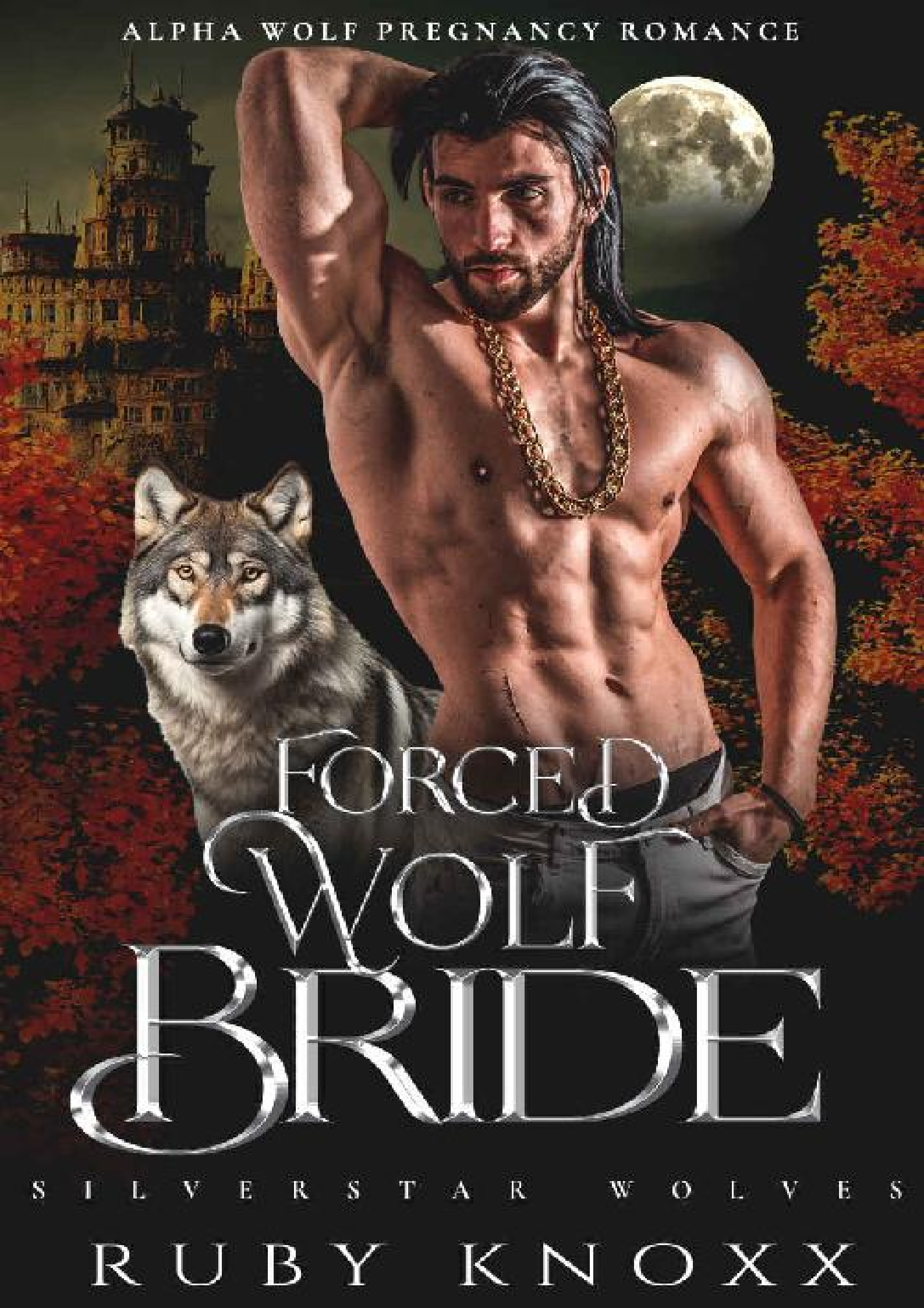


ALPHA WOLF PREGNANCY ROMANCE



FORCED
WOLF
BRIDE

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

RUBY KNOXX

FORCED WOLF BRIDE

Alpha Wolf Pregnancy Romance

Silverstar Wolves Book 4

Ruby Knoxx

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Chapter 1 - Diego

“Find me a mate? Have you all lost your minds?” I scoff, my gravelly voice echoing through the dimly lit meeting hall, incredulity blazing from my eyes as I look at each of the pack members assembled. “The mate bond won’t magically make me stronger or give us an advantage against Silverstar pack. It didn’t work with my first wife, and it won’t work now.”

“You’ve seen how Mateo only grows in strength since taking Billie as his mate. The same goes for any other Silverstar wolf, including Mason.” Marcus, a young, low-ranking wolf, steps forward. “That’s no coincidence. He’s gaining strength by the day, and soon, we won’t be able to keep up. If you take a mate of your own, it could even out the playing field.”

I roll my eyes, running a hand through my long, slightly graying hair, and try to keep a handle on my simmering rage. “And what makes you think I’ll find such a woman? We’re currently under attack from one of North America’s most powerful alpha males. Most females would run a mile. Besides, my strength has always been my own, as alpha. Not because of a bond. You should all remember that.”

I stand, holding Marcus’s stare until the lower-ranking wolf looks away and steps back in retreat. Silence descends over the meeting hall, and I’m on the verge of dismissing everyone just to put a stop to this ridiculous line of discussion when I hear someone clear their voice.

The pack’s second-in-command and my lifelong friend, Zack, steps forward, seemingly undeterred by my aggressive stance and fierce glare. “Alpha, we’ve seen the power of the mate bond in other packs. It’s not just about strength; it’s about support, unity, and healing. We can’t afford to lose focus or let the opportunity for revenge slip through our fingers. Not after what happened with Tyler. We can’t just let that slide.”

My thoughts had begun to drift over the thought of starting again with a new mate, but the mention of my son's name brings me sharply back to the moment and sends a sharp pang of discomfort through my heart. My strong, proud son Tyler had been taken from me by Mateo's pack in a dispute over his ex-girl, McKenna. He hadn't been a perfect man, to say the least, but he was my son, and I owe him vengeance. And it's the least my pack expects from me.

I find it ironic that my pack seems to think that finding my own mate will somehow ease my soul and deliver us the advantage we need after our recent setback. Our lives and destinies appear to be ruled by this damn mate bond.

Despite my doubts, I know my pack's thirst for revenge and my oath of vengeance to Tyler must prevail. Our recent losses have left the pack uncertain, and there's no way my wolf will allow that sentiment to fester.

"Fine," I say. "If it will appease you all, I'll consider it. But I'm not sure where you think I'll find a suitable mate?" Though I'm never short of female company, there's no one in the pack I'd ever consider as a mate.

I can't deny my wolf is intrigued, though. There's a strange gnawing that creeps into my consciousness now and then, a feeling that I'm missing something. Someone. The feeling has been even more present since Tyler's death. I assumed it was the natural feeling that results from a parent losing a child, but if I'm honest, the feeling was present long before his death.

My first wife, Tara, was a good woman and an excellent mother. I loved her and grieved as a man would when she died in a tragic accident when Tyler was only a pup, but my wolf was able to navigate her loss far more easily than when Tyler died. She and I simply weren't true mates, and the mate bond wasn't broken because there was nothing to break.

As the pack members exchange knowing glances, a few younger members stand with Marcus, nudging each other

casually and laughing. “I’d suggest not waiting for the perfect woman to wander in off the street,” one says with a chuckle.

Zack raises his eyebrows at me, and I shake my head. “If anyone suggests that damn true mates site, I suggest you leave now before Diego rightly throws you out.”

I’m glad Zack said it. I can’t imagine anything more demeaning than internet dating for alpha wolves. I stand, about to signal the end of the meeting and kick everyone out when Marcus has the audacity to step forward again. I find myself wondering when that wolf will learn his place.

“Let me and the boys handle this issue, alpha,” he assures, obviously keen to impress. Part of me wants to encourage his ambition, and another part wants to crush him to relieve some of my frustrations.

“And just how do you ‘boys’ expect to handle such a problem?” I ask. “From what I hear, you struggle to find your own women.”

That comment raises a round of raucous laughter from the rest of the room. I level my gaze on Marcus, looking defiant with all eyes on him.

“We’ll bring you some women. If you don’t like them, we’ll try our luck. If you do... then problem solved,” Marcus replies confidently.

I roll my eyes as some of the younger men whoop, obviously thrilled at the prospect of an influx of new women to the pack. I look to Zack, who shares my distaste for Marcus’s plan. I can’t deny he’s got the pack fired up, though.

I find myself wanting two things: for Marcus to shut up, and to draw a line under this stupid mate issue.

“Do as you wish on this minor subject, Marcus,” I say, stepping off the slightly raised stage so we’re level. Even so, I still tower over him. “But be careful not to overstep with me. Know your place before I have to put you in it.”

Marcus immediately bows his head, and the other men fall silent. It's been years since I've had to assert my authority in outright combat, but I won't hesitate to put Marcus in his place. The whole pack knows that, but does he?

"This meeting is over," I say, not even giving him a chance to reply. I've heard enough. "My only priority is getting revenge for Tyler's murder. Mason is responsible, and he must pay. I won't allow our pack to look weak. We avenge our own!"

The crowd breaks out in loud cheers, with several men at the front raising their fists in agreement. Many of them were friends with Tyler and felt his loss almost as much as I did. He was a complicated and sometimes difficult man, but he was also a prominent member of the pack.

The men begin to file out, all except Zack. As my second-in-command, he sees everyone out, no doubt listening to their opinions as I hear the word "mate" muttered several more times before he finally shuts the doors to the hall.

I release the breath I hadn't realized I was holding and lean back against the bar.

"Zack, I don't need a mate," I say, finally breaking the silence. "I don't know why it's even being discussed."

He sighs and shakes his head before responding. "You know as well as I do that it's not just the younger men who are pushing for this. The elders believe a mate would bring you strength and stability."

I scoff at his words. "Strength and stability? That's what they think I need help with?"

Zack looks away, clearly uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. He pauses before continuing. "Look, we all want revenge for Tyler. And no one wants a fatal attack on one of our own to go unpunished. But some of the elders are questioning where this is heading. Is there an end goal, other than a protracted war with Silverstar wolves?"

He turns to me then, his face softened by understanding. “We both know how Tyler got himself into that situation.” At that, my wolf bares his teeth in warning, but Zack continues, perhaps the only man around me who’d dare. “Maybe finding someone to share your life with wouldn’t be such a bad thing at this point, especially if she could help you manage the pack.”

I roll my eyes and scoff but find myself considering his words, mulling them over more carefully than I’d admit to him. It’s true that I’ve found the general duty of managing the pack more arduous since Tyler’s death. I’d always assumed he’d be alpha material, too, and so I’d been training him for the role, although he’d never shown much aptitude for leadership. More recently, I’ve been leaning on Zack in that regard, but would a mate make the burden easier to carry? A woman who can help me lead? Or is Zack just thinking that a woman would distract me from revenge?

I consider my old friend as we slam the meeting hall doors shut and walk in silence toward my imposing cabin across the clearing. He’s never been one to back down from a challenge, so why does he think I’d even consider it? Me, the alpha?

“I’ll think about it,” I reply after a moment of silence. I see Zack smile ever so slightly out of the corner of my eye. “Besides, I don’t know where those idiots think they’re going to find a steady stream of women to parade in front of me until I find my mate. It didn’t work with Tara or any other woman, however good-looking they were.”

Zack laughs. “That’s the young for you: romantic and optimistic.”

I bark out a laugh at that. “So damn true. Were we ever like that, Zack? Before we got old?”

“Speak for yourself, Diego—I’m not old. You’re not, either. Perhaps some young mate will make you realize that.”

I'm about to tell him to get lost, but as I turn, he's already walking away. My friend's right about one thing, though: he doesn't seem as old as me. Instead of being weighed down with responsibilities, a mate, or pups, he's a lifelong bachelor with an impressive string of conquests, a serious commitment issue, and as few connections as possible. He's also dedicated to having as much fun as possible—though there's little fun for anyone at the moment with our ongoing feud.

Zack's lack of a mate is obviously keeping him young, I muse as I step inside my house. Ironically, we've both ended up alone. At least his loneliness is by design.

I throw my keys on the sideboard and walk into the dark entrance hall. The automatic lights flicker on low, illuminating the grand staircase and the luxurious hallway beyond. I kick my boots off and pad across the thick carpets to the entertaining room. An old-fashioned portrait of my late grandfather hangs above the grand fireplace, a reminder of days gone by.

Beyond this room is an expansive kitchen with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking a dark forest. I pour myself a glass of bourbon and knock it back in one go. My gaze falls on Tyler's photo, perched on the windowsill. He had his mother's eyes, but he definitely got his mean streak from me.

He missed his mother so much as a boy, and I was as hard as nails, so busy running the pack and building my empire, grieving my wife, and overwhelmed by this little pup who looked to me for everything. What would she think of all this? I can barely bring myself to look at her photo. Guilt? I'm not sure.

I certainly passed on enough of my flaws to the boy—namely, his temper and ability to push women away. I'm not blind to how he treated his ex, McKenna. And I will forever regret choosing to mind my own business. Maybe if I had reacted in time, none of the events that followed would've happened.

Ultimately, it was his similarities to me that got him killed—reckless, hot-headed, and too powerful for his own good. Mateo’s pack took him out because he thought he was invincible. He got my bad points without a dose of my common sense.

I knock back another bourbon, placing the glass on a table as I pull my shirt over my head, slide open the patio doors, and step out into the night.

The shift is already starting as I shrug the clothes off my body—muscles, skin, and bone twisting and breaking, remolding into my wolf’s form. Dark, thick fur and amber eyes reflect the moon as I step onto the porch and stare into the night. Keen to forget the feud, my regret over Tyler, and the growing tensions within the pack, I race down the steps, ready to take my frustrations out on the night.

A cold breeze ruffles my fur as I take off through the thick trees bordering my property, and soon, I find myself surrounded by the familiar blanket of wildflowers that are starting to bloom at this time of year—a reminder that life continues no matter what’s happening in my world. The smell of fresh grass fills my nostrils as I run faster than ever before, pushing further away from all that was and all that could have been.

I run for hours and hours until exhaustion eventually takes hold. I collapse on top of a boulder just before dawn begins to break through, finally feeling a sort of contentment wash over me. The kind of contentment that can only be achieved through complete physical exhaustion. And if I’m honest, the only way my body can finally find enough peace to actually rest these days.

Chapter 2 - Quinn

As I race through the shadows, the forest soothes me with its cool, moonlit embrace. My paws effortlessly find their rhythm on the solid earth beneath me, and each step feels like a heartbeat of freedom. Moonlight filters through the leaves above, casting a silver glow on the path ahead. It's like a dance with the night, a secret shared between me and the wild.

With every stride, I feel a mix of gratitude and something else—sadness—swirling within me. I'm grateful to be near my friend Gina and her pack, to share in their warmth and laughter. Being with them feels like finding a missing piece of myself, a taste of the belonging I've longed for. The way Gina's eyes light up when she sees me, the camaraderie of her pack, it's all a balm to my soul.

Yet, beneath that gratitude, there's a pang of longing. The ache of not having my own pack always lingers, a reminder of the void that remains. While Gina, Lucca, and her pack have offered me a temporary home while I renovate the fountain destroyed by Diego's pack, and while they have been so welcoming, there's a part of me that yearns for my own place among the trees, my own pack to call family. As I run through the moonlit forest, I wonder if it will ever be possible to bridge the distance between longing and belonging.

I'm a rarity in the shifter world: a lone wolf. Not that there aren't wolves out there who have been cast out of packs for committing crimes or unsuccessfully trying to overthrow the alpha. They surely have their own set of struggles. But a genuine lone wolf—there are not many like me.

Abandoned as a baby and raised by humans, I was lucky to encounter shifters early on to make sense of my developing powers. And even more fortunate to meet Gina at college. If it hadn't been for her distance from her own pack, we'd never have had the chance to become friends. Now she's

home with Lucca where she belongs, and as much as she tells me I can stay, too, something is stopping me.

I can't put my finger on it, but it just doesn't feel like home. Whatever that is.

I come to a stop, the unwelcome feelings still lingering in my mind. I take a deep breath and try to savor the crisp night air, relieved as it fills me with new strength. Gina and Lucca are having a BBQ tonight, so I should head back. I already helped Gina prep everything. Part of me doesn't want to leave the forest, though—the peace, the familiarity of being among trees and nature, is something that can't be found anywhere else.

As I turn away from the forest path, I hear something in the trees nearby. A rustling of leaves or maybe another wolf? Suddenly surrounded by shadows and half-expecting danger, I try to understand what's happening, my heart racing.

An enormous stag thunders into the clearing, his majestic antlers reaching toward the sky like hands outstretched in greeting. He stares at me for a moment before raising his back legs and turning into the darkness once more.

For some reason, I feel unnerved by his presence. It feels like he was trying to tell me something.

I'm left standing there, uncertain and feeling suddenly very alone. My enhanced hearing focuses on the sounds of the forest, the unmistakable sounds of other animals moving in the undergrowth. I tense, my amber eyes flicking to the sides as I plan my escape route.

Then I see it, the eyes reflected by moonlight staring back at me. I hear a low growl.

I make a run for it, using all my strength, but am immediately blocked by a large gray wolf. His eyes flash with something like glee, and I am immediately certain he's not from Mateo's pack.

I know I'm in big trouble.

I take a step back but freeze as I hear more wolves emerge from the trees behind me, some standing and some crouching low to the ground, seemingly ready to pounce. They all seem to be sizing me up. I can feel my heart racing as I realize that these must be Diego's men.

They stand between me and the way back home, and it's clear that they're not going to let me pass. I berate myself as it occurs to me that if I hadn't been so caught up in my thoughts, I'd have noticed them hunting me through the forest.

My eyes dart around, desperately searching for an escape route or the sound of any other wolf in the area, but there's nothing. As a lone female wolf, I know the odds are stacked against me. I have my shifter strength, but I'm untrained and alone.

I'm well-aware of the feud between Mateo and Diego's packs, so I can only assume that these are Diego's men, though I don't think their alpha is here. With no other option, I prepare to fight.

Taking a deep breath, I scream defiantly and lunge forward, pushing through their barricade. I'm thrown back with brute force, slamming into the hard ground and hitting my head on a rock. My vision goes blurry, and all I can see are their shadows swarming me as I lose consciousness.

When I wake up, I'm lying on my side. I can feel that I'm in a car or van from the motion rocking me from side to side. My head pounds, and my eyes don't want to open properly. I feel sick and disoriented. The men are still talking and laughing, but my head is ringing, and I can't make out what they're saying. Their voices sound muffled and distant.

I can feel something scratchy on top of me, and when I look down, I see a dirty blanket has been haphazardly thrown over me. They must have put it on me while I was unconscious.

It suddenly dawns on me that if I shift back into human form, they'll be able to see me naked. A wave of fear rushes

through me. What are they going to do to me? My stomach churns as the possibilities run through my mind. A group of men doesn't kidnap a female by herself for any good reason.

I'm in big trouble.

I whimper quietly underneath the blanket so as not to draw attention to myself, hoping against hope that they won't realize I'm awake yet. Perhaps I can buy some time to figure out where I am and how to escape.

The van bounces over uneven ground for what feels like an hour, but is probably less time. Eventually, the road levels out, and it feels like we're in a more residential area. My eyes and head are clearer now, and I can focus on the voices around me. They're talking about how Diego will be happy when they deliver me to him.

I'm confused. Why would Diego want me? From what I know of him, he's a ruthless alpha who doesn't take kindly to outsiders. The only thing that makes any sense is that they must think I'm part of the Silverstar pack. I'm sure that once Diego realizes his mistake, he'll be furious.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot what looks like an old t-shirt or rag in the corner of the van. I know I can't outrun these wolves, especially on their land, and I need to be able to communicate. Therefore, I'm going to have to shift. And I need to cover myself if I do.

Reluctantly, I shift back into human form, ignoring how hard and cold the metal floor feels against my bare skin. I quickly reach for the rag, hoping I'm right and it is a shirt. Relief courses through me when I feel for the armholes of the t-shirt in the semi-dark, and I pull it over my head, trying to ignore the stench from the dirty fabric as the huge shirt drowns even my curvy frame. I wrap the blanket around me and try to steady my breathing.

The van stops abruptly, and the door slides open with a loud creak, flooding the inside with light from the streetlights outside. The men grumble as they climb out of their seats and

move towards the back door, where I lay terrified beneath the blanket.

I don't move, trying to buy time by pretending to still be asleep, but one of them pulls the blanket from me. I try to cover myself with the oversized t-shirt, but I still feel painfully exposed.

They all laugh at me, making crude comments about my body. I feel violated. I can feel my body trembling with fear, but I don't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing how scared I am.

One of them grabs my arm, yanking me to my feet. I stumble but manage to stay upright. I try not to look at them as they push me toward a large, ominous-looking building. My blood runs ice-cold with fear as I consider what's waiting for me on the other side of the door, and my heart races as I wonder what will happen to me now that I'm here. Will they torture me? Will they kill me?

The metallic door slams open, and I'm pushed inside. The room is dark, lit only by a couple of tiny wall lights, but I can make out some sparse furniture. The men surround me, laughing and jeering. I know I'm screwed, but I can't let them see any fear. I stand tall, staring them down.

"Who are you guys?" I demand. "What do you want with me?"

They all laugh, and one of them steps forward. He seems to be in charge, though none of them look like the alpha. They all seem too young—I can't decide if that's more worrying or not.

The man stands in front of me with a sinister grin and a strange glint in his eyes. "That really doesn't matter, sweetheart," he says, his voice dripping with malice. "As for why we took you, let's just say we have a little job for you to do."

I really don't like the sound of this. "What kind of job?"

He smirks. “You’ll see soon enough. Don’t you worry.”

Dread washes over me. Whatever job they have in mind, it can’t be good. I try to keep my cool, but inside, I’m screaming for a way out. I need to find a way to escape, but I don’t even know where I am.

The man steps closer to me, and I take a step back, feeling the hard, unmovable wall behind me. I’m trapped.

“We were going to hand you straight off to Diego, but now that I’ve had a good look at you, I think we might hang onto you for a while. Maybe have some fun,” he says, his disgusting breath hot against my face. “And if you behave, we might just let you go. Or not.”

I feel a surge of anger and disgust at his words. I’m not some toy to be played with; I’m a shifter. I remind myself that I’m a strong, independent woman. I refuse to let them break me.

“You can try,” I spit out, trying to sound tough.

His grin widens, and he reaches out to grab me. I raise my hands, ready to fight, but the door bursts open and a deep voice booms through the room.

“What the hell is going on here, Marcus?”

I turn to see a tall, imposing figure standing in the doorway. He’s muscular and ruggedly handsome, with dark, silver-flecked hair and piercing green eyes. He’s the most powerful shifter I’ve ever seen. And he’s looking right at me.

“Diego,” one of the men stammers, bowing his head. “We were just... taking care of a little problem.”

Diego’s eyes flicker to me, and I feel a shiver run through me as our eyes connect. I had no idea Silverstar’s enemy looked like this. My brain almost short-circuits, and my wolf whimpers as I try to reconcile the stories I’ve heard about Diego with the man currently taking my breath away.

I find myself unable to tear my eyes away from him as his gaze lingers on me, pure hunger in his eyes.

Chapter 3 - Diego

My heart seems to stop beating altogether as I take in the scene before me. When I got word Marcus and some of his buddies had dragged in some kidnapped women they thought might do for my mate, I simply rolled my eyes. Trust those idiots to think finding the perfect mate was as simple as picking one up like they're at the supermarket.

I immediately stormed over to the outbuildings where Marcus and his friends hang out. He runs the local auto shop, and they have a makeshift bar out back. I know exactly where they'd head when they returned.

So far, so predictable.

However, what I wasn't expecting was my reaction to the scene unfolding in front of me as I flung open the metal door.

Marcus has some woman cornered. I can't see her face, but my eyes immediately land on her legs—endless, curvy, and barely covered by a scrap of dirty material.

“What the hell is going on here, Marcus?” I bark.

Marcus spins around, and that's when I see her properly for the first time. Her auburn hair is falling in messy curls all around her, concealing part of her face, but her beauty is unmistakable. Her eyes are wild and angry, but as our gaze locks, there's something else there. Shock? Recognition?

Whatever it is, it's only a flash, and then the indignation returns to her face as she tries to jump away from Marcus.

“We've got a live one here, Diego. I was just about to send word to you.” Marcus holds his hands out defensively as he speaks.

“He's lying. That's not what he said,” the woman says, her voice loud and clear. I can smell her fear from here, but

she's obviously determined not to show it.

I know Marcus is lying. I wouldn't trust him on any given day, and I'm no fool. He had a half-naked woman backed into a corner when I came in, and I don't think he was about to give her up. Even for his alpha.

The day is coming when I have to either get Marcus in line once and for all or get rid of him. But right now, I can't think of anything but the proud, strong, and half-naked woman with her back against the wall.

She's still staring at me, peering around Marcus's large frame, her eyes never leaving mine. I'm used to less dominant wolves looking to me for the next move or trying to figure out their fate, but I don't think that's what she's doing. I see it now. Behind the fear and obvious rage, there's heat.

Heat that I know is reflected in my own gaze.

I don't even need to look at Marcus to feel his eyes on me. He's defiant even when caught, which is not good at all.

"Out. All of you." I growl, watching the woman as her eyes widen. "Head to the hall. Zack will meet you there."

The men begin to shuffle out, but Marcus remains. "And what are we doing in the hall, Diego?" he finally asks.

Without hesitation, I answer, "Having a mating ceremony, obviously."

I hear the woman gasp, but ignore her for now.

Finally, my eyes leave the woman just long enough to level my alpha gaze at Marcus. As usual, he lowers his head immediately. He can talk the talk, but deep down, his wolf knows his place.

I dismiss him with the smallest inclination of my head. I feel him pause, almost willing him to say something just so I can knock him down like he deserves. But eventually, I hear the heavy door slam shut.

For a moment, the silence in the room is deafening. I'm waiting for the hysterics, and part of me wishes she'd get it over with so I can tell her I don't care what she thinks—from the moment I saw her, my wolf called the shots. He wants her, and so I'm going to have her.

I'm still not sure I believe in true mates, but I can't deny feeling something I've never felt before. Or maybe it's just her long, curvy legs and sexy hair...

"Stop looking at me like that," she finally snaps, and I can't help chuckling.

"I think I'm looking at you the same way your wolf's looking at me," I say, stalking closer to her and enjoying the way she skittishly backs into the corner, shaking her head.

"You're crazy, all of you," she spits. "You have to let me go. My pack will be looking for me. You don't want any trouble."

I step closer again, crowding her now. Her eyes widen as she realizes she's completely backed herself into a corner—strangely naive behavior for a wolf.

I sniff the air around her, my whole being thrumming with satisfaction as her scent confirms my suspicions. "You've certainly no mate or even a man. I'd smell him on you." She blushes as I continue. "In fact, I can barely smell anyone on you. Bit strange for someone whose whole pack will be motivated to start a war over you?"

She opens and closes her mouth, seemingly lost for words. I know I'm onto something. I take a closer look at her. She's pushed her auburn curls back, and I can see her stunning brown eyes that are still burning with indignation. Her full lips look enticingly soft and kissable. Her body is curvy in all the right places, pushing against the thin fabric of her t-shirt. She's a vision I can't help but appreciate as I take in every detail of her.

My wolf calls out to me, urging me to mark her, make her mine. My hands itch with the need to touch her, feel her

warmth beneath my fingertips. I take a step closer, and she flinches from me before quickly regaining her composure.

“What is your name?” I ask, approaching slowly.

She hesitates for a moment before finally answering, “Quinn.”

“You don’t have to be scared, Quinn,” I mutter softly. “I won’t hurt you.” I reach out and brush away a few strands of hair that have fallen into her face.

Her skin is like velvet beneath my fingertips, and my heart skips a beat as she looks up at me with those big brown eyes wide with fear and something else—desire? That thought sends a thrum of electricity through my veins.

I add, “But you will come with me. And you will not disobey me.”

Tears start welling in her eyes, but I feel unmoved.

“Y-you can’t do this,” she sputters. “We’re not mates. You can’t make me do this.” All pretense of bravery crumbles before my eyes, and I see how vulnerable she is. Which is a good thing—she’ll fight less.

“If you don’t agree, I’ll give you back to Marcus and his friends. I don’t need the hassle,” I lie. I’d never let Marcus touch her.

She seems to waver for a minute, and I watch, curious as to which way she’ll go. Will she mate willingly?

Finally, she squares her shoulders, raising her head slightly as she meets my eyes. “I’ll go to the ceremony, but you’re making a huge mistake. My pack won’t just let this go. You can’t just kidnap me. I’ll never let you touch me, so don’t even try.”

At that, I simply smirk and step back slightly so she can pass as we head toward the door. I might as well give her the impression that she has some choice in all this.

She doesn't. My wolf decided what it wanted the moment I stepped into the room. And it wanted her. As I watch her curvy ass, narrow waist, and sexy hips sway as she walks ahead of me, trying to keep her head held high, I can't say he's wrong.

The mate ceremony is almost irrelevant at this point, but it's essential for the pack to see me making a bold declaration after our recent defeat. Whether I believe in the power of the mating bond or not, most of my pack seems to, and I need them motivated and confident if we're going to get the retribution we deserve.

That Tyler deserves.

We have several witches living on or around my pack lands, so finding someone to perform the ceremony is easy enough. They even brought some clothes for Quinn—a simple dress in a dark fabric that covers her more than I'd like but at least shows off her ample cleavage. I left the whole thing up to Zack, and he managed to pull off a gathering in the main square in front of the hall.

I'm surprised when the witch confirms our match, though I fight the urge to roll my eyes as she speaks about the power of finding your true mate. Yet, even as I internally groan at the notion, I feel myself drawn to Quinn so acutely, I have to force myself not to overthink it.

I steal a glance at her as she stands, back straight and eyes forward. Anyone who didn't know the situation would think she was listening to the witch's pontifications, but I can see the telltale tremble of her lips and the moisture gathering in her eyes. She's gripping her hands together in front of her, and her knuckles are white.

She's terrified.

I've never had a problem inflicting fear. In fact, I thrive on it in many ways and consider it a vital component of being an alpha. However, something about her is making my wolf feel anxious. Concerned, even?

I push down the feelings as I raise my arms, celebrating loudly with my pack as the ceremony concludes. Quinn stands silently next to me, looking almost dazed as the pack cheers.

I take her by the hand and half-drag her into the main hall. I can't help but smirk at the slight resistance she offers. She's no match for my alpha strength, and I'm able to pull her along with me easily.

A bar has been set up, and the band is already playing. It occurs to me that the pack needed an excuse to get together more than anything. My mate ceremony has already been beneficial, and my wolf feels satisfied.

The party quickly becomes lively, with laughter, music, and drinks flowing freely. At least, all except one person. Quinn is stoically quiet, ignoring most people just as they ignore her. I don't blame her; she doesn't know what else the evening has in store for her. I'm not even sure myself yet.

She's clearly still scared of me, but she's trying to be brave. I find myself almost respecting her strength and courage in this situation, though my apprehension at bringing her into my pack like this still lingers. If I'm honest, the decision took me by surprise. I expected to walk in and tell Marcus to cut the woman loose or at least shut her up. But as soon as I entered the room, my wolf took over.

"Don't even think about running," I tell her, making sure she knows she's my prisoner as much as anything else tonight while reassuring myself that no matter what happens next—whether we truly are mates or not—I will do anything to ensure I have my revenge.

"I-I want to go home," she says quietly, apparently thinking only I can hear. I'm about to tell her to shut up when some wolves behind us laugh and mimic her voice.

"Aww, she wants to go home!" Marcus jeers. He's standing with his younger cousin and some friends, and they've clearly been drinking for a while.

Ken, Marcus's friend from the garage, nudges Zack and laughs. "Diego's going to show her how it goes, isn't he, Zack? He's gonna break her real good."

I hear Quinn gasp and feel her tense next to me as she tries to stand, but I grab her hand and hold her down.

"Shut the fuck up, idiots," I growl, and they raise their hands in mock surrender.

"Come on, Diego. You know you'll give it to her good." Marcus's cousin laughs mirthlessly

I'm seething. Zack simply looks bored and raises his eyebrow at me as Ken continues to become even more belligerent.

"We can all join in if you want," Ken says, winking at Quinn suggestively.

I take a step forward, my fists clenched. "Enough!" I bellow, cutting through the noise of the room like a knife. "We're leaving. Zack, take care of these idiots. I've got better things to do tonight."

I grab Quinn's hand again and lead her out without another word. I don't even bother looking back as I hear Zack enlist some other pack members to drag Marcus's disruptive group out. I've no doubt it will descend into a fight, but I know Zack's got the situation covered.

If the pack wants to assume I'm taking my mate now, willing or not tonight, then they can. The truth is, I haven't decided yet.

We make our way out of the hall and into the night air. The stars are twinkling above us, and I can feel Quinn's hand trembling in mine. She's scared, and she probably should be. But I can also tell there's something else beneath that fear. A spark of something that I can't quite put my finger on.

I don't say anything, just lead her silently to my cabin. As we approach it, I wonder if she's at all impressed by the

modern timber and glass frame. Shaking my head, I wonder why I care what she thinks. Do I want her to be impressed?

I'm aware of a strange sense of anticipation. Something inside me quiets as we reach the door. Releasing her hand, I take a deep breath before unlocking the door and leading her inside. We pause briefly in the semi-lit hall as I kick off my boots. Looking down, I realize she's just walked through the snow in some thin slippers the witches must have given her.

"We'll get you some boots and things tomorrow," I tell her suddenly, inexplicably embarrassed about the state of her. It's like I'm seeing her for the first time. The soft light and shadows falling on her face only highlight how much younger she is than me.

I can feel my heart racing as I take in her auburn curls, smooth face, and plump lips. The low-cut sheath dress hugs her curves, and I can see the rise and fall of her chest with every breath. She looks away, and I see her eyes fall on the collection of photographs that line the sideboard. Tara did all this, and I've never thought to change it.

I see she's staring at one of me, Tara, and Tyler. She's probably wondering where my wife is now. "She's dead, they're both dead," I say.

Her eyes flicker to mine, and I'm surprised to see an unmistakable flicker of sympathy. "I'm so sorry about your family." Her voice is small, and she looks away again immediately, but I'm surprised by the genuine emotion in her voice.

"Come," I say gruffly, gesturing to the stairs. "Let's get to bed. It's been a long day."

Quinn nods and follows me, her steps slightly unsteady as if she's still unsure of what's going to happen. We reach the bedroom, and I gesture for her to enter. As she does, her eyes go wide as she takes in the spectacular picture window overlooking the mountains.

I feel my heart pounding in my chest as she turns to face me, and something significant passes between us. The air is charged with an unspoken understanding—she knows I could take her tonight, willing or not. She looks away quickly, nervously biting her lip.

“I’m not taking my dress off,” she says as she stands by my large, imposing bed.

I know this is a challenge, a way for her to test me. After a moment, I decide. “Get in,” I tell her firmly but without a threat. “I won’t force you.”

Her eyes widen with surprise before they soften slightly in relief. She climbs into bed silently and, without another word, pulls the covers up around herself like a protective shield for whatever might come next.

We lie in the dark until I eventually hear her breathing level out and assume she’s fallen asleep.

What the hell was I thinking?

Chapter 4 - Quinn

My muscles always feel sore after my wolf has had a long run. Right now, they ache deliciously. Even in my sleepy state, I stretch, enjoying the relief it brings.

I dreamed I was running through the trees. I'm not sure where I was, though—my surroundings didn't look like Gina's pack lands or anywhere near where I grew up. It feels familiar, though, almost like home. Which is ironic, as I don't know where home is. Being adopted by humans, I don't know anything about my shifter heritage. But the canopy of trees above me and soft undergrowth feels so deeply comforting, it's like being held in an embrace.

I sink back into the feeling. It's rare I feel so comforted, so in my sleepy state, I try to get back to the dream. I search my mind as if looking for clues to where the forest is, lingering on the feeling that I'm not alone. Someone is running with me, but I'm not afraid. We're running together in sync, and it just feels right.

The next moment, I'm in human form, lying on soft moss next to a beautiful stream. I feel naked, but then realize my thin dress has simply shifted, exposing most of my body. I'm lying on my back and can feel the heat of a body close to me—if this was the other wolf, he must have shifted, too.

A masculine hand softly caresses my skin, sending shivers through my entire body. His fingers move lightly up my neck, across my collarbone, and down the length of my spine. He moves lower, cupping both of my breasts in his hands, squeezing each one gently before tracing the curves of my waist and hips. There's hardly any resistance as he pulls the thin dress from my body, leaving me completely naked.

My breathing is becoming heavier as his lips press against the small of my back, his kisses getting more passionate, fueled by my moans. He moves closer to me, pressing his hardness against me as I grind against him in

response. I'm lost in this moment. Never have I ever felt so connected to someone like this. Everything feels so real as wetness coats my inner thighs and an unfamiliar tension grows in my lower tummy.

I have been with a man before—my human college boyfriend—but it never felt like this. My body and wolf feel in alignment, primed and ready. I shift back further and delight in hearing his guttural groan as his cock slides between my legs. I gasp at the sensation as his cock nudges my wet folds, grazing my clit. We're both becoming frantic now, and I can feel that his sharp fangs have descended slightly as they graze my delicate skin, sending shockwaves straight to my core.

I don't ever want this dream to end, I think, just as his cock finds my entrance. I urge him on, completely lost to my desire.

His firm grip squeezing my hip releases me from the last of my sleepiness, and I freeze. Reality crashes over me.

“Diego?”

“Tell me to stop, and I will,” he says, his voice rough and husky against my ear.

I should tell him to stop, but I've never felt desire so intense. Never wanted someone like this.

“Don't stop.”

My words are barely out when his cock begins to push through my wetness. I have to grip the pillow as he struggles to enter me completely, my tight walls grip his cock, and I'm suddenly aware of just how big he is. I cry out, and he goes slower, reaching around to tease my clit and rub some of the wetness from my core onto his cock before sliding back in.

“You're so tight, Quinn. It will feel good when I'm in,” he says through gritted teeth as he pushes on. “God, you feel so good.”

His voice soothes me, and I relax slightly as he fills me. He pauses for a moment while I adjust, then begins a

steady and gradually relentless pace. His thrusts become passionate and frenzied, his hands gripping my hips tightly as he slams into me over and over again. Every time he slides in, I can feel his entire thick length inside me, and it feels like nothing I've ever experienced before.

His large frame has me pinned to the bed almost completely on my front, and I can barely move. I am forced to take all the pleasure he is giving me. One hand holds my hip, and the other rests on the back of my neck. He's all alpha in this moment, and the thought sends an illicit thrill through my body.

I grind my hips back, enjoying the curse that rips from him as he tries to hold me still. He fists my hair, making me arch my back and still my hips as his thrusts pick up pace, slamming into me. The only sounds in the room are the slapping of our skin and my screams of pleasure.

I'm close now, my walls fluttering around him as he thrusts. I'm so wet, he's now able to slide in and out relentlessly. His breathing has become labored, and I can feel the heat radiating from his body. He fucks me deep and hard a few more times before biting down on the back of my neck in a dominant gesture that sends me crashing over the edge.

My body clamps down around his cock as I come, screaming his name. As if it was all he needed to hear, he lets out a loud roar and follows soon after, collapsing onto me as his hot release fills me.

As he lies on top of me, I can feel the tension in his body slowly fade. I don't know what to do, whether to move or stay here, so I just lie still, enjoying the slight roughness of his skin, his masculine scent, and the taste of his perspiration on my lips.

"That was amazing," he mumbles into my hair.

"That was a mistake," I whisper back.

He doesn't answer, and we just lie there in silence for a while.

I try to catch my breath, and he begins to pull out. His cum spills out of me onto the bed, and I wince slightly as he moves. He rolls off me and onto his back, a hand rubbing his stubble.

He looks at me. “Are you okay?”

I don’t know what to say. I should be running, screaming, anything. Instead, I nod. The truth is, despite the burn between my legs, part of me wants him to take me all over again. The other part of me feels a deep sense of shame. Gina’s pack will never forgive me. Although they’re not my pack, they represent the closest thing to acceptance I’ve ever felt in the shifter community. Gina even thought Mateo might ask me to stay on after the fountain repairs were complete.

Being kidnapped is one thing, but it will be clear I’ve mated with Diego—his scent, the bite on my neck. I will reek of the betrayal. I could tell them he forced me, but for some reason, the thought of betraying Diego like that makes my wolf anxious.

“Well, damn,” he says, blowing out a breath. “I think those witches might be onto something.”

He seems to be mulling something over. His handsome face is a mixture of confusion and lust as he looks at me. Despite all my feelings of shame, I want nothing more than to climb onto him, to know how he tastes... my eyes flicker up to meet his, and I see my passion reflected in them. Looking down at the hard plains of his muscular body, I notice his cock is already hard again. Only now can I see his full size. My inner walls clench in anticipation, but sheer panic overrides my desire.

What the hell am I doing?

I push myself up, grabbing the remnants of my dress and the sheet as I go, shifting so my back is against the headboard. I hold my knees to my chest. Diego looks at me and rolls his eyes.

“No point hiding what I’ve already seen and had my hands all over.” He smirks before adding, “I don’t think you’ve had a man in a long time, Quinn. I think you’re the tightest I’ve ever had.”

He’s fisting his cock now, and my eyes are fixed on the hard length, my thoughts so clouded with desire that I have to look away.

“Stop, Diego. None of this is right.” Despite my efforts, tears start to fall down my face.

I hear him sigh and then see his large hand reach for me. I flinch, but he still rests it on my knee.

“I get you’re angry. I’m not going to tell you not to be, but I’m sure as hell not letting you leave.” I can feel his eyes on me as he adds, “I wouldn’t have kept you last night if my wolf hadn’t sensed something, and what happened this morning seems all the proof I need. If you and that bond can make me stronger, then you’re staying. You might as well let yourself enjoy it.”

I look up just in time to see him wink at me. I want to slap the suggestive look off his ruggedly handsome face, but I know better than to ever raise my hand to an alpha like Diego. As if he can tell what I’m thinking, I see the wolf flash in his eyes, forcing me to look away.

“Y-you have to let me go,” I say, unable to stop fresh tears from falling. “I won’t tell anyone about any of this.”

I feel a whoosh of cool air on my breasts as he snatches the sheets away from me and pulls me under him. I gasp at the intrusion and mentally chastise myself as my body immediately responds to his casual domination, my legs falling open as he settles between them.

“If you think for a second I’m giving this up,” he says roughly, palming my core that’s still wet from his cum, “you’re making me stronger already. And you loved it. Your wolf responds like my own. Whether you want to admit it or not, you came screaming on my cock. You wanted it.”

Angry and embarrassed, I push with all my strength, but he laughs at my attempts. Once I've worn myself out, he casually rolls off me and gets out of bed.

“Stay in bed naked or wear one of my shirts. Whatever,” Diego says while dressing. “I’m going out. I’ll set the house to secure, so don’t even bother trying to escape. I’ve got things to do today. I’ll have someone sort out some stuff for you, because you *are* staying. You really don’t want to piss me off, Quinn.”

With some distance between us, I’m able to summon some courage. Enraged, I pick up a book on the nightstand and throw it at him. “Piss you off? You kidnapped me!”

I’m looking for something else to throw until his anger stops me in my tracks. “Enough! You think I care about kidnapping? Besides, it was you who started things this morning. You wanted me to fuck you, and you loved it.”

I know he’s right, but his words are still like a slap to the face. I honestly don’t know how to respond because it’s true. What on earth does that mean for me?

Diego storms out of the room, slamming the door. I sit in silence for a moment until I hear some beeps throughout the house—presumably the security system he mentioned—and then the slam of the main door. Only when I’m completely alone do I break down and cry.

What have I done?

I lie in bed for over an hour, letting my tears dry as I try to think through everything. Diego doesn’t come back. Part of me is relieved because I still feel so drawn to him, though I’m also terrified of him.

If he’d come back, I know he’d have taken me again. And worse, I’d have let him. I want to run—I need to run. But I’m scared. I don’t even know where I am, really, except somewhere in the heart of Diego’s territory.

I quickly shower in the large en suite and pull on one of Diego’s huge flannel shirts, deciding to take control of the

situation. I need to find a phone or a computer, anything that might help me contact Gina. I can't just sit here, waiting for him to return.

I start with the top floor, looking in all the bedrooms. Each one is simple but luxurious. I don't find anything helpful, though. Heading downstairs, I hope to find a study with a computer or something, but the cabin is huge. Some rooms are also locked, making me suspect they're the only ones that could help me. Diego wouldn't leave me here alone if he thought I could access anything useful.

After going in circles, I finally find myself in the kitchen. Passing the table by the door, I catch sight of some framed photos. One of Diego with his arm around a young boy makes me pause. He must be Diego's son. The image of the happy father and son seems at odds with everything I'd heard about the family. Losing his son must have been devastating.

I inwardly groan. Now I'm sympathizing with the enemy. Not to mention sleeping with the enemy. My kidnapper.

I try the large patio doors, but they're locked. I briefly consider trying to smash the glass, but after a simple inspection, I've no doubt they're made of reinforced material.

My stomach groans with hunger and relief as I find the kitchen fully stocked. Helping myself to a pot of coffee and a fresh pastry, I sit on one of the high stools overlooking the balcony and the forest beyond. The view is spectacular but does nothing to calm my racing mind.

My wolf, however, feels surprisingly calm. Edgy but calm. Diego's scent is everywhere, permeating my senses in a way I can't describe.

What have I done?

Chapter 5 - Diego

I storm out of the house, slamming the door so hard, any standard material would have shattered. Luckily, the entire cabin is practically a fortress of the finest reinforced materials, so it simply reverberates as the beeping confirms the building is secure.

Standing on the front porch, my fists ball, and I have to fight the urge not to head straight back inside and sink myself into Quinn's tight body again. I smirk as I consider she'd probably fight like a hellcat, but I know she wants it just as much as I do.

I run my hand over my three-day stubble and lean back against the porch. The events of the last 24 hours swirl in my brain, and I savor the scent of Quinn's body all around me.

When I got word that Marcus and his bunch of idiotic friends had been stupid enough to kidnap a random woman from Silverstar land, I had gone over with the intention of cutting her loose if she wasn't going to cause me more problems. And then I was planning to knock some sense into Marcus and his crew.

Sadly, the biggest issue with Marcus is that he's a dangerous combination of stupid and overly confident. He inspires leadership, though, and can be useful in guiding younger pack members when it comes to things I need taking care of. The kinds of things where I don't need men asking questions.

However, since Tyler's death and the power vacuum he left behind, Marcus has become increasingly belligerent. I know we're heading for an impasse. I just hoped I could avenge Tyler before having to deal with Marcus.

So, I headed down to Marcus's place to sort out his latest mess, only to be smacked in the face by Quinn and her damn wolf. I've never felt anything like it, and as soon as I

saw Marcus with his hands on her, I knew she was mine. The evening is a blur—the ceremony, the pack celebration, and taking her home. The next thing I know, I'm buried deep in her body this morning, and it wasn't just sex. It was something else. My wolf responded like an animal freed from a cage, my whole soul burning with the release.

I know she felt it, too. The raw power. The same power that is still coursing through my veins right now.

I can still feel her soft, perfect skin beneath my rough hands, the curve of her hips that seemed to be made for me to grip as I slammed into her. Her tightness gripped my cock like it was the only one she'd ever known. Thinking about it, I see now that her youth and inexperience are obvious. That only fuels the fire burning within me.

I want to take her again. I want her to submit to me, to understand her place. I want her submission to be real. But I really don't understand why that seems to matter so much to me.

I roll my head on my shoulders, trying to relax the tension that's still gripping my muscles. Heading toward my truck, I climb in, revving the engine loudly as I pull away from the house. The engine growls as I accelerate, and I know I need to go on a long run before I meet with the others, so I drive out to the edge of the reserve. Running in human form so I can go straight to the meeting, I take one of the well-worn tracks from my youth, weaving in and out of the trees. All the while, I try to force down the memories of when Tyler was a boy and would try to keep up with me on my daily runs.

I feel the rage build, forcing me to go faster. The branches scratch my bare arms, but I don't care, lost as I am in the fog of my memories. Tyler was a sweet young pup and then a boisterous boy who idolized me. All my hopes and dreams for him and our pack were shattered by Mason.

The unspoken thrum through my veins that Tyler shattered most of my hopes and dreams before Mason brought

him down pulls me up short. My feet plant firmly on the ground as I gasp for breath.

I shove the thought down, allowing my rage at Silverstar to return to the fore. Tyler would have become good in time. Now he doesn't have the chance, and *that* is their doing.

Looking up, I see my truck in the distance and slowly jog back to it, grabbing my towel from the back seat to wipe my sweat and then pulling on a clean t-shirt. Throughout, I try to hold onto the rage I feel for my enemies. I want to use that righteous anger to propel our plans forward for revenge at the meeting this morning.

But all I can think about is Quinn. What she's doing, if she's okay, and whether I should go back to check on her. I'm only kidding myself, though—I wouldn't be checking on her, I'd be taking her again and again. I want her like I've never wanted any other woman, and it's like she's taken root in my mind.

I want the additional strength the mating bond provides, and I sure as hell want Quinn's body, but the last thing I need is some female dominating my thoughts.

I slam the truck door shut and head out to Zack's, knowing I'll catch him before the meeting starts. Sure enough, he's where he spends most of his downtime—at the side of his property, chopping wood for the stores. My oldest friend is one hell of a conundrum: a tech whiz who loves nothing more than being outside, doing manual work.

I shake my head, chuckling as I approach him, watching how he swings the axe down with brute force.

“Who are you imagining under that axe today, Zack?” I ask as he gives me a brief nod in greeting before returning to his work.

“I got a whole list, Diego,” he says, taking another swing. “Probably almost as long as yours.”

I nod in agreement and wait until he's finished. In a moment, he throws down the axe and takes a long drink of his water. I've always loved Zack's property. There's a calm in the air here, and it's been a respite to me nearly all my life.

"I'd say a good woman might help, but that's probably your department after last night," Zack smirks, knowing he's the only one who can get away with that statement. Still, my wolf flashes in my eyes defensively, making him laugh. "It's like that, is it?"

I'm about to respond when I hear the porch door swing shut behind me. Turning, I see Zack's sister Saffy appear. She hesitates when she sees me, her striking red hair whipping around her as she hovers, unsure what to do in front of her alpha. She's a sweet kid but nervy as hell. She's also just the person I need to see today.

"Saffy," I say.

Her eyes flick to me, but she doesn't respond.

"I need you to head into town and buy whatever you think my new mate will need: clothes, boots, and whatever toiletries you women use. Just send me the bill. Think you can handle it?"

"Y-yes, of course. I don't want to spend too much, though. How much do you think is right?" She's already edging to her car as she speaks, probably grateful to get out of here.

"I really don't care, Saffy. Just get the stuff and drop it in front of my cabin. Don't bother knocking for her. She can't open the door, anyway."

Saffy's eyes widen at that, but she knows better than to say anything. Instead, she simply nods and rushes off in her little car. She and Zack are practically family to me. I care about them both, but it still amuses me how skittish she is.

I'm still chuckling as I turn back to Zack, who looks less amused.

“Will you stop scaring her? She’s just a kid.” He groans. “Now she thinks you’ve got that woman chained up or something.”

“Maybe I have,” I mutter, but then shake my head so he knows I’m joking. “I do have her locked down, though. She’s a runner.”

“Most women who have been kidnapped tend to try and run,” Zack states dryly.

“That’s true,” I admit, though Quinn certainly didn’t want to run this morning when she was practically begging me to take her.

“Must be worth the effort for the bond,” Zack says, considering me briefly. “Her scent’s all over you, so I’m thinking it was worth it all around.”

“She’s worth it,” I acknowledge reluctantly. “For the bond. I wasn’t expecting her to get so in my head, though. Even my run this morning didn’t shake her.”

Zack throws back his head and barks out a merciless laugh. “Ooh, she must have been good!”

“Enough!” I snap before even realizing I’ve done it, my wolf near exploding with rage.

Zack immediately drops his head in submission, raising his hands. “Woah, I meant no disrespect, Diego. Honestly, I’m happy for you. I wasn’t sure I believed in that mate stuff, either, really, but I’d say it’s had quite the effect on you already.”

I shake my head, my eyes returning to normal. “Shit, sorry, Zack. I know you meant no harm. She’s got me feeling all kinds of weird today.”

We fall awkwardly silent for a moment. There are few—or honestly, no—other wolves I’d ever show any kind of uncertainty or weakness around except for Zack. My dad gave me some advice when I took the position of alpha. Find

someone I can trust, just that one wolf for when my back's against the wall.

For me, that person is Zack. He's a hard-nosed man with more than enough of his own issues. But he's also strong, loyal, and has zero aspirations to take on the "nightmare," as he calls it, of being alpha. He's earned my trust and loyalty over a lifetime.

But the truth is, if he speaks too familiarly about Quinn again, I don't know what my wolf is capable of. And that scares the shit out of me.

Zack sighs, taking another long swig from his water before regarding me carefully. "We've all heard and seen wolves with their mates. It's strong stuff. I'm guessing she must be the real deal for you." Then he chuckles. "Seems like Marcus finally did something right."

At that, I scoff. "We both know damn well what was going down in that room. He was about to take her for himself."

Letting out a low whistle, Zack replies, "I'm not sure we have the moral high ground here, Diego. Kidnapped is kidnapped."

"You questioning my decisions, Zack?" I snap, knowing full well he's right.

"Lord, no. You know that, Diego. Just pointing out our position."

I can't help but wonder what the hell is wrong with me today. Snapping at Zack, the one wolf I can fully trust. I need to get my head on straight before the meeting.

"Marcus is a problem for another day," I say. "Right now, I need to be planning our next steps. I'm going to make Mason and Silverstar wolves. Securing my mate straight from under him is just a bonus." Squaring my shoulders, I meet Zack's eye. "But she's done something to me this morning, and I can't shake it."

Zack chuckles. “Her scent is all over you, so I can only guess. Before you retaliate, I’m happy for you. To be honest, she’s probably stuck in your head because you’re happy. You’ve just forgotten what that’s like.”

His words hit me more poignantly than he probably intended. Is that what this is? Feeling happy hasn’t been a priority of mine these last few years. There were plenty of issues within the pack before Tyler died, and a hell of a lot of pain and anger after.

“It’s more than that. My wolf is straight-up confused,” I admit. “Seeing her, rushing in when I don’t even know her. You’re right—the bond is some damn powerful stuff. I feel the strength already. She’s fiery, though. She hates my guts, and I can’t figure out why I care so damn much when I don’t even know her.”

“You think she’s got a man? Someone we need to put down?”

My eyes flash at the thought. “She’s mine. No way she’s had another wolf around her. I’d be able to tell.”

“Well, that’s something,” Zack says as we start toward his truck, the meeting looming, “Gotta say—and I’m no expert—but if you’re that bothered about her hating you, maybe you need to make her like you a bit more?”

I’m about to tell him where to go, but he continues. “You were all fired up about this meeting two days ago. Now you’ve been standing here for near forty minutes and not mentioned it once. Make that mating bond work for you, its strength and power. And if it’s got you like this, she must feel the same, so it can’t be that hard to make her a bit friendlier. If you know what I mean.”

He winks with his final statement. I want to slap the smirk right off his face, but instead, I find myself laughing. It’s true—Quinn definitely felt it, too. I’ve never needed to use charm to get a woman into my bed, but if doing so makes her less of a nightmare to be around, it might just be worth a shot.

She ain't going anywhere while the bond is working, and I certainly want to get my hands on that body again.

Zack and I head off to the meeting, but my mind is still fixed on the woman waiting for me at home.

Chapter 6 - Diego

Sitting on the window seat overlooking Diego's estate, I can't believe it's been nearly two weeks since I was taken. We've fallen into something of a bizarre yet comfortable routine. I'm under no illusion that I'm a prisoner here, but it's beginning to feel like a gilded cage. One I'm not even sure I want to escape as the days merge into each other.

When Diego came home late that first night, I'd fallen asleep on the comfortable sofa, unsure what to do. I braced myself as he approached, pretending to still be asleep. He must have known I was awake, but he said nothing. Simply lifted me into his arms and carried me to his bedroom.

My heart was racing by the time he laid me down, my core wet and my body primed to be touched. I knew it was the mating bond, but I'd never felt anything like it before. It was completely overwhelming.

But Diego didn't touch me. He just covered me with a blanket and left the room, not returning for hours. When he did, he remained on the other side of the bed.

The pattern has been the same every night since.

I should be grateful he's not forcing me to sleep with him. So why can't I shake the memory of being with him? Why doesn't the idea disgust me the way it should?

And why does my body respond every time he looks at me? I can't be that starved of affection that I want my kidnapper to have sex with me?

The hardest aspect of trying to maintain my distaste for Diego is that he's actually being so damn nice to me.

I was instantly suspicious on the first day when I saw a young red-haired woman leave a bag on the doorstep. She looked so nervous when she heard me banging on the door,

begging for help. She didn't even look up, just kept her head down and ran off.

Diego gave me the bag when he got back, and I discovered it was full of clothes and toiletries. There was even a pair of hiking boots—not that Diego has ever let me go far from his cabin.

On the third day, I was surprised to find him out on the deck. The doors were wide open. Desperate for some fresh air, I crept out. I didn't approach him, and he kept his back to me. As I scanned the steps and the forest, I calculated how fast I could shift and run.

“Don't even think about it, girl,” he says, his back still to me. “I could take you down faster than you can even shift. And once I get hold of you, I'm not sure I'd let you go.”

I shivered at the possessiveness in his voice. A slight thrill ran through me at the thought of him chasing me down, catching me. What would he do to me? He must have sensed me wavering as he finally turned to look at me, a glint of satisfaction and something else flashing behind his eyes.

I scurried back inside but was later surprised to see him approach me, holding my boots.

“I take it you need some fresh air. Why don't I give you a tour? You can run if you want. It'll make things more interesting.”

I was too dumbfounded to answer right away, and he tossed the boots on the floor near me. “Come if you want. If not, I'll set the alarms.”

“N-no, I'm coming,” I said, scurrying to my feet, suddenly desperate for some fresh air. Plus, If I wanted to find a way to escape, I knew it would help to know exactly where I was and which direction I should run in if I ever had the opportunity.

That first day, our walk only lasted twenty minutes, and conversation was awkward and stilted. He kept up his stony-faced bravado, but I couldn't help but think that was all

it was: bravado. He talked about the pack's property, its history, and his plans for expansion as though he really *wanted* me to know about his home. When I shivered, he handed me his jacket. It was an abrupt gesture rather than gentle, but as our hands grazed, the fizz of electricity between us was unmistakable.

I turned on my heel and rushed back into the cabin, unable to shake the unfamiliar and unwanted need rushing through my soul.

Diego didn't chase after me or try to talk to me again that night, but since then, our walks have become a daily ritual.

As usual, he's left me alone in the house. After days of searching, I know there's nothing that can help me here, so I've been snuggled up in the window with a book I found. My mind keeps wandering to Gina. She must be going out of her mind with worry. I'm sure she's got others in the pack looking for me, but I'm pretty much a stranger to them. I'm sure they'll be concerned, but it's really only Gina who will be genuinely worried about me.

And that's quite sad, to have no pack, no real family. I try not to dwell on the things I lack, but given my current situation, it's hard not to consider how few people will miss me.

Before I get too wrapped up in my sad reverie, I hear the security system deactivating, signaling Diego's return. My breath catches in my throat as he walks in, his gaze turning predatory the moment he sees me.

He's pure sex appeal, and I can't tear my eyes away from him. He has silver flecks in his hair and is wearing a plaid shirt that barely contains his biceps. His muscles ripple beneath the fabric as he strides toward me, and I can feel my heart thundering in my chest. He must be able to hear it.

I draw back from him, but he doesn't seem to notice as he hands me a bag of supplies. "I had someone pick you up

some more things,” he says gruffly before putting away a bag of groceries.

But something has changed between us since the day I was snatched. Since *that* morning. The air is thick with tension now, and I can sense something unspoken yet powerful passing between us. A connection that neither of us can ignore or deny any longer.

I think the situation has surprised us both, even if he won't admit it.

He keeps looking at me from the corner of his eye, and I can feel my face flush as I try to look away. He doesn't make any moves toward me, but I can sense his desire. It's primal and almost too much to handle.

Finally, he clears his throat and looks away. “You should probably get ready,” he says gruffly. “We're going out.”

I'm taken aback by his sudden suggestion, unsure if this is some kind of test or a genuine invitation. But before I can find the courage to ask him what he means, he turns away and leaves the room.

I stay in my corner for a few moments more, still trying to process what just happened before finally heading upstairs to get ready. For what, I'm not sure. A date? Dinner? Or simply a walk?

Looking inside the bag the woman gave me, I find some makeup. Not all of it is in my chosen shades, but I make some of it work and feel vaguely satisfied when I'm done. The woman looking back at me in the mirror looks strange, and I almost don't recognize her. And it's not the makeup or the slightly too-tight tank that's revealing way more than I usually like to show.

It's the glow to my cheeks and the sparkle in my eyes. I should look scared, and I am scared. I should look like a stereotypical kidnap victim. And yet, my wolf is calm. She's

not afraid of Diego. Which is insanity, considering everything he's done to Gina's pack. To Gina.

I throw the makeup brush down in frustration and groan. *I'm a traitor*. For looking nice for Diego, for sleeping with him, for not doing more to escape, even though I know it's pointless because I *have* tried. Haven't I?

"I'm going to make something happen tonight. Escape. Get a message to Gina. Something," I tell the woman in the mirror.

My wolf doesn't echo my sentiment, but my eyes are steely. I square my shoulders, grab a shirt to cover myself, and head down to meet Diego before he comes to find me.

I find him in the hall, standing by some kind of open safe. His broad body is partially obscuring the view, but I see a flash of metal before realizing he's putting guns away.

I speak before I can stop myself, incredulity lacing my words. "What does an alpha need a gun for?"

He spins, and before I know what's happening, my body is pinned against the wall at the bottom of the oak staircase, my feet slightly lifted. I may not have grown up in a pack, but I'm not stupid. You don't sneak up on a male wolf, and you definitely don't question the alpha.

"What did you just say?" he snarls, his handsome face contorted with a rage I last saw that night with the wolf called Marcus. "I don't *need* a gun, but silver bullets would see off most intruders or escapees around here. Don't you think?"

I shudder in his grasp, the implication clear. "I-I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean anything. I was just surprised." Tears brim in my eyes. I want to wipe them away, but I'm gripping Diego's strong arms to stop myself from falling.

We remain like that for a moment, our faces a mere breath apart. Despite my fear, I raise my gaze to look into his eyes, and I'm surprised at what I see there now. The rage has lessened, and all I see is an inner conflict. He lowers me

slowly, and I flinch as his hand comes toward my face. He pauses before wiping one of my tears away.

“Don’t spoil that pretty makeup,” he says, his voice softer than before. “You took me by surprise. I’m not used to having someone in the house anymore.”

I want to say that he didn’t need to threaten to shoot me, but I just nod, deciding now isn’t the time for sass.

“I think we could both do with a drink.” His eyes flicker to my lips and then cast downward to my chest. I’m not a super skinny girl, and I’ve certainly got the type of curves that most men seem to like. It used to make me self-conscious, but recently, I’ve been trying to take a leaf out of Gina’s book and dress a little more to show off my frame rather than hide it.

However, this tight tank is way more revealing than anything I’ve worn. Under Diego’s scrutiny, I almost feel naked.

He looks back up, and his eyes are almost black with desire. But instead of repulsing me like I know it should, it only turns me on. We stay like that for a minute, and I think he’s about to kiss me when suddenly he pushes off the wall and away from me.

“Don’t run, Quinn. I ain’t letting you go.”

His words send a shiver through my body, and all I can do is nod and follow him out to his truck.

“So, um, where are we going?” I ask when we’ve been driving in silence for a few minutes. I’m still hot and bothered by our interaction at the house.

Diego sighs, still looking at the road. “Well, I figured, seeing as how you’re staying, I’d better show you around a bit. We’ll go get some food. Don’t think I’m going soft, though—you run, and I’ll stop you. You won’t taste fresh air again.”

I believe him. “I won’t run. Will those other men be there? From that night?” I hate how my voice trembles

slightly, but that wolf Marcus is bad to the bone. I can sense it.

Diego seems to catch my drift straight away, “No. Those idiots never come into town.”

“If they’re idiots, why do you let them stay?” I can’t help but ask, though I cringe as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

I think Diego’s going to go off at me again, but instead, he chuckles as we turn into a nice-looking bar. “Marcus is something I’ll deal with later. After...”

“After Mason?” I finish for him.

In the semi-dark, I feel his eyes on me. “Yes, after Mason. I know you’re not a part of his pack, Quinn. I’ve done my research, and you have no alliance. So stay out of it.”

“B-but my friend Gina is in that pack and—”

“And nothing. They killed my son, Quinn, and I will have vengeance.”

His words are abrupt, angry even. But there’s something else, too. It sounds a lot like sadness. Of course he’s sad, his son *is* dead. I’d heard the story from Gina and others. I’d even rebuilt the fountain Diego’s pack had destroyed, and I’d been terrified for Gina when she was held hostage. But I didn’t even once consider how Diego felt. His son Tyler sounds like a terrible man, but he was still that little boy from the photo years ago. Still Diego’s son.

I don’t know what to say or do, and we’ve fallen silent. I look out the window. The bar ahead looks cozy, with lots of cute tables outside and string lights in the back courtyard. I’m almost surprised Diego would take me somewhere so... romantic.

“This looks lovely. Are we eating here?” I ask, trying to break the tension. It seems to do the trick as Diego slides out, slamming the door and coming around to my side of the cabin.

“Come on, kid.” As we walk toward the bar, he slides his arm around my waist and pulls me close. I’m not sure if it’s to stop me from running or because he wants to hold me, but I lean in, anyway.

I increasingly find myself drawn to Diego rather than repulsed, and it’s not just my wolf urging me on. There’s something in his soul pulling me in despite myself. Is it just the bond messing with my head?

Chapter 7 - Quinn

She looks so damn pretty sitting across the table from me. So damn pretty, and the softness in her eyes makes me feel like a total asshole.

We have been doing a weird dance these last couple of weeks. I don't even know why I started suggesting the walks. Keeping someone captive against their will usually involves keeping them locked up, not strolling around. I've no doubt her wolf would be fast if given the opportunity. I'm also not worried; I'm the fastest there is. Seeing her come alive in the meadows around my property has brought out unexpected emotions in me.

I knew from the first moment I clapped my eyes on her that the bond was more powerful than I could have ever imagined. But I still hadn't expected the emotions that came with it. If I'm honest, I'm not sure I've felt many emotions full-stop for a few years now. Even when Tyler died, I was numb. The only emotion I could feel—rage—was more of a functional feeling. It was about doing something rather than feeling something.

Even Zack doesn't know the extent of the bond's hold over me. I think about Quinn all the time, making excuses to spend time with her. Like the walks, like this dinner. I assume it's the bond, anyway. There are times when we're walking, when she talks about her life and art, that I find myself drawn to her as a man versus a wolf.

I find myself saying things to her I don't talk to anyone else about, opening up about Tara's death, my childhood, and now even Tyler. It scares the shit out of me.

We haven't even slept together since that first morning. Her rejection of the mating bond, and me in general, felt so visceral that I decided to give her space. I have a feeling if I start something, I won't be able to hold my wolf back. And

although I'm not blind to my faults, I've never forced a woman into my bed. Never had to.

Never particularly bothered wining and dining women, either. Yet, here we are.

I'm well-aware that Silverstar wolves have been looking for Quinn, searching the forest and making inquiries throughout the vicinity. She's technically not part of the pack; she's a bit of a strange one, as she was raised by humans from all accounts. Still, Mateo's pack obviously cares for her. It's not that I haven't considered how I could use her in my quest for revenge beyond the additional power the bond is giving me, but I'm surprised at how much the effect of the bond is clouding my judgment.

Something I can never admit to my pack.

I'm staring at the menu intently, even though I already know what I'm going to order—ribs, as always—when I realize Quinn's asking me a question. I can tell she's skittish about being out. Probably thinks it's her big chance to escape.

“W-what are you having?” She's looking right at me, and I gather she's had to repeat the question.

I clear my throat. “Ribs. Sandy owns this place, and she does the best ribs around. You should definitely get some.”

She smiles, her whole damn face lighting up. It's like lightning through my veins. “That sounds perfect. I'm starving.”

I laugh. “I like a girl who eats. None of that picking through a salad business.”

I already know Quinn's a curvy girl, not one of those stick-thin women. My thoughts instantly turn to when we were in bed, my hands gripping her soft hips as I pounded into her body. My eyes drop to her ample cleavage, and my dick is already rock-hard. When I look up, I see her eyes are on me and her cheeks are flushed. I've no doubt my thoughts are written all over my face.

We've fallen silent again. She's nervous, which is understandable. I'm the one who breaks the silence this time.

"So," I start, wanting to get her talking and ease the tension, "tell me how you got into art?"

She takes a deep breath and begins to tell me about growing up around humans, never quite fitting in with them or the wolves she encountered. She found solace in art. It was her escape from the world around her. She could use it to visualize her wolf side and find a way of dealing with not having a pack of her own.

She tells me about meeting her friend Gina at college, another wolf on her own, and their shared love of art and close bond. I remember Gina from our last attack on Silverstar. Another feisty female, if I recall.

I feel an immense but carefully contained sadness emanating from Quinn as she talks, and I can't help but place my hand over hers on the table. Her eyes meet mine in surprise, and there's something in them that makes my heart ache for what she's been through. Still, despite everything she's endured, she's brave enough to make her way in life without a family or pack of her own.

I can't bring myself to dwell on the similarities between Quinn losing her wolf family and me losing my first wife and now my only child. My son, and the ultimate source of all the vengeance running through my veins. I suddenly wonder if Quinn has ever felt the same bitterness.

"Does it ever make you angry?" I ask. "That your family left you, I mean? Or were taken from you? That humans raised you and denied your wolf?"

She thinks for a moment and then scoffs lightly. "Of course I don't. I've no idea why they left me, but my human parents were great. I've been loved." She's thoughtful for a moment before adding, "It is hard not to belong, but I'm not angry about it."

Sad, though. Maybe.

I simply grunt at that. She's obviously more forgiving than I am. Perhaps it's a female thing.

"So, I do art. What do you do?" she asks lightly.

"What do you mean, what do I do?" I shrug. "I do this. I run the pack, I run my businesses. I take out my enemies."

She sighs. "That all sounds very *productive*, but what do you enjoy doing?"

I want to tell her I actually do enjoy fighting and winning, but pause. She's looking at me with such openness in her eyes, it makes me want to give her a bit more. "I like sports. We used to do these big-pack games. A tournament. Tyler was just a kid then, but he was great. So fast, and a great team player." I smile as the memories come flooding in.

"You don't do them anymore?" she asks gently.

"Things changed. Different priorities." I reply gruffly.

"Well, the games sound fun. Maybe you should hold them again sometime."

I feel something at the back of my throat, a weird, constricting emotion that I have to stuff back down. "Wouldn't be the same."

She's looking at me now with a sympathy I can't stomach. I push away my half-eaten dessert and motion to Sandy for the bill. Quinn doesn't say anything as we head to the front, just sticks close to my side as I chat with some pack members. I'm not sure if she's scared or shy, but she barely raises her head. I catch Sandy giving Quinn concerned looks, which pisses me off—Quinn may be my captive, but I'm clearly treating her well. I give Sandy a pointed look, and she makes her excuses to head back into the kitchen.

Feeling guilty isn't something I'm used to.

Standing by my truck, I'm about to tell Quinn to get in when I hear shouting across the street near a general store. There's the smashing of glass and then some shouting. The

store's owner, Mack, yells out, confirming my suspicions. His store is being robbed.

Two men I don't recognize come charging across the street, trying to reach a car parked opposite mine. My wolf howls within me as he takes control, urging me to take action.

Without thinking, I leave Quinn and help apprehend them. As they struggle against me, my fists move of their own accord, punching one in the face before throwing him against a wall. The other man turns to run but is stopped by Mack, who grabs hold of his collar and drags him back to the group of wolves that have gathered. Zack arrives just in time to take over.

I was right—these idiots aren't from around here and seem human. Some swift justice from Zack will see them deposited on the main road out of town with enough bruises that I doubt they'll ever return.

“Never a dull moment,” Zack quips as the men are thrown in the back of his truck. “Where's that girl of yours?”

The adrenaline still flowing through me falters as realization dawns. Quinn. I just left her standing there. Her wolf is probably halfway through the forest now.

My eyes scan the small crowd, and then I see her. Standing by my truck, just where I left her. She didn't run.

I walk toward her slowly. Her expression is soft as she watches me approach with a faint smile playing on her lips. It stirs something inside me that I've long forgotten: hope.

I stop right in front of her, and without thinking, I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She shivers slightly at my touch, her eyes widening in surprise. I can't help but smile as I lean down to whisper in her ear, “You should have run when you had the chance.”

She's trembling now, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to pull her body against mine. My wolf is demanding it.

Instead, I step back and take her hand. Helping Quinn into the truck feels like a promise. One that won't be broken tonight.

The atmosphere in the car is charged with an unspoken electricity between us. I can't help but glance at Quinn as I start the engine, and when our eyes meet, I know she's feeling it, too. We drive back to my place in silence, but the heat between us is palpable.

I turn off the engine, get out of the truck, and walk around to her side. I move to help her down, my hands on her waist. But as she slides down, I push her back against the truck in a searing kiss.

Her arms are instantly tangled in my hair, our bodies grinding together in perfect harmony as if we've done this a million times before. It's like no other feeling I've ever experienced before.

Pinning her against the truck, I use my free hand to pull her vest down, and her breasts spill out. I palm one, roughly enjoying her gasps as her head tips back. Her nipples are pointed in the cool night air, and I dip my head to suck one into my mouth. Her little mewls as I gently nip her go straight to my painfully hard cock.

I can't wait any more. I move my mouth away, my breath hot on her neck as my hands roam down to the button of her jeans. I make swift work of removing them before forcing her down to the soft ground on all fours. With her knees on the grass, I can't help but admire her beautiful ass.

I run my hand down her back until my fingers slide through her wetness. I push one finger in, then a second, watching as her body opens for me and her back arches in anticipation. Fisting my cock, I rub the head of it in her juices before pushing it into her tight, wet core.

Quinn gasps and moans beneath me with each thrust, pushing back against me more and more eagerly until we are both lost in our own little world of pleasure. My grip tightens

on her hips as I pick up speed, pushing ever deeper until she is screaming with every thrust. I reach around, alternating between squeezing her breasts and rubbing her clit until she's begging for release. Molten heat floods through me as my wolf threatens to completely break free.

As I peak, I bite down on her neck, setting off her orgasm. Mine follows, and I'm still thrusting with nothing left to give as her walls continue to convulse around my cock.

We collapse on the grass, my body pinning her to the ground. The cool night air and the earthy smell of the forest soothe our ragged breathing.

After a while, I roll off Quinn and onto my back, my hand immediately going to her, tangling in her hair. She looks up at me, her eyes full of questions, the depths of which I'm not sure I'm ready to answer.

"We're mates, and you're mine," I say as if that's all the explanation she needs.

Chapter 8 - Quinn

I wake with the early morning light flooding the bedroom, the soft covers in disarray from all the times and ways Diego took me last night. My core aches, and every time I roll over, I'm reminded of the thousand different sensations my body has experienced at his hands.

I'm also alone. I don't even need to open my eyes to know he's not there, the bond is so strong now. Even in my sleep, I sense the loss of his physical presence.

I allow myself a few more minutes to process everything beneath the soft covers. I *should* have run. It was my big chance. Diego was otherwise occupied, everyone on the street was focused on the scene unfolding before us, and no one was watching me. Not only could I have run, but Diego left his keys in his jacket pocket when he ran over to apprehend the robbers. I could have just driven out of there. I could have been out on the main road in no time and figured out how to get back to Gina's.

Gina. What would my friend think if she could see me now? Literally sleeping with the enemy.

I groan, throwing the pillow over my face. I can barely admit the truth to myself, never mind Gina—if I ever see her again. I didn't run because I didn't want to. I want Diego, my wolf wants him. She senses the bond and will not be denied.

I didn't run because I chose to stay. I've sealed my own fate.

With that knowledge weighing heavily on my mind, I finally drag myself from the sanctuary of the bed and shower quickly before dressing in another of Diego's massive plaid shirts. As I step back into the main bedroom, feeling remarkably fresher after towel-drying my hair, I smell something delicious coming from downstairs.

If I didn't know better, I'd say Diego was cooking.

He hasn't shown any signs of being domesticated since I've been here. He's been gone by breakfast most days, though pastries and bread are always delivered. When he returns in the evening, he brings some kind of roast with him. I suspect he hasn't bothered cooking for himself in a very long time.

I pad down the central wood staircase that dominates the cabin, then turn left into the kitchen. It smells amazing in here: eggs, bacon, and waffles. I smirk to myself. Diego's clearly in a good mood after last night.

He stands with his back to me, and I can't help but admire his broad shoulders in the light gray t-shirt he's wearing, his biceps straining and flexing as he flips the pan. I shiver as I recall the effortless way his strong arms lifted me last night as he bounced me on his cock.

Just the thought makes me blush furiously. I never imagined sex could feel like that.

Diego seems to sense my presence and turns around. His handsome face with the sexy five-day stubble he always seems to have looks amused when he takes in my obvious blush.

Stalking toward me, he laughs. "Whatever you're thinking must be good."

I open my mouth to reply, but then he's on me, his hands tangling in my still-wet hair. I let out a surprised yelp as he lifts me and spins me around so I'm sitting on the edge of the large island.

I gasp as he slides his hands up my thighs, pushing them apart and bunching up the fabric of my oversized shirt. His fingers find me already wet and begin to spread me open. A moan escapes me as he pushes my body slightly back so he can add a second and then a third thick finger. Feeling impossibly full now, I have to open my legs wider as his thumb runs circles around my clit.

"I know just what you need," he whispers gruffly in my ear before dipping his head to kneel between my open

thighs. My hand grips his hair as he begins to suck my clit, his fingers continuing to fuck my tight channel.

The sensation is overwhelming, and I pant with pleasure as Diego relentlessly teases my clit with his tongue while his fingers fill me. He brings me closer and closer to orgasm until I can't take it anymore. Finally, I cry out as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me.

Diego chuckles wickedly as he stands back up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand before planting a gentle kiss on my lips. He whispers, "Now that's what I call breakfast."

He turns back to the food, already dished up and probably half-cold by now. I slide off the counter, straightening the shirt, my legs shaky.

I can't get over the effect he has on me.

Wordlessly, I grab some placemats and cutlery as he brings our plates over. The food is slightly cold, but it still tastes amazing.

"You should cook more often," I joke between mouthfuls.

He shrugs and then eyes me. "Guess we built up an appetite. The kitchen could probably do with a few more groceries."

That's an understatement. The kitchen is bare, apart from the fresh pastries that arrive each day and the dinner he brings home.

I scoff. "You think?" He shoots me a look, but I add, "If you let me get some things, I'll make dinner."

He seems to think about it for a moment and then nods. "Okay. You can ride out with me this morning. I've got to head into town, and you can go into the store. My second, Zack, has a sister who works there. Saffy. She can keep an eye on you."

He obviously still doesn't trust me completely, but I'll take it. After all, I shouldn't fully trust him, either.

Given that he seems to be in a good mood, I decide to try for the one thing I really want. “Y-you said maybe I could contact my friend Gina soon?”

He sighs, cutlery clattering onto his empty plate. “Not yet. There are things in play. Things that have nothing to do with you, but you can’t be messing things up by running your mouth off.”

My stomach churns as I think about how worried Gina must be. “I just want her to know I’m safe,” I say quietly.

He looks at me, his eyes flashing with something dangerous. “You gonna tell her exactly how well I’m taking care of you?”

My mouth runs dry at the thought of Gina finding out I’ve slept with Diego. He laughs, standing up. “Didn’t think so. Now, get ready if you want to come.”

And just like that, Diego’s hardened exterior returns. But I’m not going to miss the opportunity to go out, and by the time we’re in the truck, he seems to have thawed a bit again, telling me bits and pieces about the area’s history.

We drive by the large sports complex, and to the side is an overgrown field. He gestures to it. “That’s where we used to hold those tournaments.”

The sports complex has an amazing backdrop of mountains and woods, and I can easily imagine it packed on a glorious day. “Looks like a great spot for them. You should really consider doing them again.”

He grunts in reply, continuing to drive slowly as he looks out at the field. I think he’s lost in a memory, and I don’t want to intrude. As he told me, the sports complex holds many happy memories with his son.

From everything I’d heard from Gina’s pack, Tyler was a terrible man. Abusive. I’d never given any thought to how Diego might have felt about his death until being brought here. Now, as I watch him lost in memory, I’m filled with so much sympathy for him.

I reach over and put my hand on his forearm. The simple gesture seems to jerk him back to the moment. He shrugs me off but doesn't say anything.

I wouldn't know what to say, anyway.

We pull into the general store on the main street, and I'm again struck by how pretty this little town is. It's very similar to Silverstar, with a real community feel and some lovely local shops. The park across the street looks green and inviting, reminding me of the damage Diego's pack wreaked on the fountain that I helped rebuild.

I'm finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile Diego's actions with how he is with me and how fondly he talks about his community.

"I called ahead, so Saffy knows you're coming in," he says. "Stay with her until I get back." He turns to me. "Don't run, Quinn. I'm not stupid."

"I'm not going to run, Diego," I say honestly. "I'm just getting dinner."

He regards me coolly for a moment, but then his eyes shift, and something resembling a smile flashes across his face before he walks away toward one of the other buildings.

I take a deep breath, suddenly feeling exposed without Diego's presence. Some men across the street appear to have stopped what they were doing and are watching me. I don't want to look too closely to see if I recognize any of them from the night I was taken, but I have a bad feeling about them. Turning, I rush inside the store.

"Hey, hello?" I hear someone call out from down one of the aisles.

I poke my head around and see a young woman with stunning long red hair balancing precariously on a stepladder. "You Quinn? I'll be one sec!"

I rush forward as the ladder wobbles. "Are you okay? That looks really dangerous." I grab the ladder to steady it.

The woman laughs as she steps down, and I see how young she really is, maybe nineteen at most. “It’s okay. I haven’t fallen yet.”

“Don’t you actually sell ladders here?” I ask, gesturing to the homeware section where some ladders are stacked against the wall.

She breaks out into a beautiful laugh, nodding. “It’s probably not the best advertisement for them, me wobbling up there.”

We’re both laughing now, and she introduces herself. “So, Quinn, right? I’m Saffy, Zack’s sister.”

“I, um, haven’t met Zack properly yet, but I’ve seen him. Did I see you dropping some things off at the cabin the other week?” I ask.

“Yeah, that was me. Hope everything was okay?” Saffy asks. Looking around nervously, she adds, “I know this is all a bit weird. I think you look pretty calm, and I’d be a mess. I’m just trying to say, I hope you’re okay?”

She looks so sincere and kind at that moment, tears well in my eyes, and I can’t reply. She immediately reaches out and places her hand on my shoulder. “Oh, god, he’s not hurting you, is he? I know Diego. He’s not usuall—”

I wave my hand to stop her. “No, no. It’s nothing like that. He’s actually... I mean, we’re... fine,” I stutter, unsure how to explain. “I’m just worried about my friend from the other pack. She must be so worried about me.”

Saffy frowns slightly. “He hasn’t let you contact her at all? It’s all very tense, isn’t it, with the other pack? It’s difficult.”

She heads to the counter, where she has a pot of coffee. She gestures if I’d like a cup, and I smile and nod, taking a seat on one of the benches. I’m glad to finally have someone else to talk to.

“I’m not actually from Mateo’s pack; I was just staying with Gina,” I clarify. “Fixing the... well, the fountain.”

At the mention of the destroyed fountain, Saffy blushes slightly. “Yes, there’s been a lot of that. Marcus and his boys seem to think it proves a point.”

From the disgusted way Saffy says Marcus’s name, I can see she’s not a fan of the guy, either. I decide to push. “So that wasn’t Diego?”

Looking slightly wary, she shrugs. “I’m sure he was happy for them to do whatever, but I think he has bigger plans. With what happened and all.”

I nod in understanding. “What was Tyler like? I only know the basics about what happened.”

A strange look passes over Saffy’s face before she pastes on a smile. “Look, I’m not going to speak ill of the dead or my pack. Diego was his dad, and he’s hurting. Not many see that, with him being alpha. Men like Marcus just think about ego and revenge. Diego’s just thinking about his son.”

“Yeah, I think I see that, too,” I say thoughtfully.

“You do, don’t you?” Saffy says carefully before adding, “Diego’s not like Tyler was, you know. He’s a good man.”

I thank Saffy for the coffee and pick out some ingredients, mulling over her words as I walk through the aisles. She told me a lot while remaining loyal to her alpha, confirming my suspicions that Diego’s revenge is driven by pain. It also sounds like Marcus is every bit as dangerous as I first thought.

By the time Diego steps into the store, looking for me, I’m sitting back at the counter with Saffy, laughing like we’ve known each other for years. I turn as he walks in, not missing the surprise that flashes across his face.

“You two getting on, I see?” he asks, picking up my bags.

Saffy takes my cup as I stand and draws me into a hug. “Yes, we are, and you’re not to hide her away anymore. She can at least come over to ours, can’t she?”

I hold my breath while I wait for Diego to answer. He looks between us before nodding. “Yeah, we’ll see.”

I exit the store with Diego, feeling better than I have in weeks.

Chapter 9 - Diego

Driving away from my cabin, I feel a twinge of what I can only describe as guilt as I think about setting the security system and locking Quinn inside. It's what I've been doing every day for the last six weeks.

But things have changed since she was kidnapped by my pack. Since I realized she was my mate. *We've* changed.

At first, I thought it was the bond making me feel things, purely driven by my wolf. Now I see that it's her and the way she makes me feel as a man. I haven't felt this content in years, maybe ever. I haven't laughed this much in years, that's for sure.

Choking back my laughter, I remember surprising Quinn this morning when she came into the kitchen making eggs and bacon, wearing just her little apron and nothing underneath. Her face was a picture, and definitely worth the sparks I'd taken from the frying pan. Remembering how she'd sunk to her knees and taken me deep into her mouth in return was also well worth it.

Trying not to dwell on the memory as I head to the pack meeting, I have to adjust my hard cock in my trousers. I seem to be permanently hard at the moment. Quinn's body is pure heaven, and I can't get enough. Can't keep my hands off her.

At first, I didn't trust her not to run. My wolf needed to lock her down to maintain the bond. I couldn't risk her getting away when the strength the bond provides is out of this world. Now, it's the man in me who's scared that she'll run, that I'll lose her and the light she's brought to my life. I hadn't even realized how little I was living until she reminded me how things could be.

Driving into the town center, I pass the sports complex, and my eyes land on the tournament grounds. I don't know

why I told Quinn about that, but ever since, it's been on my mind. I can picture Tyler so clearly there as a young pup, best in his class and destined for great things. I don't understand where it all went wrong with the boy.

Looking at the unkempt tournament grounds suddenly makes me angry. Rage bubbles up from somewhere deep inside, and I grip the steering wheel. Punching out Zack's number on the car control panel, I seethe, waiting for it to connect.

"You nearly here, Diego?" Zack answers lightly, and I can hear a crowd in the background.

"Why the fuck aren't the tournament grounds maintained?" I snap.

Zack pauses for a moment before replying, "Um, it's not needed, I guess." His tone is careful.

"Well, tell whoever maintains the sports complex to fucking sort it out. It's a disgrace," I bark, knowing deep down, I'm being irrational with Zack.

His reply is smooth and calm. "Sure thing, alpha. I'll make sure it's sorted out this week. Tournaments were always a lot of fun for the pack."

Some of the rage dissipates, and Zack and I hang up on good terms. I pride myself on my ability to stay calm and direct my emotions at the right people, and the neglected sports complex isn't on Zack. If anything, I should have taken charge of it. As alpha, I oversee the maintenance of the lands for my pack.

Pulling away from the tournament field toward the meeting, I try to push down the nagging feeling that I can't decide if I'm angrier at the groundskeeper, myself, Zack, Tyler, or Mason.

I think I'm angry at everyone. Except Quinn.

The last people I want to see as I drive into the lot are Marcus and a couple of his cousins, hanging around and

apparently dragging their feet about going into the meeting.

Marcus's father was one of the best wolves I ever knew, a long-time pack elder who had been full of wisdom, quiet power, and selflessly community-minded—the exact opposite of his son. I have often wrestled with how Tyler's values appeared to differ so much from my own. But I find the contrast between Marcus and his father almost more startling.

Still, I struggle with a sense of loyalty to Marcus's family, and since his father's passing, I've perhaps given him too much slack. His reckless nature is useful in my war with Silverstar pack, though, and I have every intention of using it.

Marcus approaches the pack community hall to meet me. "You didn't bring that pretty mate of yours, alpha?" He grins. "We'd sure like to see her again properly."

After my outburst with Zack, I'm determined to keep my emotions in check. Still, I won't have Marcus talking about Quinn. She doesn't trust him, and I can see why.

"How about you don't think about my mate at all, Marcus? Let's focus on the job, shall we?" My eyes flash in warning.

Seemingly not taking the hint, Marcus follows me toward the hall. "Obviously, I'm thinking about the job, Diego. She could be useful."

I'm tired of listening to Marcus already, given his previously stupid ideas about what's "useful"—like smashing up Silverstar's fountain, which achieved absolutely nothing. I turn my back on him and walk to the front.

Despite feeling out of sorts when I arrived, I'm able to work the room as alpha. If anything, I feel stronger and more determined than I have in a long time, which I know is partly due to the bond. It's also partly how Quinn just makes me feel. Happier, I guess.

It's a busy season for the pack, so I let Zack run through the agenda he's put together while I answer questions and make decisions as needed. It's a lengthy system, but one

that has worked well for decades and helped make our town one of the most prosperous in the area. We dominate in this part of the state.

I told Zack to deliberately leave our next steps against Silverstar until the last section of the meeting. I wanted to make it clear that the pack's well-being comes first, ahead of vengeance. Clearly, Marcus and his cronies are only attending the meeting to hear more about our plans to attack, so they're easily distracted during the main parts of the meeting. Clearly, community issues aren't their priority. Which is why I'm alpha.

"Something to say, Marcus?" I ask after his latest insistence that we get to what he considers the main purpose of the meeting. "The school refit not important enough for you?"

"I never said that. Just thought we were here to finally get a plan together," he mutters.

It's true that many in the pack have been eager to strike back after Mateo's men killed our men in the last encounter. They're right to be angry, and it needs addressing. But I won't be rushed.

"I will address this when we're finished," I growl. "Tyler was my own. I want revenge, I want Mason dead. But I'll be the one who decides when."

"Jameson was my uncle, and he died in that attack. I deserve vengeance, too." Marcus says, not backing down.

"Jameson knew the risks, Marcus, and he stepped up. He also didn't listen. He wasn't supposed to go into that bar, just destroy it," I reply coolly. Jameson was as bad as Marcus, and together, they nurtured a thirst for violence. It had cost Jameson his life.

Though clearly still fuming, Marcus says nothing more. The meeting continues until we have no other business to discuss.

"I've already made it clear I want Mason," I say, looking around the room. "This is about Tyler and my right to

avenge him. I'm going to challenge Mason."

A few murmurs go around the room, and I catch Zack's concerned expression. A challenge between alphas means certain death for one.

"There's too much bad blood between our packs," Marcus's brother says. "If you lose, it will be an all-out war. They'll try to take our land. You know how it goes."

It's true that in other communities, when there is no natural alpha left, the victorious pack has often taken property after a challenge, displacing pack members.

"Besides," Marcus adds, "We want more than just Mason. We want the whole lot of them. Lucca and Mateo, too."

I consider what they're saying. Part of me wants that, too—a decisive fight that takes out the whole damn lot who had a hand in killing Tyler.

"We just need to get them together, and I have the perfect plan," Marcus says, nodding to his boys, who are obviously in the know about that plan.

"And what is that?" I sigh, already knowing it will be stupid.

"You've got the girl. Word is they've been looking for her everywhere. She may not be pack, but she's clearly important to them." I feel my wolf begin to pace as Marcus speaks. "Let's send a video, get her to act scared for you—I'm sure you can make her do anything, Diego. Get them to bring a ransom for her."

"Maybe something where she's on her knees..." One of the wolves next to Marcus begins to laugh, and my feet move before my brain can catch up. I backhand him, sending him flying into the wall with a sickening thud.

"Woah, Diego," Marcus starts but freezes the moment my glare turns on him.

“No one—and I mean no one—will talk about my mate that way. *Ever.*”

The crowd falls silent.

“There will be no videos,” I add.

“Now, Diego,” one of the elders says calmly. Although I don’t have to take his advice, I will show him respect. “The boys here are wrong to be so... belligerent about it, but they have a point. The girl is clearly important and could be used to draw the men into the open. Perhaps she’d even help you if she’s your mate.”

But I know Quinn would never turn on her friend’s pack. I turn my back on the gathered crowd and run my hand through my hair.

“What’s more important? Vengeance for Tyler, or some hot woman’s feelings?” Marcus taunts me.

I snap, launching myself at him. Marcus and I punch and slice until he surrenders. He lies on the floor with his bloody arm covering his face for protection, his eyes down. He’s a strong wolf, but no match for an alpha. The sooner he realizes that, the safer he might be.

“Enough of this,” I growl. “I have listened to my pack. We will draw all three out and kill them, but it will not involve my mate. The matter is settled.”

I turn, and the crowd parts as I storm out. Zack follows me to the door. “What do you want me to do with Marcus?”

I sigh. “Get him cleaned up and let him know this is his final warning. Have him and his boys clean up the tournament field. It’s about time they thought more about community than fighting or their dicks.”

Zack smirks at that and gives me a mock salute as he turns to go back in. Before the door shuts, I call out to him. “You think I’m doing the right thing, taking out all three?”

Zack shuts the door so it’s just us standing outside. “He was your boy, and they killed him. They knew the

consequences of doing that. The way things are going down shouldn't be a surprise to anyone.”

I nod, a mixture of anger and adrenaline still rushing through my veins. My mind turns to Quinn, waiting back at the cabin, and suddenly, I want nothing more than to be with her. Possibly even more than I want vengeance for my son.

Chapter 10 - Quinn

Looking out from my comfy seat in the huge bay window in Diego's den, I can't believe how the seasons are beginning to change already. The vivid greens of the trees that surround Diego's mountain home are beginning to intermix with bright yellows, reds, and oranges. It's like a fall painting come to life. The leaves dance in the gentle breeze, rustling together as if performing just for me. I can feel the chill in the air now, and I'm finding that I need warmer clothes as each day goes by.

I've been here for weeks now, and I'm more confused than when I arrived. I can barely admit to myself how much I'm falling for Diego. He's nothing like I imagined when I heard what his pack was doing to Mateo's or how they'd kidnapped Gina. I'd assumed he was just like his son, an abusive and dangerous man.

Although loyal to a fault, Saffy has told me tidbits about Tyler. It appears she and most other women were scared of him. His behavior bordered on psychotic. He abused his position as the alpha's son and thought he was entitled to do whatever he wanted.

I think she's a bit scared of Diego, too, but not in the same way. She's simply timid around her alpha, but clearly admires him. She told me that Diego tried everything to make Tyler a better man, a better wolf. Diego wanted Tyler to lead the community and be involved with the business of running the pack, but Tyler just wanted to "have fun." I shiver to think what his idea of fun must have been.

It confirms my suspicions about Diego, though. He clearly loved his son despite his faults and thought he could change someday. The situation with Silverstar means that Diego will never get the chance to rehabilitate his son. If that was ever even possible.

I can't condone the attacks on Gina's pack, but I understand Diego's rage. It comes from a place of deep sadness and grief.

I also suspect that Marcus and his boys conducted many of the more destructive acts of their own accord, using Diego's grief as an excuse for violence. Diego seems more concerned about killing Mason, Mateo and Lucca than destroying fountains or setting a few cars on fire.

The fact that I'm starting to feel more concerned about Diego's well-being than anything else scares me slightly. I dread the thought of him attacking Silverstar pack... and losing.

I don't want *anyone* to get hurt.

My thoughts turn back to Gina. Have they realized I've been taken, or do they think I'm dead, vanished? She must be so upset. She's already been through so much and had just gotten her happy ever after with Lucca. Now this.

I need to ask Diego again to let me contact her. I'm almost scared to, though, because everything is so damn near perfect between us. Diego is dominating, self-assured, and pure alpha, but he's also sexy, intelligent, and surprisingly funny. I never expected him to have such a playful side, and while it took a while to come out, now his whole demeanor is brighter. His laughter comes more easily. At first, I thought it was the bond making me feel things for him, but now I know: it's him.

If I can talk to Gina, perhaps we can find a way to bridge the hostilities between the packs so no one gets hurt again. I have to try.

When I was at the store the day before, visiting Saffy, I picked up some amazing steaks. My plan is simple and appeals to Diego's most basic instincts. Feed him everything he seems to love, make sure he's in a good mood, and then broach the subject of Gina again.

I mentioned her a few days ago, and I could see he was wavering more. I think he's scared to break the bubble we're in. I am, too. I don't think my friendship with Gina and her pack can withstand my relationship with Diego, but neither my wolf nor my human self will ever give him up.

My friendship with Gina means everything to me, though. She's been the closest to a wolf family I've had.

I can't win.

Rising from my seat in the window, I tear my eyes away from the autumnal scene and head toward the kitchen, where I'm thawing the steaks. The kitchen is stunning—a modern cabin design with warm maple cabinets, floating shelves, and a beautiful apron-front sink. The quartz countertops are a mix of white and gray, while stainless steel appliances give it an industrial edge. The huge island sits in the middle of the room, with four burners for cooking as well as additional storage and high stools for informal dining. The large windows offer beautiful views of the surrounding woods. A massive panoramic window on one wall gives me a glimpse of the meadow and the forest beyond.

The scents of steak, onions, garlic, and rosemary fill the air as I prepare dinner. I know it *should* smell amazing, but something feels off. My stomach rolls slightly, and I put the A/C on, wondering if I'm too hot with the cooking. There's some fresh bread on the side, so I butter some and take a few bites to settle my stomach.

I stir the pan one last time and am about to add the vegetables, but suddenly, the cooking scents become too much and another wave of nausea rises up inside me. Twisting away from the heat, I make a mad dash for the downstairs bathroom, barely making it in time before my stomach empties itself into the toilet and I sink onto the cold tile floor.

With each heave, I moan and gasp for breath, my head swimming with dizziness until there's nothing left inside me. Perplexed, I collapse onto the bathroom floor, wondering what on earth has caused this sudden illness.

With my head resting against the cool tiles, I place my hand on my churning stomach for a moment. Suddenly, a thought slams into me. I haven't had my period since I've been here, and it's been nearly two months now.

Counting back, it hits me like a ton of bricks—my period is at least three weeks late. I've never been late.

I'm pregnant.

I'm pregnant.

The gravity of the situation hits me like a ton of bricks, and sheer terror radiates through my core.

My heart races faster and faster as the ramifications of this decision become clear. Diego's pack is at war with Gina's. Even if Diego lets me contact her, she'll have to disown me now. I don't even know what my life here looks like long-term. Diego and I haven't talked about it. Does he even want me, or is he just using me to maintain the strength he gets from the bond?

I'm certain we have a connection that runs far deeper than the mating bond. I also know I have feelings for him, but I don't know what he's thinking or planning.

And if he attacks Silverstar wolves again, and people I know are hurt, how can I stay with him?

Then it occurs to me that Diego could be killed in an attack or challenge, too. I'd lose him, and our baby would grow up without a pack, just like I did. I couldn't stay here, not with Marcus around. I have no doubt he's a threat.

Sorrow chokes my throat as tears rush down my face, each carrying a million unanswered questions that seem to grow more daunting by the second.

I'm splashing cold water onto my face, trying to calm down, when I hear the security system beeping. Someone is approaching the door. Terrified it's Diego and he'll find me like this before I'm ready to talk, I quickly dry my eyes and rush out of the bathroom.

As I cross the lobby, I see Saffy approaching the door, carrying a heavy bag and waving with her phone to her ear. As she stands on the porch, the door unlocks. “Okay, Diego, I’m here now,” she says into her phone.

I realize that Diego has remotely unlocked the door for her. I smile in greeting, but Saffy doesn’t miss my disheveled state as her eyes go wide. She’s still holding the phone. “Um, yeah, sure. She’s fine, I’m with her now. Hey, Quinn.”

She’s covering for me, and I release a sigh, grateful that she didn’t mention to Diego that I look a complete mess. She hangs up and rushes over to me, putting the bag down and touching my shoulder.

“Are you okay, Quinn? You look so pale.” She guides me to one of the stools in the kitchen.

“W-what are you doing here?” I ask, trying so hard not to let out the tears that are threatening to fall.

She’s still watching me, concerned. “We got these cakes in at the store and some more of those firefighters. I was heading home, so Diego asked me to drop them off here. I was going to suggest we go right ahead and open the cake. You look like you could do with it.”

The thought of cake, combined with the cooking smells in the kitchen, turn my stomach again. Before I can say anything, I’m rushing back to the bathroom to be sick.

Saffy’s waiting for me outside the bathroom with a fresh towel and a glass of water. “You poor thing. I’ll call him back and tell him you’re sick.”

“No!” I shout in panic as she reaches for her phone.

“Ok, okay.” She puts it away. “You’re not hurt, are you? Tell me what’s wrong.”

I take a deep breath, then tell her about the pregnancy and how scared I am. She looks at me in shock before pulling me into a big hug.

“It’s all going to be alright, Quinn,” she says soothingly. “This is Diego we’re talking about. He’s the alpha; he protects the people he cares about. It’s literally in his DNA. He loves you—it’s obvious.” She pauses before adding, “Don’t worry, this might actually make things better. Babies have a way of bringing people together. Perhaps you’ll be able to speak to your friend Gina.”

My tears start falling as she puts her arms around me. I’m so grateful for the kindness despite the fact I must be gross after being sick. I haven’t known Saffy long, but she’s such a kind, sweet soul. I know she’s a true friend.

She pulls back from the hug and looks at me sympathetically. “Let’s try to get some food in you, or at least some water.” She pours me another glass, “Do you have any crackers or something plain?”

I stand and get some biscuits out of the cupboard for us. Saffy takes over stirring the pans while I sit and nibble on one.

“Let’s see if you keep those down before we attempt that cake.” Saffy laughs light-heartedly.

I nod gratefully, feeling a little better with Saffy’s kind words and support. As we sit in the kitchen, my mind races with thoughts of the future. What will happen once Diego finds out about the pregnancy? Will he be happy, or will he be upset and angry? I can’t bear the thought of losing him, but this pregnancy feels like the end of my friendship with Gina and her pack.

Saffy notices the worried look on my face and places a reassuring hand on my arm. “Don’t worry, Quinn. Everything will work out in the end. You’ll see.”

I nod, but I’m not sure I believe it. The situation is too complicated, and there are too many unknowns. I can only hope that Diego will understand and that this development may change things somehow, but I can’t help fearing the worst.

Suddenly, we hear the sound of the security system disabling and the door unlocking. I freeze. It's Diego. He's home.

Saffy jumps and grabs her bag, stopping to check the stove one more time while I take a deep breath, preparing myself for the conversation that needs to happen.

As Diego walks into the kitchen, Saffy gives me one last hug and then heads out after briefly greeting Diego. As soon as he enters the room, his eyes find mine, and he immediately seems to pick up on my nervousness.

Damn mating bond.

"Is everything okay, Quinn?" he asks, stepping toward me.

I hear the front door shut, and I nod, opening my mouth to say something, but he interrupts. "Are those the steaks? It smells amazing in here. You look a bit pale, though. You okay?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him, but I plaster on a smile and say, "Of course. I'm just hungry."

He laughs. "I'd better dish this up, then. You sit down—you did all the hard work."

I smile as I take a seat, feeling a bit bad for taking credit as Saffy ended up cooking most of this meal.

I will tell him. When I find the right words.

Chapter 11 - Diego

Walking into the cabin and seeing Quinn looking settled with Saffy, coupled with the warm, inviting smell of home cooking, sends a wave of emotions racing through me. I hadn't even realized how cold and lonely my world had become before Quinn came into my life.

I've been feeling more and more like a jerk, keeping her locked in the house while I'm out seeing to the pack. After coming back to find her like this, I feel even worse. I know we can't go on pretending this situation is normal. I can't be her lover and her kidnapper.

I have to choose. I guess *we* have to choose.

I know I'm never letting her go, though. As soon as I walk into the room, my eyes find hers, and my wolf practically clambers to be near her. I hear Saffy's greeting, but my response is distracted as I notice Quinn looks a bit pale.

"Is everything okay, Quinn?" I ask, stepping closer to her and feeling irrationally concerned.

My eyes turn to the feast she's been making, my mouth watering in anticipation. I'm suddenly grateful I asked Saffy to drop off the cake she'd talked me into buying. Really, I'm just glad that Quinn and Saffy seem to be friends. I know Saffy's jumpy around me—hell, she's jumpy around everyone. But she and Zack are the closest thing to family I have left, and it makes me happy to see her with Quinn.

Quinn smiles and insists she's okay, but I can see the weariness in her eyes. I offer to serve up the amazing dinner, hoping that a good meal will help her feel better. She agrees with a grateful smile, and I quickly dish up the food, keen to get her to eat something and hoping it makes her feel better.

The food tastes just as wonderful as expected, and bit by bit, I start to see some color come back into Quinn's cheeks. But she doesn't eat much, and something still seems

off—I can feel it in the air between us. There’s something unsaid between us, despite me trying to fill the silence. We normally don’t struggle to talk, so I’m at a bit of a loss.

I wonder if it’s because she wants to talk to her friend Gina. I know she’s really missing Gina and wants her to know she’s safe. I also suspect she’s scared to tell her friend about us being mates. I know I should let Quinn contact her friend if I’m serious about making this work.

Deep down, I’m scared she’ll run the first chance she gets.

My mind races with possibilities as I consider the best way to handle the messy situation we’re in, but before I can say anything, my phone rings. I try to ignore it, but it starts ringing again as soon as the first attempt stops. I quickly look at the screen and see it’s Zack, so I apologize to Quinn and pick up.

“Sorry to interrupt your evening, Diego. All right if I stop by? There’s something we need to discuss.”

Zack would never ask me unless it was important. “No problem. I’m guessing it must be vital,” I mutter before disconnecting the call.

Quinn and I had almost finished our delicious but awkward dinner, anyway. I notice she is back to looking a bit pale.

“Are you sure you’re not sick or something?” I ask, touching her face to see if she’s warm. It’s very unusual for wolves to get sick, but passing bugs do happen.

She shakes her head. “Honestly, I’m fine. You go talk to Zack. It must be important.”

I sigh, remembering that everyone in the pack thinks their problems are important. I spend my days sorting out business, personal, and pack problems. But I know Zack wouldn’t bring something to me like this lightly, so I’m waiting anxiously for him on the porch when he arrives.

Quinn shot upstairs as soon as I cleared away our plates, and I still can't shake the feeling something's wrong. My wolf is on edge, pacing. He feels it, too.

"What's that expression about?" Zack asks as he approaches me.

I shake off my concerns about Quinn. "Nah, nothing. Quinn just seems a bit out of sorts," I admit.

"She okay?" he asks, genuinely concerned.

"Yeah, she'll be fine. Probably be better if I let her talk to her friend." I sigh.

Zack shakes his head. "Damn mess, really. But she is your mate, and the two of you seem very bonded. It's actually been a hell of a thing."

It really has. Kidnapping Quinn might just be the only beneficial thing Marcus has ever done for me and the pack.

"Anyway, what brings you here tonight?" I ask.

Zack runs his hand through his thick stubble that's edging closer to a full beard by the day and sighs, "We gotta talk about Marcus, Diego."

This isn't the first time Zack has started a conversation with that opener. I'm about to tell him to save it for later, but he continues. "Marcus has been holding some meetings of his own, not just with his boys, but inviting others in, too. He's trying to gauge support for a challenge, Diego. It's happening."

This is the least surprising news, though the timing could be better. Marcus is a problem I've been planning to deal with for a long time. It was difficult when Tyler was always fighting in his friend's corner, but now I can't help but wonder if ridding the pack of Marcus might have helped Tyler. The two seemed to feed off each other, and they shared many of the same views. Views that didn't help the pack.

But Marcus has been useful since Tyler's death. His sense of outrage has somewhat fueled mine. I've been

reluctant to deal with him because I also wanted to use him in my plans for revenge against Mason and the rest of Silverstar.

“What exactly have you heard?” I ask Zack as I sit on the porch step.

“They’re obviously ready to step up on plans concerning Mason. We all are,” Zack begins carefully. “Marcus is still hot on his plan to use Quinn to taunt Silverstar into retaliating, a video or something threatening her. Tie her up and show some bruises, that kind of thing. He knows Mateo won’t stand for it and will agree to meet.”

My wolf fumes at the thought of Marcus wanting to use his mate. “Stupid boy. I can’t believe the balls on him to still be talking about using Quinn when I already shut that down.”

Zack shakes his head before adding, “He thinks the bond is clouding your judgment to how useful she could be.”

My eyes flash dangerously. Inside, I’m seething, but I try to temper my reaction. Zack’s on my side. He’d *better* be on my side.

“And what do you think, Zack? Do you think my judgment is clouded? Do you think I should use and terrify my mate?”

“Hell, no!” Zack scoffs. “There are a ton of different ways to get back at Mason, challenge him, and avenge Tyler. Marcus has caused more problems than he’s solved by going off and smashing things up. He likes to pretend he’s doing it for Tyler, but you and I know better. This is a power play.”

I nod thoughtfully. “Time’s coming to put that boy in his place or out in the cold. I’ll meet with the elders tomorrow. Mason and his friends killed Tyler, and it’s time I bring this to a close.”

“You have the support of the pack, Diego. Always have, always will. Marcus talks a good game, but when it comes down to it, he’s no alpha. And sadly for him, he’s no match for an alpha,” Zack adds darkly.

We both know it could well come down to a physical challenge. There have been only two challenges in the many years I've been alpha. One ended in surrender and banishment. The other, in death.

I love my pack, and however deserving the punishment, killing a pack member is not without sadness for the family and pack members left. But I won't hesitate where Marcus is concerned. Especially if he's looking to hurt or scare my mate, just to continue playing around at revenge.

Zack's about to say something else when he pauses, looking behind me into the house. I turn slightly, just in time to see Quinn slipping away. Damn, I wonder how long she's been there.

"Quiet as a mouse, ain't she?" He chuckles, and I roll my eyes. "I doubt she's a fan of Marcus, either."

"No." I laugh darkly. "She sure ain't. She's no fool. But I do need to talk to her."

"That you do." Zack laughs again, putting his hands up as I shoot him a glare.

We say goodbye, and he heads back down to his truck. I watch as he turns the vehicle and heads back off my property. I appreciate him coming to me, but it's nothing I wasn't already aware of. I'll deal with Silverstar, get my revenge for Tyler, and then I'll put Marcus where he belongs. Whether that's in the ground or far from here will depend on his actions.

I sigh and roll my shoulders before heading back in to find Quinn. I wonder how much of that she heard. I don't want her frightened. She obviously isn't feeling herself today, so the last thing she needs to hear is that Marcus wants to use her like this.

Upon entry, I hear sounds coming from the kitchen, where I find Quinn pacing and making some hot chocolate.

"Enough there for two?" I ask, causing her to spin around and almost drop the pan. I rush forward to steady her.

“Woah, didn’t mean to startle you.”

She tries to laugh it off and insists on pouring the drinks, but she’s still quiet and jumpy. I carry our hot drinks to the back porch and then pull out some of the thicker rugs. The weather is changing rapidly now, and winter will be here sooner rather than later.

Quinn pulls her legs up beside me, taking the giant cup of sweet hot chocolate in both hands to test its temperature. I decide this is the perfect moment.

Taking a breath, I start, “I know you heard me and Zack talking. I don’t want you to worry about anything, okay?”

“Of course I’m worried,” Quinn says with a sigh. “I’m worried about how scared Gina must be. I’m worried about this revenge against Mateo’s pack. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. I’m worried about you.”

Our eyes meet just as she says she’s worried about me, and the words warm something deep within me. Her concern touches a part of my soul that has been devoid of care or companionship for too long.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I reply gruffly. “Is that what’s wrong? Is that why you’re not yourself?”

Her eyes go straight back to her drink, and she takes another quick sip. “N-no, I’m okay. I do worry, but it’s not about that.”

So it’s something else?

“Is it Marcus? I think you heard Zack airing out his thoughts on this.” I sigh. “That won’t happen. This situation doesn’t concern you, and I won’t let Marcus near you. He’s a problem for another day.”

Quinn takes a deep breath and looks up at me with tears in her eyes. My wolf howls at the sight of my mate in distress. I wipe away a tear, and she instinctively leans into my touch.

“It’s not Marcus. Well, not *just* Marcus,” she whispers, her voice barely audible. “It’s me. I have something to tell you, Diego.”

I furrow my brows and brace myself for the worst.

“What is it, Quinn?” I ask gently, trying to keep my voice calm. Inside, my mind is racing with possibilities. Has she already managed to contact Gina? Has she betrayed me somehow?

“I’m pregnant,” she says, her voice trembling with emotion.

I freeze, my mind going completely blank. It takes a moment for her words to sink in, and when they do, all I feel is pure shock. This is the last thing I was expecting. I had braced myself for betrayal, not this...

“Pregnant?” I repeat dumbly. “How? I mean, when? How long have you known?”

Quinn takes a deep breath and looks at me with a mixture of fear and hope in her eyes. “I realized today,” she says. “I didn’t realize the dates. Everything has been so... I-I just didn’t realize.” She stops talking again as fresh tears begin to fall.

I feel a surge of emotions that I can’t quite identify. Part of me feels a rush of excitement and pride, but another part is terrified of what this means. I’d resigned myself to only having one son. When Tyler died, I thought my line died, too.

And now Quinn is pregnant. That means a whole new family for me.

I realize I haven’t said anything in response. Instinctively, I pull her into my arms, her body now wracked with sobs.

“Shush now,” I soothe. “A baby is a good thing. My mate, my baby.”

My hand reaches for her still-flat stomach, and she looks at me with fresh hope in her eyes.

Does this change anything? Everything?

I have no idea.

Chapter 12 - Quinn

I wake with a heavy weight around my middle, anchoring me. I stir, and Diego tightens his grip on my waist, pressing me closer to his body.

His already hard length slides between my thighs, and I hear him hiss as I move my hips. Soon, his hand drifts to my breasts, and I'm amazed at how sensitive they feel this morning. I wonder for the first time if it's the pregnancy.

His mouth is hot on my neck, and I moan as he lightly bites down, sending tingles through my body. He moves his hands to cup my ass, and I can feel myself getting wet, anticipating what I know is coming.

Diego slowly slides inside me, pushing deeper as my body stretches to accommodate his thick cock. We move in perfect unison, our bodies swaying together as one. His hands caress my stomach and hips as his thrusts become more passionate. His breathing is heavy in my ear, echoing the rhythm of our fucking.

I arch into him as the waves of pleasure build and then crash over me. Diego follows suit, and soon, we're shaking from the intensity of our orgasms. When the feeling subsides, we collapse in each other's arms, exhausted but still consumed by the heat radiating between us.

"Are you okay?" Diego asks, his hand coming to rest on my stomach. He's asked me the same question at least a million times since I told him last night.

I laugh and roll onto my back. "Yes, I don't even feel sick at the moment."

Happy with that answer, he dramatically pulls the covers off the bed, making me laugh. "W-what are you do—" I start, but he sweeps me into his arms and carries me to the shower before I can even finish my sentence.

“The perfect start to the day,” Diego declares later as he serves me a huge plate of waffles downstairs. I eye the enormous portion, unsure if the churning in my stomach is hunger or sickness. Only one way to find out.

“I’m not sure I’ll manage *all* these, Diego,” I say with a laugh.

He looks confused for a moment. “But you’re growing my baby. You need to eat a lot more.”

“I’m more than happy with the excuse to eat more.” I laugh again. “But let’s just see how I go. I don’t think I’ve seen the last of the morning sickness.”

He looks concerned again, and I can’t help laughing at his helpless expression. “I think the sickness is normal. Gina had a lot of it.”

“Yes, of course.” He sighs, turning back to put the pan on the side. “Call Gina this morning. It’s time. It has been a while.”

I can’t help the smile that breaks out on my face, and I jump up and wrap my arms around him. He returns the embrace, sweeping me off the floor. “Thank you, thank you,” I gush.

He shakes his head, setting me back down. “Don’t thank me, Quinn. I’m not the good guy here, am I? But I guess I want to be. For you. For our baby.”

I know this is huge, for Diego to acknowledge that he wants to be a good man for *me* and *our* child. I place my hand on his face, my soft fingers tracing his rough stubble, and look into his mesmerizing eyes. I see the good there already.

“You are a good man, Diego. I want to call Gina and see her, but you’re my mate.”

This seems to do the trick, and he leans down to capture my mouth in a searing kiss. My fingers instinctively tangle in his slightly long hair, and my brain scrambles. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to his effect on me.

Leaving me to finish my waffles, he's happy to see I've eaten most of them when he returns. Perhaps I can eat for two after all. He approaches the counter and slides a phone over to me.

"I'm going to the study to do some work. You can call Gina on this. I'll be in the next room."

I nod, slowly picking up the phone. It's been nearly two months, and my fingers tremble as I dial the number.

Diego walks away, and I know this is a huge test of trust for him. I've no doubt he'll be able to hear everything I say, but my heart is still soaring as I listen to the phone ring.

"Hello?" Gina answers.

The tears start falling before I even get my words out. "Oh my god, Gina?" I cry.

"Q-Quinn?? Is that really you?" she asks frantically, and I hear her rush downstairs and shout for Lucca. "Where are you? Are you hurt?"

I try to calm my breathing. "No, I'm not hurt. I'm okay."

"Is it true? Did Diego take you? Have you escaped?" Gina fires off a thousand questions at once, and I can hear Lucca in the background, trying to calm her down.

I take a deep breath and start at the beginning. Gina puts me on speaker so Lucca can hear, too, and I tell her about Marcus, the kidnapping, and the fact that I'm staying with Diego. I don't know why, but I don't tell them we're mates or about the baby.

I've wanted nothing more than to talk to Gina, but now that I am, I find myself uncomfortable when they talk about Diego. The feud between the two packs is clearly in full swing, and they're full of anger and understandable vengeance. It makes me wonder if there can ever be peace between the packs, and I find myself wanting to defend Diego. They don't realize how deeply Tyler's death affected him as a

father, or that Marcus is the one more responsible for the looting and destruction. Diego wants revenge on Mateo and his friends, not the whole town.

“It’s more complicated than you think. Diego’s not—” I pause as Diego appears in the doorway. He looks conflicted, like he wants to say something.

“Gina, I’m going to call you back, okay? No, everything’s fine here. I’ll call back, I promise.”

I put the phone down. Diego doesn’t speak immediately, and I wonder if I’ve said the wrong thing.

“You didn’t tell them about the baby yet?” he asks.

I shrug. “Just seemed like a lot to drop on them at once.”

“But you are happy?”

“Yes!” I exclaim, moving toward him. “I’m scared of this feud and overwhelmed by how things have happened. Meeting you the way I did. But I wouldn’t change this for anything.”

I touch my stomach, and he steps toward me, putting his hand over mine. “You don’t think I’m too old? I failed once as a father; no one would blame you for thinking I’m unsuitable. I’m not a good man, Quinn.”

My mind races with his words. “Diego, I didn’t know Tyler, but I’ve heard the things he did. I’ve also seen the photos you still have up of you fishing and hunting together, his school achievements, the tournaments, and the trips you took. You don’t seem like a bad father.” I pause as tears threaten to spill. “Your pack loves and respects you. I don’t think you’re responsible for what Tyler did in life.”

He turns away from me, looking out over the meadows. I don’t think it’s easy for any man to have a discussion like this, let alone an alpha.

“And you’re not old,” I laugh, trying to lighten the mood. “I like the salt-and-pepper look. And you certainly have

the stamina to chase after a pup.”

He scoffs but adds, “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

We fall silent again for a moment, and then he says something that takes me completely off-guard. “Call Gina back. I take it that was Lucca on the line, too?”

I nod, waiting to hear what he’s going to say.

“I’m willing to sit down and talk with Mateo and the others... No challenge, at least not straight away,” he says. He looks me dead in the eye. “I’m willing to talk about a truce if the terms work for me and my pack. I won’t apologize, and I’m making no promises. But I’m not so sure a fight to the death helps my pack or this baby.”

“Oh, Diego,” I say, rushing into his arms. This is more than I could have hoped for.

But will Silverstar wolves agree? Will a meeting end in bloodshed, regardless? Can Diego keep his cool if actually faced with his enemy?

This time, Diego stays in the room as I call Gina back. She picks up on the first ring, and I smile, knowing my friend was literally holding the phone, waiting for me to call back.

I outline what Diego told me to say. He’s willing to talk, just him. He’ll meet Mateo on neutral territory between the two packs, and they can discuss if there’s any way forward. There will be no direct challenge at the meeting, even if it goes badly.

“Are you sure about this, Quinn?” Gina asks nervously. “Is it a trap?”

“No, not at all. I’ll come, too.” I say, and Diego’s eyes flare. He obviously wasn’t planning on taking me.

“Then I’ll go, too,” Gina says, and I hear Lucca in the back yell, “Hell, no!” It makes me smile. I know Gina will definitely be there if it means we can see each other.

We hang up, Gina promising she'll call back as soon as Lucca has spoken to Mateo.

I hand the phone back to Diego, something playing on my mind. "It's not a trap, is it?"

He chuckles. "You know, I did think about it. But no, it's not. One of the more astute elders who's lost most of his family once told me I needed to look to the future and find something to look to. I thought he was just getting senile. But you and this baby make me think about the future of the pack, the best thing for the pack. I want to rip Mason's head off; that's not going to change. But it might not be the best thing for everyone here. We'll see."

I believe him. At least, I believe he wants to try.

Zack arrives later in the afternoon. As he walks into the kitchen, I greet him shyly and am about to make myself scarce when Diego tells me to stay. "This involves you, too, Quinn."

Zack's eyes widen when Diego tells him I'm pregnant, and his face breaks into a grin. He hugs Diego, and I see for the first time what true friends they are. It goes way beyond Zack being Diego's second or his loyalty to his alpha. They are brothers.

"This is amazing news. I'm so pleased for you both. This is truly an unexpected joy."

Diego laughs. "You're so enthusiastic about pups. Perhaps it's time to settle down yourself."

Zack looks aghast. "Steady, Diego. Let's not be crazy."

We laugh at the good-natured ribbing, but it does make me wonder what Zack's story is. I'll have to ask Saffy the next time I see her.

Zack's good mood rapidly evaporates when Diego tells him his plan to meet Mateo unaccompanied.

"Absolutely not. You're my alpha, but you're also my friend, and there's no way I'm letting you walk in there alone. Even if Mateo is willing to talk, are you sure you can come to

terms? Can you really walk away from this, Diego? Walk away without taking out Mateo, Mason or their packmates?"

"I honestly don't know, but I know with Quinn and this baby, I have to look at the option." Diego sighs. "And Marcus's behavior is out of hand. The feud has gone in a direction that doesn't serve me, and it certainly doesn't avenge Tyler. It doesn't mean anything."

Zack nods thoughtfully. "I do see the sense in looking forward, Diego. But I don't trust them. No way you're going without me."

"This isn't up for negotiation, Zack. You're my second, and you'll stay here while I'm at the talks. Quinn is coming because she can keep her distance from her friend. She doesn't belong to their pack; she's neutral in this." Diego pauses before adding, "Have some faith in your alpha, Zack. Besides, no one here can know I'm in talks. Not yet. You need to run interference."

"And what am I supposed to say if you go missing?" Zack asks.

"Tell them I've taken my sexy mate to one of the outer cabins. Let them think I'm off having my fun." Diego laughs.

I groan, not really wanting the whole pack to think he's taken me off for a dirty weekend. But I guess it will stop them from thinking too much about our whereabouts.

"That is, of course, if Mateo even agrees to meet," Zack adds somberly.

"He will," Diego replies darkly. "This sit-down is long overdue."

Chapter 13 - Diego

“Don’t fuss,” I grumble as I watch Quinn fiddle with the bag on her lap.

The truck bumps over the gravel road as we head deep into the country to meet with Silverstar wolves. Zack is following us in his truck to see us over the line and ensure we’re not heading to an ambush. Afterward, he’ll turn back. He doesn’t like it, but it’s my plan and my pack.

Quinn finally stops checking her bag and looks at me. “I can’t help it. Do you trust Mateo?”

I scoff. “Of course not, and no way in hell should he trust me. His closest friend killed Tyler. No alpha can let that stand.”

“No father would let that stand, you mean?” she asks quietly before we both fall silent.

I’ve never considered whether I’m seeking revenge as an alpha or a father. Is there a difference? I’ve dealt with grieving parents in the pack—some from tragic accidents, others from fighting with other wolves or just stupid misadventures. I don’t doubt they all wanted to do something to make the situation *right*.

With a clear head, I could tell them there is no way to make the loss of a child right. But Tyler’s death wasn’t an accident or a tragedy—he was killed by Mason. That’s a situation that can be made right, can’t it?

“I’m acting as a father *and* alpha,” I tell her, keeping my eyes on the road.

“H-have you ever killed someone in a fight?” she asks.

“You know the answer to that.” I chuckle. “Not many alphas get to where they are or stay where they are without being able to fight. Why?”

“And did anyone take revenge for their deaths?” she asks carefully as I maneuver along the steep mountain road.

“No, why would they? They were fair fights,” I grit out, unsure what she’s getting at.

“Was Tyler’s death a fair fight?”

I take my eyes off the road to turn on her, fury rushing through my veins. But when I look at her, I see such compassion in her eyes, my temper dissipates slightly.

“His death will never be fair,” I reply, emotion coming out of nowhere. I stuff it down, gripping the steering wheel.

“I’d want to kill someone if they hurt this baby,” Quinn says, her hand resting on her still-flat stomach. “I can only imagine how you must feel. I think your pack loves and respects you, from what I’ve seen, and you’re trying to put them first. And you’re a good father to try and put this baby first.”

“No one will hurt that baby, Quinn. No one,” I growl, reaching over and putting my hand on top of hers.

Nearing the cabin that borders both territories, we fall silent again. No one would dare question my motivations for Tyler’s revenge, but Quinn’s words have struck a chord deep within me. Tugging at a thread I have been aware of, but never wanted to pull.

Was Tyler’s death unjustified?

I have to believe that Tyler was capable of becoming a strong man and a good leader, but I’m not blind to the kind of person he was in the last few years. How he treated McKenna. Why Mason would have needed to defend her.

Tyler was capable of violence, but I still believe he would have matured into a decent wolf in time. And now, he’ll never get the chance.

Lost in thought, I realize I’m gripping the steering wheel so tight, I could almost rip the whole damn thing off. I try to loosen my grip and relax my shoulders. The familiar

feeling of burning rage and grief bubbles through my system. As we make the final approach to the cabin, I'm ready to fight them all. I can feel the red mist descending.

Pulling up to the cabin, I kill the engine and look at the building. Two trucks are already there, and I know Zack has pulled in behind me. No one makes a move, though I can see at least two men in each truck.

Some would say it's reckless of me to even come out here, but I'm not concerned. I know Mason won't be here tonight; he's sending Luca in his place. These wolves may be grown and can handle themselves, but I'm older and far more battle-ready than any of them.

The only one I'm worried about is Quinn. I should have left her at the cabin, but I just couldn't. I can scarcely believe how strong the mate bond is, how much I need her by my side. There's also no way she was going to stay behind, and I must admit, I'm starting to enjoy her headstrong ways. She's feisty, independent, and brave—everything she needs to be to create a place for herself alongside me in the pack.

Everything has changed in only a couple of months. But as I wait to meet with Silverstar representatives, I'm not sure enough can change to stop this war. Ever since Tyler started this mess, our packs have been on a collision course.

And he's not here to clean it up. I briefly ponder just how many years I've been cleaning up that boy's messes.

“Stay here, Quinn,” I say with no humor in my voice. “I don't know how this is going to go down, so just sit tight. You'll be in no danger if you don't get in the middle.”

She grabs my arm. “Get in the middle of what? You're here to just talk, right?”

“That's up to them and what they say,” I reply as I notice Zack stepping down from his truck, waiting for my signal.

“Diego, I—” she begins to say, but I cut her off, crashing my lips onto hers and inhaling her sweet scent. Her

soft lips part, and I pull her body closer to mine. My wolf basks in close proximity to my mate, and I feel my body becoming more focused and energized.

I don't let her say anything else; nothing she can say will change what happens next, anyway. I fix her a look that I hope conveys how much she needs to stay in the car, then I set off toward the clearing between the cabin and the waiting trucks.

"You think that girl of yours will stay in the truck?" Zack chuckles as we approach.

"If she knows what's good for her. I'm not sure she's ever seen wolves fight like they mean it, what with never having a pack of her own," I say grimly.

"I guess she's got one now. That baby belongs to the pack, and she's your mate." Zack shrugs.

I hadn't really thought about that until now, but it's true. I wonder if Quinn feels like she's part of the pack. I don't see how she can when she only goes out to see Saffy at the store or accompanies me to a few places. She's skittish, though, and I know Marcus and his boys still scare her. I can't have my mate scared—just another reason to get this situation sorted. One way or another.

Lucca steps forward, illuminated by the lights from his truck. He's got a few other men with him who look like they're ready for anything. I can feel my wolf stirring inside me, and I know he's itching to take this guy out and be done with it. But I remind myself that we're here to talk. Or at least to try talking.

"Mateo sent us," Lucca says gruffly. "We'll listen to what you have to say tomorrow, but if he doesn't like what he hears, then this is the end." He looks behind me toward my truck. "She here? Is she unharmed?"

I scoff, my wolf clawing to the surface at the thought of my mate being harmed. "Of course not. She's here because she wants to be. Bring Gina to see her. It's what she wants."

Lucca steps forward, his eyes flashing. “Don’t even talk about Gina after what you did.”

“She came to no harm, unlike my son. Quinn’s with me, and she will be tomorrow. She’s neutral in this, so you’ll all respect that.”

“Oh, we do. She’s just another victim in all this. Gina will come tomorrow, but if anything happens I don’t like, it will be a short fucking meeting. The route in and out of here is secure, so don’t try anything, Diego.”

I take a step forward. Lucca is a large man, and I can feel his wolf’s commanding presence. But it’s nothing compared to my alpha energy, and he knows it.

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes, and his fangs slightly descend, demonstrating his true feelings. He won’t act, though. He’s a good soldier, and tonight, his orders are to make sure I turn up, that this is not an ambush, and that Quinn is safe.

We stare each other down for a moment before he nods and heads back to his truck. His men, still shrouded in darkness, follow, and they drive away in a cloud of dust.

As soon as they’re out of sight, Quinn jumps down from the truck and rushes over, her cheeks flushed. “I thought you were going to start fighting.”

I pull her against me, aware of the wolf in my eyes and the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. Lucca is as guilty as the others, and I wanted nothing more than to rip his throat out. Feeling Quinn’s soft body against mine anchors my rage and reminds me why I’m doing this.

“Well, we didn’t,” I say. “We’re here to talk, remember? It’s my plan. I’m not going to throw it out the window at the first meeting.”

“Not the first one, anyway.” Zack laughs humorlessly, walking toward the cabin to begin his security checks.

I shake my head at my friend's retreating form and take Quinn inside. She makes drinks for us in the simple yet luxurious kitchen. The counters are lit up by a central pendant light, and a deep green marble countertop covers the large island. The cabinets are made of dark wood, and there's a small fireplace in the corner that fills the room with warmth.

We sit down at the table, sipping our drinks while Zack continues to run through the security protocols and plans for tomorrow. I'm sure Mateo's men have already done the same, but with the cameras we placed on the road and our combined knowledge of this area, we can be confident that we're secure tonight.

Tomorrow will be a big day—it could mean peace or war between our two packs. I struggle to see a way back from this, but I suspect more attacks will never bring the closure I need. Perhaps the only way will be a direct challenge, an alpha fight to the death. But as I look at Quinn, I find myself less keen on that option. It's not that I don't think I can win—Mason is younger, but from what I've seen and heard, he's had a lot less fighting experience. Frankly, I'm a mean and battle-tested warrior when I want to be, and my rage toward him runs as deep as possible. But something is stopping me from pursuing it, at least not right away.

Perhaps the father in me wants the challenge and the taste of blood for revenge. But as the alpha of my pack, I don't think it's the right thing to do. Perhaps that's what Quinn was trying to say earlier when she asked if Tyler got a fair fight. Is revenge justified if it affects the whole pack?

I walk Zack out to the porch before he heads down the mountain. As I look up at the stars, I realize I've been asking myself this question for months now. Tyler's death still weighs heavily on me, but I can't forgive Mason. He killed my son.

I'm not sure there is a way to end the conflict without more bloodshed. But I'm determined to find out.

I turn away from the porch and head back inside. Quinn's sitting on the couch, and I join her under the thick

blanket, pulling her against me. Her soft body against mine anchors my rage and reminds me why I'm doing this. I wrap my arms around her, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine and imagining our child growing in her belly.

Chapter 14 - Quinn

I pour the steaming sweet tea into the tall mug and hold it in my hands to warm them. I knew this was a pretty spot, even in the dark when we arrived last night, but nothing could have prepared me for the early winter picture-perfect scene when I woke up this morning.

The view from the kitchen balcony is breathtaking, and I pull open the large glass doors to step out, even though it's freezing. I hold the mug close to me for extra warmth.

There's a light dusting of snow stretching from the edge of the cabin to the forest beyond. I've no doubt that in a few more weeks, the snow will become a deep blanket. The sun rises slowly above the distant mountain peaks, casting a soft pink hue across the vast landscape. I can make out the shades of blues and greens in the valley below where the snow hasn't quite reached yet.

Suddenly, I'm pulled backward by strong hands, and my body presses against a solid bare chest. One of Diego's hands immediately slips protectively to my stomach, while the other palms my breast through the flannel shirt I pulled on. Instinctively, I lean my head back against his broad shoulder as my nipples harden at his touch.

"Woman, you are going to freeze out here," he mumbles into my ear as he nuzzles my neck. "We need to get you warm."

Before I can answer, he takes the cup from my hand, discarding it on the side before walking me back through the cabin toward the large bathroom. The shower is already running, creating a haze of inviting steam.

His eyes flash with something like a challenge as he strips the shirt from my body and backs me into the stream of water. His rough, tanned hands contrast with my pale skin as

he begins to soap my breasts. “You are much too soft and delicate for me. Too young. But my wolf sure disagrees.”

I look down at his hard cock between us and laugh. “It’s not just your wolf that disagrees.”

Before he can say anything else, I decide to show him how I feel. I slip to my knees under the warm spray, my breasts brushing against his legs as I lean forward and lick some precum from his cock.

He hisses as his hips buck slightly at the contact. “Fuck, Quinn. You don’t have to.”

I look up at him. “I want to, Diego. You’ve no idea how much.” Before he can reply, I take him deep into my mouth until I feel his cock nudge the back of my throat.

He moans with pleasure as I start to bob my head, taking him deeper with each pass. My hands slide up his thighs to grip his hips, pushing him further into me. His breath quickens, and I can feel the tension building in his taut muscles as he starts thrusting.

I can feel he’s getting close, so I adjust my grip and begin to swirl my tongue around the tip of his shaft, teasing him until he grasps my head and drives himself deep into my throat. I try to breathe through my nose as he shoots hot ribbons of cum down my throat. I keep going even as he roars with pleasure, gripping me tightly as he comes down from his orgasm. Once he has finished, I stand and wrap my arms around his neck, pressing our bodies together.

“I think we fit pretty well together,” I say with a smile. He laughs and then kisses me deeply, the taste of his cum on my lips making me feel even more turned on.

“I have never...” he says, spinning me around and dropping to his knees behind me, pulling my ass checks apart and making me blush with embarrassment before licking all the way up my slit, “felt this way.”

I don’t get the chance to reply before he begins tongue-fucking my holes from behind. Soon, I’m screaming his name.

I never imagined I could feel this way, either.

I should feel more nervous as we wait for the trucks to arrive, but after Diego's treatment in the shower, my whole body is still tingling with pleasure. I can't wait to see Gina, but I'm also worried that she'll sense Diego all over me the moment she walks in. I need to explain the situation before she judges. As a wolf, I know she'll scent our mating. Even a human wouldn't miss the smile on my face or the after-sex glow.

I'm arranging some drinks in the kitchen for Gina and me, knowing the men will hold their meeting in the den. Just Mateo and Diego, with Zack and Lucca nearby. I've already put some drinks in the den, as if having a nice beverage will help the men meet any kind of compromise.

Looking at Diego and Zack talking by the porch, I'm struck by how calm and authoritative Diego looks. I know he says he's too old for me, but all I see is a sexy alpha. He has some salt and pepper to his dark hair, which only adds to his rugged sexiness. His broad shoulders and imposing height make me feel tiny in comparison. When I think of how he took control in the shower, the way he always does in bed, a delightful shiver runs through my body.

Yep, Gina's definitely going to pick up on our insane chemistry.

As if on cue, the sound of trucks rolling up the driveway interrupts my thoughts. I take a deep breath and head toward the door, steeling myself for the conversations to come.

Mateo steps out of his truck first and walks around to lean against its front, waiting for us to meet them outside. I see Gina and Lucca get out just as I step onto the porch. Diego gives me a reassuring nod as I step down toward the group, slowly at first, but then breaking into a run as Gina ignores Lucca's words of caution and rushes to meet me.

Gina's face lights up as we collide in the drive in a tight embrace.

“God, it’s so good to see you,” she says, her eyes shining with excitement. “You have no idea how worried I was when you disappeared. What the hell is going on, Quinn?”

Before I can form a response, I see Diego has moved closer to Mateo, and the two men seem to be involved in a tense standoff. Zack and Lucca remain near but appear to be standing back, letting the two alphas size each other up.

I know how conflicted Diego is about this meeting. Thank goodness Mason isn’t here; I’m not sure Diego can ever come to terms with the man who actually killed Tyler. I want this to work so badly, but I’m not sure that Diego, as a father, can let go of this war.

As Mateo and Diego continue to stare each other down, I can feel the tension in the air. It’s so thick, it could be cut with a knife. Gina looks between the two men, her face a mask of concern. I know this is the moment when everything could fall apart before it’s even begun.

Diego breaks the silence first, his voice low and measured. “Mateo, I’m willing to sit and talk this out alpha-to-alpha. There’ll be no challenge today. From me, anyway.”

Mateo snorts in derision but nods. “We can talk, Diego. I’m surprised, though. You haven’t seemed to be in a talking mood.”

I can feel the tension rolling off Diego in waves. He rolls his shoulders and turns his head just a fraction, almost checking I’m still here. “Like I said, we can talk.”

Gina and I exchange a look, and I can see her silent question: Is this going to work?

Diego turns on his heel, taking the lead and walking toward the cabin. Mateo follows, with Zack and Lucca bringing up the rear. Gina and I look on nervously as Mateo and Diego disappear into the den. Zack and Lucca stand guard outside but do not exchange a single word.

Lucca tells Gina and me to go catch up. I can see he’s worried about having her here and is just as tense as Zack.

Gina and I sit in the kitchen, watching the door nervously for any sign of what's happening inside. When all seems quiet, I finally pour us some drinks, grateful to sit beside my friend for the first time in weeks, even though the circumstances are crazy.

“Are you really okay?” Gina whispers. “Is Diego hurting you? Why did he take you?”

I place my cup back down on the counter and take a deep breath to gather my thoughts. I need to explain this properly. At least, as best as I can, considering I'm not sure I understand it myself.

“Diego didn't take me,” I say slowly. “Marcus did—a wolf in his pack. I don't know what he was going to do to me... but Diego saved me. As soon as we met, we both kinda knew.”

I can see Gina's confusion, so try to give her some more explanation. “It's like there was an immediate connection between us, like our souls were already connected somehow.” I pause for a moment before continuing, my voice barely above a whisper. “We just knew that we had to be together. I mean, I tried to fight it, but my wolf knew. She just knew.”

Gina looks at me with wide eyes, then slowly shakes her head in disbelief before finally responding. “You know what he's done, right? If he's your mate... I just don't know what to say. At all.”

I look down at my cup, not wanting to meet her eye. It's clear her feelings about Diego aren't going to change anytime soon. Can I really tell her about the baby? Everything I've feared about losing her seems to be coming true.

She leans over to take my hand. “The bond is strong, sometimes unstoppable. But if he's not a good man, you can still escape.”

“No!” I exclaim. After seeing the surprise in her eyes and noticing Lucca and Zack enter the room, I tone my voice

down. “You don’t understand—he’s not bad at all. He’s grieving. Tyler was everything your pack thinks he was, but that’s not Diego.”

Gina rolls her eyes. “And how can you be sure? Look what Tyler did to McKenna. That’s going to be you,” she whispers, obviously not wanting Zack to hear.

“No, no, no,” I say passionately. “Diego is angry and grieving his son. You think of Tyler as the monster he became, but Diego’s home is full of pictures of them together when he was a boy. He was his child, and he’s grieving. He keeps saying Tyler would have become a better man in time, but now he can’t. This isn’t the war everyone thinks it is.” As I speak, Gina’s face softens slightly.

“But what about the attacks, the destruction, even my kidnapping? I...” She trails off.

I sigh, scared I’m going to reveal too much about things even I don’t understand properly. “Diego didn’t give the go-ahead for all that. That was this Marcus guy. I think he was Tyler’s friend, and he’s using Diego’s grief as an excuse for violence. I’m not saying Diego doesn’t want revenge, but random destruction wasn’t his idea.”

Gina looks thoughtful for a moment. “Well, if this Marcus is anything like Tyler... but what kind of revenge does Diego want?”

I look at the closed door to the den, anxiety racing through my body. “He wants Mason to pay for Tyler’s death. I don’t know if, as a father, he can let it go.”

“I guess I can understand that a bit as a parent now,” Gina says quietly. “I think everyone assumed Diego’s just like his son. I hope for all our sakes you’re right about him.”

“I know I am. I have to be.” I steel myself before continuing. “I’m pregnant. This war has to end. I need him to be safe, to be here, and...”

I can’t even finish my sentence before dissolving into tears. In a second, Gina’s on her feet and holding me, “Oh,

god, Quinn, why didn't you say?" She strokes my hair as the tears keep flowing. "It's going to be ok. They'll talk, they'll find a solution. If you want to stay, you can. If not, we'll help you leave. Okay?"

I nod against her shoulder, my tears subsiding. I've never cried so easily. Must be all the hormones, I guess.

"I don't want to leave; I want to stay with Diego," I say. "But I want you in my life, too. I've never had a pack, Gina. These past weeks with Diego, my wolf feels settled in a way I never felt possible. It's because of him. I'm meant to be with him."

Gina looks toward the door to the den, where Lucca and Zack are still standing guard. Mateo and Diego have been in there a while now, but there are no raised voices, so we can only assume the men are still talking.

She looks back at me and takes my hands before folding me into another hug. "You deserve to get everything you want, Quinn. And you'll always have me."

Chapter 15 - Diego

“Well?” I ask, staring at the man I fully intended to kill until just a couple of days ago. Even now, the urge is there; I’ve just tempered it.

“We have a lot to think about, and I’m glad you called this meeting,” Mateo replies. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I’m cautiously optimistic. If you’re serious, that is? Wouldn’t be the first time your pack has done the wrong thing, now would it?”

Negotiations with another alpha can be notoriously difficult. I can only imagine what stupid ideas Tyler would have if he were here now. He’d have embraced the war and petty destruction, just like Marcus.

“As alpha, you must realize the pack is our responsibility, but people often have their own ideas. I’m here to do the right thing for my wolves. And for Quinn,” I say sincerely.

Mateo’s eyes light up with surprise, “For Quinn, eh? So, you are together? Kidnapping a woman doesn’t seem like the best start to a relationship.”

“The bond is real. And I guess she must appreciate my charm.” I say calmly, though my fangs descend slightly. I’m not sure if Mateo is deliberately trying to press my buttons. If he is, he clearly thinks better of it as his expression returns to neutral.

“I certainly can appreciate the effect of the bond. You’d do anything for them, wouldn’t you?” Mateo says thoughtfully.

He’s talking about Tyler. And the fact that Mateo himself would do anything for his mate just like Mason did for McKenna, even have Tyler killed. To protect her.

How do I rationalize the killing of my own son? That Mason had to put him down to protect his mate? Would I do the same if Quinn were in danger?

Of course I would.

“That’s enough for today. You have my proposal.” I stand abruptly, unable to continue this conversation any further.

Something flashes in Mateo’s eyes as though he understands. He pushes himself to his feet, too. We don’t shake hands, just nod at each other before we head to the door.

I immediately see Quinn searching for me as we leave the room. I can see she’s been crying, and my wolf immediately goes on high alert.

The fact she has her arms around Gina makes me nervous. For a brief moment, I wonder if she’s going to try to leave with them. My heart thunders in my chest, but then she steps away from Gina and rushes into my arms. I hold her to me, almost shocked at how right she feels.

Gina eyes me warily from Lucca’s side. I can well imagine how they both feel about me. Part of me doesn’t care at all, but I know it matters to Quinn.

I nod toward them. “Thank you for coming, Gina. It means a lot to Quinn.”

Lucca pushes Gina slightly behind him, but she pushes back around. She always struck me as a headstrong woman. “Is that all you have to say?”

I chuckle. “I doubt an apology for your previous treatment means much, but you have it. I want no quarrel with Quinn’s friend.”

Lucca seems about to say something, but Gina lightly touches his chest and moves forward. “I hope the meeting went well,” she says. “Quinn says she wants to stay. Will you let me visit her?”

I tighten my grip on Quinn, elated that she's said that to her friend but not wanting to show my surprise. "Of course. That's Quinn's decision now, anyway."

"We'll be back tomorrow morning with a decision. Think about what I said," Mateo says to me from the front door.

We head out onto the porch and watch them drive away. Zack offers a low whistle when they're finally out of sight. "Not sure I've had a more tense morning, Diego." He chuckles as we walk back in. "Did that go how you expected?"

I pause for a moment as Quinn walks back into the kitchen and begins gathering things for lunch. She looks tired and wrung out, and I'm reminded exactly why I want to find a different path.

"Better, probably," I admit. "Mateo came with some reasonable suggestions. My offer of the haulage routes, something they're struggling with, and his willingness to forget Marcus's petty vandalism seems pretty straightforward. They're looking to build a skills college on the Colton Road. If both packs can attend, it would link our communities, foster closer relationships so war is less likely in the future..."

I trail off. These are all good points. As alpha, I know this is a just and sensible plan for my pack going forward, but...

"But?" Zack asks, as if reading my mind.

"As alpha, I say it's a good plan. As a father, I still want blood," I admit, the emotion hanging like a weight around my neck.

"Did Mateo specifically mention Tyler?" Quinn suddenly asks.

"No," I reply. "Though we discussed how we'd feel if anyone threatened our mate. How far we'd go..."

"You'd do the same," Zack finishes for me. I nod, suddenly unable to find the words.

Quinn comes around to my side and places her hand on my arm. We're silent for a moment before Zack stands. "That's my cue to leave. You know where I am, Diego. Call if you want to discuss anything, or I'll see you back here tomorrow. I'll be with you, whatever you decide. You know that."

After lunch, Quinn falls asleep on the sofa, and I cover her with one of the large quilts. Watching her sleep, I consider the baby growing in her belly and remember Tyler when he was a pup. And all my hopes and dreams for the boy.

He'd been so strong, and I was proud to be his father. I'm not sure when things began to change. Probably after his mother died. His willfulness became disobedience, but I tried to steer him right. I was busy with the pack, and he'd run out with his friends. They were wild, but I thought he'd mature.

I'd thought being with McKenna would tame him, but he only seemed to get worse. I knew they had problems, but they seemed fine. I hadn't realized the situation was as bad as it was until she was shipped off to Silverstar. That was when Tyler began to unravel.

I know he could have killed McKenna, but deep inside, I still see my little boy. I know he could have been a great man.

Now he never will be.

I ran out of time to get him back on the right track.

I blame myself.

I don't know how long I've been sitting there, but after some time, Quinn sits up, looking at me with concern in her eyes. "Are you okay? You look upset."

I pull her toward me, relishing in the softness of her body and the way her arms wrap around me. "I don't want our child to turn out like Tyler. It kills me to admit that about my boy."

She tightens her grip on me. “You’re a good father, Diego. You’re good because you loved him and you cared enough to try. What Tyler did was on him, not you. He was a man.”

“Why do you have such faith in me?” I whisper into her hair.

“My wolf knew you from the start, and my heart followed.”

Her words stun me, and I pull her closer, staring into the fire as I contemplate the inevitable next steps if Mateo refuses terms.

The following morning, I gently and reluctantly extricate myself from Quinn’s naked sleeping form and head downstairs. The crisp morning air reminds me how much I’ve always enjoyed being up in the mountains, my wolf relishing the freedom even amid tense negotiations.

Zack’s truck pulls in just as the first coffee brews. Perfect timing, as usual.

“One of those for me?” he asks as I put two full coffee cups on the counter.

“You’re just lucky Quinn isn’t up yet,” I reply, pushing one over to him.

He nods, smiling as he takes a sip. “Checked all the cameras on the way back up. No one’s been through, not even on that rear track we found. Seems like they’re holding up their end. So far, anyway.”

I nod, though I didn’t think Mateo would try anything here. Alphas have a code of honor, and attacking me when I was here for negotiations would have broken just about every rule of decency.

“You think on it anymore?” Zack asks to break the comfortable silence that’s fallen.

I sigh, pushing the cup away. “My position still stands. I think the terms are good for our pack. Better, if anything.”

We'll make a fortune from the haulage deals, and the skills college will be positive for our younger ones, perhaps put some of them on a better path." As I say it, I'm not sure if I'm thinking of Marcus's boys or Tyler. "It's good for the pack. A path forward away from the nonsense of petty retribution."

"But?" Zack prompts.

"I never wanted the petty retribution; I wanted blood. Do I put that to one side for the good of the pack?"

Zack eyes me thoughtfully. "Maybe it's not just for the good of the pack. Maybe these terms, Quinn, the baby—perhaps they're all good things for you."

Before I can reply, I hear a rustling behind me and turn to see Quinn dressed and standing in the doorway. The winter sun shines through the large picture windows, bathing her in a soft golden light. She couldn't look more perfect, and I suddenly remember her words from last night.

And my heart followed.

"Hey, Quinn," Zack greets, standing. "Looks like you're just in time."

Behind Quinn, through the large glass door, I see two trucks driving up the long track. "Right on time," I echo.

I give Quinn a brief kiss as we head to the door. I can feel her anxiety and want to reassure her. I feel calm, however. If Mateo wants a war, then I'm more than happy to give it to him, but I'm also ready to do the right thing for my pack. They deserve more than a personal vendetta.

All except Marcus, of course.

Mateo is first out of the truck, quickly followed by Lucca, Gina, and another wolf I don't recognize. Quinn waves in greeting and meets Gina at the bottom of the stairs, embracing while the men remain in their positions.

I nod at Mateo in greeting, intrigued as to which way he has decided. "Do you want to go inside or do this here?" I ask, not wanting to waste time.

Mateo slowly pushes off his truck and steps closer. “We can do this here, Diego.” He puts his hands in his pockets, and his posture is confident. “It occurred to me that the terms favor your pack. Not by much, but financially, a little. Now, I was weighing a counter or even a refusal, but I received some wise counsel. Something I hadn’t considered before, though I should have.”

I’m not 100% sure where this is going, but I don’t let anything show on my face, keeping my features neutral. Quinn is standing by my side, and I see Gina nod at her. I wonder what that’s about.

“Go on,” I say to Mateo.

“I was thinking of the damage done to my town, my people, and the cost of retribution. What I didn’t think about was you. As a father myself, I can’t imagine losing my child, no matter what they’ve done. And while I won’t apologize for what’s been done what with one of my our she-wolves being in danger, I never gave you my condolences. I never came to you, alpha to alpha, to offer you my respect. I see now that not doing so contributed to this situation.”

The forest has fallen completely silent. All I can hear is the rushing of blood in my ears.

Mateo clears his throat. “So, I’m here to offer you that respect, one parent to another. And to accept the terms. If you’re willing.”

A strange sensation grips my chest, but I manage to nod my agreement. “I’m willing. I accept the terms.”

I step toward Mateo and offer my hand. The forest falls silent again as everyone around us seems to hold their breath, seemingly unable to believe this moment has come.

Mateo steps forward and takes my hand firmly. “My hope is that both packs prosper under these terms. I also heard about your good news with Quinn. Mason, McKenna and the rest of Silverstar join me in saying congratulations,” he says sincerely, and I nod in acknowledgment.

The relief spreading through our small group is evident, and I see Quinn and Gina celebrate by hugging before Quinn insists on heading inside to make everyone drinks. As I watch her go, I briefly wonder how Mateo knew about Quinn's pregnancy or his sudden declaration of condolences for Tyler's death. I can't help but assume my mate and Gina had a hand in his new perspective.

Chapter 16 - Quinn

Walking back into Diego's cabin after the negotiations feels different somehow. I could never have imagined when I arrived here, kidnapped and afraid, that I'd consider this my home. And Diego, my future.

As soon as Mateo delivered his verdict, offering Diego the recognition of his grief that he needed, I felt something in my mate settle. Nothing can bring Tyler back to him, though I suspect Diego knows that the boy he loved had long since gone. But Mateo recognizing Diego's grief and acknowledging his part in it seems to have given my mate something he thought only bloodshed could provide. Closure, perhaps?

He hasn't said it, but I know only one thing stands between this plan coming to fruition and it falling apart: the pack accepting the terms, too. Diego wields the power in his pack, but only by consent.

Diego has already sent word that there will be a large pack meeting. Not at the usual hall, but on the edge of neutral territory. Everyone will know it's serious, as no pups or weapons are allowed. Diego has even secured the local witches to be on hand for crowd control. Even wolves won't cross a defensive witch.

The whole thing makes me very nervous. As soon as Diego's pack sees Mateo and his men there, it could go one way or another. I know it's how Diego needs to handle things, though. It's his style: authoritative and decisive.

I watch him now, bringing in extra firewood. His size and strength are unparalleled. I really shouldn't worry about him, yet as I touch my belly, imagining our child growing there, I can't help but fear what could happen. I feel like we're so close to mending this rift between the packs and creating peace for Diego to move forward. Where he and I can move forward together.

“Do you want something to eat? You’ll need something before the meeting,” I say as he drops off the last of the firewood.

“I’ll get it. You need to rest.” He gestures toward the sofa.

“I’m barely pregnant,” I protest with a laugh, but he looks completely serious.

“That may be, but you look tired. It may have been long ago, but I still remember enough, and you need to rest.” He heads toward the kitchen, then pauses. “You shouldn’t come tonight. You stay and rest so I don’t have to worry about you.”

The thought of Diego worrying about me sends a rush of warmth through my system, but there’s no way I’m staying here, only to spend the night worrying about him.

“Absolutely not,” I say, standing again. “Do you intend to lock me away again? Do you trust me? Tell me now if nothing has changed.”

His breath rushes out in frustration, and he runs his hand through his dark hair. “That’s not what I mean, Quinn. I know you had your chance to run away with Gina at the cabin. You could have run, but you didn’t. I do trust you.” He paces before continuing, “But you and that baby, you’re too important.”

I soften slightly at that. “Do you think the meeting will go that badly?” I ask, suddenly even more concerned than before.

“I can handle anything that comes my way,” Diego replies confidently. “But there are certain factions I can see causing problems.”

“Marcus?” I ask.

Diego nods grimly. “I suspect a reckoning is coming.”

My mind starts racing. “Maybe you should talk to him before then?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Diego says, stepping closer to me, “Marcus is a pack member who won’t be singled out for special consideration. He’ll accept the plan with everyone else. Or he won’t, and then I’ll deal with him.”

He wraps his strong arms around me, and I lean into him, my wolf instantly calmed by his proximity.

“Okay,” I say, my words muffled by his chest. “I’m still coming, though. If we’re together, then I want to be with you.”

He sighs again, and I think he’s still going to fight me on it, but then he surprises me by chuckling. “All right. You’re quite stubborn, aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure having a pushover for a mate is what you need,” I reply.

“No. I know what I *do* need, though,” he says, his voice low as his hands slide down my body.

“Oh, yeah?” My breath hitches as he bunches up my dress and slides his fingers past my panties. Finding me already wet, he groans deeply as his strong hand begins to rock back and forth through my folds.

I cry out in frustration as he removes his fingers, but he hushes me with a searing kiss as he moves me back onto the sofa. He pushes me back and opens my legs so he’s settled between them. I blush as I realize he has a perfect view of my vagina, and I instinctively try to close my legs, but he forces them apart again and slides two fingers back inside my wet channel. My hips buck as he curls them, stroking a sensitive spot deep inside me.

He smiles mischievously as he moves down my body, his fingers moving faster, and I can feel the orgasm building up inside me. He leans down, licking and sucking my clit as he thrusts his fingers deep into me. His tongue works its magic, and soon, I’m screaming his name. I’m shocked when I feel a gush of liquid as I come all over his face.

“That was so hot,” he groans. “Come here.” He pulls me effortlessly onto his lap, freeing his cock before slamming me down on it.

I scream, my body filled with pleasure as he pushes deep inside me. His thrusts are steady and powerful, filling me up in a way I’ve never felt before. I have to grab his shoulders to anchor myself as he firmly grips my hips, practically bouncing me on his cock. With each thrust, he brushes against something deep inside me that sends sparks of pleasure coursing through my entire body.

I can feel the orgasm building again, and this time, it’s even bigger than before. As he picks up the pace, I cry out as I come again, feeling like I’m about to burst from the intensity of it all. Diego follows closely behind, groaning loudly as he forces me down onto his pulsing cock one last time. We collapse together on the sofa in a sweaty embrace, our hearts pounding.

“I’m never letting you go, Quinn,” he says gruffly. “Never.”

I can only nod against his shoulder, overcome with the emotion of truly belonging with someone for the first time in my life.

“Everyone here?” Diego asks as we approach Zack, who looks more serious than I’ve ever seen him.

He nods grimly. “Yeah, and Mateo is due any minute now.”

Diego nods, squares his shoulders, and gives my hand a brief squeeze before heading into the large warehouse for the meeting. “You stay with Zack and stay back, okay?”

“I will. I promise.” As worried as I am, I know Diego needs to concentrate and not worry about what I’m doing.

Diego rises to the podium, and the crowd falls silent. As he begins talking, my eyes scan the room, and I find Marcus and some of his boys in the corner. They don’t seem to be listening to Diego, and I gasp when Marcus meets my gaze and winks.

A few surprised whispers go around the room as Diego tells the crowd he’s been in negotiations with Mateo. As he outlines the positive terms, surprise turns to murmurs of approval, and there are even a few claps when he brings up a combined skills college. I’m so relieved that some people can see the clear benefits for the community.

When he introduces Mateo, the crowd falls silent. Diego invites him on stage and shakes his hand, explaining that if he is able to agree on these terms, after everything that happened, everyone else should be able to as well.

The two alphas cast a strong presence over the crowd, and I can see that the majority of the pack is in clear agreement. But suddenly, there’s a commotion to the side. I close my eyes in preparation for what I know is coming.

“This is ridiculous,” Marcus jeers. “You bring the enemy into our territory and do secret deals? You don’t deserve to be alpha. You’re old and weak.”

The crowd falls silent in shock, but Diego looks completely unfazed. He knew this was going to happen. Marcus continues, “We even got you a whore mate, but even she couldn’t boost you enough. You’re past it, old man.”

I feel someone’s presence beside me, and Saffy slides her hand into mine in solidarity. We know a challenge is coming.

Mateo steps back slightly as Diego turns toward Marcus. “Is there something constructive you wanted to say, boy?”

“I’m no boy, Diego.” Marcus sneers. “I’m the alpha this pack needs. I challenge you. I’m calling you out.”

A gasp reverberates through the vast warehouse, first shock and then an eruption of chatter and confusion. Diego raises his hand, and the room falls silent.

“Are you sure this is what you really want, Marcus?” Diego asks solemnly. “You know this means banishment or death?”

“For *you*, old man,” Marcus says, shrugging off his jacket and handing it to one of his men. His friends seem just as confident as him, jeering and trying to rally the crowd.

Diego stands tall, and I can feel the tension in the room. He turns to me and winks before jumping off the podium and facing Marcus. Saffy grips my hand tighter as Zack pushes us back further. I can’t see Diego anymore and start to panic, but I remember what he said. He knew this was coming, and he was prepared for it.

The men collide, fists punching each other. Claws erupt as they partially shift. Marcus slashes at Diego, and I scream as I see blood erupt on his chest.

But it doesn’t take long for Diego to gain the upper hand. He ducks under another punch from Marcus and grabs him by his throat with one hand while using his other to hammer blows into the younger man’s stomach. Suddenly, he releases him with a roar of power, sending him flying back into his gang of men, who quickly catch him before he hits the floor.

“Surrender, Marcus. You won’t win here, and I don’t want to have to put you down!” Diego yells.

Marcus springs to his feet and wipes the blood from his mouth. Shrugging off his injuries, he advances again. “This is my fight, Diego. You’re finished. Your entire family ends here.”

I see something dangerous flash in Diego’s eyes, and I know with absolute certainty that Marcus is the one who is

finished today.

The fight intensifies, both men shifting completely now. I'm taken aback by Diego's magnificent wolf form. He's large and completely black, and his amber eyes glow powerfully. I calm a little when I see how much larger he is compared to Marcus's wolf. But the fight isn't over yet. Their huge claws tear at each other's fur, and powerful jaws snap at exposed flesh. Blood spatters across the floor as they battle for dominance.

Finally, after what seems like an eternity of fighting, Diego ducks under one of Marcus's blows and rips his throat out in one swift move, ending the challenge for good.

The entire warehouse falls silent at the violent ending. Marcus's body lies on the concrete floor. Though he died instantly, my stomach roils at the scene. I've never witnessed a pack fight like this before.

The crowd suddenly parts, and Diego emerges, covered in blood and wounds that are already starting to heal. I know I should find the image disturbing, but to me, he looks magnificent. Ignoring everyone around us, I run into his arms. He sweeps me up, and the crowd begins to cheer as he kisses me deeply. I feel a thousand emotions all at once.

Zack moves around us, standing between us and Marcus's body. "You," he says, gesturing to Marcus's shell-shocked friends. "Take his body out, and we'll arrange burial. Then we'll deal with you."

The men nod solemnly and step forward. The crowd is silent again in respect as Marcus's body is carried out.

Mateo approaches us and shakes Diego's hand. "A decisive victory, as expected. We'll go and let you deal with this, but you have my support and our promise of friendship."

"Absolutely," Diego replies, still holding onto me. Mateo nods at me as he leaves with his men, all of whom are clearly impressed by Diego's display.

Zack moves to the center of the room and addresses the crowd. “Anyone else have a grievance? Anyone else doubts our alpha’s decision?”

There’s a brief pause before applause erupts, creating a deafening cacophony of cheers. “I think you have their support,” I whisper to Diego.

“As long as I have yours,” Diego replies.

I simply nod, resting my head against his shoulder, overwhelmed with gratitude for his safety.

Epilogue - Quinn

“Quinn!” I turn as I hear Saffy calling my name excitedly. I wave with my free hand as she approaches, adjusting the bundle in my arms.

“You made it,” I greet her with a smile. She immediately leans down to coo over my five-month-old daughter, Savannah.

“Oh my goodness, just look at you!” Saffy chatters to Savannah, who beams back at my friend, her blond curls bouncing in the breeze.

Saffy finally looks up at me apologetically. “Sorry, I’m late. I had to wait for the cakes to be delivered. Thank god I got Zack to give me a lift in, or I’d never have been able to carry them all. Look at this place!”

She gestures to the brand-new pavilion Diego has built at the sports ground. It’s a large, intricately carved wood and steel structure big enough to hold events like this community fair. It will also be a hub for the newly launched pack tournaments later in the spring. At the moment, it’s decked in beautiful early autumn flowers and lanterns. The arena is packed with stalls, food stands, and a square for musicians and dancing.

“Where is Zack? I think Diego was looking for him,” I say, handing Savannah to Saffy as I can tell they’re both desperate for a cuddle. My daughter is the happiest baby and seems to love everyone. Saffy beams as she bounces Savannah, making her shriek with laughter.

“He took the cakes over to the stand,” she says, gesturing to her right. “Over there.”

We both turn to see Zack stacking the cake boxes and talking to someone. “Who’s that?” I ask, watching a woman with long blond hair take one of the boxes from him.

“Oh, that’s Tanya. She’s one of the tech teachers at the new Colton College. She’s really nice.”

“From Silverstar pack?” I ask as we watch Zack laughing at something Tanya’s said. Zack never stands around laughing, so Saffy and I exchange a knowing smirk.

“Sort of,” Saffy says conspiratorially. “Apparently, her parents were banished years ago when she was a pup. She’s just moved back because of the college. It’s all a bit awkward, but she’s so nice.”

My eyes widen. “Goodness, that is a bit weird. You’ve met her, then?”

Saffy nods. “I’ve signed up for her class. I’ve always loved tech, and I’m good at it. Time to do something more than work at the store.”

I embrace her. “This is amazing, Saffy,” I say sincerely. “It’s so perfect for you.”

And it really is. Having known Saffy for a while now, it’s clear she’s meant for more than working in the store. She just needs to come out of her shell a bit.

I look at Zack talking to the newcomer. Perhaps he’s even talking to her about Saffy. It’s clear he only wants the best for his sister.

There’s a sudden influx of more people into the pavilion, and I see Gina, Lucca, and their daughter Rose making their way through the crowd.

“This place is incredible,” Lucca says as we all greet each other. “Did Diego tell you we’re putting in a team for the tournament? I can’t wait.”

Gina rolls her eyes and laughs. “They’ve already started training. It’s all they’re talking about at the moment.”

Lucca is clearly enthusiastic about the thought of inter-pack competition, and I sympathize with Gina. Diego is full of plans for next year’s sporting calendar. Both packs have gone

a bit sports-mad. I won't complain, though. It's a far cry from how things were between the packs last year.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by the loudspeaker. I'd been looking for Diego, and now I see him standing on the main stage.

"Everyone, thank you for coming," he begins to a whoop of cheers from the crowd. "Especially all those who came early to set up, and my beautiful mate Quinn, who's headed up this whole fair."

I blush as everyone around me starts clapping. I'm not used to the attention, but Savannah, who's back in my arms, seems to lap up the fuss and begins clapping adorably. My heart is full of emotion as I look around at all I have now.

On the stage, Diego adds, "Though Quinn doesn't actually know about all the arrangements."

I look up in confusion and see him staring right at me, his face a picture of mischief. I look at Gina and Saffy, and they both look conspiratorially at each other. I'm so confused.

"It occurred to me that you didn't get the welcome to this pack you deserve." Someone in the crowd heckles Diego good-naturedly, and he laughs. "Okay, okay, that's an understatement. So, it's time I put that right. Can you come up here, Quinn?"

Suddenly, Gina pulls out a beautiful bouquet of flowers while Saffy carefully places an autumnal flower crown on my head. "What on earth is going on?" I ask with a laugh.

Gina opens her arms for Savannah, and I hand her over just before she hands me the bouquet. "Oh, you're just getting all the lovely fuss you deserve." She shoos me toward the stage.

I pass through the smiling faces until I reach the steps, and Diego leans down to help me up. Once there, I realize he's also invited one of the high witches onto the stage.

I look at him, and he takes my hands. “You’re getting the mating ceremony you deserve in front of your friends and new family. If you’ll have me?”

Tears suddenly choke my throat, but I manage to nod and say, “Oh, Diego, of course.”

My tears fall as he steps forward to embrace me, much to the crowd’s delight. “Quinn, you have my wolf and my heart.” And then, he speaks louder to the crowd. “This is your home, your pack, and our future.”

The dark witch steps forward and quiets the excited crowd to perform the ceremony. It’s all symbolic, as the words have already been spoken, but it means so much more. As I look at Diego, I see a man transformed. Though he was always handsome, he now exudes life and light. When he holds Savannah, I see the love in his eyes as pure as any could be imagined.

He has my whole heart.

The ceremony concludes, and I’m swept into his arms again in a passionate kiss that I know promises so much heat later. The afternoon spills into an evening with dancing and the arrival of a very special cake, which was the real reason Saffy had waited for the delivery.

“We’re going to head off, get Rose to bed,” Gina says, embracing me. “Such a perfect day!”

“I’ll walk you out,” I say, walking with her. “I think Diego is ready to go, too. He’s been dancing with Savannah to keep her awake, but she’s just fallen asleep.”

Gina laughs. “Our daughters do seem to enjoy the dancing, don’t they?”

We pause at the edge of the pavilion. “I never thought I’d have all this, Gina,” I say. “A family, a pack of my own. Diego. If it wasn’t for your friendship, I wouldn’t.”

Gina is tearful as she takes my hand. “This was meant for you. It was all fated, and you deserve all the love.”

After one final embrace, I watch my friend walk toward her own family, marveling at how we both got everything we ever wanted.

Suddenly, an arm snakes around my waist, and I lean back, instantly warmed by Diego's presence. I turn slightly to see he has a sleeping Savannah against his shoulder, and I don't think a man has ever looked so attractive. I reach up on my tiptoes and kiss him. What starts off slow and sweet, he quickly deepens.

As we break apart, he chuckles. "Definitely time to get out of here and get this little princess to bed."

I couldn't agree more, and after saying our goodbyes, we walk back to the truck, arm in arm.

Diego

I insisted Quinn get ready for bed in peace so I could put my little sleeping princess to bed. It's my favorite time of day, and I try to do bedtime as much as possible. As I tuck the blanket around Savannah's tiny body, I feel a rush of love I know will never fade.

Her surprisingly thick blond curls make her look angelic, and when I think of her sweet, sunny disposition all day, I wonder how I got so lucky.

"I think you're more like your mom," I whisper to my beautiful sleeping daughter.

All my worries about having another pup disappeared the moment Quinn handed me our daughter. As soon as she was put into my arms, a whole lot of healing took place. Meeting Quinn made me want to be a better man, but having my daughter only cemented that. I would do anything for my family, including living well and creating a harmonious pack.

I turn on the baby monitors and close the door quietly, heading back to our suite. I thought Quinn might already be in bed, but the room is empty, though I can hear the taps running in the en suite. I shrug out of my shirt and talk through the door, "You must be ready fo—"

I stop talking as the door opens and Quinn steps out, wearing a floor-length dark blue slip. The cut is low on her breasts, and because she's breastfeeding, they are full to the point of straining against the fabric. My mouth waters, and I have to hold myself back from the urge to rip the garment away. She looks incredible.

"I... um, I was saving it for a special occasion," she says shyly. "I didn't know that was going to be today."

I step forward and trail my hands up her bare arms, marveling at the goosebumps racing across her skin in response. "You look amazing. So hot."

Before she can respond, I capture her lips in a kiss that almost knocks us both sideways. I push her back against the doorframe, my hand instantly palming her large, firm breast and eliciting a moan from her that only drives me on.

I turn and walk her backward to the bed, never breaking our embrace. Slowly laying her down on the bed, she looks at me with a mix of excitement and anticipation in her eyes. I start by tracing circles around her nipples before moving lower, my tongue exploring every inch of her body as I go. My hand slides between her legs, feeling how wet she is for me.

She whimpers, obviously trying to stay quiet, and grabs my hair as I start to circle my tongue around her clit, finding the pace that makes her body tremble. Her hips rise off the bed, and she stifles her cries as her orgasm crashes over her like a wave.

“That’s just the first, Quinn,” I say with a chuckle. “I’m not done with you yet.”

I move up her body to kiss her, my lips slick with her arousal. I never tire of her taste; it simply drives me wild. My fangs are slightly descended in arousal, and I know my eyes are glowing amber.

I look down at Quinn, my mate. She offers me a slow smile as she reaches between us, palming my painfully hard cock through my jeans. I groan before shrugging them off as quickly as possible. Then her small hand wraps around my flesh, my cock already pulsating with precum.

“I want you,” she whispers, her voice husky with desire.

I nod and kneel between her legs, both of us trembling with anticipation. Slowly, I push inside her, my hand gripping the bedframe as I feel her tight heat around me. I know I’m big, and I still worry about hurting her after the baby. I look down and watch my shaft slowly push into her body. It takes all my control not to let go at that moment.

With one final push, I'm fully seated, and we moan at the intense sensation. I pause for a moment, letting her adjust to the fullness. I can't hold back for long, though, and desire quickly takes over. My thrusts become more urgent as I drive into her deeper and deeper. Our bodies move together as one, our passion and desire becoming an inferno that neither of us can control.

Her nails scrape down my back as I piston in and out of her, searching for that spot deep inside that pushes her over the edge. I angle my body so I can reach between us and stroke her clit, making her muffle a scream against my bare shoulder. A few more powerful thrusts later, we cry out in pleasure as we approach our climax together.

I increase my pace, my thrusts becoming more erratic as I feel the pleasure building to a crescendo. I can feel Quinn's muscles gripping me tightly as she starts to come, the grip of her orgasm squeezing and milking me of every drop of pleasure I have to give.

I lean down and gently bite her shoulder, marking her with my power and claiming her as mine once more. The feeling is too much for me, and with one final powerful thrust, I empty myself deep within her body.

As our breathing returns to normal and our hearts beat in sync, I pull Quinn close to me and kiss her forehead. "You. You and Savannah are everything. I never thought... just thank you, Quinn. Thank you."

"I love you, Diego. You have my heart."

THE END

About the Author

Ruby lives on a farm with her two daughters and husband. Besides horses, chickens, and a donkey, she sometimes imagines that there are other types of animals on her farm, too... Animals that turn into Very Hot Men at night to look for their mates... Whenever that happens, she turns to her computer and writes down the paranormal love stories of these rough Wolf, Bear, and Dragon shifters who will destroy any obstacle to protect their mate. Come and enjoy the steamy, suspenseful, and slightly sweaty adventures of Ruby's shifter romance world.

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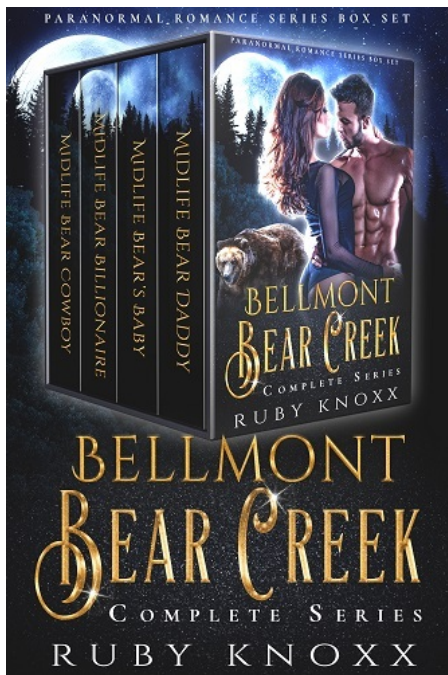
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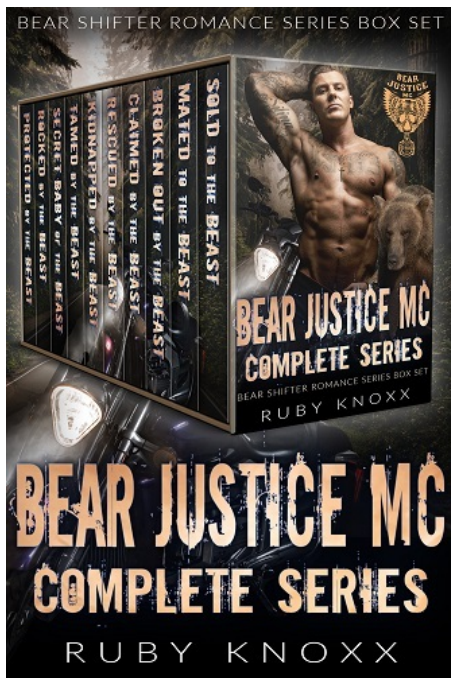
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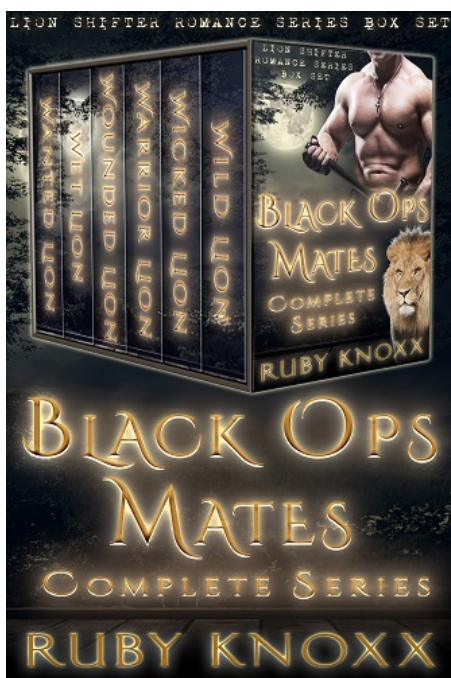
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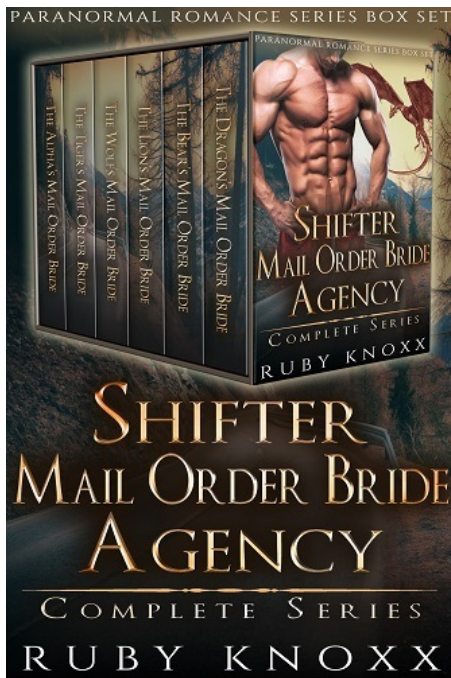
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