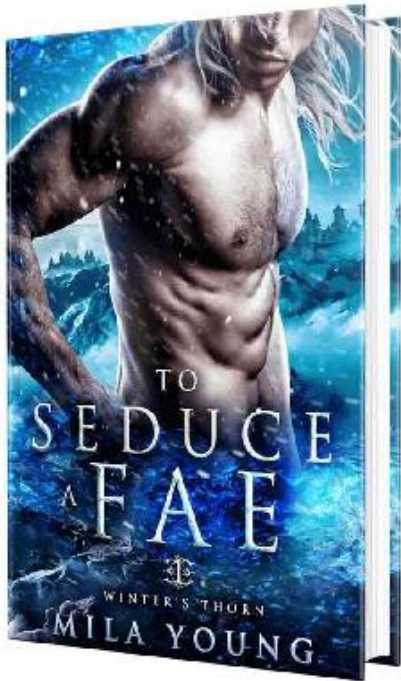
[Seduced By The Wolf](#)

[To Seduce A Fae](#)

[FREE BOOK](#)

[About Mila Young](#)

## WHAT'S NEW



LUTHER IS THE MOST  
BEAUTIFUL OF MY  
CAPTORS.

STILL I HATE HIM MORE  
THAN THE OTHERS.

AND I HATE MYSELF FOR  
CRAVING THE PRINCE OF  
THE DARK FAE.

FATED MATE  
ROMANCE

START THE WINTER'S THORN SERIES

# SHADOW SHIFTERS SERIES

BY MILA YOUNG

Captured By The Wolf

Cornered By The Wolf

Desired By The Wolf

Mated By The Wolf

Hunted By The Wolf

Seduced By The Wolf

## HUNTED BY THE WOLF

**She's running of her life... He's in the wrong place, wrong time. Will he risk everything to protect her?**

After fleeing her abusive ex, wulfin Cacey Varg and her daughter settle happily with a new pack in Finland. As Christmas approaches, Cacey learns her ex has found them and is on his way to take their daughter back. But a massive snowstorm prevents her from packing up and leaving town—and instead delivers a sexy stranger to her doorstep. Can she trust that he isn't one of her ex's henchmen?

Second-in-command to Europe's most powerful wulfin, hunter Vincent Lyall's spur-of-the-moment decision to check on his ailing mother soon finds him marooned at a cabin in the woods by the blizzard of the century. Trapped with this spirited vixen, resisting temptation is easier said than done... But she refuses to believe he is who he says he is.

Is love powerful enough to win when two sexy wolf shifters, an unwelcome past, and animalistic urges wreak havoc on the holiday season?



## GLOSSARY

**Moonwulf** – Wolf shifters who will transform from human to wolf form only during the full moon.

**Wulfkin** – Moonwolves who have gone through the Lunar Eutine rite of passage and are now able to change at will into their wolf form.

**Lunar Eutine** – A rite of passage for a moonwulf to permanently transform into a wulfkin. It takes place beneath a blood moon. Eutine means true of heart and draws on a moonwulf's connection to his or her inner wolf. When the moon is completely shrouded in black, a new wulfkin will be delivered.

**Alpha** – The leader of a pack of wulfkin/moonwolves who rules only over his or her claimed territory.

**Varlac** – A reigning wulfkin clan who rule and set laws for all alphas living under their territory jurisdiction (e.g., Europe, Africa, etc.).

**Varlac Emperor Alpha** – Varlac leader who rules over every Varlac, alpha and pack in Europe.

## CHAPTER 1

### CACEY

Some people were born with bad blood. Me, I attracted it.

A permanent blemish on my yellow dress. A discolored stain on the sleeve of a pyjama shirt. Or a splatter from fighting with my wulfkin jerk ex. The red stuff always found me.

I glared at the crimson on the fur lining of my knee-length boots and cringed. My inner wolf surged forward, pressing against my breastbone, sniffing the coppery scent from my patient. Ever since dawn, my wolf had been jittery, eager for release, or food, or something. She hadn't behaved this way since Tianna and I ran away to Finland from Denmark. That was eight months ago.

A crisp breeze swept into the room from the open window and curled icy fingers around my arms. I scrubbed the blood with a paper towel. No luck. Damn. These were new boots too. With a grunt, I scrunched the soiled towel and tossed it into the wastebin across the room.

As the only doctor in town, I had rented the supply room at the back of the grocery store from Henri for my medical practice. Best decision ever. I provided the pack of wulfkin with a service they lacked, and in exchange, they gave Tianna and me a home. A win-win situation, and if there was one regret, it was that I hadn't done this years ago.

"Run out of hydrogen peroxide again?" A male voice cut my thoughts in half.

I lifted my gaze to Mr. Vasara, a 145-year-old wulfskin with white hair parted above his right temple. He was slouched on the surgical bed I'd fashioned out of a long table and blankets.

"I'll be fine. But you need to promise me you won't go hunting alone again. Take your son with you, or next time you might do more than split open your leg on rocks." The neat stitches along Mr. Vasara's calf appeared glossy from the antibiotic ointment. I placed a non-stick bandage over the wound. "This will heal soon, and the stitches are self-dissolving. Just take care until then." At his age, he had plenty of life in him, but his healing would require a full week. The same injury on me would take less than two days. I rolled down his trouser leg for him.

"You're a gem, Cacey, a real asset to our town. Manu did right to accept you into our pack." The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled, and for the first time in forever, my body and mind relaxed. I took a deep enough breath, loving my new home, because for the last few months, I hadn't woken up with a nightmare about my ex.

Since moving to Susi, there had been only laughter, warmth, and lots of smiles. No apologizing for someone else's mistakes, no tiptoeing around aggressive pack members, no hiding my daughter in the closet whenever my ex arrived home drunk. Nope. Those ghostly memories were tucked into the darkest recesses of my mind. All that filled my mind now were sounds of my daughter giggling with her new friends and the thankfulness I owed Manu for taking me into his family. I blinked away the tears. No more running.

My last alpha was also my ex, and after Daan had threatened to take our daughter away because I dumped him, I had two choices. Lose Tianna or run. So, my time in Denmark had come to a swift end.

Mr. Vasara patted my shoulder and used me for balance to get on his feet and off the exam table.

I held on to his arm as he found his footing. "Well, don't make me regret the decision by having to keep patching you. Anyway, come and see me if the pain doesn't ease."

His grin had a way of brightening my day, akin to most wulfskin living in Susi, which ironically meant wolf in Finnish. “Girl, the moment I stop moving, I’ll die. I’ve got to keep going.” He eased his shoulders back and hobbled toward the door before leaving.

He was the last patient of the day, and I released a long exhale, standing alone in the fluorescent-lit room. Freestanding metal shelves against the back wall were jam-packed with canned foods and dried meats. I’d tacked a photo of Tianna on the filing cabinet last week. Not much else screamed medical practice in here. I’d added a chair and a table to replicate the appearance of an exam room in any physician’s office. It wasn’t much, but the job afforded us a house and a spot in the pack. Sure, it placed us at the bottom of the hierarchy, but I didn’t care as long as Tianna was safe. Hell, I’d scrub toilets if it meant my daughter and I could stay here forever.

I tugged on my sleeves, trying to cover my arms better. The locals insisted on keeping their windows open for fresh air even during winter. That would be great in the tropics, except we lived north of the Arctic Circle in Lapland.

Thunder roared. A threatening storm. Outside the window, the night was a flurry of winds, throttling the trees. Yellow street lights illuminated the only road in town. Snow painted the dense woodlands with its white strokes, and feathery flakes cascaded. I took a huge inhale, letting the cold seep deep inside me. Cleansing me. Even though I’d lived here for eight months, the scenery still was spellbinding. Serene northern lights, the soaring mountains, and an ocean of trees in every direction. The magic of this place had me believing that any moment, Santa Claus would poke his head out from behind a fir tree. Tianna gave me new insights into Santa or his reindeer twenty times a day and assured me we’d get presents first before all the others in the world since this was Santa’s backyard. Her enthusiasm and the welcome I felt since we arrived here had made the decision to move here an easy one.

With the equipment sanitized and window locked, I shut the door behind me and stepped into the general store. The

town had once been a popular tourist resort, but after the place went bankrupt, the human owners lost everything. Manu had approached the bank and bought the site for a steal. He moved in with his wulfskin pack and claimed it as his territory. Now it served as home to a pack of thirty wulfskin. Like an abandoned gift, Susi still had running water, underground power, and a ton of backup generators. A few wulfskin now occupied the former snow resort welcome centre. My new home was located deep in the Finnish woods, away from prying eyes, making it the perfect spot to hide. Though according to Tianna, the Santa Village in the nearby human city of Rovaniemi, just south of Susi, was what made this place a magical location.

A nutty and cinnamon scent wafted through the air of the store. Dried herbs hung from the ceiling, along with tinsel of every color, casting shadows across the walls. Oak shelves lined the walls, filled with everything from clothing and condiments to buckets of jerky. Plus baubles. The decorations were tucked into every crevice, and each time I entered the store, I swore I'd stepped into a Christmas wonderland.

I salivated for a moment, unable to move past the fresh meat behind the refrigerated glass panel. But without missing a beat, I pulled out several strands of mistletoe from a wooden barrel, along with a bag of jelly candies. Tianna insisted they were necessary for Christmas, and something about this place caused the child in me to linger. But the rumble and whistling gale outside reminded me blizzard conditions were headed our way.

“The weatherman said we had two days to prepare, but I can already feel the storm in my bones.” Henri stepped around the counter, wearing a Santa's hat and dressed in a red jacket. All he was missing was a beard. The wulfskin was incorrigible when it came to all things festive, so no wonder the kids in town visited the store several times a day. He grabbed a notebook from the shelf behind him. His angular face and large eyes reminded me of my dad. Strange, because my old man insisted that working inside was a female's job. My father had been very opinionated about his old-fashioned beliefs, but I still loved him. Maybe it was the way Henri studied at me—

without a smidgen of judgment—that brought me comfort. I’d lost my parents three years and five months ago in a car accident. A day didn’t pass when they didn’t enter my thoughts, and still, their memories cut right through me. The loving moments we’d had were a double-edged sword, a reminder that I’d never experience those times again. So instead, I made new memories with Tianna.

Henri scribbled my purchases in his notebook. No need for money in Susi. Each citizen contributed. Hunters brought in fresh meat for the store. Others sold deer meat to the local city for money in order to pay for the electricity and water used in the town. A teacher taught the young ones, and a singer entertained the pack. I provided services as the local doctor. Something my parents had forced me to study, and I thanked them every day because it meant helping others.

“I hear Tianna’s spending the night at Anja’s.” Henri’s gaze lifted from his book, his eyes smiling. “You can finally enjoy an evening to yourself.”

Anja had greeted me the first day Tianna and I arrived in Susi. She asked no questions, but took us into her home and gave us food, and we’d been inseparable friends ever since. Plus, she had two young girls, one aged six, and the other nine. They’d bonded with Tianna right away.

“Yeah, Tianna was so excited, she packed her bags last week.” I broke into a laugh. “Time to myself sounds fantastic, even if it did take me more than a week to agree to this sleepover. I’ve never spent a night without her under the same roof, you know.” Besides, it was selfish of me to deny Tianna the opportunity to create her own childhood memories.

“Anja will take good care of her, don’t worry.”

I nodded, anxiousness tickling through my veins. *Focus on the positive. Everything is going to be fine.* “Without Tianna shadowing me, I’ll have more time to prepare the house for the blizzard.” She’d be home before the full brute force of it.

My attention shifted to the meat counter, and my stomach growled at the thought of treating myself to a nice adult meal. “I’ll take two deer steaks.” Usually, I’d only eat one steak, but

tonight I wanted to gorge on food, take a bath, and read a book.

Henri bustled with the order and bagged it in no time. “I’ve added a small sachet of my special Christmas blend. Add heated milk and you’ll forget your troubles for the night.” He winked the same as my dad had when he used to sneak another glass of blood wine, three parts fresh animal blood and one part red wine.

“Thanks. Have a great evening.” With a skip in my step and bag in hand, I hurried toward the exit as the winds outside rattled the building walls. Hopefully, this storm was all bark and little bite. Otherwise, in a couple of days, the blizzard would demolish the forest.

“Oh, Cacey I almost forgot. You received a letter today.”

Every muscle froze. Surprise wasn’t an emotion I ever accepted well. I’d run away from my last pack because my ex wanted to harm my daughter and me. And for that reason alone, I kept my new home a secret from my past. So who was sending me mail? No one knew we were here, and I preferred it that way. It had to be a mistake. I twisted around and the knot in my stomach tightened, but staring at the envelope in Henri’s hand wasn’t helping. My fingers trembled as I accepted it. We couldn’t move again. Not so soon. Tianna would be heartbroken. I couldn’t do this to her. I bit the inside of my cheek, hoping the mail was a fluke.

“Have a nice night, Cacey.” With a few quick steps across the room, Henri entered the storeroom and a clank of cans resonated.

My gaze fell to the envelope with my name gracing the front in cursive writing.

Shakily, I turned it over and found no return address. I shook my head at my nerves and let out a short chuckle. Could be one of the fashion stores I’d signed up for online to receive discounts.

The old wound on my wrist itched, and I rubbed it against my hip, remembering I got that by deflecting one of Daan’s

drunken tantrums. It happened the night I decided to leave because he was swinging at Tianna who wouldn't stop crying. I'd been stupid and defended his behavior for years, but that night was the last straw. We had to escape.

I ripped open the envelope.

Fear crouched quietly in my chest as I unfolded the letter. My eyes kept going over the one handwritten sentence, repeatedly, and still it wasn't registering because this had to be a mistake.

*B*oo. *I've found you, C!*

*M*y heart banged against my breastbone, and I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

Only one person ever called me C. Daan.

The sudden silence constricted around me, weighing on my shoulders, threatening to knock my legs out from under me. Fuck!

We had to get out of here. Now! The only reason Daan had send me a note first was because he was playing his games. I should have known living in Susi was too good to be real. Should have kept running away until I found a place across the world. Should have never believed Daan would leave us alone.

The last time I ran away, he sent his second-in-command after us, who kidnapped Tianna. For three agonizing days, I searched for her. Only sheer luck from the moon goddess helped me get her back. I fought the bastard and won, but gained myself a broken rib and major blood loss in the process.

Daan was a violent alcoholic who'd threatened to kill me if I ever left him. But no one was safe when he mixed drinking with his wolf side. I'd watched him tear a pack member's throat out for disagreeing with him. No one went against him, and all pack members followed his commands.



He'd broken so many of my bones, but no way in hell would I let him harm Tianna.

A grip of silent panic rattled through me. I scrunched the letter in a fist and stuffed it into a pocket, yet my body kept shaking.

I grabbed my bag of supplies, spun, and darted for the exit, ripping open the heavy door. We had to leave. Thunder cracked overhead. In haste, I shoved open the screen door, but the wind ripped the handle from my grasp, swinging outward. The door slammed into a tall wulfskin.

He reeled backward from the impact, his hand pressed to his face. A duffel bag fell from his grasp, thumping against the wooden porch.

“Shit.” I rushed outside, kicking the door shut behind me. “Are you okay? Sorry. I didn’t see you standing there. The door got away from me.”

He massaged his brow and groaned. “Never been struck by a door.” His voice was like brandy, sweet and potent. My inner wolf whined in response to his deep, throaty one, but I didn’t have time for this. As I retreated along the front porch, he lowered his hand and I stared into midnight eyes so deep, I wondered what I’d find at the bottom. Broad cheekbones, square jawline, long stubble, and perfect, white teeth on show.

Wind swished through my hair, bathing me in his musky wolf and fresh woody notes.

Why did he smell so sexy?

Then, as if a truck had collided into me, Daan’s threat swirled on my mind. And in front of me stood a stranger with an unfamiliar scent. A wulfskin I didn’t recognize. He didn’t belong to this pack.

I studied him ... his furrowed brow, the way he watched me, and the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Dread gathered in the darkest corners of my mind as I stood face to face with danger. He wore a hoodie underneath a fitted winter coat and perfectly cut jeans. When I noticed the stranger’s duffel bag near his feet—black with the silver word

Fetched printed just below a pair of antlers—I lost the ability to speak. That brand was Danish ... Daan's favorite.

Every piece of the puzzle fell into place. The letter from Daan. The sudden appearance of a stranger. Me, caught. My mind sputtered, failing to formulate a thought. Daan had sent this wulfskin for us. Again. And by the looks of this one, I doubted I could win against him, but I'd fight until I couldn't move to save my daughter.

I scanned the surroundings, expecting Daan to burst out from the woods any second. The sky was charcoal black from the building storm clouds, and the harbinger of gloom seemed to watch me.

Double damn. I'd been wrong to ignore my wolf's warning earlier today. Her constant stirring and unease had been a premonition.

"Miss, are you all right?" He stepped closer with a hand outstretched toward me. A red bruise formed on his forehead.

"Don't." I reeled backward, gripping the shopping bags. "Who are you?"

He ran a hand through his dark blond hair and studied me in a nonchalant way as if the situation were somehow funny.

"What are you doing here?" The words scraped my throat raw. Like he would tell me now. No, he'd wait until he had Tianna; then Daan would call, gloating. I couldn't let my guard down.

"Visiting? What's your name? Do I know you?" I trembled.

The stranger stood there; his brown snow coat did zilch to conceal his muscles. I had no chance against this wulfskin. At least the last guy Daan sent hadn't been built like a train. *Run.* Get Tianna and escape.

I recoiled near the verandah, shadows writhing amid the trees across from the building. Returning inside the store would draw Henri into my troubles. The problem wasn't my safety, but Tianna's.

“Stay away from me. Understand?” I hurried onto the road, snow crunching beneath my quickened footsteps. How could this have happened again? I’d been so careful, told no one where we’d settled. How had he tracked us? What if Daan had sent more than one wulfin this time? My gut clenched so hard, I suppressed a whimper. What if the other guy was already after my daughter? Hunting her?

Behind me, the stranger hadn’t moved. He tilted his head, eyes narrowed, as he watched me.

No one was taking Tianna. My chest squeezed tight with anxiety.

Bags tucked under my arms and resolve strong enough to withstand a hurricane, I sped as fast as possible without attracting attention. My boots sloshing through the snow. I had to put distance between me and the center of town.

Tall, hulking birch trees flanked the narrow road as if they were guardians. I grasped for the flashlight from my handbag with a shaky hand. The beam penetrated the blackness, guiding me along the narrow path in the woods. I’d walked this passage for the past eight months and knew it better than the streets of Denmark. Though, tonight the journey felt treacherous, every shadow a promise of someone leaping out to attack me.

Strong winds whistled through the woods, and snow plummeted, claiming everything in its grasp. The sky rumbled and night tightened around me.

Uncontrollable shivering made it difficult to glance over my shoulder without appearing conspicuous, all the while expecting to see the strange wulfin. Branches and trees swayed, some limbs almost touching the ground as the storm roared overhead.

My breaths hitched. For the moment, Tianna would be fine where she was. Anja wouldn’t let anyone take her. But we couldn’t stay here. Not now.

Go home, pack, and collect Tianna. *We leave tonight.*

## CHAPTER 2

VINCENT

*Who the hell was that minx?*

The wulfkin who'd slammed a door into my face vanished behind a wall of trees, and I rubbed the lump on my forehead. The doe-eyed female smelled like blood and delicious candy. Sure, not the homecoming welcome I'd expected, but a night with that fierce vixen would suit me just fine. The deluge of snow intensified, and the smart members of the pack in Susi were in their homes deep in the woods, safe and warm.

With my bag in hand, I pulled open the door to the general store and stepped inside. A blanket of bittersweet spices and beef jerky greeted me. The aroma brought back memories from my childhood of lingering at the counter where I'd buy bags of the dried meat. Now everything seemed different and smaller and coated in Christmas decorations. A sense of absence filled me, sitting heavily in my chest. Since leaving Susi six years ago, I had dreamt about the containers with the dried meat near the counter, but they were no longer there. Me squeezing into the back where the salty licorice was stashed, yet that back corner now displayed a rack of clothes. Even the magazine stand where I got my first peek at a woman's breasts was gone, replaced by buckets of mistletoe. While minuscule, the rest of the pack had probably embraced the changes and moved on, while it was clear I was no longer in the natural flow of their lives because I remained in the past. A time when there were fewer Christmas decorations, fewer human customs, and bear pelts for warmth instead of beanies and scarves.

Behind the counter, Henri's head jerked upward. "Cace—" His voice splintered as he stared at me with squinted eyes. "Vin? Vincent Lyall?" His grin widened. "You old dog. When'd you arrive?"

I broke into a chuckle. No one had called me Vin since the day I left home, and the longing ache of being back echoed through my head.

Henri skirted the counter and stepped closer. He grabbed me into a hug, the kind he'd given me as a kid, minus the strength that left me feeling as if I'd been strangled by an anaconda. Silver streaked his short hair, but as always at this time of the year, he wore his Santa outfit. He used to visit every house in the pack to deliver bags of candy to kids, even during a storm. I dropped my bag on the floor and embraced him. It was strange being here after so long, yet at the same time, it felt like sanctuary, a cave away from the world, my place to rest.

"Just got here."

He pulled away, running fingers across an unruly eyebrow. "Like always, you bring chaos with you." He winked, glancing at the door still shuddering on its hinges. "How are the Varlac treating you?" He studied me, his gaze sweeping down my body. "No bruises or broken bones. They can't be that bad if you're still alive. And look at your size. What are they feeding you?"

"You know, they're just normal wulfskin, right?" As the ruling clan over all wulfskin packs in Europe, everyone feared the Varlac. The old reigning alpha ruled with his fists.

But those days were changing, and I'd witnessed them firsthand from my second-in-command position to the new Varlac leader.

"Sure they are." Henri's words dripped with sarcasm. "So, what brings you back home? You haven't returned since you got recruited by the Varlac leader to join his pack as a fighter."

The past six years had flown too fast. One minute I was training to be in the Varlac guards; next thing I was leading

them. Not that I minded because fighting was second nature to me and I loved the hunt. Joining the Varlac ranks opened up a world of opportunities. But nothing compared to returning home and seeing my parents again. Something I'd promised myself to do every year, but it never seemed the right moment. After I received my father's letter about Mom's injury, I'd made the call and took time off to check up on my parents. Plus, it offered me a vacation to relax and not be on call to the Varlac leader at a moment's notice. Still, my Varlac leader insisted that while I was in Susi, I had to speak to the alpha on his behalf.

"Is your fearless leader, Manu, upstairs?" My gaze drifted toward the dark hallway. I refused to elaborate on how Manu had contacted my alpha back in Hungary with a secret proposal he would only talk about in a face-to-face meeting. Alpha to alpha.

"Manu went home early. Hasn't been himself. Distracted, rarely around these days. Is that why you're here?"

I slapped a hand to his shoulder. "Can't talk about it, old man. You know that." I didn't yet know why Manu had called this audience and I'd find out soon enough, but Henri didn't need to know that, or he'd speculate the worst.

Releasing a long breath, he lowered his gaze. "Sure, sure. Anyway, are your parents expecting you?"

I shook my head, eliciting a deep, hoarse laugh from Henri. "Got a message from Dad saying Mom broke her hip. Figured I'd surprise her and see how she's doing in person." My dad had sent me a letter outlining how a pack of gray wolves had attacked my mom during a solo hunting trip. In winter, wolves attacked anything with a heartbeat. She should have known better than to go out alone.

"Don't be too harsh on her, boy. She's getting old and makes mistakes. We all do." I was uncertain what he meant, but figured I'd find out once I visited my parents.

Thunder boomed again as if the apocalypse had rolled into town. I had to move if I intended to make it home alive.

“Better head off. If you see Manu, tell him I’m here.”  
“Will do. Great to have you home, Vin.”

“Thanks.” Pulling the collar tight around my neck, I picked up the duffel bag and threaded my arms through the straps. My brain was on fast-forward with images of my parents’ smiles, what they’d say, whether I should sneak through the back door to surprise them, or countless other scenarios. But above all, getting home fast was priority.

The moment I stepped outside, an assault of biting winds nipped at me, gripping me in their icy claws. Snow flew on the diagonal, cloaking the street, obscuring the building and trees. The local weatherman must be new to the job because the blizzard wasn’t waiting for the couple more days of his prediction. It was here, now, with me in it. My hands swelled with the onset of the storm.

It felt as if I had slugged through an ocean of icebergs. Back in Hungary, the winters never seemed this bitter. I broke into a faster march, my chin tucked low as tiny ice crystals pelted my frozen cheeks. Once in the pitch-black woods, I recalled the way to my parents’ cabin. *Follow the path for half an hour to the two birches that had grown so close they twisted into one massive trunk. Then swing left off the track and head uphill.*

The familiarity of the birch, cloudberry, and smoky scents made me smile.

The wind screamed in circles around me. My boots slid on the slick snow underfoot, and each step was sluggish as I battled the beast of a storm. Deciding I’d never make it home at this rate, I dropped the bag to the ground and undressed. Boots and socks off. I stuffed my belongings into my bag. An Arctic chill snapped around me as my teeth chattered, and my warm breath was sucked away by the cold. But I’d seen worse blizzards. I’d survive.

I called to my wolf. He surged forward like a tsunami, claiming my whole body. Limbs elongated, jaw stretched, and glorious warm fur covered my wolf form. On all fours, I shook away the last remnants of my human form. The world

sharpened and showed shadows in the night where my human eyes hadn't seen them.

A howl crashed past my throat. I cherished the freedom, eliciting wolf howls from the distance.

I snatched the bag handle with my teeth and trotted along the worn road.

A deluge of gusts beat at my back. The icy flakes were a wet tongue on my nose. Ahead, white lights twinkled amid the trees. The quicker I moved, the clearer they became, swinging against a porch railing. A warm glow shone out from the corners of a log cabin's windows, but with the blinds pulled, it was impossible to see inside. Smoke wafted from the chimney atop the high-pitched roof. Snow piled in small drifts at the front door. Other houses stood deeper in the woods, invisible in the storm. Wulfin families typically changed homes when they outgrew them. Anyone could live at this cabin now. Back in my day, Mr. Vasara, a schoolteacher who'd retired after losing his wife to another hunter, had owned this spot.

I reeled sideways from the ferocious gusts. Fresh powder gathered around me, now knee-deep as a slice of panic rose within me. Stopping back at the cabin until the storm eased played on my mind. Most members of the pack would remember me.

A slight movement farther ahead on the narrow passage between two trunks caught my attention—glinting eyes. A rabbit or fox? Its white fur camouflaged the animal in the snow. I'd reach home tonight, one step in front of the other, but it wouldn't be easy as the wind shoved against me.

The distinctive crack of wood echoed, followed by a swooshing sound. I froze. *Where's it coming from?*

A gigantic tree limb fell in front of me, landing with a crash a mere foot away. I leapt back. The branches lashed against my face, and I stumbled backward from the flurry of snow.

*Son of a ...*



The glint of eyes caught my attention again from within the folds of green foliage around the fallen tree. I rushed over and found an Arctic fox caught under a limb, his body unresponsive to my prods. Burying my nose in the white fur, I inhaled his sweet and earthy scent along with a coppery tang, but I noted his pulse. Still alive.

My wolf's first instinct was to enjoy the delicious meal for extra energy. But my head filled with stories my mom once told me about Arctic foxes. In Finland, they represented good luck and opportunities. My wolf whined, insisting that finding this morsel was indeed both opportune and lucky.

Mom's words streamed through my mind about how an Arctic fox only appeared when magic was afoot. It didn't seem right eating him. Or leaving him here to die. I could carry him home, which was another hour's hike in this storm, but not my bag.

I glanced back at the house. Lights twinkled through the torrential snowfall like torches calling to my salvation. Was the fox's presence a message to rest?

As if the weather listened to my thoughts, a blanket of snow descended in sheets, layering the woods in more white, including the fox and me. If I continued my trek, I'd end up a frozen popsicle, lost in the woods.

With haste, I shifted into human form, the icy razor blades cutting my flesh the instant I lost the fur. I lifted the branch and freed the unmoving fox. Once dressed, I picked up the fox, tucking him under my arm. Together, we retreated toward the log cabin. In this storm, if I had continued to my parents' house, I'd probably end up flattened by a fallen tree just like the fox.

## CHAPTER 3

CACEY

I jabbed Anja's number into my cell phone and paced in the kitchen, one arm clutched around my stomach. I had to tell Anja I was headed there for my daughter and, most importantly, to keep her safe until I got there. "Come on, pick up."

A beeping sound screeched through the earpiece. The connection broke.

"No. No. No." Tension grew in my limbs and neck, my mind replaying the scenario of Daan's goon kidnapping Tianna. I strained for each breath as a primal urge to run out of the house and straight for Anja's jolted within me.

*Fuckin' storm.* "What am I supposed to do now?" An invisible hand squeezed my chest. What if the stranger had already taken Tianna? Bile rose in the back of my throat. I stared at the bag filled with the bare necessities—clothes, ration of food, photos, and two of Tianna's plush wolf toys. I'd need to hire a truck to haul the rest of our things. We'd start fresh elsewhere. Then why did it feel as if my heart struggled to keep a steady beat? Susi had become home, the pack my family. My insides were raw as if the outside storm blew right through me.

A lashing of winds swept into the cabin, throttling the place. My nerves pinched at the thought of going outside. I'd get blown away. The niggling sensation deep in my gut reminded me how perfect the last eight months had been. How welcoming the pack was. How my medical training had helped the young and elderly. Was I ready to give that up?

I hiccupped the next inhale. Tianna was counting down the days to having a real Christmas for the first time in her life. Wulfkin didn't celebrate human holidays. But from the moment Tianna discovered that this pack celebrated Christmas, she made me promise we'd stay. I had even promised to make her a stocking this year, which was half done and hidden in the nightstand. Every day, she marked off the days in December, announcing gleefully the remaining count. How could I snuff away her dreams? The worst part wasn't leaving a pack I considered my family, or abandoning our home, but that I'd shatter an eight-year-old's heart in the process. My eyes prickled, but I pushed those emotions behind the potential tears away. No time to fall apart. The priority was making sure Tianna remained safe.

Next to the kitchen, the French doors rattled on their hinges. In the backyard, the snow was a white sheet with mounting piles of powdery flakes collecting on the veranda. The outside walls groaned.

I scrunched my nose from the pungent stink of mildew and wet dog fur wafting through the house. A gap in the basement foundation had caused dampness there for months, releasing all sorts of reeks. But I supposed that was no longer my problem.

Trudging through the storm for several hours to reach Tianna concerned me. And once I had her safely in my care, how far would we get before we turned into icicles? As a wulfkin, I could transform and withstand the weather, but Tianna was still a moonwulf.

Without a full moon, she couldn't shift. In her human form, she'd freeze to death.

I paced from the fireplace to the kitchen, fingers digging into my hips.

If I trekked to Anja's house in wolf form, I'd end up frozen in the woods, and then Tianna would be alone.

A forceful knock resonated from the front door, startling me from my thoughts.

I flinched. The whole house creaked, trees swished, branches grating against the roof. “Calm down, it’s just the weather,” I said out loud to no one while releasing a long breath.

When another knock came, this time, louder, I shuddered. Someone *was* at the front door. Not my imagination. My breaths turned to pants as a cold sweat beaded down my back.

The stranger. He must have followed me home, hoping to find Tianna. I backtracked into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. My wolf nipped beneath my skin, desperate for release to protect us with every fibre of her being. Still, my adrenaline flew through my veins, but I couldn’t move a single muscle.

Another knock echoed through me, and I fumbled with the knife to stop it from falling out of my grasp. I inched closer, and goose bumps littered my skin. The guy I’d seen near the general store was huge. No way I could take him down, even in my wolf form, and that terrified the crap out of me. Who would protect Tianna if I were knocked out? Or worse. I swallowed.

*Pull it together. Don’t show fear.*

I should have left Daan years ago, but when he lashed out at Tianna in his drunken state and I blocked his attack. That was the wake-up call I needed to leave. That was when he threatened to take Tianna away from me. For so long, I stayed to give my daughter a two-parent family. Worst mistake I’d ever made.

Reaching for the bolt lock, I asked, “Who is it?” My voice failed me, sounding weak- assed and shaky. I cursed myself.

A male voice responded, but with the storm’s tremendous roaring, the words were muffled. I clasped the knife with a death grip, figuring it was better to face the guy without Tianna here. Then I would try to steer him away, giving us time to escape.

Finding my backbone, I ripped open the door and thrust out the knife in an attack posture. The air jerked out of my lungs at the sight of the stranger from town, and my heart

raced. Shit, shit, shit. I'd been right. Daan had sent this guy, and my daughter would be ripped from me. All I wanted to do was curl into a ball and pretend this wasn't happening.

His deep midnight eyes locked onto mine. His cheeks and nose glowed red. His body curled forward. Layers of snow covered his shoulders and head. In his arms, he held a limp, white fox.

Stunned, I stood there, immobile. *What was he doing?*

The softness and desperation behind his gaze had my inner wolf reacting with a whimper, not a growl, the kind she only offered wulfskin she befriended. Or was she sensing the fox—a meal?

“What do you want?” I demanded.

Wind whistled around the stranger and into the house. His quivering intensified, and I tried to ignore the enticing musk reaching me, teasing my senses.

His lips had turned white, and his teeth chattered. “I-If you're going to s-stab me, do it fast.”

“Why are you here?” I waved my knife at the fox. “What's that for?” Was he thinking I'd lower my guard because of the animal? To distract me?

“I ... I've lost feeling in my body, can I ... I come in?”

“No!” Could I live with myself if he froze to death on my front porch? If it kept Tianna safe ... hell yes. “What do you want?”

He stepped closer, his gaze bouncing over my shoulder. Was he searching to see if anyone else was home? Like a boyfriend he might have to fight? Or Tianna—which meant he didn't know she wasn't here. One small thing in my favor.

I held my ground, gripping the knife between us, yet it felt as if someone choked me. “You're living dangerously.” I raised my blade.

He released a longer breath, and half stumbled on his feet. His shoulder leaned against the doorframe as if exhaustion had worn him out.

“Speak fast.” An avalanche wouldn’t drive me back or let him cross the threshold.

Except, when he straightened, his eyes rolled backward. His arms dipped with the fox tumbling from his hold.

I stepped closer and caught the largest Arctic fox I’d ever seen with one arm. The stranger’s knees buckled, toppling him forward.

I jumped backward as he crashed face first into the rug and lay there. Was he dead?

The unconscious fox remained in my arms, while my head spun with confusion. “Why carry a fox?”

## CHAPTER 4

VINCENT

*H*ad someone hit my head with a hammer? Every joint ached. Why did the air stink like rot and wet dog?

When I opened my eyes, I flinched at the blade pointed in my face. Everything came streaming back—visiting my parents in Lapland, the storm, the Arctic fox, the log cabin with lights. Seemed the house belonged to the strange wulfin who'd smacked me in the face with a door at the general store. Should've known then that she was trouble. And now she stood over me, still wielding her weapon. Had she held the knife there while I was passed out? How long had I been unconscious?

“What the hell's going on?” My gaze swept past the crazy lady, noting my surroundings. I lay on a couch inside a brightly lit house. Fire in the hearth crackled and spat embers into the metal guard across from us. A tiny Christmas tree in the far corner glinted with a rainbow of lights. Pink kid's boots stood in front of the glass doors. Whew. No torture chamber in sight.

The wulfin again waved the blade in my face, the sharp tip promising to draw blood. “I ask the questions, buddy.” She stood over me, clad in tight jeans and a stretchy black shirt. If she weren't impaling me with her intense glare, then I'd be interested in learning more about her. Packs were required to take in wulfin in distress or danger, yet she acted as if I would gobble her up.

The fear behind her narrow gaze deepened. A terrified person, especially one holding a knife, was capable of irrational things. Last time I faced a blade-wielding lunatic who insisted he had a right to enter the Varlac castle, I ended up covered in cuts and passed out from blood loss, but not before I kicked his butt back to wherever he crawled out from.

So, this woman's knife had to go.

On the bright side, she wasn't an insane kidnapper. Otherwise, I'd be in a basement or worse. Despite my nerves bristling on edge, I got a strong whiff of her sweet candy scent, which called to my wolf. Long hair tumbled over her shoulders—a shimmering reddish blonde akin to the blaze in the fireplace. The palest blue eyes contrasted with her dewy skin. Her features perfectly rounded down to her inviting rosy lips.

“Who are you, and why are you following me?” Her voice climbed an octave, and a crease formed on the bridge of her nose.

A sharp pain had accumulated behind my eyes, and my head felt as if I'd been shaken, not stirred. “Was I hit by a truck?”

“You fainted.” She shrugged a shoulder. “Happens if your core body temperature lowers dramatically. Your blood vessels were constricted, so they were carrying less blood and oxygen to your brain.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” When I lifted my hand, it snagged on something. My wrists were bound across my stomach with pink rope extending to my tied ankles. No boots. Nothing about this wulfskin made sense.

“Pink rope?”

“Hey, you're tied up, aren't you?” Her lips pursed to the side of her mouth, and for a wild moment, I imagined myself kissing them. Insane. Now I knew I'd hit my head hard because my dating history included crazy girls, and the last thing I wanted was another one.



“You can untie me now, but this isn’t my idea of rough play. If bondage is involved, I do the tying up.”

She shook her head. “What are you doing in Susi?”

“Well, a storm hit, then I saw the dying fox, and your house was the closest shelter.” I fidgeted against my restraints, searching for leverage. When I bent my knees, the ribbon slackened as did the ties around my wrists and ankles. As a general rule, I hid my emotions whenever I’d gained an upper hand against my enemy. That was my poker face. But in that moment, the craziness of pink rope and how badly I’d been tied up left me smirking.

She glanced down at my hands, and I straightened my legs, not revealing my discovery.

When she met my eyes, I wriggled my hands free. I’d have to teach this wulfin how to tie people with no chance of them escaping. If she didn’t cut me first.

“Liar.” Her voice spiked. “You just happen to arrive in town and arrive on my doorstep? I know who you are, but I haven’t worked out the fox angle yet.”

A chuckle burst free, slow at first, then rolling deep from my chest. “I doubt you know me.”

“Stop laughing at me.” The blade bit into my neck, the cold tip sending a trail of goose bumps on my arms. This chick meant business.

“You’ve had your fun. Now, either put that knife away, or I’ll have you under me before your next exhale.”

“Ha ha.” Her eyes rolled as if my threat weren’t serious.

Free from the restraints, I snatched the hand brandishing the knife, and forced it away from my face. I tightened my grip. “Drop it.”

She gasped, her mouth twisting in pain. The blade fell from her grip, landing somewhere behind the couch.

Good. At least she listened.

In a swift move, I swung my legs over the side and pulled myself up. Before she had a chance to think, I grabbed her hips, pulling her close. Inches apart, her frightened gaze widened, but my wolf lapped up every second. Her cherry lips parted, calling me, tempting me for a taste. *Bad timing, boy.*

With a frown capturing her expression, she thrust her palms into my chest and recoiled.

“Who are you?” I asked, still holding her tight against me, which wasn’t helping my inner wolf stay at bay.

When she tried to back up, she tripped over something behind her—my boots— and tumbled sideways onto the couch, drawing me with her. I lurched forward from the momentum. One hand perched on the back of the couch, the other against a cushion alongside her shoulder. My body pressed on top of her, and she was deliciously sweet. I sniffed her perspiration, a sugary fragrance, and blood. But beneath lay her flesh—raw— akin to her delicious wolf scent. And my wolf roared to attention, inhaling her.

An angry huff of air escaped her lips. “Get off me.”

“Told you I’d have you beneath me. Anyway, your wolf doesn’t seem to mind.” I sensed it surging through her veins, swelling with excitement, and mine responded with the same fervor.

She squirmed. “Shut up.”

“I don’t manhandle women unless they insist, but I’ll make an exception for you.

Now, tell me who are you and why you tied me up.” What exactly was her story? Most people who introduced themselves with a knife first came with a trainload of baggage.

Her glare could decapitate someone, and maybe she was tougher than I’d first given her credit. “I’ll never let Daan get Tianna. Last time I warned him I’d kill the next goon he sent. So your luck just ran out.”

A tidal wave of bewilderment rattled me, and I pulled back slightly off her body. “Wait, what? Who’s Daan?” My head spun from her confusing words.

The deep guttural growl of her wolf wavered between us. She lifted her chin, her mouth pursed and eyes fixed on me.

She shoved her palm into my shoulder. My elbow gave way and tipped me sideways, throwing me off balance and landing me on the floor with a thud. She scrambled over the arm of the couch, then faced me in an attack posture with curled hands raised.

I climbed to my feet, convinced I'd walked into a situation that had nothing to do with me. "Look, maybe we've—"

Her right hook clipped my face. Not enough to send me reeling back, but a shattering sting reverberated through my skull.

"Damn. Where'd you learn to hit like that?" Back in Hungary, I'd spent months teaching seasoned guards to hit with such precision.

She stood there with her skin vibrating as if she were ready to shift into her wolf form.

No chance of talking if that happened. Just fangs and fur. I had no intention of hurting this wulfkin, especially when I was uncertain about what the hell was going on.

I stepped back and raised my palms to show her I posed no danger. "There's been a misunderstanding."

Behind her, I noted the white fox sprawled across the kitchen counter. Next to the animal lay several interesting metal instruments. Medical supplies? "What did you do to the fox?"

Her gaze didn't leave me. "He had a cut on his back leg. I stitched him up. Now, who are you? And did you hurt the fox?"

She was a doc or vet? That explained what she said about constricting blood vessels and stuff. I swiveled my stinging jaw from side to side. She really did throw a devil of a punch. This one had obviously been trained to defend herself and knew how and where to hit someone. Admiration? But at the same time sadness that she'd obviously had to learn this for some reason.

But she didn't act like a hunter. "I'm in town visiting my parents for a two-week vacation." My secondary reason for visiting Susi had zilch to do with this little minx or anyone else in town. It was between Manu and me, though right now even I didn't know what exactly that meeting would entail. I'd find out soon enough, but Varlac matters were never to be discussed with general wulfkin. "And I found the fox tangled in tree limbs not far from your place."

"Where are you from?" With her gaze never leaving mine for more than a second, she retrieved the knife from behind the couch, grasping it so tight her knuckles turned white.

Boy. Someone had hurt this wulfkin so much that she was ready to take on someone twice her size. That weighted heavily on me because no one ought to harm a female or a child.

I released a long breath and backed toward the kitchen, studying the white fox, whose little chest rose and fell in slow motion. Coming clean on who I was might put Cacey at ease, but then again, most wulfkin who met Varlac for the first time tended to go into a strange panic episode. Had a lot to do with the older Varlac leader who wasn't shy to punish anyone who didn't follow his rules.

"I live in Hungary, a quick flight from here, and work as the second-in-command to the Varlac alpha. You're safe around me."

Her mouth dropped open, eyes widened.

Yep, the deer-in-headlights reaction was normal.

"Bullshit. Try again, but use a more convincing lie." With the knife still in her grip, she folded her arms just below her breasts. Even though we weren't touching now, I still felt their softness crushed against my chest. Not huge, but a perfect fit for each hand.

"Come closer and I'll show you." She arched an eyebrow.

"Suit yourself." My gaze swept the room to the vase of mistletoe on a side table and several plush toys scattered on the carpeted floor. Even a basket of wrinkled clothes sat near

the hallway. A family home with children, probably only one given the single pair of small boots near the back doors. Photo frames dotted the wall in the corridor of a young dark-haired girl. No sign of the father. Was that why this minx was so jumpy and ready to slash her knife around? She'd had to fight to protect her child.

Her jawline set, but she tilted her chin up once. "Show me this so-called proof."

I turned my head away from her but leaned my right ear nearer. Any wulfskin who worked with the Varlac received a tattoo with three tear marks. The ink behind my earlobe declared I'd been accepted into a Varlac family, and my loyalty would always lie with them.

"Shit! Are you in Susi to kill someone?" Her voice trembled, and I studied the fast steps she took as she recoiled away from me.

"As if." Why did everyone jump to the worst-case scenario? Why couldn't I be here to protect someone?

"You're a Varlac. It's what you do."

"I don't blame you for the misconception. I guess the Varlac clan should spend time on their image. But like I said, I'm here on a short vacation to visit my parents."

She stood across the island counter from me as if my presence would cause her harm. "You should leave." Her voice quivered.

Outside, the wind battered the trees and howled a menacing song. The house continued to creak with each gust. Past the French doors leading to the backyard, snow was already half a foot deep along the porch. My attention shifted to the overpacked bag in the corner. What had frightened this wulfskin away from a safe haven in the storm?

"Neither of us are going anywhere tonight." I made my way to the fireplace to dry my clothes and calm the chill settling in my bones. Sure, she seemed ready to claw my throat out, but I'd take my chances with her over the snowstorm ripping through the woods.

“Don’t tell me what to do. And maybe I don’t feel safe near a Varlac. I might call our alpha.” She still held on to the kitchen blade as she stalked toward the hearth.

I smirked. “You’re safer with me than anyone else. And go ahead, call Manu. Tell him I said hi.” I stuck out an open hand. “We should try this again. I’m Vincent.”

She stared at me but didn’t return the gesture. Her body was slender, but she had enough curves to make me imagine her in the nude and us eating breakfast in bed.

Once she reached the other end of the large fireplace, she halted. “So, who are your parents?” A distrusting tone underlined her question.

“The Lyalls. They live in the small cabin—”

She gasped. “The deepest one in the woods. Brita’s your mom? She’d mentioned her son’s name was Vin. That’s short for Vincent, isn’t it?” Her mouth gaped open, and her gaze scanned me as if trying to find similarities. Though most people said I took after my dad with his solid frame.

I nodded.

Her weary expression softened. “You have her chin and eyes. I’ve treated your mom’s injuries for the past week after her nasty accident in the woods. A broken hip isn’t an easy thing to heal, especially for an elderly wulfskin.”

“Really? I can’t thank you enough for taking care of her.” Something inside me softened because maybe this wulfskin was more than she appeared. She’d helped my mom, and for that, I was at her mercy.

“She’ll be fine with rest, if your dad can keep her indoors. But she never told me she had a Varlac son. She’s so proud, and beams each time she says your name, but it never occurred to me you were in the ruling clan.” She paused for a moment, focusing on the blaze. “I’ve never met a Varlac before. The stories I’ve heard paint you as ...” Shadows danced behind her eyes. “I’m gobsmacked. And your parents are so sweet.”

“Who says I’m not sweet?”

She shrugged in a way that said she didn't believe me in the slightest. And if I were in her position, after being fed years of threats from the Varlac, I wouldn't trust me either. Except I reported to the new Varlac leader, Marcin. He believed in helping wulfin; he wanted to unite packs, not terrorize them with rules. Marcin intended to implement changes that would improve all wulfin lives, and for that reason, I stayed by his side.

But of course with the old regime still permeating the European packs' lifestyle after centuries of power, changing old behaviors was never a straightforward approach. It would take time.

Now if I intended to share a roof for the night with this minx, I'd make her see I wasn't the typical Varlac everyone feared. She'd see that the ruling pack was changing and for the better.

A scratching sound came from the kitchen. I jerked around to find an empty counter. "Hey, where's the fox?"

## CHAPTER 5

CACEY

I backed away from Vincent, who remained in the kitchen slouching on one leg, hands hanging off his hips. I searched underneath the couch for the missing fox. No luck.

My thoughts kept returning to the freakin' Varlac in my house. I would welcome a polar bear before anyone from his clan. Varlac were a bad omen. See one and a dead body appeared. They might be the ruling pack, but they were bastards and held zero sympathies for the average wulfkin.

Could Daan have hired a Varlac to do his dirty work? It didn't seem likely—the whole time I'd been with Daan, he never once mentioned the Varlac. He'd have bragged or threatened me if he had connections that high. Regardless, I wasn't dropping my guard with Vincent.

"You know," Vincent called out from across the room. Like poison, his voice left me tingling.

"When I used to live in Susi," he continued, "locals were hospitable, welcoming, and not brandishing knives." He shrugged and cocked an eyebrow. "Just saying. Plus, I don't even know your name."

"Life changes. Deal with it." No way would he catch me unaware, especially after stealing the liberty of my night off. And I still didn't trust him, so how could I be hospitable after receiving Daan's surprise letter today?

"Or maybe you're the only change here."



I squared my shoulders. “What does that mean? Actually, I don’t care. What has Daan been up to lately?”

His brow bunched into a state of befuddled lines. “Who?”

No quivers underlined his response, no twitching from a lie. As a Varlac, was he an expert at fibbing? “Your buddy.”

He studied me, long and hard, his gaze boring into me. “Never heard of him.” He strolled into the hallway. “Here, foxy fox. Where the hell are you?”

Okay, did I interpret this whole thing wrong? I grabbed my cell and dialed Anja again.

The disconnected beeps jabbed my heart. *Damn the storm.* The snow outside continued slashing sideways, smacking into the glass doors. I ran a hand down my face. Should I leave and go collect Tianna or wait out the blizzard? The lights flickered. Geez, all I needed. Surely, no one would venture out into the storm. And if the wulfskin inside my house was working for Daan, better he stayed here than go elsewhere to hunt for my daughter.

I stalked after Vincent, into the corridor, wondering if he was really searching the house for Tianna.

He vanished into my bedroom, and I rushed after him to find him pulling open my closet. “Hey, get out of there!”

He made a wow shape with his mouth. “Someone has a shoe addiction.”

Fire claimed my cheeks. Who was this guy, prying into my business? “I doubt the fox opened the door and climbed inside.” I stormed across the room and slammed the closet shut. “Most of the shoes were on sale, okay. Don’t judge.”

His gaze swept to the wooden cutout of my name tacked to the door by Tianna, who’d insisted I needed one for my room. “Cacey, I’m guessing you’re new to this pack and probably upsetting the locals with your wild ways. This is a pretty laid-back town.”

“Excuse me, but I’m contributing to this town as their local GP, so don’t get high and mighty with me. You haven’t been

here for the past eight months, so how do you know what's been going on?" *Sure, make yourself at home. Make assumptions.* I released an exasperated breath. "Did you arrive in town with anyone else?"

"Nope. Just me." He glanced at me, then the blue bed sheets, and then back in my direction. "Big bed for one wulfkin."

I put both hands on my hips. "Are you in my room to interrogate me or find the fox?"

He sniffed the air. "I can smell it as if it's everywhere, yet nowhere." When he sauntered toward me, I backed up for him to pass. I traipsed into Tianna's bedroom, across the hall. The earthy, fox scent lingered there too, but faint, as Vincent had said. I crouched low and searched beneath the bed. Clean. Nothing under the desk or in my daughter's treasure box piled high with toy wolves. Back in the hallway, I found Vincent emerging from the bathroom.

"You've got a sauna." He glanced down at his damp clothes. Really? That was his focus? "Did you find the fox?"

"If you never make time in life to enjoy the small things, what's the use of living?" "Says the Varlac who's on guard for this clan twenty-four/seven." And potentially working with my ex. Until I had concrete evidence, I wasn't letting him out of my sight.

"Hey, I'm on holiday. No guarding. Anyway, no fox."

I spun on my heels, marched into the main room, and searched the kitchen, around the couch, and even in the linen closet. "Why'd you bring that animal into my house? Now I've got a loose fox in here. Thanks."

"If the animal escaped, it means you've healed it, so that's fantastic." He ambled closer, his gaze studying the fireplace. "Arctic foxes are considered spirit animals in this part of the world. They appear for people to remind them of fun and enjoyment in life."

"Never took you for being spiritual." A Varlac with faith in something other than repression, torture, and killing. Who

would have thought?

“Well”—he wandered into the kitchen, searching between the fridge and cupboard— “you shouldn’t judge people by their cover. It pays to be more open-minded.”

“I’m open-minded, but I don’t want Tianna to freak out when a fox jumps out at her during the night.”

The crack of wood resonated outside, along with more branches falling against the roof. My insides were like glass, shattering at every sound.

I stared into the backyard where a jumble of ferocious winds and snow whiplashed back and forth.

I’d love to instantly dry Vincent’s clothes, give him a quick bite of food, and get him the hell out of my house. But could I live with myself?

I closed the distance between us. “Look, have a shower. I’ll get you a bathrobe to wear and prepare us a meal while your clothes dry. How does that sound?” Maybe he was lying about why he was in Susi. But I remembered the surprise in his eyes when I first mentioned my ex. And my wolf wanted closeness with Vincent, not to attack him. So, I had to believe my instincts about this Varlac, or I’d go insane with worry. Yet my mind kept sprinting back to Daan’s letter, along with how much I loathed him for making me constantly check over my shoulder, for threatening Tianna, for reminding me that I wasn’t safe anywhere. The storm was a momentary obstacle, a blip that only delayed the inevitable. Our time in Susi had come to an abrupt end, and that notion terrified me. I couldn’t stop the shakes engulfing my body or the speed with which my pulse sprinted. The moment the blizzard died down, I was hightailing to collect Tianna.

Besides, Vincent was from the Varlac clan. He might report me to the emperor for punching him, and I’d end up with warrior wulfskin troops on my doorstep. Yep, my hospitality was expected, so I’d oblige. One night only, otherwise he wouldn’t make it far in this weather. And I didn’t need the death of a Varlac on my conscience.

“Come, I’ll get you a towel.” I headed toward the bathroom, his footsteps trailing behind me.

He stood in the doorway, waiting for goddess knows what. “Here you go.” I shoved a clean towel and bathrobe into his hands. “Enjoy.”

I walked away, and when I reached the end of the hallway, I glanced over my shoulder to find Vincent still staring at me. What was he doing? “You okay?”

He nodded and retreated, shutting the door behind him.

Back in the main room, I collapsed onto the couch in front of the crackling hearth. My tangled emotions were a mess, and my heart pounded. I plucked my cell from the coffee table and made another quick call to Anja to check on Tianna. No connection. Of course not. No use e-mailing. Anja didn’t do Internet.

Releasing a long exhale, I plated the steaks because standing still was killing me. My mind drowned in how fast my life had fallen into darkness. I grabbed Henri’s famous hot chocolate mix that he’d slipped into my shopping bag. He’d promised it would relax me. I sighed. Goddess, how I needed a bucket of calm.

*Keep my head focused, and control my tongue. Get through the night with a stranger in my house. Easy peasy.*

With the milk simmering on the stove, I grabbed the paper bag with the hot chocolate and untied the ribbon. A wonderful aroma of cinnamon, peppermint candy canes, and chocolate wafted out. Oh, yum. I poured some into the milk, stirring while tapping the paper bag to pour more into the saucepan.

A loud throat clearing sounded behind me.

I flinched, knocking the entire mixture into the milk. *Shit.* Mocha colored powder floated on top of the simmering milk. I grabbed a spoon and stirred.

“Whatever that is, it smells heavenly.”

Rushing to the fridge, I grabbed the milk and poured it into the mixture, attempting to balance the ratio. Considering I’d

just added five times the amount, it was like trying to save the sinking *Titanic*. “I ruined it.”

“Nonsense.” Vincent’s bare arm brushed against mine, reaching for the spoon in my hand. I stepped back. Why was he only wearing a towel?

I shuddered. My gaze traveled along his thick arms, a six-pack stomach that could double as a surfboard, and holy smokes ... who had layers of muscles? Did his bicep feel as hard as it looked?

“W-why are you naked?”

He faced me, wearing a mischievous grin while stirring the hot chocolate. “Bathrobe didn’t fit, and if I tried to shove my arms into the sleeves, I’d resemble the Hulk. My clothes are soaking. But if I’m distracting you—”

“No. It’s fine.” The response flew out of my mouth too quick. *Stay away from the Varlac who looked as if he’d just stepped out of an ancient gladiator battle.* Not that I was interested, because I wasn’t, but I couldn’t stop staring at the sharp curves of muscle across his back. My ex was a stick compared to this wulfkin—in fact, all my previous boyfriends were.

He returned to the stove, his lips widening. What was he smirking at?

I had to keep my head straight, remembering to keep Tianna safe, to provide her a life she deserved, and that meant preparing to leave Susi behind. Everything else paled in comparison.

Still, my gaze locked on the half-nude guy in the kitchen. Maybe there were benefits to having a male in my life—companionship, protection, eye candy, and sex—oh, how I missed that.

My sights lowered to the tight butt beneath the white towel. Goddess, if he turned around now, I might melt and make a complete fool of myself. A distraction was in order, so I dashed into the bathroom. I scooped up his clothes that lay on the floor and rushed them into the dryer, but not before I

inhaled his muskiness. My wolf stirred in the center of my chest, inhaling his scent, insisting he was perfect for us and would do very well.

*Back down, girl. This wulfkin isn't on offer. He might even be the enemy.*

The Varlac clan rarely ventured beyond their own pack for a mate, or so I'd heard. But Vincent didn't quite strike me as the Varlac everyone described. That sounded wrong, even to me. We were the same kind, all wulfkin, but not for hierarchy. Most of us knew our place, and if we played our parts and listened to the rules, no one got hurt.

Yet, his parents were the most loving wulfkin in the world and cared for Tianna when Anja wasn't free. Didn't mean their son was cut from the same cloth. I'd overheard numerous tales of Varlacs using their power to take what they wanted. What if Vincent was involved in one of Daan's schemes? At least once every six months, Daan would come up with a new ploy to cheat a nearby pack out of their territory for his gain.

I pressed the lid shut on the dryer and pushed the start button. Vincent's clothes swirled inside. The whirr of the motor was a sharp reminder to get Vincent dressed as soon as possible. With my back to the dryer, I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt.

Couldn't have him freeze to death, or me gawking. Though, if I was being entirely honest with myself, between his nakedness and the way he moved, damn, a girl could picture him in her fantasies.

As I stepped into the corridor, a scratching sound escalated from Tianna's bedroom.

*The fox.*

I bolted inside and breathed in the light musky, skunk-like smell. Oh, it was here. "Where are you?" I checked under the bed. Clear. Inside the closet, pushing Tianna's clothes aside. Nothing. A flicker of light from the crystal light catcher hanging from the window caught my eye. My daughter had insisted on buying it, and even called it a mooncatcher,

because she had wanted to use it to catch the moon's light, rather than the sun's.

The scratching came again, drawing my attention to the wall behind me.

Retreating in slow motion, I waited, listened.

More noises, this time from the wall. *Shit no.* I ran to the opposite wall and placed an ear against the plaster. Not a sound.

“Is everything all right?” Vincent's sudden voice made me jump. Did he even make a noise when he walked? When he stepped into the room, my gaze dipped to the *V* tapering between his hips. The simple fold of the towel threatened to come apart any moment. I swallowed hard ... whatever he packed under there wasn't small in the slightest. Hell, clothes were in order and fast. I could wrap him in a bed sheet before I morphed into a sex-starved wulfin. Or was it too late? Without a man in my life for more than a year, no wonder I'd lost all inhibitions.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he stood there in his full glory ... well aware I was ogling him. Talk about arrogant, pretentious ... delicious.

Changing the topic before heat consumed my cheeks, I said, “Your stupid fox has gotten himself inside my walls. Now he'll die in there and stink up the place.”

“Might improve the mustiness. You've got water problems in this place and should get someone to look at it.” The bridge of his nose creased, but when the scratch sound came again, he rushed over to my side, a hand pressed to the wall. He nodded. “Something's in there. I can sense it moving.”

“How did the fox get into the walls?” Wild animals living in my walls wasn't acceptable in the slightest. Tianna would freak out, but then like a thunderous wave, I recalled that it no longer mattered. We were moving out, and emptiness took hold. I refused to grumble and let Daan win. I'd die before he took our daughter.

Vincent's deep voice sliced my thoughts. "Got any holes or areas of the house needing repair? What about the basement? Maybe that's how the fox got into the walls."

"Nope. And the door to the basement is shut."

"Perhaps a critter from outside climbed in through the roof or a hole in the house's exterior. It's winter, and animals are searching for a warm spot to—"

White movement flashed past the doorway in the hallway. "The fox."

Vincent sprinted out of the room, faster than I'd expected someone of his size to move. I chased him, but before I got there, a tremendous crash sounded.

*What now?* I darted after him, dread clinging to my insides.

When I rounded the corner to the living room, I found the Christmas tree on its side. A white fur ball with steak in its mouth vanished into a tiny crevice between the fireplace and the wall.

Vincent glanced back at me. "No holes in the walls, you say?" Sweet mother of sex. My body flushed within an inferno.

I didn't care if the fox took both steaks and the pot of chocolate milk with him. Not when Vincent stood stark naked in my living room. His towel lay behind him, tangled in the branches of the fallen Christmas tree.

He must have seen the shock on my face before I could hide it, as a small smile played on his lips.



## CHAPTER 6

VINCENT

I cleared my throat. “If you keep staring at me like I’m chocolate, we’re going to have a problem.”

Cacey’s incredible cyan eyes pinned me where I stood. I didn’t mind in the slightest.

Damn, I encouraged her to gawk because all my previous girlfriends had.

“W-what problem?” Her cheeks glowed pink, and I loved the reaction I roused in her.

Better her this way than flushed with anger and ready to spear me with her knife.

She took a deep inhale and dashed past me, toward the Christmas tree. She yanked the towel free from the branches and threw it at me. “Put something on and make yourself helpful.” She clenched her fists tightly by her side.

*Okay.* This wulfskin didn’t like to play, so what would it take to lower her guard? I wrapped the towel around my waist and restored my sense of modesty, then had the tree upright in a second flat. Cacey stood across from me, straightening the decorations. I reattached a bauble with the name Tianna painted in white script across its purple surface.

“You know, the wulfskin pack in Susi are the only ones I’m aware of who celebrate Christmas.” I attempted to ease Cacey into a different conversation. While flirting came as easily as breathing, it seemed wrong to tease her. This was her home with Tianna, and the last thing she’d needed was a stranger knocking on her door.

My wolf recognized the connection between us—primal and raw—but with our human sides, life wasn't so straightforward. Nothing ever was. My last girlfriend, Laila, dated two other wulfskin while with me, and even now the ache of rejection stung. She'd called to ask if I was interested in still dating her while she remained with the other wulfskin. What fuckin' world was she living in? The real question was why hadn't I known what sort of person she was before we dated? My alpha, Marcin, would answer that by saying I dated with my dick, not my head. And maybe at first that was true, but for a while, I believed Laila might be the one. The only fool in that relationship was me. But that was a past I intended to forget. After meeting with the alpha of Susi, Manu, and checking on my parents, I'd enjoy a short vacation in town. No other complications.

Cacey's soft voice lulled me out of my mind. "Christmas has always fascinated my daughter. Since she first watched a snowman cartoon, she's been obsessed with the festivities. She's been begging me to take her to Santa Claus's house in the North Pole." Cacey reattached the fallen tinsel to a branch. "I promised her this year we'll have the best Christmas she's ever had. I know it's insane, as the festive season means little to wulfskin, but I'll do anything for her."

The twinkle in her eyes was genuine, yet behind her gaze lay something else—sorrow. Cacey and her daughter deserved a happy Christmas, and maybe I could help. Get them a new tree, ask Mom to bake them her famous deer pie. But at the back of my mind, I couldn't forget the name she'd mentioned earlier with a tremble in her voice.

"Who's Daan?"

Cacey's lips thinned. Her gaze lowered as she fidgeted with a shiny, red ornament in the shape of a bell. She gave a wistful sigh. "He's the alpha of the Denmark pack." She slid a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "Sometimes we make stupid mistakes in life. I don't want to talk about him. He's ancient history." Her chin lifted to a defiant angle.

Had Daan harmed her? I'd break his ribs if he showed his face in Susi. In fact, when I got back to Hungary, I'd find him

and pay him a special visit. As an alpha, Daan had a responsibility to keep his pack safe.

Her eyes widened, and her gaze jerked toward the kitchen. “Oh shit, the hot chocolate.”

She skirted around me, brushing my arm. My wolf rumbled in my chest. He demanded we take her into our arms, comfort her, and reassure her that no one would ever touch her again.

“I already took it off the stove.” I aligned the star on top of the tree as a sense of calmness threaded through me. The last time I’d felt this way was back home with my parents. Then again, the town of Susi had a way of grounding me.

“Thank you.” She served the steaming chocolate milk into two mugs and set them next to a plate with only one steak. “You should enjoy your meal.”

I stepped up to the counter and cut the raw steak with the knife. Half on my plate, half on Cacey’s. Even though I was ready to eat four of these steaks, I’d rather go hungry than see someone else miss out. “Better eat before that sneaky fox steals it.”

She broke into a chuckle, and her face changed into that of unrestrained mirth. “Can’t believe you brought that thing into my house.”

“Hey, every critter needs a safe place from the storm. And now he has a meal too.” With both of us sitting on stools at the counter, we ate, and somehow the silence now became the enemy. Regardless, I wanted to make it clear to Cacey that she should feel safe in her home. “This is a decent pack in Susi. You and your daughter will be protected. Let me know if Daan shows up, and I’ll take care of him.”

She slowly turned, wearing a strange expression—a blend of joy and confusion. Her eyes kept wandering across my face as if searching for something. “Why do you care? I’m sure Varlac have bigger issues.”

“You distrust us, don’t you?” She shrugged.

How could I put this in a delicate way without giving a two-hour history lecture of the Varlac family in Hungary? “There’s always at least one rotten soul in every pack.

Unfortunately, the Varlac had theirs appointed as emperor. But don’t paint everyone with the same tainted brush because of one wulfin’s actions.”

Cacey narrowed her eyes, studying me as if searching for that loose thread to pick.

I lowered my gaze, away from the judgment every Varlac received. Having to explain myself, to defend the ruling clan. “If I were the monster you think I am, I would have arrested you the moment you punched me.”

Her breath hitched, and when she finally spoke, she stared at me, unblinking, as if I were a television and not a wulfin to be interacted with. “You might do that once the storm runs its course.”

“You have my word.” I pacified her as the conversation was getting old quick and resembled a circus act—me rehashing the same story. Reassuring others that I wouldn’t harm them, that they didn’t need to hold their breath around me, that I wasn’t looking for any excuse to detain them. “I’m here to visit my family and have no intention of hurting you. I appreciate you for taking me into your home and feeding me.”

A softness washed behind her eyes, along with a hint of something else. She ran a finger over the lip of the mug cupped in her hand. The silence that followed softened our moods. It seemed as if I had shared a meal with a friend and the uneasiness between strangers was evaporating.

She climbed off the stool. “Let’s go sit on the couch. It’s more comfortable.”

The crackle of the fire and the humming drone of the dryer in the distance was a soft, repetitive tune.

We sat at opposite ends of the couch. I took a long sip of the hot chocolate. At once, a flavor boost of chocolate, cinnamon, and something else, something bitter, danced across my tongue.

“Whoa, it’s strong.” Cacey glanced at me, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “Think I ruined it. Too much mixture.”

“Nah.” I swallowed another mouthful of the sugary milk. “Nowhere as bad as my first attempt at making a cup of coffee. It’s good.”

“On the bright side, it’ll keep us extra toasty.” She sat cross-legged, glancing my way, sipping on her drink. Was she considering the best way to grill me to make sure I didn’t murder her in her sleep? Or picturing me ripping her clothes off, bending her over the arm of the couch, and taking her from behind? The latter was on my mind.

Outside, the blizzard howled, and the tree branches occasionally scraped across the roof. “Back home, we hold wrestling matches during snowstorms. The wulfkin get restless being stuck inside, so it makes for light entertainment.”

“Wrestling, hey? Is oil or jelly involved?” The corners of her mouth tugged upward.

Laughter rolled through my chest and burst free. “I can just picture it now. My alpha rolling around in strawberry jelly. Would never happen, but I might propose it during the next storm.”

“So, you’re second-in-command, you said. Do you ever want to be alpha of your own territory?”

The last remnants of hot chocolate washed down my throat, leaving me too warm. “I’m already an alpha of a small pack, but would love to have my own piece of land one day. Isn’t that every wulfkin’s dream?”

“Not mine.”

“Being an alpha means having responsibility for other wulfkin and keeping them safe.

Always putting them first. By the way you care for Tianna, you’d make an incredible leader.”

I stood, and she handed me her cup, her thumb caressing my fingers. A single jolt of electricity zapped through me. She

flinched, as did my wolf, who pressed against my insides, urging me to get a move on with Cacey already.

She wiggled her cup in my hand. “D ... do you mind filling me up?”

My gaze locked on those red lips, certain they’d taste sweeter than this brew. Damn, speaking of filling her ... *Tone it down, man, and put it back in your pants. If I had pants, I would.*

Outside, a gust of wind broke the silence as I returned with full cups.

“My ex is an alpha,” she said. “He’s a perfect example of why not everyone is suited to the job.”

“Daan?” Back on the couch, I downed half my drink, while Cacey finished hers in record time and wore a giddy grin.

“Yeah, he’s a jerk.” She blew a long breath upward, sending strands of hair billowing into a wave across her brow. “But I won’t talk about him, so stop asking.”

“I can keep you safe from him.” I inched closer, embracing the inferno building within me. Why was it so hot? Inside my head, heat waves rippled. I studied Cacey’s wicked smile, the gentle slope of her shoulders.

Slowly, she reached out and touched my knee. Her fingers were matchsticks, fueling the blaze.

“Something about you makes me want to trust you.” Using my thigh for leverage, she pushed herself to her feet and headed for the kitchen.

I set my mug on the floor near my feet, missing her hand against my skin. Where did she go? I cranked my head around and spotted Cacey gulping back the rest of the brew straight from the pot.

“Isn’t that hot?”

She lowered the saucepan, sporting a white mustache, grinning. “Not at all.” Then she broke into an uncontrollable giggle, and before I knew it, I was standing next to her.

When had I moved? Didn't matter with a gorgeous wulfin whose voice had my hair standing on end for all the right reasons.

Even though my brain told me to sit back down, remember who I was, right then, I could barely remember my name, let alone logic. The earlier electric charge sparked deep in my gut and radiated within me.

My wolf hungered for a mouthful of the morsel before us. And with the way Cacey stared at me, a savagery in her eyes as her laughter eased off, she might mirror my thoughts.

Despite the muddled fog in my head, a strong urge soared through me. My wolf stirred awake. He demanded that we had to keep Cacey safe and protected at any cost. She was ours.

## CHAPTER 7

CACEY

I hadn't laughed that hard for a long time. Yet for the life of me, I couldn't recall the joke. Staring at Vincent, I considered jumping into his soul, diving deep and never resurfacing. I'd misplaced my inhibitions. But I also couldn't think straight to remember why being with him was a bad thing.

The fox had darted so fast and disappeared into a crack near the fireplace that I didn't even know existed. A spirit animal that reminded wulfskin to enjoy life, or so Vincent had told me. Maybe the fox represented a premonition, a message I ought to listen to.

A childish giddiness filled my soul. I inched closer to Vincent, whose chest rose and fell, his starved gaze locking onto me. His musky, manly scent engulfed me, infusing heat into every inch of my being, caressing my wolf.

My heart beat so fast, I swore my whole body pulsed. I wiped my upper lip. Milk streaked my hand, and the giggles returned threefold. My stomach ached in the best possible way.

"I seem to have a milk problem." Had I just purred those words? A grin raised the corners of his mouth.

His powerful hands gripped my waist. In one swift motion, he lifted me onto the counter and wedged himself between my thighs.

My voice vanished as the thrumming of my pulse sharpened. Every molecule in me focused on the point of contact of his fingers finding skin under my shirt.



“You going to help or keep gawking?” My breathing became rapid and uneven.

Vincent’s presence made me batty with temptation, with desperation, with urges I hadn’t experienced for anyone.

He leaned in, his mouth on my upper lip, licking my lips, leaving me trembling.

The need coursing through my veins zoomed faster, and I embraced the flames radiating off his body.

I slid my hand to the nape of his neck, drawing closer. Nothing else felt more perfect.

Not the tingle in the pit of my gut, not the way the recessed lights illuminated his midnight eyes, and definitely not the cinnamon aroma teasing my nostrils. Only Vincent and me.

He pulled back. “It’s like you’re inside my head. I want you.”

“Fuck.” My response was a squeak. I couldn’t take another breath after hearing a hunk like Vincent saying he desired me.

His fingers swept through my hair and grabbed a handful. The back of my head cradled against his fist. He tilted it back, and my chin lifted when he stared down at me. “From the first moment I met you in front of the grocery store, I fantasized about tasting you.” His devilish smirk left me burning up. “Unless you have any objections?”

“If you don’t hurry, you’ll have a major problem.”

“I like your style.” His voice flowed over me like caramel. His mouth brushed mine, hot, fiery, and demanding, his tongue pressing past the seam of my lips. I kissed him back, and my world fell away.

An inferno invaded my insides, leaving me breathless. I was against his warm chest, and my heart fluttered. My wolf stirred too, giving her approval, insisting Vincent was ours now. Always.

I shoved her aside and focused my attention on Vincent.

His tongue swept along my chin, nuzzling on the hollow of my throat while his hands unclipped my bra. In one swift movement, he lifted my shirt and bra over my head and tossed them behind him. My nipples beaded tightly in anticipation.

I gasped at the way he homed in on my breasts.

“Damn sexy.” He reached out with both hands, cupping my breasts, kneading them.

His thumbs flicked the taut nipples.

A moan trilled past my throat, and my eyelids waved shut as I melted beneath his strokes. The moment his mouth seized a breast, the apex between my thighs tightened.

I eased my eyes open and found Vincent studying me. He winked and ran his tongue in a circular motion around each breast as if I were no more than ice cream. If he asked, I’d give him the entire tub to lick.

“You’re killing me.” My hips rocked back and forth, unable to scratch the insatiable itch burning deep inside.

When his teeth gently gnawed on a nipple, I mewled with delight. He pulled, heightening the sensation as his hands tugged at the button on my pants, unzipping me, yet somehow I felt completely unprepared. After a night of gawking at Vincent, finding him naked in my living room, I should be jumping his bones. Desire burned through me, but a light shiver of the unknown trickled through me as well.

Releasing his hold, he focused on drawing my pants down, and I shimmied to help him drag them and my panties off.

I reached over and trailed my hands across his hard, muscled arms. My brain was on fire from touching the chiseled God in front of me. “How did you get so strong?”

“Lots of training.”

“Mmm hmm.” My hand caressed lower and over the huge bulge beneath the towel around his waist.

Vincent groaned as he nudged my hand away. “Not yet.” Instead, he took me into his arms and kissed me with ferocity. Lips, tongue, and his whispering breath against my cheek. His

chest pressed against mine, steel covered in warmth. He nudged me onto my back, the counter cold, but a welcoming reprieve from the heat invading me.

His mouth trailed lower on my chest, my abdomen, as his hands caressed down my thighs, over my knees, and down to my feet. He lifted my legs onto the counter and spread me.

He glanced up at me, a swirl of lust cramming behind his eyes. "I'm going to lick you until you beg me to stop."

Why'd he have to tell me? Knowing it only made the anticipation worse. A shiver ran the length of my body at the image of him taking me. He slid a finger along my silkiness, stealing any attempt I made at a response. My mewls played a melody deep inside my throat. He took mock bites out of my thighs as he dipped lower. "You're intoxicating, and I want you now." He latched onto my bud, sucking, his tongue flicking.

I writhed beneath him, floating on air. This was magic. My body and wolf having a mind of her own, responded to Vincent like a puppet. "Yes. Yes." He drove me closer to the edge. The electricity on my skin sparked, the rise of my wolf intense.

When I arched my back, he slid two fingers just past the entrance, then three, short-circuiting my brain. I cried out as I was overcome by an orgasm, teasing, shuddering me at the core. I released every bit of pent-up tension.

With a long lick across my sensitive folds, Vincent stood, his eyes caught in his own ecstasy. "You're delicious."

He ripped off his towel, and I snapped my head forward for a better gawk. Sure, I'd seen him before, but sweet goddess, not in full hardness mode. I panted.

"Come here." He took me by the elbows and lifted me upright, his hands gliding behind and across my back.

Beneath his passion, I swooned, lost in a world I never intended to emerge from. His lips traced my cheeks and across to my ears. "Wrap those sexy legs around me."

I held on to Vincent, and he picked me up into his arms, hands squeezing my butt. “Let’s go to my room,” I suggested.

He shook his head and grinned. Instead, he carried me to the rug in front of the fireplace and knelt down in slow motion, never wavering once. His strength was unbelievable. With my back on the rug, I bathed in the lust capturing Vincent’s gaze.

He rolled back on his heels and pried apart my knees as he inched closer and guided his tip along my sleekness. I moaned from the desperation to take him. With a kiss, he’d breathed fire into me, a heady passion filling every inch of me.

“You’re ready?”

“You bet your sweet ass.” I raised my hips up to meet him. “Stop teasing. Come on.”

He slid himself into me, filling me with a shudder of ecstasy. My inside walls clenched against his girth as he pushed deeper.

My groans escalated, my body taking him in. Shit, who was that huge? “You okay?” he asked.

“Why are you stopping?”

He broke into a chuckle. “Checking.” He drove back into me, faster, deeper. Shivers overcame every fiber of my being.

“Harder.”

He rocked into me so fast, I forgot where I started and where I ended. We were a tangle of limbs, and I never wanted this to end. A tingle gripped me as his slapping continued, the sound a siren’s call.

With my ankles in his hands, he positioned my legs against his shoulders and ... “Goddess.” He reached so deep on the next thrust that an orgasm shattered me from head to toe.

I shook, riding the tide as he rammed hard. He moaned and pulsed inside me. After we caught a breath, he lowered my legs on either side of him as he pulled out.

I lay there, spent. Vincent crashed alongside me, and he rolled me over onto him, his legs snaking around mine. “We’re

doing that a few more times tonight,” he breathed heavily.

A laugh broke free. “You animal. Let me rest a bit, then I’m all yours.”

My world faded into the background, because while I remained in Vincent’s arms and drunk on his kisses, nothing could touch me.

## CHAPTER 8

VINCENT

The scorching water from the shower streamed down my shoulders as the night played over in my mind. I pictured Cacey wriggling beneath me, sending me to further heights with her moans each time I drove deeper into her. My pulse skyrocketed in a second flat at the memories.

Overnight, the hot chocolate had somehow lowered our inhibitions, and considering I'd never behaved that way after such a tame drink, I'd say the thing was spiked. But this morning my thoughts were sharp and crisp and centered on Cacey. These two weeks in Susi promised me a much-needed break with fantastic company because no other wulfkin played on my mind like she did, lingered in my veins, consumed me. Not even my last girlfriend.

The minx remained in bed, fast asleep. Later, I'd join her for a cup of coffee. Or tea.

Depending on what I uncovered in the kitchen.

I grabbed the towel hanging over the railing when Cacey stepped into the bathroom. She stood there, staring at me, wrapped in a bed sheet. Her hair resembled a porcupine's while her gaze traveled down my body. Well, someone was up for another round, and I wholeheartedly agreed. I dried myself off in a hurry.

"Morning."

"What happened last night?" Sleep clung to her raspy voice.

I lowered the towel from my hair. “Would you like me to show you?”

Her focus lowered for a moment. “It was that stupid hot chocolate. I never behave that way. Henri said it would relax me, but ...” She ran a hand through her tangled hair, reminding me of how I held on to her strawberry-blonde locks while taking her from behind, as per her instructions. I loved every second of claiming Cacey.

“My head aches.” Her voice was a whisper. “We need to forget last night.”

The hurt from her words was a knife to my chest, reminding me of Laila’s rejection, a disappointment that she didn’t reciprocate my feelings. I sighed and swallowed past the dryness in my throat. “I won’t forget you, or the five times I made you orgasm.”

Her cheeks deepened a shade of red. “Stop talking and get dressed.” She huffed and vanished into her bedroom across the hall.

Well, at least she hadn’t chased me from the house yet, but after our sex marathon, I wasn’t sure I could walk away from her now. But something deeper pulled me to her ... she had innocence about her, yet she carried a fierceness when it came to protecting her daughter. It reminded me of my parents, my alpha and his loyalty to protecting all wulfskin. There was no selfishness there, just pure devotion.

I quickly dressed in my wrinkled jeans and shirt.

Cacey reappeared, wearing black leggings and a white blouse with a frilly collar. Despite her hair patted flat, the wild curls around her shoulders were rebelling. “The worst of the weather is over, and I’m heading out.” Her intense undertone told me to go, but her lingering stare betrayed her.

“Thanks for taking me in during the storm. And sorry we never tracked down the fox, but I’m sure he’ll come out eventually.”

She shrugged. “I’ll leave some food and water out for him. Then I’m grabbing Tianna’s skis from the basement, and I’m

leaving.”

Her defenses were back up. She'd probably thought her ex was her mate and look how that turned out, so I understood her reaction of getting away from me fast. “Need help?”

“Nah. All good.”

A response tacked to the front of my mind about leaving. “I'll be in Susi for a couple of weeks.” I cringed on the inside at how desperate I sounded. *Pull your fuckin' shit together.*

She disappeared into the corridor, unable to leave my side quick enough. Well, if that wasn't rejection at its finest. *Fuck.* The early cheer now sat like a brick in my gut, weighing me down. Maybe she needed time to get her head together. My wolf demanded she was ours. Something I'd only ever heard other wulfskin talk about but never experienced myself, until now.

The night's warmth had now morphed into an iceberg. I'd give her space, and maybe soon she'd realize I hadn't meant her any harm. Hopefully by the time she understood this, I wasn't back in Hungary.

First Laila and now Cacey. Her pushing me away hurt worse, and I'd only known her for a night. My wolf had never reacted so forcefully to anyone else.

But in the long run, I had to return to Hungary. I'd worked too damn hard to secure my second-in-command position and trained to the point of exhaustion. Marcin was more than my alpha. He was the closest thing to a brother I had. Then why did the notion of pushing Cacey away claw at my chest?

My wolf rumbled through me. *You can protest all day. A Varlac isn't her type. She said so herself.*

Slouched on the edge of the bathtub, I was pulling on my socks when a yelp ricocheted from somewhere in the house.

I catapulted into the hallway where a white blur nudged open the basement door, sending it into a wide swing. I chased the fox downstairs. While I'd lost sight of the fur ball, the dread of Cacey injured tightened around my neck.



The earlier reek of mustiness deepened at the bottom of the darkened basement. “Cacey?” I choked on the truckload of odors that crashed into me—mold and pungent

smells.

Shuffling sounds came from my left. I jerked in that direction. The darkness remained impenetrable. My nerves prickled.

“Are you here?” My strained words floated through the dark. I harnessed my wolf’s sight, and like an electric charge jolting through me, my eyes shifted. Shades of dark gray and black outlines surrounded me. Stacked chairs, a huge table, boxes, skis against the wall, and even a sleigh on its side.

A muffled moan came, followed by a gurgle from farther in the corner.

It was as if an invisible fist knocked the wind out of my lungs. “Cacey?” If anything happened to her ... My hands curled into knots.

I sniffed Cacey’s honeyed scent, along with something else—a wolf smell. Faint but present. I silenced my breathing and listened.

A rapid intake of air, then another too soon after that. Two wulfskin shared the room with me. Cacey’s fears about Daan coming for her and Tianna sent a chill through my bones.

“One more step, and she’s dead.” A gruff male voice echoed from the back corner.

I spun about and spotted two figures. A bulky wulfskin towering over Cacey, his arm wrapped around her throat. Too dark to see his features, but none of that mattered. If he hurt Cacey, the fuckhead would choke on his own blood once I got my hands on him.

“Be a good mutt and fuck off. You’ve had your fun with Cacey, but she’s not your property.”

A raging blaze burned within my veins, and the more I stared at his hulking figure, the more I shook with urgency to

plow his head into the wall. “Big mistake. Do you know who I am?”

“A fuckin’ lucky bastard if you leave now.”

My fake laughter filled the silence, while my wolf chewed on my insides for release and to teach this intruder a lesson. “I’m the second-in-command to the Varlac alpha, and you’ve just gained yourself a spot on our hit list. I’m sure you’ve heard the stories of how vicious we can be, or how we never stop hunting until we catch our prey.”

Stillness and only the sound of hitched breaths resonated from the corner of the basement.

“This ends one way.” I stepped closer. “Release Cacey, or I will rip you apart.”

When the coppery tang of blood reached me, adrenaline shot through my veins like a piercing arrow, and the threads of hope that Cacey would be okay were slipping away. My wolf rushed out. I tore my clothes off and transformed, hair snapping across my body, and a howl burst free. *Negotiations end now.*

With the force of a train, I lunged forward at the wulfin and Cacey.

A sharp nick of a blade sliced across my cheek. I ducked low and attacked. I tore into the intruder’s leg from the side, flesh and bone. Blood coated my tongue.

His yells filled my ears.

Cacey didn’t move out of the way, only made muffled sounds.

A whack to the back of my head had my legs wobbling. I stood my ground even as confusion gripped me and the world spun. My bite loosened, and I stumbled backward. The intruder kicked his foot into the side of my face. I felt as if my skull split in half, my vision bounced.

*Shithead.*

Cacey’s desperate cry tugged at my heart. Despite my head and body aching, my lungs gasping for breath, I’d fight to the

end before leaving Cacey at the mercy of this slime.

“I warned you.” Dickhead’s raspy voice swarmed around me like a swarm of wasps. “Leave. After the count of three, she dies.”

Shudders swept through me. Keep it together. Still, the knock to the head had made me stumble sideways. My legs faltered beneath me, trembling, threatening to give out. I couldn’t let him win. Couldn’t let him hurt her.

“One.” Footsteps echoed from ahead, and I stared upward at the dark figures approaching, Cacey in front of the gutless ass who held her as a shield across his front.

Bastard was going down. How dare he touch her. I embraced the pumping adrenaline.

*Suck it up and beat the asshole at his own game.*

“Two.”

They were standing near the table. Now was my chance because living with regret wasn’t my thing and no way was this wulfkin leaving the house with Cacey.

“Three. Time’s up, fuckhead.”

I retreated and leapt onto the table. Then in a thunderous launch, I catapulted myself into the wulfkin’s side, driving him into a wall, praying he released Cacey.

With claws piercing his back and shoulder, my mouth wrapped around his neck, teeth piercing flesh. My weight dragged us both backward.

His gargled sounds gave me the satisfaction I craved. But when Cacey’s screams started, my world shattered.

## CHAPTER 9

CACEY

I drove my elbow into the intruder's gut, and his arm around my neck loosened. The wulfkin had attacked me the moment I stepped down into the basement, hitting me in the head with a piece of wood. Tianna wasn't safe, because whoever this wulfkin was, he had to be working for Daan. I'd been wrong to believe it was Vincent. I trembled with the urgency to escape. My breaths were coming too fast, every sound pounded in my skull.

The house wasn't safe. Susi wasn't safe. Tianna ... my throat choked, and a desperate adrenaline kicked in to fight, kick, and do whatever it took to rescue my daughter.

Vincent's weight hauled the wulfkin backward, but not before the intruder's blade ripped across my collarbone. I screamed and stumbled out of his slackened grasp. Behind me, a scuffle, the coppery stench of blood, and growls. Vincent and the wulfkin exploded into a knitted tornado of shadows and snarls.

I scrambled away and tugged on the light rope near the steps. The sudden boom of yellow light blinded me at first.

Vincent, in his silvery wolf form, stood atop the wulfkin's chest, snarling in his face. I hadn't recognized the lowlife at first, but now that I laid eyes on Mark and his hooked nose, the truth crashed into me. He was Daan's sidekick, and the world crumbled in around me. This was real. The letter from yesterday was Daan's sick way of telling me to run because he enjoyed hunting me down. Once a jerk, always a jerk. But the bigger problem was Daan targeting Tianna.

At first I stood there, a dark void consuming everything within me.

Vincent morphed into his human form, his hands clasped around the wulfskin's neck. "What are you doing here? Who are you?" His voice punched through the silence of the basement, sharp and hostile as he stared down the intruder.

Blood trickled over my fingers from the deep cut. It didn't matter. I rushed toward the pair and laid a kick into Mark's ribs. "How'd you find me? Where's Daan?"

The wulfskin gave an awkward, half smirk, then nodded in the way he always used to back in Denmark after knowing that Daan had raised a hand to me. The kind of look that said I deserved it.

My body shuddered, and I threw another kick into his side.

"Want me to finish him?" Vincent's comment jarred my attention in his direction.

I fastened my sights on Mark, gasping for air. "Is Daan here for Tianna?" I should have gone to Anja's last night, should have braved the storm, should have ignored Vincent. Now, ice filled my veins.

Vincent smashed a fist into the wulfskin's face, busting open his lip. "Answer her." "Daan has the kid and a message for you." His response sliced my heart into a billion

pieces. I froze, hanging on for his next words. "Don't go near him or the kid gets it."

Fear pushed against me, locking my stomach tight. For those few seconds, my life ticked like a time bomb. Helpless and terrified. *Daan has Tianna*. A shudder rattled through me. Tears prickled my eyes, and I spun around, running toward the stairs. I had to save her.

A strong hand banded around my wrist, stopping me midstep. "Wait for me."

I turned to Vincent, my limbs shaking and tears blurring my vision. "Tianna ..."

“Give me two seconds to tie up this guy; then we go together. Trust me, Cacey. I’m on your team, and you need bandaging.”

The kindness and concern in his eyes buffered my nerves. “I’m fine.” Despite blood trickling from my wound, time wasn’t on my side. “Every second is precious! Tianna’s life is at stake.” I wrenched free from Vincent’s grip and dashed upstairs. Outside, a knee-high wall of snow blocked the exit. With the sun not rising until eleven thirty in Susi, I was doing this in the dark. But I didn’t care. I had to get to my daughter. Now.

I undressed. The wintery frost snapped around me, but my wolf poured through, freeing herself. Limbs stretched, and my spine elongated. The change increased the effects of the knife gash. It stung like a branding iron to my flesh. I collapsed on all fours. Golden fur coated me, sealing out the icy conditions, and encasing me in warmth.

*Tianna.*

With determination to fight death itself, I leapt over the snow barricade. The powdery stuff along the front veranda swallowed my paws.

*Tianna, I’m coming.*

I pounced into the woods, faster with each leap over trees downed from the storm. My heart beat fast beneath my ribs. My chest hollowed out. *Please be all right. Please.*

The distinct scent of wild muskiness rushed up behind me on the wind. Vincent, who stood half a foot taller than me, sprinted in rhythm. We picked up speed, zipping from one tree to the next.

Just knowing a powerful Varlac stood by my side injected me with a new surge of energy.

Forest debris and snow were tossed beneath my paws. Quick breaths escalated even faster as the forest became a blur on either side of me. Adrenaline propelled me into a race against time. My mind went numb. *Tianna, I’m coming.*

Up ahead, a wolf broke cover from the dense woods and halted in our path. When I caught a glimpse of white ears, I knew it could only be one wulfin—Anja.

My heart slammed into my ribcage. I shoved my wolf back as I ran toward her, shifting into my human form. She transformed too.

One strangled word poured from my mouth. “Tianna?”

Anja’s eyes were frozen, robbed of their usual merriment. Pale cheeks, glistened eyes, trembling lips said it all.

My knees hit the snow as my world dissolved. If I lost Tianna, I’d die. My shoulders sagged. I gasped for breath. “No, please, no.”

Tears covered my cheeks. Darkness gathered into my mind, blackening my thoughts. I should’ve come for her as soon as I saw the note. Why hadn’t I? I could’ve borrowed winter coats for her and me from Anja. Questions jumbled in my mind, each one slicing through me.

Vincent was there, a hand around my waist, lifting me to my feet, but I could barely feel his touch.

“Where is she?” Vincent asked Anja what I couldn’t. My focus was the rawness beneath his words. Anja’s hiccupped breaths. Eight months we’d lived in Susi. Tianna fit into the pack family. I adored my job, our easy life, the friendliness. How had Daan tracked us?

My body shook as I stared at the sharp indents of our footsteps in the surrounding snow. The drum of my heart pounded in my ears, and something cut into my hands. My fingernails had dug into my palms, drawing blood.

Anja wiped her red eyes. “Sh-she went missing this morning. My girls came for breakfast while Tianna slept in, but when I went to check on her, she wasn’t there. The window was open. Why would she run away?” Hugging herself, she sharply drew in her next inhale. Her words were a train, linked to one another, shooting past at lightning speed. “I was searching the forest and making my way to you since the

phones aren't working. So sorry, Cacey. We'll find her. Kids, they take off sometimes when they're scared."

My insides twisted into a warped knot of thorny vines, scraping me raw. "She didn't run away. Daan took her." And my body folded over, last night's meal resurfacing. I stumbled away from the pair as everything came flooding out. Why didn't I follow my instincts last night? "It's my fault."

"Who's Daan?" she asked.

"It's her ex. She's been hiding from him." Vincent was near me in an instant, holding my hair, his hand rubbing my back. But I felt like a ghost, like nothing around me was real.

Anja gasped and sniffled, wiping her eyes. "Shit, Cacey. We'll find her. I promise." "Daan will pay." With his attention back on Anja, he said, "Take me to your house.

I'll find tracks. A scent."

"It's good to have you home, Vin." Anja's words quivered.

Vincent offered me a strained smile, something I doubted I'd ever be able to do again. I brushed past them both and threw myself into wolf form, sprinting for Anja's house.

Maybe Vincent was right, and I'd find a clue. And when I got hold of Daan, I would make good on my promise to rip out his spine.



## CHAPTER 10

### VINCENT

*M*y wolf flooded through me, fur spreading across my body. I hurtled after Cacey on all fours with Anja behind us. The crispness of winter and pine trees soured the back of my throat. Daan—a dead wulfin walking. Cacey’s tears were shards of my soul, and that only drove me faster.

As a Varlac, I accepted my vow to protect wulfin. In my short time with Cacey, I’d seen her caring nature and how she strove to save her daughter. Not to mention, she had nurtured my mom back to health. Everything about her drew me closer. So shit, yeah, this was personal. I wouldn’t let anyone harm her or Tianna. Plus, this was my hometown, and it meant the world to me that every wulfin who lived there felt safe.

I jumped over a dead log. Cacey’s golden fur glinted beneath the low moon, her form fleeting amid the trees. We emerged into a clearing where we found a two-story cabin. The lights from the windows gleamed like a dozen lighthouses guiding lost ships.

Cacey shifted into her human body as she sprinted to the front door.

I swung left toward the back. There, I discovered a window opened just enough for a small child to climb out. From inside, Cacey’s cries were serrated and slicing. I trotted closer. No forced entry, no scratch marks or torn clothes caught on the window frame. Tianna had left of her own accord, probably lured outside by her father.

Other scents bombarded my nostrils: wulfkin, youngsters, burning wood. Which one belonged to Cacey's daughter?

Last night's snowfall covered any recent tracks. Behind the cabin sat a wooden shed, embraced by white powder and low-hanging branches from a lofty pine. The double doors stood ajar. Up close, it became clear someone had snapped the lock open. I trotted inside, and the light from behind me revealed a snowmobile, along with an empty spot for a second one. I'd bet my right leg that Daan had taken the other snowmobile.

I head-butted the door open, staring at fresh tracks near the doors.

Footsteps caught my attention. I looked up to see Cacey, wrapped in a blanket, and Anja, wearing a robe, hurrying toward me. "The second mobile's gone!" Anja's words strained.

In seconds, I embraced my human form. "Did you hear anything this morning?"

Anja shook her head. "With Eelis out hunting, I was too busy chasing the girls, who refused to change clothes, and making breakfast."

Cacey said nothing. Tears streaked her cheeks as she stood there, trembling.

I approached her and took her into my arms. She quivered against me. "Anja, please bring me something that belongs to Tianna. A toy, her scarf, something."

She nodded and ran into the house.

"I give you my word, I'll find Tianna if I have to tear apart every inch of Finland." I held her tight as she sobbed into my chest. The crying killed me as much as it left me feeling helpless. Nothing I said improved the situation. Normally, I'd run away as far as possible from weeping women, but now a crane couldn't pry me from comforting Cacey.

Dry her tears and find her daughter. Maybe I was going soft, but I didn't give a shit as long as I could protect the girls.

When Anja reappeared with a red sweater, I pressed the fabric to my nose, deeply inhaling. Perspiration and sweet clementine. Beneath that lay Tianna's wolf—the distinct fragrance of fresh kindling spiked with juniper—as unique as a fingerprint.

I handed the sweater back to Anja and sifted through the surrounding smells—the fireplace smoke from the chimney, vanilla rice pudding. Amid them wafted Tianna's scent.

“I'm coming with you.” Cacey's lips clamped together in a mutinous line.

“No, you're not. Stay here in case she returns.” Before I lost Tianna's scent, I called to my wolf and shifted, ready to do what I'd trained for my entire life. Brute force and tracking down enemies were my forte.

No hesitation. No emotions. Just hunting.

I swerved around the house and bulletted into the forest.

Twenty yards away, the repetitive taps of paws on snow found me. I skidded to a halt near a gigantic birch tree dripping with icicles, my muscles taut. The breeze carried the familiar sweet honeysuckle perfume, enveloping me. A growl rumbled in my chest as Cacey thundered closer. When she halted, snow covered my face from her momentum. *Thanks.*

For a wild moment, I had believed she might stay put, but her lifted chin and pointy ears proved me wrong. Blood matted her fur below her neck from the earlier knife wound. Until we found her daughter, she'd refuse any aid. I couldn't help but admire her tenacity and determination. Many others would crumble.

I nudged my head along her ribs and released a low-pitched growl, the kind I'd use with the pack under my command. Follow me, and we'll be fine.

Unfazed, she catapulted forward. I chased her.

I filled my lungs with fresh air, confirming Tianna had headed southeast. The faint horizon glow offered me enough light to penetrate the dark forest. Keeping a vigilant ear on Cacey, we stormed ahead.

When my lungs couldn't take it any longer, we came to a stop. Cacey's chest heaved with each inhale.

I claimed my human side, the warmth vanishing as my wolf receded deeper within me.

My bones realigned, my skin stretched, and I shook away the last bit of wolf with the barest amount of pain. Wulfin were resilient that way.

She followed my lead. "We've been running in circles for half an hour. I can't detect Tianna anymore." Her words labored while her fisted hands pressed to her stomach.

I took her into an embrace to chase the chill from of her body. "Look, return to the house, and I'll keep tracking." I hunted better alone, no need to worry about her.

"No." She ripped free from my hold and stumbled back a few steps, her cheeks red and her chin shivering. "I'll die before I stop searching for my little girl."

Her stifled voice had my throat tightening, reminding me the time one of the wulfin training under me lost his father to a bear attack. Despite his loss, the young wulfin refused to take even a day off, insisting that if he remained behind, he'd drown in grief.

"Fine. But there wasn't a struggle. Your daughter didn't scream, or Anja would have heard her."

Cacey's gaze narrowed as she focused on the trees, still hugging herself. "I rarely let her see Daan and me arguing. Or the time he twisted my arm so hard he snapped my wrist, or the multitude of other incidents. She has little reason to fear her father." Her response hardened as if putting up a wall. "But make no mistake. Tianna's in danger, and the only reason Daan's interested in her is to make me suffer."

The blend of hatred and dread lacing her voice was a hand around my heart, squeezing. No one ought to live with such fear, ever, and any male who harmed a female deserved worse than death.

Rubbing my arms from the chill settling into my flesh, I paced between two trees to keep warm. "Okay, so where did

they go? Daan's on a snowmobile, and he'll try to take your daughter as far away from you as possible. He's not stupid; he knows you'll hunt him, and—"

"And he won't want to scare Tianna because that draws attention." The wintery wind froze me, and I no longer felt my toes.

Her eyes widened. "She wouldn't leave to return with Daan to Denmark. Unless ... I'm such an idiot." Her words drifted on the breeze, and her body vibrated with the transformation back into a wolf. Within seconds, she wore her golden pelt with white stripes and sprinted past me.

"Yeah, don't share your plan with me." I jumped into my wolf body, and in no time, I found her darting through the woods. Wherever she headed was a start, a clue. I hoped we picked up her daughter's trail there.

After another long run, I caught the glittering twinkle of lights ahead. We'd reached the city of Rovaniemi. The place was massive. If I were Daan, I'd return to my hometown. Or a familiar location where I could hide with Tianna.

Cacey took a sharp right, away from the grunting of engines and the pungent stink of humans.

When we came to a dead stop, we stood in front of a sea of cottages. The terra-cotta buildings reminded me of gingerbread houses topped with icing. My stomach groaned for food. I pushed aside the instinct. Eating could come later.

Soft orange light glowed from several windows. Must be the slow tourist season in Santa's Village. Cacey had mentioned her daughter dreamt of experiencing her first Christmas in Susi. But did she believe her ex would bring her here?

If he had made Tianna such a promise, he wouldn't keep his word. Scum rarely did. But with the desperation behind Cacey's eyes, who was I to rip away her hope? Besides, we had no other clues, so we'd do this. But the first point of order: clothes.

I studied her as she focused on a house where a family was emerging onto the front porch. Beyond them lay the main road with a parked bus. Tourists started early in the morning in Santa's Village. Several square buildings made of stone and wood were visible in the distance. Each had elongated pitched roofs, decorated with strings of fairy lights. On our right, lines of Christmas trees stood like wooden soldiers, leading into Santa's Village.

I nudged Cacey to follow me. If Daan was here, I'd sniff him out. We trailed the outer rim of the tourist houses. The pine needles carpeting the snowy ground cushioned my soles. When we reached the main road, Cacey stayed by my side. Her fur and warmth against me provided a strange sensation of protection that washed through me. As my wolf had claimed last night, she was ours; I knew it deep in my gut. Whether she agreed or not was a different matter, but right then I knew she meant more to me than any other female I'd met. Our wolves had connected on a primal level, and the notion of not being near her was like losing a limb.

Nearby were no cars and humans. I sprinted across the road, Cacey on my heels.

*A scream.*

Shit. Was that Tianna? I shuddered but not from the cold.

Over my shoulder, I locked eyes with a pear-shaped woman. She pressed a small child to her bosom, her voice a stringent alarm bell.

Shit timing because being chased by humans wasn't going to help us. If anything, it might alert Daan to our whereabouts. Cacey and I darted between two enormous pines surrounded by shrubs. Without the dark, we'd be outed quicker than leaping salmon in breeding season. We targeted a tiny tree-style house, painted in red and green stripes.

A whistle echoed from behind, along with male voices and heavy footfalls.

Fear ricocheted up my back. Any delay gave Daan more time to escape, and that wasn't happening.

I burst into a cluster of tall shrubbery, branches tugging my fur, poking me in the eyes.

When I emerged on the other end, I froze. A towering metal fence blocked our path. I couldn't scale it even as a human, especially with the curled barbed wire on top. Beyond it lay an army of trees: our salvation.

Cacey whined and bumped into my side, then made a mad rush alongside the fence.

Sounds behind us told me someone was closing in on our location. Two options: shift into humans and explain why we're both naked ... or run. The latter was my sort of plan. No time to be taken into custody for indecent exposure.

"There they are!" a loud voice erupted.

I twisted around for a quick glimpse. Two uniformed men with rifles rushed in our direction. Their presence was a nail scratching across my skull, reminding me of the danger they posed, their questions wasting time, Cacey falling apart.

Up ahead, I sighted the elf houses again. I swung right and charged headfirst into the door. Hurt like a bitch, but didn't open.

Cacey snarled, and I jerked my attention her way as she vanished inside a similar hut. I scrambled in after her and rammed the door shut. The barest hint of light came through the tiny, fan-shaped windows. Shelves and boxes filled the large space, big enough for two or three people.

I transformed, and Cacey did the same, our breaths on high speed. Her elbow bumped into a large box and knocked it off the ledge. My pulse thundered, and I leapt forward, but the box slipped through my hands.

A loud crash resonated.

I flinched. Dozens of plastic candy canes scattered across the floor and clattered, making enough noise to attract attention.

"Over there," a man said.

My gaze swept the room. To my right, a pile of clothes covered a box. I grabbed pants and a shirt and tossed them to Cacey. In haste, I held the top over my head and forced it over my body, then reached for the slacks. Green? I struggled to pull them up my thighs and finally tugged the stretchy fabric over my hips and waist.

The moment I turned around, I realized Cacey wore the same outfit—a freakin’ elf’s costume. I grabbed the huge box to fix the mess at the same moment the door burst open, guns pointed in our direction.

I pushed in front of her, in case these humans were trigger happy.

“What are you doing in here?” the man with a handlebar mustache asked. The guy behind him shook his head, smirking.

“We’re just taking a small break from work.” I lifted a hand, showing them my palm in a peaceful offering, but the moment I heard fabric rip, I dropped my arm. Elves apparently only came in one size—small.

“I’m reporting this. We have designated lunch rooms for staff.”

Fuck, that was the worst outcome. Looked like these guys were getting locked up in the elf house.

Cacey slid in alongside me, her arm brushing against mine. “We’ll clean this up and return to work.”

Handlebar guy stared at her, his gaze lingering over her body. Last thing we needed was security arresting us. “Wild wolves are in the park, and everyone’s been asked to help.”

“We didn’t know.” Cacey’s eyes widened. “Thank you for warning us.”

Handlebar guy nodded, but said, “Hurry it up and get out of here so we can lock the place.”

I licked my lips, driving away the urge to lock these guys into this elf house while we escaped. “We’ll be out in a sec. Cut us some slack.”



The second man gave me a once-over and shook his head. The long pause of silence squeezed my chest. “Get to work now.” The pair backed up and bolted away.

“We need to leave before more security return.” Cacey shoved past me and vanished around the corner.

Glancing at my clothes, I cringed. The frayed pants reached my knees, while the top rode up my stomach, creasing across the chest. “Hell.” I rummaged through the leftover outfits, tossing them on the ground. Nothing my size. Cacey wouldn’t wait for me, and I couldn’t let her face Daan alone.

Fuck it. I dashed after her.

## CHAPTER 11

CACEY

Snow crunched beneath my borrowed boots from the elf shed. I sprinted past an oversized snowman and darted into the Santa Claus office building. A rope barricaded the stairs for Santa's Toyshop to my right. The arched entry stood shut. Presents littered the foyer's corners. Tianna loved the gift store every time we had visited, especially the miniature wooden doors covering the back wall. She insisted tiny folk lived inside, and the single thought of never experiencing this with her again was a noose around my neck. Each breath tightened the rope.

Without a soul in sight, I rushed back outside where the elf costume I wore fluttered in the breeze, giving my skin a bluish cast from the cold.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, I surveyed the empty path. White powder coated everything. A few people hurried into stores this early in the morning. Probably the guards ushering everyone inside from the wolf scare.

"Where are you, baby?" A morning wind swished around me, bringing with it Vincent's scent. I headed right and followed a foot-worn snow path dotted with Christmas trees. I passed a house made of ice. Tianna loved to run her hands over the smooth surface. *And she'd do it again when we visited the village.* No way would Daan win.

I curled my hands into fists as the cold closed in around me. *I hate you, Daan.* My heart throbbed with dread. Would I ever see Tianna's face again, hear her laughter, make her

sausages and hash browns for breakfast? Listen to her ramble about the latest cartoon while she helped me slice the potatoes.

A mock village with stores and Santa's workshop lay farther along the path. Fairy lights adorned the houses, along with old-fashioned street lanterns, illuminating the darkness.

Sounds of laughter floated on the wind, light and chirpy.

*Tianna!*

My breath caught inside my lungs, and my sights homed on an enormous ornament in the shape of a Christmas bell. I rushed in that direction. The light scattering of snowflakes kissed my cheeks, but my chest tightened. I swung around the shiny red piece and came to a sudden halt in front of a man sitting on a bench with his two sons.

Everything inside me shattered, and nausea swirled in my stomach. My knees wobbled. Tears smudged my cheeks as I trudged away, my limbs heavy, feeling as if I were alone in this world. My soul crushed, and all memories turned bittersweet.

Movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention. Vincent sprinted past, his shirt riding up his sides as he ran.

He'd found something. I chased after him, passing the souvenir stores and various elf workshops. Every inhale and exhale quickened.

In the distance, a figure in a black coat emerged from behind a reindeer merry-go-round. Daan! He hauled our daughter by an arm into the open. Her face was twisted in agony, her hair tucked into her beanie, making her look even smaller next to Daan's six foot frame. Her mouth opened, but a fit of sobbing sounds came out. She looked scared, but not alarmed.

Rage overcame me. Any other time, I would have screamed. I flew toward them, my fingers tingling with the urgency to grab Tianna. Every emotion inside heightened on the avalanche of hatred and fear and anxiety crashing through me. I ran, and pain stabbed inside my head. Not a word or breath. I couldn't.

“You’re too old for this crap, and our kind doesn’t celebrate this stupidity. We’re leaving.” Daan’s demeaning voice reminded me of the numerous times he’d patronized me. But he had zero right to treat my daughter the same way. He yanked on her arm again.

Vincent was closing in on Daan and Tianna.

She still wore her pajama pants, the ones with wolves printed on them. She was dressed in her snow boots and a bomber jacket. Her dark hair fluttered beneath her red beanie with the pom-pom on top. “Don’t. It hurts. Mommy said you’re never too old for Christmas.”

Although the wind bit at my face, I scrambled closer, disregarding the pain. My body tingled to take Tianna into an embrace for eternity.

“Well, your mom’s a—” Daan’s head jerked in Vincent’s direction, his hunched form frozen.

Tianna twisted free from Daan’s grasp and stared my way, a smile tugging her lips upward. “Mommy’s here. Mommy!” She waved a hand.

Daan stood, his shoulders squared, mouth parted for a smidgen of a second. His hand grasped Tianna’s, and he dragged her behind him. Her screams were blades to my heart as she lost her footing and fell. Daan wasn’t releasing his hold. Her tiny body flipped and bounced across the snow as he broke into a run.

“Daddy! Daddy, don’t!”

Just hearing her panicked voice rattled me at the core. Discomfort spread throughout my chest, as if I’d drunk twenty cups of coffee.

“Daan, please.” My insides constricted. My hand reached for my baby. He hauled her as if she were no more than a sack of potatoes. My angel.

Daan’s head jerked toward me, his expression a reprimanding grimace as if this were my fault.

That exact moment, Vincent launched at Daan and hooked an arm around his neck, throwing him sideways.

Tianna dropped from his grasp and collapsed onto her back, her startled cries breaking my heart. I rushed toward her.

“You’re mine.” Anger engulfed Vincent’s tone as he fisted Daan’s coat beneath his chin and towed him through the snow on his back. My ex’s legs kicked for leverage as they disappeared around a corner.

I scooped Tianna into my arms, lifting her off the ground, covering her with kisses. “Baby, are you hurt?” I checked her face and neck. No scratches. I hugged her again, unsure I could ever release her.

“Don’t worry, Mommy. I just tripped.”

I placed her on the ground and took her icy fingers in mine. “You’re so brave and also freezing.” I reached into the pocket of her jacket with shaky hands and plucked out the gloves I always stashed in there. “Let’s put these on.”

“Mommy, where did the elf take Daddy?”

Tianna was too young to understand her father’s actions or how close to danger she had come, but my little angel didn’t need to have those things in her head. Even if the horror jabbed my insides, I’d keep her protected. I studied the corner where the pair had vanished and listened to the distinctive grunt of a person having the air punched out of them. Voices echoed, but I didn’t need to hear them. And not letting Tianna witness her dad getting hurt was priority. Even if the bastard deserved worse.

“They’ll be back. They’re talking. We’ve got to get you home and into warmer clothes.” I hoped Vincent’s presence would put Daan in his place and scare him enough to back away.

“The washing machine must have shrunk the elf’s clothes like that time you shrank my sweater. But why are you dressed like an elf, Mommy?”

I smirked and crouched low, brushing her hair behind her ears, staring into blue eyes resembling her dad’s. “Just trying

on a costume for Christmas, that's all." Too close. I'd stood on the razor's edge of losing my little girl, and tears filled my eyes, but I quickly wiped them before Tianna noticed.

"Do I get an elf's costume too?"

I laughed, glancing at myself, surprised I'd find anything funny at that moment. "For sure."

The sharp crunch of snow drew my attention upward.

Daan stumbled out from behind the building, wiping his swollen and bloody lip. The top button of his shirt was gone, the collar sat askew across his collarbone, and he walked with a slight limp. The bruise beneath his left eye glowed several shades of red and purple. The whole time I'd known Daan, no one had ever stood up to him, so seeing him deflated was a long overdue relief. Though part of me wished he'd had a few broken bones too. While satisfaction washed through me at seeing him knocked down a peg, would Daan return with double ferocity once Vincent left Susi?

Vincent emerged and tugged on his green shirt that kept creeping up his flat stomach. He offered me a nod, the kind that said he'd dealt with the problem ... But why did my stomach remain knotted? Would Vincent's threats really keep Daan in check?

Vincent approached Tianna and lowered himself on bent knees to appear less intimidating. "Hey, Tianna, I'm Vincent. A friend of your mom's. She's told me a lot about you." The way his voice softened made me smile. He was comfortable around kids for sure.

She glanced at me, and I nodded, smiling.

"Anyway," Vincent said. "It's my first time here. And I was wondering if you'd show me which candy you recommend for someone with a sweet tooth."

"Are you sure?" Tianna tilted her head to the side, studying Vincent. "You should use the money for new clothes."

Vincent chuckled. "I'll do that." He stood and offered her his hand. "Shall we?" "Mommy, can I?"

“Tianna.” Daan’s response perished when Vincent stared in his direction.

“You and Vincent go,” I said. “We’ll be right behind you. Daddy and I have to talk.” That earlier uneasiness heightened as I dreaded this chat, but I had to stop running away. I had to give Tianna a good life, which I couldn’t do if I kept looking over my shoulder for Daan to find us. That meant trusting that Vincent had done enough to scare off Daan and coming clean with the alpha of Susi about my problems. He might be able to help.

Without hesitation, Tianna grabbed Vincent’s hand and she pulled him toward the candy store. Kids were resilient and bounced back from situations that would leave me traumatized for weeks.

As soon as they were out of earshot, my ex snarled, taking a step closer. “A fuckin’ Varlac? Really, C? He threatened to take my alpha status from me. Thanks. And I thought we had a future.” His words dripped with venom, but I no longer feared him because I noticed the way he studied Vincent. Daan’s voice trembled as his brow furrowed, revealing his fear.

“Never come near us again. You’re lucky Vincent didn’t rip your head off. And Vincent will be around Susi if you decide to make any unwanted visits.” I lied, but Daan didn’t need to know.

His cold, dark eyes examined me.

Why had I ever considered this wulfkin my mate? His high cheek bones and strong expression were appealing to the eyes, no denying it, but relationships needed more than physical attraction. It wasn’t an excuse because I owned my behavior, but what tore me to shreds was that Tianna was in the middle of our mess.

With his shoulders stiff, his hooded glare stabbed me where I stood. “This little stunt hasn’t done you any favors.”

Instead of backing away or lowering my gaze, I held my ground. No more letting Daan dictate my actions or force me to continue running. If I didn’t stand up to him now, then when

would I? “I’m not scared of you. Keep your distance, or Vincent will remove your status. He’s a Varlac. Everyone knows how vicious they can be.”

Daan’s posture flinched, and his hands fisted by his side, but he never struck. In the past, if I had spoken to him that way, his response would come in the form of a backhand. His gaze jumped to Vincent near the candy store, then back. He spat blood on the ground, and the growl rumbling in his throat misshaped his mouth. “Why bring a Varlac into our family business?” He snatched my wrist and squeezed so hard, the pain snaked up my arm.

I shoved my free hand into his chest and ripped away from his grasp. “Don’t ever touch me again. You’re not my family. Don’t ever show up again, or next time, Vincent will break every bone in your body.” Sure, I spoke on behalf of Vincent, but this was my chance to finally break free, and I’d exploit the hell out of my advantage of having a Varlac on my side.

Daan shook his head, and his narrowed gaze teemed with a comeback, words to put me down, but instead his gaze shot across to Vincent again. For those few seconds, he paused as if determining how to best proceed, but the lines marring his brow and his sighs were proof enough that he was backed into a corner. “Why would a Varlac hang around a tiny backwater town like Susi?”

“Because the place is his hometown. So it’s personal for him.” Daan’s posture curled forward.

For once, my world had shifted for the better because of a chance meeting during a stormy night. Now, Tianna and I could stay in Susi, continue our life, and no longer live in fear. My hands tingled as I breathed a sigh of relief. My first reaction was to spin with Tianna in my arms.

“As her father, I have a right to be part of her life.” Rage trembled beneath his words. “Stay away, and maybe we can arrange for you to have supervised visits with Tianna.

Under my rules. Until then, if you or any of your goons come near us, you’ll be sorry. Understand?” I glanced behind me at Vincent. Tianna was pointing at the glass panel of the



candy store. I was insane, and reckless, and unrealistic. But seeing Vincent's protective nature with me and remembering how his wolf awakened mine brought a spark of possibility into my life. Goddess help me, but after a lifetime of no real man, no mate, no equal, I was ready to try again for love. Who knows, this time, I might luck out, except I had to stop fooling myself. Vincent wasn't staying in Susi.

"You'll be sorry, C."

I lowered my voice. "You will say farewell to Tianna and leave. Never return. Then maybe, I'll be in contact with you about an arrangement to see her in the future."

Daan didn't say a word, but studied me, his thick eyebrows bunching into a straight line. His mouth opened, but no words came out for a change. His breaths quickened at having to play nice. I bet it killed him, and that single thought made me want to laugh.

I didn't give a crap about Daan anymore because I would never again run away from the devil.

The snowmobile purred beneath me as the engine roared to life. Daan had shown us where he'd parked the vehicle near Santa's Village, as if his actions garnered favor with me. Didn't matter. For the first time in years, Daan didn't consume my thoughts with retribution. No measure of payback compared to my new sense of freedom.

"Ready to head home, girls?" Vincent's voice sang over the motor as a reminder of how much impact he'd had on my life in our short time together.

I pressed myself against his back, bathing in the heat he radiated. Considering we still wore skimpy elf costumes, I'd take warmth wherever available, and if it meant snuggling next to Vincent, well, I'd endure such a burden. I grinned and threaded my arms around his waist, grabbing Tianna's jacket. She insisted on sitting in front for the drive back home. To my surprise, Vincent offered to show her where he had built his

first tree house as a child. My eyes teared for the hundredth time today, thinking about how close I'd come to losing her.

“Can we go?” Tianna yelled through the helmet.

Vincent patted my arm. “Hold on. I've got Tianna. Okay?”

I nodded against his back. Sure, I could have offered to run alongside the snowmobile in my wolf form, but I'd miss out on embracing Vincent. Where had this wulfskin been my whole life? He'd swooped in at the right moment and answered my prayers like a Christmas miracle. My wishes for anything further were pure fantasy.

We wove through the woods where the trees were sparse. Each time Vincent descended into a dip, he hit the gas and Tianna squealed with excitement. My laughter was muffled in the sound of the snowmobile, but I enjoyed the moments anyway.

The headlights streamed through the morning darkness, and the snow glinted beneath their beam.

I leaned a cheek against Vincent's back and watched the forest of birches blur as we passed them. Even saw a few startled deer who bolted in the opposite direction. A perfect moment. Me wrapped around Vincent. Tianna safe. Our future in a family pack was now secure. While a part of me danced with the idea of Vincent sharing such a life with me, I doubted he intended to live in a small town for long. His obligations were with the Varlac back in Hungary, not staying here with Tianna and me in Susi.

Close to home, Vincent slowed down and retrieved a duffel bag from beneath a downed tree and attached it to the side of the mobile. Had he dropped his bag out here last night?

By the time we reached home, my daughter was bouncing on her feet as she pulled the helmet off her head and handed it to Vincent. “Let's do that again. Can you build me a tree house sometime?”

I climbed off the snowmobile. “Sweetie, go inside and warm up. I'll be there soon.”

She nodded as she approached Vincent and stared at him, her head tilted. “I know you’re not a real elf, because if you were, Santa would give you a costume that fit.” She spun on her heels, skipped up the steps to the veranda, and climbed over the snow wall at the front door as if it were an everyday event.

“She’s adorable.” Vincent closed the distance between us. “Just like her mom.”

He called me adorable. I studied the sharpness of his jawline, his parted lips, and the smile in his eyes. Yeah, we’d had a wild sex romp last night under the influence of a relaxant. But today we no longer felt its effect, and his behavior this morning meant more than the attentiveness he had shown me during our night of passion. But he was still a stranger, a Varlac for that matter, and after Daan, I wasn’t ready to let myself fall for another guy until I was certain he was the one. Then why did my wolf grumble in my chest in protest?

“You’re amazing with kids,” I said. “Tianna took to you right away, and she’s not usually like that with strangers.”

“Their innocence and playfulness bring out the child in me.” His smile radiated. “I plan on having at least five or six myself one day.”

“Six kids? Wow, you’ll have your hands full.” And yet the notion of him with such a large family touched me. I could relate, and I believed him. With no sisters or brothers of my own, I’d always planned to give Tianna a sibling or two.

He shrugged. “It’s lonely as an only child.”

A light breeze swooshed strands of my hair in front of my face. “When you came to my house last night, I was ready to throw you back into the storm to freeze. Sure glad I didn’t.”

He chuckled, the soft sound curling around me. “I’m relieved you didn’t either. I owe you for taking me in.”

“And I’m indebted to you for helping me with Daan. I guess we’re even now.” More words bubbled on the forefront

of my mind ... Would he stay? Every molecule in my body hoped he would.

“Seems that way.”

The silence became awkward, and my nerves sizzled beneath my skin. Every inch of me implored that I shove them aside, sidle up to Vincent, and kiss him so hard he'd never contemplate leaving. But what could I offer him compared to a Varlac's life?

“So”—I kicked a pile of snow at my feet—“you'll be heading to Hungary after your break here?” Geez, could I sound any more desperate?

He nodded. “I'll be here for a short while. Then yeah, my alpha is expecting me back.”

“Oh, nice.” No, it wasn't pleasant in the slightest. Not after I'd discovered a wulfin who loved kids and stared at me with so much admiration that I could drown in his gaze. Vincent did me a huge favor and helped with Daan.

“Okay, well, I need to check on Tianna.” I turned away, but Vincent caught my elbow drawing me toward him, his arms gliding around my waist. With my body pressed against him, he leaned in and kissed me, his tongue tangling with mine. I raised up on tiptoes for better reach, unable to get enough of his musky scent. Or the desire in the way his fingers pressed into my back. His wolf was a heat wave, coaxing mine to respond with whimpers. She'd never once responded this way to Daan or any wulfin I'd dated.

Beneath Vincent's kiss, I drifted on a cloud. When we broke apart, he smiled. “Yep.

You still taste delicious. Before I return the snowmobile and let Anja know Tianna is safe, can I come in and change my clothes?”

“Yes, of course.” I backed away, yet Vincent's tender touches, his lingering words, and his ice-melting kiss had made me forget about Anja.

“We could spend time together until I leave?” His question was barely a whisper. “I'd like that.” I regretted my words at

once, because I was just asking for my heart to

be broken. “Maybe let’s see how we go. Anyway, I really can’t thank you enough for helping me with my daughter.” The surrounding awkwardness stifled my breathing. The words bubbling in my mind refused to budge for too many reasons. We hardly knew each other. Too soon, he’d leave Susi, and I didn’t want to appear desperate, drooling over him. So I had to face the truth. Nothing between us could happen. Only a few days of bliss, then we’d be back to our lives.

He stared at me for too long, studying me as if I’d said something wrong. “You know you can trust me,” he finally said.

Before I could curb my tongue, the words fell free. “I don’t really know you, so I don’t fully trust you yet. We had a fling last night, and ...” My words dried up. The ones explaining how last night was incredible, how he’d leave Susi for good, how I was fooling myself thinking that spending a couple of weeks would bring me anything but hurt and regret.

His posture softened and his gaze sailed away from me, and the silence tightened around me once again.

The wind picked up, bringing with it more fresh snow. My emotions twisted, and I wasn’t sure where one began and another ended. What was I supposed to do now?

## CHAPTER 12

VINCENT

“*Y*ou haven’t touched your food.” Mom’s voice carried the same unyielding tone from my younger days. The one saying if I didn’t eat, I’d be forbidden to hunt. But no matter how much I pushed the diced deer meat through the cream sauce, I couldn’t take another bite.

“I’m not hungry.” Across the oak table, my parents sat and reminded me of grinning gnomes with silvery hair and red cheeks. For those few seconds, I’d walked back in time to my childhood during the festive season. The three of us enjoying breakfast. The aroma of gingerbread wafting through the house. Tinsel, walnuts, and unlit candles decorated the fresh Christmas tree at the entrance. Near the evergreen stood the family Yule goat carved out of wood. I used to ride him as a child, which explained the missing horn.

Behind him, an army of wooden animals half his size, from elephants and panthers to bears, were scattered on the floor. At the age of eight, I had asked Dad to carve them for me so I could pretend they were my pack, tracking behind me as I rode the goat.

On this day, I stared out the window at the fat snowflakes, the woods that were my wonderland as a kid. They were memories I’d never give up ... I wished every wulfin had the chance to experience similar happy times.

Wulfin didn’t celebrate Christmas, but the pack in Susi did. The tradition was maintained for the children since we lived so close to the North Pole. It was one of the many things

I loved and missed about Susi while living in Hungary. Before pursuing my Varlac status, I'd intended to raise kids in the town. And with that, my thoughts shifted to Cacey and how content she was in a small pack, raising Tianna. What was she doing right now?

"Go to her and stop moping around." Mom collected the plates and hobbled into the kitchen.

"It's called relaxing. Guys don't mope." Though my insides were the complete opposite. My wolf and heart skipped a beat, demanding we pay Cacey a visit. What if Daan hadn't kept his word? What if he returned? The idea irked me to no end, and while my first instinct had been to rip his head off, I'd toned it back for Tianna. No child should ever witness his or her father being harmed.

My place belonged alongside Cacey, to protect her and the daughter she loved. But my head disagreed. What could I offer a wulfskin like Cacey? Hungary was my home now.

I'd trained my whole life to keep all wulfskin safe. Cacey had made her opinion about the Varlac crystal clear. Besides, she'd admitted to wanting a simple life. The life of a Varlac was anything but easy or straightforward.

If it hadn't been for that magical hot chocolate, would we have ended up in each other's arms? *Stop fooling yourself*. We found Tianna. That mattered. Not my emotions or any other brooding thoughts.

"Cacey is such a nice girl. You can't be alone forever, Vin. Your fighting accolades won't keep you company when you're old. Why don't you ask her over for dinner?"

I released a deep exhale and listened to the clanking of dishes from the kitchen. "With the whole family?"

Mom stuck her head around the corner. She wore a stern expression, but the loose bun on top of her head with the silver strands framing her face softened her expression. "What's wrong with that?"

Mom never relinquished an argument until she got her way.

Dad reached across the table and patted my hand and signaled with a flick of his other hand that we should move outside to chat.

I climbed out of my seat and strolled to the door. “Be right back, Mom, getting fresh air.”

We headed to the back of the house. In the distance, the slanted wooden shed wore a pointy snow hat. Dad had spent many days and nights in there working on projects.

“What’s going on?” I stepped over a young fallen pine tree. “Vin, a few things have changed at home.”

I stopped in my tracks and twisted around. “Like what?”

“Your mom’s been losing patches of her memory, reverting to her younger days.” He dusted the snow off his blue vest. “A few months ago, she wept when she couldn’t find you in the house. She insisted someone had kidnapped you.”

A chill wrapped around my heart. “Alzheimer’s?”

“Cacey’s been caring for her and suspects it might be the case. Definitely some form of dementia. She advised I spend more time with your mom, watch over her. But your visit is a good thing. She’s missed you. We both have.”

Every thought faded away except the vision of her fearing for my life. How could I focus on protecting the world when the most important person, my mom, faced such a demon? “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shook his head, sending loose snow in every direction. “Didn’t want to bother you, and I kept telling myself it would go away.” His eyes glistened, rousing a prickle at the back of my throat. “But when she wandered out of the house at night to hunt in the middle of a storm, I realized I had a problem.”

Unable to take another breath, I pushed past the ache beneath my breastbone, beat back the tears, and shoved through the fog in my head. I should have come home sooner, should have kept in closer contact.

I cleared my throat.



Dad stared at me with the hopefulness he'd always used when facing life—the corners of his mouth lifted, his shoulders squared, and his chin high. Seeing him battle through this with his resilience crumbled my insides.

Something in my peripheral vision caught my attention. Mom waved at us. “Vin, Manu is here.”

The alpha must have finally heard I was in town.

Dad patted my back. “I’m looking into alternatives and making preparation to care for her, but don’t tell your mother I told you as she’ll worry.”

“Of course.” We both trekked back to the house. When I reached Mom, I embraced her and tucked her head under my chin. She used to do the same with me whenever I’d gotten scared as a child, or when I stubbed my toe, or when I had a nightmare. And it took every morsel of strength to not collapse into the heap of emotions bubbling up in the back of my throat.

“What’s that for?”

I broke our hug. “Because I forgot to tell you how thankful I am for everything you’ve done for me. Love you, Mom.”

“*V*in.” Manu, the pack alpha of Susi, greeted me at the door. He took me into his arms, a hand thumping my back, his beard scratching my cheek. If a wulfin were to ever resemble Santa Claus, Manu was the guy. Barrel-chested with a round belly. He’d play Santa Claus at this year’s Christmas party, guaranteed.

“Our own Varlac. Still can’t believe it.” He retreated toward the fireplace, rubbing his hands together. “Is Marcin here?” His gaze shot over my shoulder to the closed door behind me.

Straight to business. My alpha back in Hungary gave his blessing for me to handle the situation as I saw fit, and that was my intention. “Marcin sends his apologies. You’re stuck with me.”

“It’s best I speak to you anyway.”

I sat on the couch, waiting for him to spill.

When he turned to face me, tightness gripped his expression. Manu had been an alpha for more than fifty years. The biggest dangers he’d faced were wild animals attacking locals or log cabins buried under snow. So, the grim mask he wore concerned me.

“I hate to burden you, but I have no one else to turn to. My pack falls into two categories. Elderly or young.”

The hairs on the nape of my neck rose. “Okay.”

“And I’m getting old.” He slouched next to me, the wrinkles around his eyes deepening. “I plan to retire.”

“Fantastic. You’ve got every right.” Did he tell me this because he wanted me to weigh in on his choices for his replacement?

“Except with no children of my own to pass the ownership on to, I have limited options. I’ve been speaking with other alphas nearby for possible integration.”

“Fair enough. So, you’re seeking the Varlac’s consent to hand over your pack?” The Varlac often stepped in and helped assure the best fit. Relief coursed through me. I’d be able to have a say on behalf of Cacey and Tianna. Ensure that both of them would be safe even after I left. Still, the idea of not seeing Cacey’s bright eyes or hearing her voice brought a tightening vice to my chest.

With a great huff, Manu studied me for a long pause, his brow creased. “Here’s the issue. The Denmark alpha said he wants it. He—”

My muscles stiffened. Fuckin’ Daan. “He’s totally unsuitable. I’ve met him. Why did you approach him of all people?”

He held his hands up, palms facing me. “I didn’t. He must have found out from someone else.” Manu nodded thoughtfully. “Rumors paint him as uncaring and impatient. I

heard he came and studied our pack from afar without even asking for my consent.”

Was that how he'd tracked down Cacey? “Yeah, well, I chatted with him two days ago and told him to keep his distance.”

Manu cut me a dark glare. “He called me this morning, saying he's taking the pack, by force if needed. He's coming here in three days.”

What the fuck? “On Christmas?” I should have ripped the bastard to pieces. I shifted in my seat as a volcano erupted through my veins. By Varlac law, Daan had every right to challenge an existing leader for their territories. Daan knew Manu was old, not a fighter. Most members of this pack weren't. He'd sweep in, kill Manu, and take his spot. The bastard had only one intention—get to Cacey. My threat to remove him from alpha status back in Santa's Village was a bluff. Per Wulfkin law, a Varlac couldn't stand in his way if he intended to claim more territory. Not without him breaking our laws, and as far as I knew, he hadn't. Being a dickwad wasn't against the rules.

I rubbed my lips. “My pack and I will fight with you.” I'd put everything in order before I returned to Hungary, and if that included flattening Daan, then I'd gladly accept the job.

Manu grunted. “You know that goes against the law. Besides, I don't want World War III on my doorstep or anyone else getting hurt.” He dropped his head into his hands, accompanied by a deep sigh.

My mind spun with anxiety. If Daan took over this pack, it wasn't just Manu's life he'd be destroying. It was Cacey's and Tianna's, my parents', and the whole Susi pack's.

Anything I did to fix the situation would be temporary and leave Daan in power. And that just wouldn't do. This wasn't a quick fix. I had to address this to ensure the safety of everyone in Susi as well as protect the wulfkin in Denmark under Daan's pack. To stop him meant I'd need to return to Hungary and speak with my alpha, the Varlac of all wulfkin in Europe. Of course it came with the risk of Marcin insisting I stayed in

Hungary while he sent someone else to fix the problem, or that he didn't see an issue. So it was up to me to do whatever it took to convince him Daan had to go. Even if it meant defying my alpha and friend.

## CHAPTER 13

CACEY

“*M*ommy, look at me.” Tianna’s voice streamed on the breeze outside the general store. Her body was swathed in red tinsel. Her two friends wore the same outfit. The three of them giggled, and I laughed watching as their costumes glinted in the streetlights.

I squinted and strolled toward them in a fake stumble. “Where are you?” The pines decorated in tiny lights were lovely, but I refocused on the wrought iron lanterns swinging from the porch railing at the store. Even the waning moon shining against a sky studded with sparkles caught my attention. “All I can see are three oddly shaped Christmas trees.”

In a sudden move, I swooped low and caught Tianna in an embrace, lifting her off the ground. “Gotcha, my little tinsel angel.”

Her laughter was contagious as she squirmed in my arms. “Put me down.”

No, I could never let her go. The trauma of nearly losing her forever stabbed me each time I looked at her. Every smile, a blessing I cherished like a balm to my soul. I planted a quick kiss on Tianna’s brow. “If you get tired sweetie, we can go home.”

Her large blue eyes contrasted against the dark hair tucked beneath the beanie. “I’m staying up to midnight. Do you think Vincent will visit us tonight?”

I took her gloved hands into mine, unable to find my words, wading through the broken pieces of my heart. Vincent had left Susi two days ago without saying farewell, and that cut me at the very core, breaking me. Had I pushed Vincent away by telling him I didn't trust him and by making it clear Varlac weren't for me? Maybe I was too rash in my decision. For the past few days, my stomach had been a muddled mess each time I thought of him ... every few minutes ... to be precise.

In my mind, I retracted the words I'd said to Vincent, but like an unforgiving blizzard, they continued to haunt me all over. My next breath rattled on the way down my throat because there was no going back to rectify the mistake. Now guilt gnawed at me.

"I don't know, sweetie. I'm sure he'll be busy tonight. After all, it's Father Christmas's big night and maybe he's going to be helping Santa as much as he can." It was easier to explain Vincent's absence to her using the fact she met him in an elf costume. An ill-fitting one at that. Just remembering brought sentimental feelings coursing through me. How was I going to live without him and pretend he hadn't touched me ... my wolf ... my soul?

"He makes you smile. I like it when you're happy." She sprinted back to join her friends. The three girls made a beeline for the oversized sleigh Vincent's father had built to seat at least six people.

If it wasn't for Tianna, I'd have spent the night alone at home. Each of my smiles were strained, and it hurt to pretend everything was all right, when it wasn't. Worst part was that I didn't know why Vincent left. I'd never know how he felt about me. I returned to the long table outside the general store, thinking about how observant Tianna had been when she'd spent a brief time with Vincent.

A hearth made of pine needles and cones adorned the table. Anja and another wulfskin set out plates and cutlery. She decorated the center with ornaments and mistletoe. Most wulfskin used their hands to eat, but there was certainly nothing wrong with creating a mood. Tianna and I got to share

Christmas night with the pack. The warm experience was the best gift ever.

“Cacey,” Anja said as she folded paper napkins onto each plate. “Can you bring out the cups and blood wine from inside the store?”

“Of course.” I was glad to help out, and keeping busy helped me not wallow in the mistakes I’d made with Vincent. By the time we’d finished preparing everything, the yard was brimming with wulfskin. Small groups scattered around the area chatted and laughed, enjoying the festive mood. The moon goddess had blessed us with a night free from winds and snowfall. Even the northern lights were on display. Green and yellow rays danced above the forest tops in a hypnotic wave.

Anja’s voice broke my thoughts. “I keep thinking about Tianna vanishing, and I get goose bumps each time. If Vin hadn’t been here ...” Her words trailed off as she lowered her head, her hand fiddling with an empty paper cup.

“But he was.” I stepped closer and took her into an embrace, rubbing her back. “It’s okay. Tianna is fine. It wasn’t your fault, you know that.”

She pulled back and nodded, wiping her eyes. “Thanks. I know; it just makes me teary each time I remember the incident. Anyway, it’s funny that Vin’s mom planned to set you and him on a blind date, and yet he somehow ended up meeting you first.”

My heart ached at the realization that I’d let him slip away. That I hadn’t even tried and had been too tangled up in my fears and my ex to take a gamble. “His mother is sweet, but I’m not sure Vin and I are matched.” A nonstop rumble in my chest reminded me of the missed chance. He was gone. And without a word or farewell. Despite my regret, it meant nothing if Vincent didn’t reciprocate my feelings.

“He’s Varlac, but I’ve known him since childhood. He’s got a huge heart. If he has a fault, it’s that he cares too much for others. Anyway, enough sadness. We need to set the food out. The pack’s getting restless.”

If he cared so much, why didn't he at least visit me before leaving Susi? I pushed the thought away, not wanting to ruin everyone's celebration with my melancholy thoughts.

Behind us, groups of wulfskin gravitated closer. I made a dash to the general store to collect the plates of steaks. And yet I wasn't sure I could eat a single mouthful as my inner wolf left me feeling empty in a different way. Yep, the festive season had turned out perfect. Tianna got her Christmas. We were safe and got to stay in Susi. Then why did every molecule of my being miss Vincent?

A clanging sound rang somewhere behind me.

I jerked toward the general store, unsure what to expect. Manu stood there, dressed in a Santa costume, with a bronze bell in his hand, swinging the instrument. Tianna and the two other girls squealed and scrambled toward Manu. His scarlet suit was stretched tight across his girth, and he wore a fake white beard, concealing the bottom half of his face. He waved to the kids as he swung a sack over his shoulder.

"Ho, ho, ho."

I laughed. The moment was perfect. Tianna gawked at Manu with wide eyes, and I wished she could always be this innocent and hopeful.

"Where's the music at this party?" A deep voice carried on the wind behind me.

I spun around.

*Vincent!* My pulse was a thundering river, though my body shivered with unexpected excitement.

His mouth split into a grin, bringing back the memories of our night together. Other wulfskin headed toward the table and took their seats. Every inch of me homed in on Vincent, but my legs refused to move. When I opened my mouth, a gasp escaped.

"That shocked to see me?"

"You disappeared." Had he forgotten something and returned to retrieve the object, then leave for good?



“Yeah, sorry. Something urgent came up. I’m here now.” He winked and took my hand in his, the touch sending a sizzling spark up my arm. Images of him taking me into his embrace consumed every thought. I drowned beneath the remembered kisses. But those were foolish dreams that only stretched out the inevitable agony when he would leave again.

Still, my wolf thumped within me as a reminder to take Vincent and stop playing this game. If only it were that easy.

He caught a glimpse of the excited kids behind me. “It took me years to figure out who played Santa.”

I twisted around to Tianna, who was ripping the wrapping paper on a present. She rushed over, hugging a wooden wolf. “Look what I got!” I crouched low and studied the figure she handed me, recognizing Vincent’s dad’s craftsmanship. “Wow. You’re lucky.”

She nodded, then lifted her gaze. “Hello, Mr. Elf. I told Mommy you would come tonight. She said you wouldn’t.”

I broke into a forced laugh and handed the wolf back to Tianna. “Well, I’m here now.” Mirth lay behind his words.

“I’m glad. Mommy smiles a lot when you’re here.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Why don’t you show Anja your new toy?” I turned her away before she told him that I snorted when I laughed too much or that I wore her socks when I couldn’t find mine. She rushed over to Anja and the other girls.

Vincent cocked an eyebrow, unable to hold back the grin. “I make you smile?”

Despite fire claiming my cheeks, I faced Vincent with a serious expression. “Don’t listen to her. Anyway, thanks for helping me with Daan. It means the world to me that we can stay here in Susi.”

“So you no longer think I’m a monster Varlac?” His head tilted as he studied me with those sexy eyes. I watched his hands tuck into the pockets of his jeans.

“You bet. You didn’t need to help me with Daan, but you did. Everyone knows Varlac are supposed to protect wulfkin, but I’d never seen it until you came along.” Of course, I’d seen much more of Vincent. His raw animal attraction, his wolf responding to mine. We’d connected on a primal level. But Vincent was more than a sex machine. He showed compassion with Tianna after confronting Daan. Everyone in the pack had spoken highly of Vincent, and I’d been the only one who had misjudged him.

“Thanks. I appreciate you saying that.”

The voices behind grew into white noise because my concentration locked on Vincent.

No matter which way I examined our situation, I always came back to the same stumbling block. “When do you return to Hungary?”

“Ready to get rid of me already?” He arched an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth lifted in a teasing appeal, but his flat, monotone voice revealed the despair he felt at believing I wanted him to leave.

“Damn, no.” I hadn’t meant for my response to snap out that quick. “It ... It’s just that”—I glanced over my shoulder—“everyone in town will miss you.”

“Including you?”

“Depends.” I shrugged. My stomach whirred, and my fingertips tingled with the desire to reach out and grab him. To kiss him until he spoke straight. But would I be willing to play this game until he left for Hungary again? Joining him had played on my mind, but I kept forgetting that it might not be what Vincent wanted. No denying our attraction, but was he a settling down type of guy?

“And what does that depend on?” He ran a hand through his hair, his attentiveness never faltering.

The high-pitched peal of the bell sounded again, stealing my words.

Manu sat on the porch, no longer in his Santa costume. He studied the pack who shared blood wine and talked nonstop.

“Everyone, please take a seat. A quick announcement before the festivities. Vin, if you will.” He waved in our direction.

Vincent brushed past me as he strolled toward Manu. My gaze lingered on his tight butt in jeans. Why would Manu call Vincent?

“For a few months, our pack’s predicament has grown critical, but I haven’t told anyone about it until now.” Manu’s voice was sharp and direct. “But I don’t want anyone to worry.”

Murmurs from the crowd filled the air with anticipation, and my breath caught in my lungs. What was Manu saying? Tianna ran to me, snapping her arms around my waist. I hugged her back.

“Several times recently, I’ve mentioned my plan to retire. So, I discussed this with neighboring packs for a suitable alpha replacement. And we received an offer.” He coughed and cleared his throat. “From the Denmark alpha.”

An icy chill sent a shiver throughout my body. I pressed Tianna closer. Daan! My eyes scanned the forest, expecting him to emerge from the shadows any second, wearing an evil smirk. The other wulfskin were standing there, waiting on Manu’s next words. No one ran away in panic. I scanned the area again, holding Tianna tighter. Was Daan really taking over the pack? My lungs ceased working, and my instinct screamed to bolt. Tianna and I were catching the next plane out of here to Australia, or anywhere that put a world of distance between us.

“That’s the bad news.” Manu’s sharp voice had me flinching. “But the moon goddess has blessed us because our very own Vin, a Varlac, has come to the rescue.” Manu patted Vincent on the back, nudging him forward. “I’ll let him tell you the rest.”

Not a whisper was uttered. Even the wind and snow silenced as if waiting for Vincent to speak. I held my breath, curiosity burning a hole in my chest. How was the Varlac going to help? He’d be all the way over in Hungary after this.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am to be back home. While it’s been long overdue, fate intended for me to visit.” He looked in my direction, then to the pack, and stopped on his parents. “While I’ve only returned to Susi for a few days, it was long enough for me to readjust my priorities, to realize how much I’d missed my family. Someone wise reminded me that life’s happiness isn’t about collecting accolades.”

I chewed on my lower lip. Where was Vincent going with this? Every hair on my arms rose in anticipation of what he’d say next.

“When Manu confided in me about the pack’s imminent problem and his plans to retire, I had one choice.” He ran a hand through his hair and glimpsed at me quick enough that most would miss the gesture. “I’ve spent the last two days in Hungary, requesting a few changes from my Varlac alpha, and with his approval, I made a short stop in Denmark. Effective immediately, Denmark and every country north fall under my jurisdiction.”

The crowd exploded in cheers and claps. Manu took Vincent into a bear hug.

My mind was on overload. The Varlac emperor ruled across all Europe, and the decision to give so much territory was unprecedented. Especially to a nonroyal. Goddess, for the Varlac emperor to bestow Vincent with such a position, he trusted him with his life. And I’d threatened Vincent the first night with a knife, but he never hesitated to help me when the time came.

“And,” Vincent’s voice streamed across the voices. “The Varlac council has given its blessing and approval for me to take over Susi as my own. Within the month, my pack of wulfskin warriors will join this family.”

I gasped as the news rocked through me. Vincent was my new alpha. The same wulfskin I couldn’t stop dreaming about, the one who my wolf had claimed. I had difficulty containing my excitement. He would be here, with me, with Tianna. *Thank you, moon goddess, for giving us a second chance.* My daughter and I didn’t have to run anymore. We could stay here

forever and know that we'd be protected ... safe ... maybe even loved. For the first time in my life since Daan, giddiness and excitement about the future poured through me.

“Mommy, I think you'll be smiling a lot now.” My laughter burst free. “Sure seems that way.”

Vincent hopped down onto the main road, inundated by a crowd of wulfskin. Less than a week ago, I had met him on this store's porch. If I had left work a few minutes earlier, I might have missed him. If the storm that guided Vincent to my house had arrived days later, he could've gone in another direction in the forest. And the fox forced him to seek the closest shelter ... mine. Had fate determined how the events played out?

“Can we go eat now?” Tianna dragged me by a hand toward the table where Anja and her girls sat. I settled down next to them with my daughter, and Anja looked at me, a sly smirk covering her face.

“Girl, sometimes things happen for a reason. I see the way Vincent stares at you, the way he helped find Tianna. You know he wants you.”

“Maybe.” My gaze sailed over at him, still chatting with pack members who hovered nearby to congratulate the new alpha. Daan could definitely challenge him to the position, but I somehow doubted Vincent lost many fights. As second-in-command to the great emperor, he'd possess expertise in battle.

“His mother just told me that part of the reason he took over the pack was because of someone special,” Anja said as she stuffed a piece of meat into her mouth, her eyebrows wagging.

“He told her that?” Reclining in my seat, I couldn't stop the warmth radiating within me. Was this happening? For years, I'd sworn bad luck trailed after me. But if none of those events had happened, would I have ended up in Susi or met Vincent?

She nodded. With most of the pack seated, Vincent and Manu remained in deep discussions close to the store. I joined

everyone else and served up some food for Tianna and me.

Near the store, lanterns swung in the trees, casting a rainbow of colors across the street. Anja stole a kiss from her husband and shared secret whispers. Tianna joined Anja's girls and slipped away from the table, huddling near the decorated pine tree.

My heart was filled with giddiness. If a strong wind came along, I'd likely float away.

I checked on Tianna and noticed Vincent stood nearby, rolling snowballs with the children. Tianna darted toward me, her cheeks rosy, her words on fast-forward. "Mommy, we need tea candles and matches. We're making lanterns." Without waiting for a response, she bolted back to Vincent. They built a small igloo-shaped dome made from snowballs.

Anja handed me candles and matches. "It's tradition to build the lanterns each year.

Better hurry up."

I approached the children and knelt next to Vincent. He lit a candle, then placed it inside before enclosing the lantern with more snowballs. A golden blaze illuminated the tiny gaps, creating a spectacular effect against the night.

Tianna squealed. "When I grow up, I want to bring Christmas to all wulfin. Now let's build more lanterns."

"Come. I'll show you how to make them bigger." Vincent's father approached. The young ones joined him as we stood and watched.

"So, Varlac leader, hey?" I tucked my hands into my pockets, unsure of what to do with them. "That's huge."

Vincent pushed a loose curl behind my ear. "Yep."

His gentle touch sent a sizzling charge through me, and his hand landed lightly on my shoulder.

"And now you're my alpha. Didn't see that one coming."

"Are you all right with the decision?" He squeezed my shoulder as if reassuring me, though the sincerity behind his

gaze did the job.

“Hell yeah. I mean, yes. Look, we didn’t start out the best way, but—”

“Shhh. It’s okay.” His fingers skimmed down my arm, and he slid his hand into mine, then guided me into the shadows behind the Christmas tree. Overhead, the northern lights shimmered across the sky in a kaleidoscope of blues and greens.

“Gorgeous.” I strolled alongside Vincent. “Can’t get enough of staring at them.” The luminous curtain flickered in various hues.

“Vikings believed they were the gates to Asgard.”

When I lowered my gaze, a flash of white caught in my peripheral vision. I shifted sideways, past Vincent, and spotted it. A few feet away sat an Arctic fox with black outlines around its ears, like the one Vincent had brought into my house. Was the fox following us?

“Is that the fox from your place?” Vincent’s arm brushed against me.

No doubt about it. Since the night of the storm, I hadn’t seen or heard from the fox and had almost completely forgotten about him.

The fox made a yawning sort of howl sound, then trotted into the woods without a glance back.

I stared at Vincent. “That was strange. Right?” “Maybe he’s our spirit guide.”

I embraced spirit animals with a healthy dose of skepticism, but the events surrounding the situation with the fox were fluky. With all the strange events that the fox lore foretold, should I believe animal guides existed?

“Cacey.” Vincent’s hand combed through my hair to behind my head. I leaned into his touch. “You’ve only known me for a short time, but I intend to take you out on a proper date. If you’ll have me. I am a Varlac after all.”

I smacked his shoulder. “Fine. You proved your point. I judged you too quickly.” And I’d eat humble pie daily for months to make up for it.

“So, is that a yes?” He drew me toward him.

My mind drifted on his fresh musky scent, and my wolf nudged my insides to claim him. Yet, I couldn’t resist the urge to tease him. I fiddled with the collar of his jacket, smoothing it down his chest. “If you take this long to kiss a girl, I might reconsider.”

Without hesitation, his mouth crushed against mine. His arm wrapped around my waist, and he pressed me closer. I nibbled on his lips and accepted his tongue, suckling on it, and adoring his moans.

He broke our kiss, his forehead against mine, our breathing as one. “I’m taking that as a yes.”

“You bet.” Life at that moment seemed beyond perfect, beyond ecstasy, beyond my wildest expectations. Tianna was safe. We had a permanent home with no need to run away. And I might have finally met my soul mate.



## CHAPTER 14

### VINCENT

#### *Three Months Later*

Snow cascaded around us, feather-soft against my cheeks. A squeal drew our attention to the edge of the mountain slope. Cacey and I stood in silence, watching.

“Come on, I’m ready.” Tianna waved us over, her nose bright red. She sat in the sleigh she’d claimed. “It’s me and Vin against Mommy.”

Tianna had embraced me into her family without hesitation, and if that meant she and I were on the same race team against her mom, then I said, “Bring it on.”

“I see.” Cacey dragged her sleigh closer to the edge, and I pushed it with my foot from behind. “Well, you two better watch out.” She climbed on. “I’m the champion in town for a reason.”

“Did you hear her, Tianna? She’s challenging us.”

Tianna broke into a fake evil laugh and rubbed her palms together. “Challenge accepted.”

I sat down behind Tianna, my legs encasing the young moonwulf to protect her from falling. “I’m ready.”

Cacey smiled brighter than the sunlight peeking out from behind the clouds. The hat with a pom-pom she wore gave her an air of innocence. It was one of several traits endearing me to Cacey. Her honesty and passion for life, while keeping those closest to her safe, made her my kind of mate. The past

few months, since I had moved in with Cacey, had been more rewarding than my entire time in Hungary. When my alpha, Marcin, had suggested I take charge of the northern territory, I knew I couldn't turn down that offer. Here, I'd control Daan, spend time with my mom, and keep Cacey and Tianna safe and by my side.

In this short time, I had gained an additional family. Every day, Tianna reminded me of my childhood. If someone had told me a few months ago I would be a dad, I'd have laughed. No way in hell did I believe I'd get the chance to be a father.

Cacey's rosy lips called to me as they always did. "One final kiss for good luck." "Oh, yuck." Tianna turned away.

Cacey winked and leaned close, her mouth grazing mine. If Tianna weren't present, Cacey would be in my lap by now. Her honeysuckle scent caressed me. When she broke our bond, she whispered, "Remember how you said you wanted a big family?"

Cacey's gaze dipped to her hand rubbing her stomach.

Excitement exploded through my veins. I climbed off my sleigh and crawled over to Cacey, taking her into my arms, my hand resting on her tiny belly. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, and her eyes glistened with happiness. My throat choked. I kissed her brow and her nose, and captured her mouth. "I love you so much. A perfect family. Now, only four kiddies to go."

"Three." She cocked an eyebrow.

"Twins?"

She nodded.

I embraced her tighter, showering her with kisses. Two pups. "I'm the luckiest wulfskin in the world."

"I love you so much." She buried her head into my chest. When a ball of snow shattered against my back, I turned and laughed at *our* daughter.

"Are we racing, or do you two plan on smooching forever?"

I reached over and dragged Tianna into my arms. “You just want a hug.”

She shoved her hands against my chest and giggled. “Come on, I want us to win.” “Okay, let’s do this.” With another kiss on Cacey’s chin, I climbed on the sleigh

behind Tianna. Cacey sat in hers several feet away. “Are you ready to start?”

“Yes, let’s start our new life.” With a cheeky smirk, Cacey pushed against the snowy ground on either side of her and propelled the sleigh forward.

“Come on.” Tianna pouted.

Quickly, I drove us forward, and the nose of our sleigh nudged over the ridge. We sailed down rapidly, gaining momentum. I grabbed the reins, Tianna pinned in front of me. The cold air rushed against me, tugging on my hair and clothes. “No way are we going to lose. Get those secret snowballs ready for attack.”

Tianna chuckled as we careened down the path clear of trees and caught up to Cacey, howling with delight.

I’d found my true mate, and nothing in this world would take her away from me. Cacey had gifted me with her heart, her life, and a family. Everything I cherished.

But first things first. Tianna and I had a sledding race to win.

# SEDUCED BY THE WOLF

SHADOW SHIFTERS SERIES

**He's my enemy and completely off limits. A forbidden encounter that changes everything.**

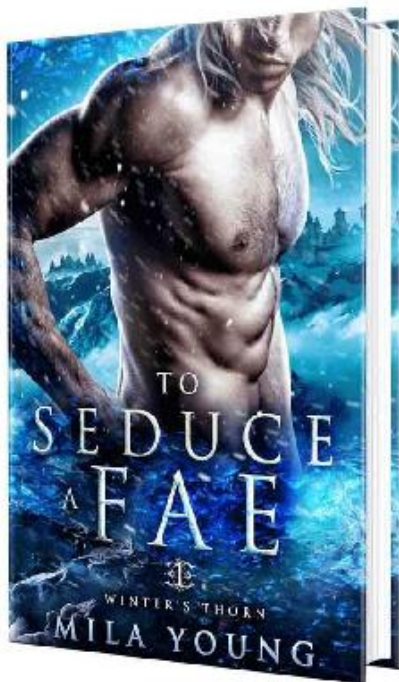
Kalin Asen wants to be the best fortune-teller at the infamous Bran Castle in Transylvania this Halloween. It should be a no-brainer...until she crosses paths with a sexy Russian wulfin who just might be her soul mate. But no way in hell would her fate lie with someone who wants her pack dead. Her mission morphs into a single focus: ignore her uncontrollable urges and stay alive.

As the commander of the Russian wulfin army, Axe Vuk takes seriously his assignment to get Bran Castle's ownership signed over to his alpha. But considering the building isn't actually for sale, he engages a witch to hex everyone into losing their inhibitions in hopes of getting the owner to accept his offer. Then he meets Kalin, and it's impossible to tell if his growing attraction is a result of the spell or whether she is truly his mate.

Will Kalin and Axe survive long enough to discover the truth behind their primal passions?

**[Start Reading Today.](#)**

## TO SEDUCE A FAE



LUTHER IS THE MOST  
BEAUTIFUL OF MY  
CAPTORS.

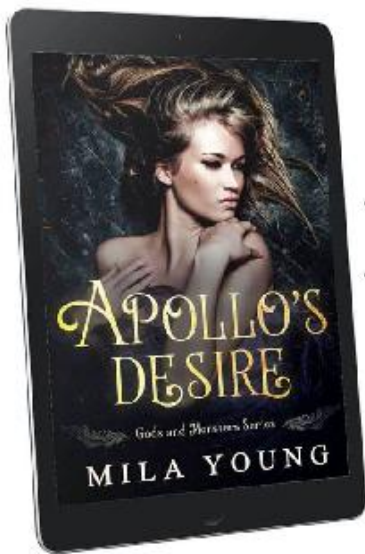
STILL I HATE HIM MORE  
THAN THE OTHERS.

AND I HATE MYSELF FOR  
CRAVING THE PRINCE OF  
THE DARK FAE.

FATED MATE  
ROMANCE

START THE WINTER'S THORN SERIES

FREE BOOK



**FREE BOOK!**

**Get a special Gods and Monsters story, Apollo's Desire,  
(only for the amazing Wicked fans on Mila's email list)**

**[Click here to get started.](#)**

BOOKS BY MILA YOUNG

**Thanks for reading Shadow Shifters.**

Reviews are super important to authors as it helps other reader make better decisions on books they will read. So if you have a moment, please do leave a review here, [HERE](#).

Find more Mila Young books.

**Gods and Monsters**

[Apollo Is Mine](#)

[Poseidon Is Mine](#)

[Ares Is Mine](#)

[Hades Is Mine](#)

**Wicked Heat Series**

[Wicked Heat #1](#)

[Wicked Heat #2](#)

[Wicked Heat #3](#)

**Elemental Series**

[Taking Breath #1](#)

[Taking Breath #2](#)

**Fallen World Series Co-write with C.R. Jane**

[Bound](#)

[Broken](#)

[Betrayed](#)

**Broken Souls Series Co-write with C.R. Jane**

[School of Broken Souls](#)

[School of Broken Hearts](#)

[School of Broken Dreams](#)

**Haven Realm Series**

[Hunted](#) (Little Red Riding Hood Retelling)

**Cursed** (Beauty and the Beast Retelling)

**Entangled** (Rapunzel Retelling)

**Princess of Frost** (Snow Queen Retelling)

**Beautiful Beasts Academy**

**Manicures and Mayhem**

**Diamonds and Demons**

**Hexes and Hounds**

**Secrets and Shadows**

**Passions and Protectors**

**Ancients and Anarchy**

**SPIRIT SERIES**

**Spirit of Christmas**



## ABOUT MILA YOUNG

Best-selling author, Mila Young tackles everything with the zeal and bravado of the fairytale heroes she grew up reading about. She slays monsters, real and imaginary, like there's no tomorrow. By day she rocks a keyboard as a marketing extraordinaire. At night she battles with her might pen-sword, creating fairytale retellings, and sexy ever after tales. In her spare time, she loves pretending she's a mighty warrior, walks on the beach with her dogs, cuddling up with her cats, and devouring every fantasy tale she can get her pinkies on.

Ready to read more and more from Mila Young? [Subscribe today here.](#)

Join Mila's **Wicked Readers group** for exclusive content, latest news, and giveaway. [Click here.](#)

*For more information...*

[milayoungauthor@gmail.com](mailto:milayoungauthor@gmail.com)

