



# Billionaire Wolf Needs a Chef

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** Cameron Fitzgerald is the king of convenience. As the billionaire founder of Cam's Comfy Cuisine, he's built a meal-kit empire that's revolutionized the way people cook at home. But when a scandal threatens to destroy his company's reputation, he needs more than a PR fix. He needs a miracle. Enter Ivy St. Clair, a ray of sunshine in chef's whites, whose infectious smile and passion for food are the exact opposite of his cold and sterile corporate world.

Ivy's life is a recipe for disaster. After a food critic with a personal vendetta tanks her career, she's left jobless, penniless, and desperate. When Cameron offers her a job to revamp his meal kits, it's an offer she can't refuse, even if it means working for the grumpiest boss she's ever met.

Cameron doesn't do cheerful, and Ivy's relentless optimism drives him up the wall. But the more time they spend together, the harder it is to ignore the sparks flying between them. There's just one problem. Ivy's been burned before, and she's not about to let another another bossy alpha male ruin her life, even if he ignites the passion in her heart that she thought she'd buried forever.

But when Cameron's wolf scents her as his fated mate, he realizes this is more than just a business arrangement. He'll brave the flames of the kitchen, destroy their enemies, and tear apart anyone who stands in his way to claim her. Forever.

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## Chapter 1

### IVY

"Ivy St. Clair: A chef who should stick to reheating pasta, not pretending to create it."

The words glared back at me from my phone screen, Ashton Blackwood's review still fresh even weeks later. My hands shook as I swiped to my bank app. \$5.02. Five dollars, two cents, and a shattered career. All because one smug critic decided my food, my life's work, wasn't worth the plate it was served on because I refused to sleep with him.

I hurled my phone onto the couch before I could be tempted to reply. Again.

With my laptop balanced precariously on my knees, I sat cross-legged on the couch, staring at the numbers on the screen as if they might magically change if I willed it hard enough. They didn't. Five dollars. That was the remaining balance in my bank account and I still had unpaid bills due before the end of the month. The chaos that had become my life was a stark reminder of how far I had fallen since Ashton Blackwood's scathing review had destroyed my career.

With a frustrated sigh, I leaned back, letting my head fall against the couch cushion. The apartment around me was a riot of color and life, colorful paintings and decorations hung along the walls, plants spilled from their pots, and the faint scent of roasted spices lingered in the air from last night's coconut curry. The busy decoration covered the cracks in the walls and the age of the apartment. It was a small space, but it was mine, and I'd made it a home. Right now, though, it felt more like a padded

cage.

The scent of burnt sugar snapped me back to reality. Shit. My caramel was smoking. I lunged for the pan, but it was too late. Another failure to add to the pile. Tossing the smoking pan into my sink and turned on the tap.

My phone buzzed. It was Katie.

"Hey, cuz," I answered, trying to inject some cheer into my voice. "What's up?"

"Ivy, are you sitting down?" Katie's tone was urgent, and I felt a pang of worry. I leaned against the counter, gripping the phone tighter.

"I'm in the kitchen, so technically, no," I said, forcing a laugh. "What's going on?"

"Okay, don't freak out," Katie began, which immediately made me want to panic. "But I found something that might help. It's not a perfect solution, but it's something."

I exhaled slowly, trying to keep my nerves in check. "Katie, I'm pretty much out of options here. At this point, I'm ready to scrubtoilets. Anything's better than staring at my bank balance until it magically adds a couple of zeroes."

"Right, so, remember the employment agency I used to find my job?"

I remembered how my cousin found a job through the agency as an executive assistant for an infamously vicious billionaire CEO and ended up marrying him a year later.

"Yeah," I answered cautiously.

"Well, one of their clients is looking for a new chef."

I blinked, processing her words. "A billionaire? Like, a real, actual billionaire?"

"Yes, Ivy. A real, actual billionaire. His name is Cameron Fitzgerald. He founded some meal-kit company, Cam's Comfy Cuisine, or something like that. The pay is insane, and it's a chance to get your foot back in the industry."

My stomach flipped. Cameron Fitzgerald. I'd heard of him. Who hadn't? He was practically a household name, the man who'd turned simple meal kits into a billion-dollar empire. But he was also notorious for being difficult. Rumor had it he was cold, demanding, and his fiery temper drove more than one employee to quit.

"I don't know, Katie," I said hesitantly. "I've heard some things about him. He sounds intense."

"Ivy, you're not in a position to be picky. I can feel the desperation oozing over the phone line," Katie said bluntly. "And let's be real, you've dealt with worse. Remember Chef Marco? That guy threw a ladle at you, and you still managed to charm him into giving you a raise."

"He threw it near me, not at me," I corrected, but I couldn't help smiling. Katie always knew how to cheer me up.

"Besides," she continued, "you're the most optimistic person I know. If anyone can handle a grumpy billionaire, it's you."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I don't know, Katie. This feels different. I mean, I've worked for difficult people before, but Cameron Fitzgerald? He's not just a CEO with a temper. He's a billionaire CEO. One wrong move, and I could end up back in this apartment, but with even less than I have now."

Katie's voice softened. "Ivy, I get it. I really do. But you're smart, talented, and you

have this magical way of disarming people. You make them want to like you, even when they're trying not to. I've seen it happen a hundred times. You'll be fine."

I chewed my lip, staring at the mixing bowl in front of me. The batter was smooth and creamy, the way I liked it, but my appetite had vanished. Katie was right, I was desperate. Rent was due in two weeks, and I had no idea how I was going to scrape together the money.

"Okay," I said finally, exhaling the word like it had been stuck in my chest. "I'll do it. I'll send in my resume."

Katie let out a triumphant cry on the other end of the line. "You won't regret this, Ivy. I promise."

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I wasn't so sure about that, but I didn't have the energy to argue. After we hung up, I pulled up the agency's website and filled out the application form, my fingers trembling slightly as I typed. By the time I finally hit submit, my heart was racing, and I felt like I'd just jumped off a cliff without knowing if there was a net below.

The next morning, my phone buzzed, skipping across my nightstand.

"Hello," I answered, my voice still rough with sleep.

"This is Gladys at Discreet Talent Connections. Is this Ms. Ivy St. Clair?"

"That's me."

"I have gone over your resume and I must say that your qualifications are very impressive. I may have a placement for you. Would you be available for an interview this afternoon?"

I sat up and ran my hands through the tangled bird's nest that was my hair. "Oh, that's so sudden!" I cleared my throat. The knot of anxiety in my stomach tightened, but I forced myself to respond with a polite, professional message. "I mean, I would be delighted to meet with you."

"Good. Come to our office downtown at 1:00 p.m. I look forward to speaking with you, Ms. St. Clair."

The line went dead. I kicked off the covers and jumped out of bed. For the next hour, I paced my apartment, trying to decide what to wear. My wardrobe was limited,

mostly casual clothes and a few chef's uniforms, but I managed to dig out a pair of black trousers and a white blouse that didn't look too wrinkled.

When I arrived at the agency's office, I nearly turned around and walked right back out. The building was sleek and modern, all glass and steel, with a lobby that looked like it belonged in a sci-fi movie. The receptionist greeted me with a polite but impersonal smile and directed me to a waiting area where I sat, clutching my portfolio like a lifeline. The chairs were incredibly uncomfortable, and I shifted nervously, trying to ignore the way my palms were sweating.

After what felt like an eternity, a woman in her late fifties with sharp icy blue eyes and an even sharper gray pantsuit emerged from a hallway. "Ivy St. Clair?" she asked, her tone crisp and professional.

"Yes, that's me," I said, standing up too quickly and nearly knocking over my portfolio. I caught it just in time and smiled sheepishly.

"I'm Gladys Martin," she said, extending a hand. Her grip was firm, and I tried to match it, hoping I didn't come across as nervous as I felt. "Come with me."

She led me down a hallway lined with abstract art and into a small conference room with a glass table and chairs that matched the uncomfortable ones in the lobby. I sat down, trying to appear confident, but my heart was pounding so hard I was sure she could hear it.

"So, Ivy," Gladys began, opening a folder in front of her. "Your resume is impressive. A graduate of Le Cordon Bleu, experience at several Michelin-starred restaurants, and then you were head chef at L'Atelier. May I ask what happened?"

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to keep my voice steady. "A food critic wrote a less than favorable review after we had a personal disagreement, and it impacted business

to the point where I had to resign."

Gladys nodded, her expression unreadable. "I see. And why are you interested in this position?"

I took a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. "I've always loved cooking, and I believe in making food accessible and enjoyable for everyone, even busy families with basic skills in the kitchen. Cam's Comfy Cuisine has a great reputation for that, and I'd love to be a part of it. And also, well, I need the work."

Gladys' lips twitched, almost like she was fighting a smile. "Honesty. I appreciate that. Mr. Fitzgerald can be challenging and demanding to work with, but he's passionate about what he does. He's looking for someone who can bring fresh ideas to the table. Someone who isn't afraid to push back and innovate."

I nodded, trying to absorb her words. "I think I could be that person. I've always believed that cooking is more than just following recipes. It's about creating something that resonates with people."

Gladys studied me for a moment, her sharp eyes assessing. "You've got passion, and from what I've seen, you've got the skills to back it up. I'll be honest, this won't be an easy job. But if you can handle it, it could be a great opportunity for you."

"I understand," I said, forcing a smile. "I'm ready for the challenge."

She leaned back in her chair, folding her arms. "Good. Here's what's going to happen. I'll speak with Mr. Fitzgerald and set up an introduction. If he's interested, you'll meet with him directly. Be prepared, he's not one for small talk."

Her words ramped up my anxiety. How bad could Cameron Fitzgerald be?



"Got it," I said, my nerves tingling with a mix of excitement and dread.

Gladys stood, signaling the end of the interview. "I'll be in touch soon. Good luck, Ivy."

"Thank you," I said, shaking her hand again before heading out.

As I stepped back into the lobby, I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the interview pressing down on me. This was it, my chance to start over, to prove myself again. But the thought of working for someone like Cameron Fitzgerald filled me with both anticipation and anxiety.

Two days later, my phone buzzed with an email from Gladys. I was to meet Cameron at his office the following morning. The knot in my stomach tightened, but I forced myself to focus. I spent the rest of the day preparing, going over my resume, researching Cam's Comfy Cuisine, and trying to anticipate what questions he might ask.

When the morning came, I dressed in my interview outfit again and took the subway to CCC's headquarters. My stomach twisted itself into knots as I stepped into the skyscraper. For a company that made its name by selling hearty homemade meal kits, the steel and glass interior which resembled a sterile laboratory was not what I expected.

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A receptionist directed me to the elevator, and I rode up to the top floor, my heart pounding with each floor I rode past. When the doors opened, the sight before me took my breath away. I stepped out into an open space with an amazing panoramic view of the city below. In the distance, ships bobbed in the harbor and the ocean shimmered under the midday sun. A large modern sculpture that resembled a blob of molten metal stood in the center of the room. The office looked like it belonged in one of those magazines featuring the rich and famous, but it felt cold and uninviting.

A man in his mid-thirties approached me, his expression friendly but professional. He was tall, with dark hair and sharp features. A thin silver scar ran along his left cheek down to his jaw. He extended a hand as he reached me.

"You must be Ivy St. Clair," he said, his voice warm and welcoming. "I'm Brody Kane, Cameron's COO. He's in a meeting right now, but I'll give you a quick tour while we wait."

I shook his hand, trying to steady my nerves. "Nice to meet you, Brody. Thanks for taking the time."

"Of course," he said with a smile. "We're excited to have you here. Follow me."

Brody led me through the office, pointing out different departments and introducing me to a few people along the way. Everyone seemed friendly enough, but there was an underlying current of stress in the air like they were all walking on eggshells.

"Cameron's very hands-on," Brody explained as we walked. "He's passionate about the company, and he expects everyone to share that passion. It can be a bit intense at

times, but it's also what makes this place run like clockwork."

I nodded, trying to absorb the information. "I can imagine. He's built something incredible here."

"That he has," Brody agreed. "And he's always looking for ways to improve. That's why he's so excited about bringing you on board."

The words should have been reassuring, but they only made me more nervous. What if I didn't live up to his expectations? What if he took one look at me and decided I wasn't worth his time?

Brody must have noticed my anxiety because he gave me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Ivy. You'll be fine. Just be yourself. Cameron might seem intimidating at first, but he's fair and he respects people who stand their ground. Just don't let him steamroll you."

I appreciated the advice, but it didn't do much to calm my nerves. "This is where most of our testing happens," Brody explained. "Cameron likes to be involved with the recipes, so he's often in here."

The moment I stepped into the kitchen, the air shifted. A man stood with his back to me, his broad shoulders rigid beneath a tailored suit that clung to his frame like a second skin.

Brody cleared his throat. "Cameron," he said, his tone professional but friendly. "This is Ivy St. Clair."

He turned, and my breath caught in my throat.

I turned, and for the first time, I found myself face-to-face with Cameron Fitzgerald.

He wasn't just handsome. He was dangerous.

His amber-brown eyes locked onto mine, and for a heartbeat, the world narrowed to just us. My skin prickled, my pulse thudding in my throat like a trapped bird. Cameron was taller than I expected, with broad shoulders and an imposing presence that filled the room. He wore a perfectly tailored suit that probably cost more than what I made in a year. His black hair was neatly styled, and his sharp jawline was set in a stern expression. I had seen his photo online from my research, so his appearance wasn't too shocking. What the pictures on my screen could not convey was the intensity of his piercing gaze as he examined me up and down and the sensual curve of his lips as he smirked.

My stomach flipped as he examined me like a scientist looking at a bug under a microscope.

Then his nostrils flared ever so slightly.

"Ms. St. Clair." His voice was a deep growl, rougher than I expected, sending a vibration that went deep into my bones. He didn't offer a handshake. Instead, he crossed his arms, his biceps straining the fabric of his rolled-up sleeves.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," I replied, forcing a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

He nodded curtly, his expression unreadable. "Gladys claims you're the best. I disagree."

"Oh?" I forced a smile. "And what do you base that on, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

He stepped closer, his amber eyes flickering like a predator catching the scent of prey. "Instinct."

His tone was clipped, and I felt a flicker of annoyance at his dismissive words. But the way he smirked sent a thrill through me. I reminded myself that this was my chance, and I couldn't afford to let my ego get in the way.

"Mr. Fitzgerald, you will see why I am the best by the end of the day." I tilted my chin up. His eyes dropped to the movement, lingering a second too long on my throat.

"Good. Brody, show her the current lineup of meal kits. I want her feedback on all of them by the end of the day." He studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Ms. St. Clair, your suggestions will determine if you will be a good fit for the company. Do not disappoint me."

It was a challenge. A dare.

With that, he turned and walked away.

If Cameron Fitzgerald expected me to back down and run out of the building crying, he had another thing coming. I had never backed down from a dare in my life.

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This predatory CEO thought he had me in his jaws, well, he was going to discover that I bite back.

### Chapter 2

#### IVY

I stood there for a moment, staring at his retreating figure, my heart still racing from the encounter. Brody cleared his throat, pulling me back to the present.

"Well," he said, offering a reassuring smile. "That went better than expected."

"Really?" I asked, my voice tinged with disbelief. "Because it felt like he doesn't like me very much."

Brody chuckled, leading me toward a stainless steel workstation where several meal kits were laid out. "Trust me, that's his version of friendly. You'll get used to it."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I forced a smile and followed him to the table. The kits were neatly packaged, each one labeled with a name and a list of ingredients. I picked up one called "Tuscan Sunset" and studied it.

"These are the current offerings," Brody explained. "Cameron's been pushing for something new, something that stands out. That's where you come in."

I nodded, flipping through the instructions and ingredients. The concept was solid, but it felt... safe. Predictable. I couldn't help but feel a spark of excitement at the

challenge.

"Can I see the kitchen?" I asked, glancing up at Brody.

"Of course," he said, leading me into the adjacent space. It was a chef's dream. Stainless steel counters, top-of-the-line appliances, and a wall of spices and herbs. I ran my fingers along the edge of the counter, feeling the cool metal beneath my fingertips.

"Mind if I play around a bit?" I asked, already rolling up my sleeves.

Brody grinned. "Be my guest. Just don't burn the place down."

I laughed, grabbing a knife and a cutting board. As I started prepping the ingredients, I felt the tension from earlier melt away.

The kitchen was where I belonged, surrounded by the smells and sounds of cooking. I hummed under my breath, letting the rhythm of chopping and slicing guide me.

"What are you making?" Brody asked, leaning against the counter.

"Something inspired by this kit," I said, gesturing to the "Tuscan Sunset" box. "But with a twist. Maybe ribollita, a white bean soup with vegetables, to accompany the pasta."

Brody raised an eyebrow. "Impressive. You work fast."

I grinned, feeling a flicker of pride at his reaction. "When you've got a fire under you, you learn to move quickly. Plus, I've always believed that cooking should be fun, not stressful."

Brody watched as I added the chopped onions, carrots, kale, herbs, and a can of strained white beans to a simmering pot of broth. His expression was thoughtful. "You've got a real passion for this, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I do," I admitted, tearing chunks of bread for the soup and spreading them on a baking tray. "It's the one thing that's always made sense to me, you know? When everything else feels chaotic, the kitchen is where I can find my center."

He nodded, his gaze lingering on me for a moment longer before he glanced toward the door. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do," I said, already drizzling olive oil on the bread. As I worked, my mind wandered back to Cameron's abrupt exit. There was something about him, something magnetic, that I couldn't quite shake. My cheeks heated as I remembered the intense way he looked at me when we met.

I'd barely finished sliding the tray of bread into the oven when I felt a presence behind me. I turned, my heart skipping a beat as I saw Cameron standing in the doorway, his arms crossed and his expression unreadable.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," I said, wiping my hands on my apron. "I was just—"

"Working on the Tuscan Sunset kit, I assume?" His tone was as sharp as his gaze.

"Yes," I replied, trying to steady my voice. "I thought I'd add a ribollita to complement the pasta. It's a simple addition, but I think it could elevate the dish and round out the meal without adding much cost to the ingredients."

"You think?" he cut in, stepping closer. His presence was overwhelming, and I had to fight the urge to take a step back. "I didn't hire you to think, Ms. St. Clair. I'm hiring you to execute."



My cheeks burned, but I held his gaze, refusing to let him intimidate me. "Respectfully, Mr. Fitzgerald, execution requires thought. If we're going to innovate, we need to be willing to take risks."

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For a moment, he said nothing, his piercing blue eyes studying me like I was a puzzle he was trying to solve. Then, to my surprise, a faint smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Risks," he repeated, his tone quieter now, almost contemplative. He stepped closer, his gaze never leaving mine, and I felt the air between us grow heavy. "Risks can lead to failure, Ms. St. Clair. And I don't tolerate failure."

I swallowed hard, my pulse racing. I could feel the weight of his scrutiny, the way it seemed to strip away any pretense. But I refused to back down.

"Failure is possible," I admitted, my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me. "But so is success. And sometimes, the only way to find out is to try."

He studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, without warning, he reached past me, his arm brushing against mine as he opened the oven door. The scent of the toasted bread filled the air, mingling with the delicious aroma of the soup simmering on the stove. He inhaled deeply, his eyes closing briefly.

"Two more minutes," he said, stepping back and letting the oven door close. "Any longer, and it'll burn."

I blinked, caught off guard by his sudden shift in demeanor. "You can cook?"

The ghost of a smile played on his lips. "I've been known to."

The admission surprised me, and I couldn't help but smile in return. "Well, I'll keep

that in mind."

He nodded, his expression softening ever so slightly. "Do that. And Ms. St. Clair?"

"Yes?"

"I'm watching you," he said, his tone serious but lacking the earlier edge. "Don't disappoint me."

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving me standing in the kitchen with a mix of emotions swirling inside me. I didn't know whether to feel intimidated, inspired, or something else entirely.

As I pulled the toasted bread from the oven, the chunks perfectly browned, I couldn't help but think about Cameron's words. He was watching me. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like someone actually saw me.

"Ivy?" Brody's voice pulled me from my thoughts, and I turned to see him standing in the doorway, his expression curious. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I said, setting the pan on the counter to cool. "Everything's fine."

Brody glanced toward the doorway where Cameron had disappeared, then back at me with a knowing look. "You handled that well by standing up to him. Cameron's not exactly known for his warm and fuzzy side."

I let out a nervous laugh, brushing a strand of hair out of my face. "He's definitely intense. But I think I can handle it." The soup had reduced to a thickened stew, so I turned off the burner.

Brody's smile widened, and he nodded approvingly. "Good. Because if you can

handle him, you'll fit in just fine here."

I smiled back, feeling a tiny flicker of confidence. Maybe this job wasn't going to be easy, but I wasn't about to back down from a challenge. Not when I had so much to prove.

"So, what's next?" I asked, gesturing to the meal kits on the table.

Brody picked up one of the kits, flipping it over to inspect the ingredients. "Cameron wants your feedback on all of these. He's been looking for something fresh, something that'll really make us stand out in the market. Think you can come up with some ideas?"

I felt a spark of excitement at the prospect. "Definitely. I've got a few ideas already."

Brody raised an eyebrow, clearly impressed. "That was fast."

I grinned. "What can I say, inspiration is easy with the right subject matter."

He chuckled, setting the kit back down. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do," I said, already turning back to the counter.

As Brody left, I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of Cameron's expectations pressing down on me. I glanced at the pot of stew, now cooling on the stove, and felt a small sense of accomplishment. If I could impress Cameron, even just a little, maybe I could prove to myself that I still had what it took to succeed in this industry.

I grabbed a notepad and pen, jotting down a few ideas that had been bouncing around in my head. A Mediterranean-inspired kit with fresh herbs and citrus flavors. A spicy

curry with a coconut milk base. A hearty vegetarian option with roasted vegetables and a tangy balsamic glaze.

As I worked, I couldn't help but think about Cameron's words. "Don't disappoint me." For some reason, he had decided to give me a chance, and I wasn't going to let him down.

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The pressure was intense, but it also lit a fire in me. I wasn't just fighting for this job anymore; I was fighting for me. For the part of myself that had been buried under Ashton's cruel words and the weight of my failures. I wasn't going to let Cameron Fitzgerald, or anyone else, dim that spark.

I rolled up my sleeves and dove back into the kitchen, experimenting with flavors and textures, letting my instincts guide me. Time slipped away as I worked, the kitchen filling with the intoxicating aromas of roasted vegetables, fragrant herbs, and toasted spices.

As the afternoon turned into evening, I continued to work, refining the recipes and brainstorming ways to make them stand out. When I finally stepped back to survey my progress, I felt a sense of accomplishment. I'd created three new meal kit concepts, complete with tasting notes and ingredient lists.

At some point, Cameron returned. He stood like a gargoyle in the doorway, watching me work. Finally, he stepped into the kitchen. "Whatever you're making, it smells amazing."

I smiled, stirring a pot of simmering coconut curry. "Just trying out a few ideas."

I shoved the curry toward him. "Taste it."

His eyebrow arched. "Bossy."

He sucked in a breath, a sharp animalistic inhale as if he could taste the curry's aroma in the back of his throat. His eyes darkened, pupils dilating. For a moment, I thought

he was going to scold me.

A beat of silence. Then he nodded and rolled up his sleeves. I gulped as the motion exposed his tanned, steely forearms. There was a curious black tattoo of a wolf intertwined with a rose on his right arm. My fingers itched with the absurd urge to trace its lines. Heat pooled low in my belly. God, what was wrong with me? I averted my gaze and busied myself with the curry before he caught me staring.

I pretended the heat in my chest and face was from the steam of the curry as I ladled a small portion of the curry into a bowl and handed it to him. He took the spoon from my hand, our fingers brushing. A jolt of electricity shot up my arm. Anxiously, I watched as he took a cautious bite. His expression remained stoic, but he took another spoonful and another until the bowl was empty.

"This is remarkable, Ms. St. Clair. The balance and depth of flavors, it's a perfect recipe."

Warmth spread through me at his praise. "Thanks. I was thinking it could replace the dish in the "Spicy Thai Nights" kit. The ingredients in the curry are easy to source and the recipe is foolproof even for amateur cooks. What do you think, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

He set down the bowl and picked up the notepad where I had jotted down my notes for each of the meal kits. I held my breath as he scanned what I had written down. "I think you've done well for your first day." His expression softened. "Get some rest. You've earned it." With those parting words, he turned to exit the kitchen.

"Does that mean I've got the job?" I asked, barely able to keep the giddiness out of my voice.

"Report back to the kitchen tomorrow morning at eight o'clock," he called over his

shoulder.

I grinned like a fool as I gathered my notes and tidied up the kitchen.

As I stepped out of the building and into the cool night air, the pressure to impress my new boss was still there, but so was the determination. I didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but I was ready to face it head-on.

The city buzzed around me, the lights of skyscrapers overhead lit up the streets as people rushed out of their offices to head home. For the first time in weeks, I felt a flicker of hope. Maybe this was my chance to start over, to prove to myself that I had what it took to succeed.

As I walked home, the smell of roasted garlic and herbs still lingered on my clothes, a comforting reminder of the passion that had brought me here. No matter what challenges lay ahead, I wasn't going to let anyone, not Ashton, not Cameron, not anybody, take that away from me.

## Chapter 3

### CAMERON

I was already awake when my alarm went off at precisely 4:45 a.m. Sleep was a luxury I rarely indulged in, and tonight had been no exception. The faint glow of dawn filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows of my penthouse, casting long shadows across the stark, minimalist interior. Every surface was spotless, every item in its designated place.

I rose from the bed, my movements precise and deliberate, and began my morning routine. A quick shower, a shave, and then into the tailored suit I'd laid out the night before. The dark fabric hugged my frame perfectly, a testament to the craftsmanship I



demanded in every aspect of my life. By 5:30 a.m., I was seated at the dining table, a steaming cup of black coffee in hand, and my tablet open to the latest company metrics.

Cam's Comfy Cuisine was my life's work, a multi-billion-dollar empire built from the ground up. But the recent scandal had threatened to tear it all down. One of the company's suppliers had been caught cutting corners with ingredients and all meal-kits for the last month had to be recalled. My jaw tightened as I scrolled through the reports, the numbers glaring back at me like an accusation. Sales were down, investors were nervous, and the media was circling like vultures. I couldn't afford another misstep.

My phone buzzed again, this time with a reminder for my meeting with Brody and Boris Tanner. The name alone was enough to sour my mood. Boris was the CEO of Gourmand's Galore, a rival meal-kit company that had been nipping at my heels for years. He was also a rabid wolf in a tailored suit, and I had no doubt this meeting was another attempt to exploit my company's vulnerability.

I drained the last of my coffee and stood, smoothing the front of my jacket. Control, I reminded myself. That was what mattered. And yet, as I headed for the private elevator that went up to my penthouse apartment, my mind kept drifting back to her. Ivy St. Clair.

She was a puzzle, one I hadn't yet solved. Her resume was impressive, but it was her audacity in the kitchen yesterday that had caught me off guard. She'd stood up to me, defended her choices instead of backing down, and for a moment, I'd been intrigued. But intrigue was dangerous. I couldn't afford distractions, especially from someone I barely knew.

The elevator doors slid open, and I stepped into the tastefully luxurious lobby of my apartment building. The doorman nodded a polite greeting, and I returned it with a

curt nod of my own. The car was already waiting at the curb, with my driver holding the door open. I slid into the back seat, the leather cool against my skin, and pulled out my tablet once more.

"HQ, Mr. Fitzgerald?" the driver asked as he merged into the early morning traffic.

"Yes," I replied without looking up, my focus already back on the figures in front of me.

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The drive to Cam's Comfy Cuisine headquarters was short, and before long, the towering glass structure came into view. It was a monument to my success, a symbol of everything I'd built.

I stepped out of the car, my polished leather shoes silent against the pavement as I walked the familiar path to the entrance. 7:00 a.m. sharp. Right on time, as always. The receptionist greeted me with a smile that I barely acknowledged, my mind already racing with the day's agenda.

Brody was already waiting for me in the lobby, his expression uncharacteristically serious. He fell into step beside me as we headed toward the conference room.

"Boris is already here," he said, his voice low. "He's in the conference room, looking smug as ever."

"Of course he is," I muttered, my jaw tightening. Boris Tanner thrived on other people's misery, and I had no doubt he was here to gloat.

Boris was seated at the head of the table, his legs crossed and a smirk plastered across his face. His polished exterior couldn't hide the venom beneath.

"Cameron," he said, his voice dripping with false sincerity. "It's been a while."

"Boris," I replied. "Let's skip the pleasantries, shall we? I assume you're here to waste my time."

He chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "Always so direct. I admire that. But I'm not

here to waste your time. I'm here to make you an offer."

I raised an eyebrow, crossing my arms over my chest. "An offer? Let me guess," I said, my voice dripping with skepticism. "You want to buy me out. Or merge. Or whatever you're calling it these days."

Boris' smirk widened, and he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Not exactly. I'm proposing a partnership. Gourmand's Galore and Cam's Comfy Cuisine. Together, we could dominate the market. Think of it, Cameron. Two powerhouses united."

I let out a short, humorless laugh. "You think I'd work with you? After everything you've pulled? Let me remind you, Boris, your company's so-called innovations have been nothing more than thinly veiled rip-offs of my ideas."

His expression darkened, but he quickly masked it with another smirk. "Business is business, Cameron. And right now, your business is in trouble. I'm offering you a lifeline."

"I don't need your lifeline," I said, my tone icy. "Cam's Comfy Cuisine will recover, and we'll do it without your interference. Now, if that's all, I have work to do."

For a moment, Boris said nothing, his gaze hardening as he studied me. Then, he stood, smoothing the front of his suit. "Very well. Just remember, Cameron, this isn't over. I'll be watching."

"Do that," I replied, my voice steady. "But don't expect me to roll over."

He gave me a curt nod before striding out of the room, his arrogance lingering like a bad smell. As soon as the door closed behind him, I released the breath I'd been holding, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

"That man is a snake," Brody said, stepping into the room. He'd been silent during the meeting, but I could see the tension in his posture.

"He's worse than a snake," I muttered, walking over to the window. The city sprawled out below was a reminder of how far I had come and how far I had to fall if I lost. "He's a parasite. A scavenging vulture feeding on other people's weaknesses. But Boris is going to learn, I don't roll over for anyone." I squeezed my fists. Control. Dominance. I had to stay on top.

Brody joined me at the window, his expression thoughtful. "He's not wrong, though. The company is in trouble. We need to do something fast before the stock price plummets any further."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. "I know. But I'm not about to let Boris Tanner dictate my next move. We'll find a way out of this. We always have."

A tense silence settled between us, the weight of the situation pressing down on my shoulders. I turned away from the window, pacing the length of the room. My mind raced, searching for answers, for a solution that didn't involve bending to Boris' will.

"What about her?" Brody asked abruptly, breaking the silence.

I stopped in my tracks, glancing at him. "Her?"

"Ivy," he said, his tone casual but his gaze sharp. "She was in the kitchen all day yesterday, experimenting with new recipes. I tasted one of her test dishes, some kind of soup. It's good, Cameron. Really good. Maybe she's the spark we need to shake things up."

"She's untested," I snarled. My canines pressed sharply into my tongue. Brody's eyes

dropped to my mouth. Shit. I was losing control. I forced myself to take a calming breath and hold the wolf back. "We don't have the luxury of experimenting."

"You're the one who's always saying we need to take risks," Brody countered, his tone firm. "Ivy's talented, and she's got fresh ideas. If anyone can help us turn this around, it's her."

I turned to face him, my jaw tightening. "Brody, this isn't just about her talent. She's different. She doesn't fit the company strategy, and I can't afford any more instability."

Brody raised an eyebrow, a knowing look in his eyes. "Instability, or something else?"

I glared at him, but he didn't flinch. He'd been my confidant for years, and he knew me better than most. Too well, sometimes.

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"She's not a threat, Cameron," he said, his voice softer now. "If anything, she's exactly what you need. Someone who's not afraid to shake things up. Someone who's not impressed by your title or your reputation."

I looked away, his words hitting a nerve I didn't want to acknowledge. Ivy was different. She didn't cower in my presence or scramble to agree with everything I said, and that was both unsettling and refreshing.

But I couldn't let her in. Not now. Not when the company was hanging by a thread.

"I'll think about it," I said finally, my tone clipped.

Brody nodded, sensing the conversation was over. "Good. Just don't wait too long. The clock's ticking."

He left the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I walked back to the window, staring out at the city skyline. My reflection stared back at me, a man who'd built an empire but was now teetering on the edge of losing it all.

And there was Ivy, a wildcard I couldn't see. I could still see the way her pulse had fluttered at her throat when I'd stepped too close yesterday, the way her breath hitched when our hands brushed. Pathetic. I wasn't some lovestruck pup. I was a CEO. A fighter who climbed his way up from the streets to the gleaming glass boardroom in the sky. And yet, something about this fragile human broke my iron-fisted control.

I closed my eyes, a rare moment of vulnerability creeping in. My mother's words echoed in my mind, a memory I'd long since buried. "Cameron, you can't control

everything. Sometimes, you have to take a leap of faith." Her encouraging words were what spurred me to create the company. But that was when I was young and full of faith in the world.

I shook my head, pushing the memory aside. Faith was for fools, and I couldn't afford to be one.

Still, as I turned away from the window and headed back to my office, Ivy's face lingered in my thoughts. The way she'd looked at me in the kitchen, unafraid and unflinching. The way she'd challenged me, her passion for her work shining through.

She was a risk, that much was clear. But maybe, just maybe, she was a risk worth taking.

For the first time in a long time, I felt something other than determination. I felt curiosity about the unknown.

And that scared me more than anything.

I escaped to the sanctuary of my office and slammed the door behind me. My reflection in the floor-to-ceiling windows glared back at me. A man in an expensive suit, not the beast that raged beneath. But my claws itched to burst out. My blood pumped hot and heavy, pounding in my ears.

Focus on the company, I told myself. Only the company.

Then why did my traitorous lips whisper her name instead?

Chapter 4

IVY



I stood in front of the mirror, smoothing down the front of my crisp white chef's jacket and adjusting the collar. Today was my first official day at my new job, and I was determined to make a good impression.

I grabbed my bag and headed out the door, my heels clicking against the pavement as I walked to the subway station. The city was already bustling with activity, the sounds of car horns and chatter filling the air. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my churning stomach.

When I arrived at the glass skyscraper that housed Cam's Comfy Cuisine, I paused for a moment and stared up at the imposing structure. Working for a large multi-billion dollar corporation intimidated me. It was a far cry from the cozy restaurants I was used to. Despite my nerves, I squared my shoulders and reminded myself that I belonged here.

The crisp cool air of the lobby washed over me as I stepped inside.

Brody was waiting for me by the elevator, a warm smile on his face. "Ivy! Right on time. Ready for your first day?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," I replied, returning his smile.

The elevator doors shut behind us and as we ascended, he gave me a quick rundown of the day's schedule. "First, I'll introduce you to the team. Then, we'll head to the kitchen and let you work your magic. Sound good?"

"Sounds great," I said, though my stomach was doing somersaults.

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped out into the bustling open-plan office. Brody introduced me to the team, and I did my best to remember everyone's names and roles.

When we reached the kitchen, there was a chef already there preparing the kitchen for the day.

"Ivy, this is Bridget," Brody said, gesturing to her. "Bridget's our sous-chef."

"Nice to meet you," I said, as I shook her hand.

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"Likewise," Bridget replied with a smile that made her cheeks dimple. She had kind brown eyes that sparkled and her long hair twisted in a bun under a hairnet. "I've heard a lot about you. Ready to dive in?"

"Absolutely," I said, rolling up my sleeves.

I tied an apron around my waist and donned a hairnet before getting to work. As I chopped garlic and sautéed onions, I couldn't help but notice the curious glances from the rest of the team as they walked past the open doorway of the test kitchen. I knew they were sizing me up, trying to figure out if I had what it took to lead the revamp.

The kitchen was a whirlwind of activity, but I quickly found my rhythm. Bridget guided me through the setup, showing me where everything was kept and explaining the workflow. Despite the initial chaos, I felt a sense of calm settle over me. The beating heart of the kitchen was where I belonged, surrounded by the smells of spices and the sounds of sizzling pans.

As she diced tomatoes, Bridget gave me a curious look. "So, Ivy, what's your deal? Where'd you come from?"

I glanced up, meeting her gaze. "I used to run my own kitchen in one of the best restaurants in the city," I said, stirring the sauce I had going on the stove. "Had to quit after a bad review, but I'm not letting that stop me."

Bridget raised an eyebrow. "Most people would have walked away from the profession after something like that." Her tone was filled with curiosity, but I didn't detect any ill intent.

"Not me," I said with a grin. "Besides, when one door closes, another opens."

She smiled as she transferred the chopped tomatoes into a bowl. "Well, I'm glad you're here. A fresh new perspective is exactly what this company needs."

By mid-morning, we'd made significant progress on the Tuscan Sunset kit. We had refined the ingredients for the ribollita soup, tailoring the recipe to what could be sourced from Cam's suppliers. The existing pasta recipe also had to be altered and I was adding the final touches to the new tomato sauce when I felt a presence behind me. I turned, my heart skipping a beat as I saw Cameron standing in the doorway, his arms crossed and his expression unreadable.

"Mr. Fitzgerald," I said, trying to steady my voice.

He stepped into the kitchen, his sharp gaze scanning the countertop where we'd laid out the meal kit components. "Ms. St. Clair," he said, his tone clipped. "Care to explain what you're doing?"

I took a deep breath, reminding myself to stay calm. "We're revamping the Tuscan Sunset kit," I said, gesturing to the array of ingredients. "We've added a white bean soup to complement the pasta and tweaked the sauce to bring out more depth of flavor as well as to take advantage of in-season ingredients. It's a simple addition, but I think it elevates the whole dish."

He picked up a spoon, inspecting the soup with a critical eye and stirring it before taking a small spoonful. The room went silent. Bridget and I watched him with bated breath. He chewed slowly, his expression giving nothing away.

"It's acceptable," he said finally, setting the spoon back down. "But acceptable isn't good enough for this company. We need exceptional."

I felt a flicker of frustration, but I kept my tone polite. "I understand, Mr. Fitzgerald. This is our first iteration of a new recipe. There's bound to be room for improvement as we try to create the perfect recipe."

Cameron's eyes narrowed slightly, and he stepped closer, his presence imposing. "I hired you for results, Ms. St. Clair, not for you to try."

For a moment, I was speechless, the weight of his words pressing down on me. But then I met his gaze, refusing to back down. "I understand the stakes, sir," I said, my voice steady. "But I also believe that if we don't take risks, we'll never grow. I'm here to help this company succeed, and sometimes that means taking a chance on the unknown."

The room was so quiet you could hear a spoon drop. Cameron stared at me, his expression unreadable. Then, to my surprise, the corner of his mouth twitched, almost like he was fighting a smile.

"Interesting," he murmured, his tone softer now. For a heartbeat, his gaze met mine before dropping to my mouth. Like a reflex, my tongue darted out to wet my lips. His eyes snapped back up. "Very well, Ms. St. Clair. Prove me wrong."

He turned and walked toward the exit before pausing for a moment. "By the way, the soup needs more rosemary." With that parting suggestion, he left me standing there with a mix of emotions swirling inside me. I wasn't sure whether to feel relieved, frustrated, or something else entirely.

"Well," Bridget said, breaking the silence. "That went better than expected. Our last head chef quit after Mr. Fitzgerald said his chicken tasted like a block of wood."

I let out a nervous laugh, still trying to process what had just happened. "Is he always like that?"

"Only when he's in a good mood," she quipped.

Despite everything, I found myself smiling. Maybe I'd gotten under Cameron's skin, or maybe, just maybe, I'd earned a bit of his respect.

The rest of the day flew by in a blur. We put the last touches on the Tuscan Sunset kit, experimenting with different ingredient combinations, so the kits could continue to go out if the company needed to switch suppliers, and tweaking the sauce and soup until it was just right. Bridget and I worked together seamlessly, falling into a comfortable rhythm that usually came from a team with years of familiarity.

At one point, I caught sight of Cameron watching us from the doorway. He stood there, arms crossed, his biceps bulging against his neatly pressed shirt as he watched me cook. He didn't say anything, but his presence was impossible to ignore. I could feel his sharp gaze on me. Our eyes locked. Then, without a word, he vanished.

Bridget smirked. "He's been lurking here three times today."

"Probably making sure we're not burning the place down," I muttered.

"Sure," she said, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Or maybe he just likes the new view."

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I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't fight the smile that tugged at my lips.

By the end of the day, we'd created two more meal kit concepts: a spicy Thai curry with a coconut milk base, and a hearty vegetarian option with roasted vegetables and a tangy balsamic glaze. The aromatic smells drew in staff from other departments. I was more than thrilled to have so many taste testers offer their feedback. To my disappointment, the one person I wanted more than anybody else to taste my food had vanished from the doorway. The team gathered around the counter to taste the dishes, their reactions ranging from impressed to downright enthusiastic.

"This is going to be a hit," Bridget said, taking another bite of the curry. "I can't wait to see how customers react."

"Me neither," I agreed, feeling a swell of pride.

As we cleaned up the kitchen, I couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. It had been a long day, but I'd proven to myself that I had what it took to succeed in this role.

As I was about to leave, Brody appeared in the doorway, a knowing smile on his face. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Better than I expected," I admitted. "The team's great, and I think we're onto something with these new kits."

Brody nodded, looking pleased. "Good to hear. Oh, and Cameron wanted me to let you know that he'd like you to present your new meal kits to the team as we prepare

for the upcoming FoodieCon conference. It's a big opportunity for the company, and he thinks you'd be an asset."

My heart skipped a beat. "Really?"

"Really," Brody confirmed. "He's impressed, Ivy. Don't let him fool you. He doesn't just hand out compliments."

I smiled, feeling a flicker of excitement. Maybe I was starting to win him over after all.

Over the next few weeks, I settled into my role at Cam's Comfy Cuisine, finding my rhythm in the fast-paced kitchen environment. The team had warmed up to me, and I could feel the camaraderie growing with each passing day. Bridget, in particular, had become a close confidant, her calm demeanor balancing my more energetic personality.

One of the first changes I made was to introduce music into the kitchen. The first time I turned on my playlist, the upbeat tunes filled the room, and the atmosphere instantly shifted. Bridget grinned, her knife moving in time with the rhythm as her foot tapped to the beat.

Cameron, however, was less enthusiastic. He walked into the kitchen one afternoon, frowning as he heard the music. Bridget and I shimmied as we worked in sync with the tempo, unaware we were being watched.

"What is this?" he asked, his tone sharp as he shouted to be heard over the speakers.

I turned to face him, a smile plastered on my face. "Just a little something to keep the energy up. You know, studies show that music can improve productivity."



He raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. "This isn't a nightclub, Ms. St. Clair. Keep it down."

I shrugged, lowering the volume but not turning it off. Over the next week, I noticed that Cameron stopped by every day to check on our progress, but always with a frown on his face and a complaint about the noise. Then, one day, I caught his foot tapping to the beat as he watched Bridget and me work from the doorway. I hid a smirk, feeling a small sense of victory.

The next day, I cranked up the music again, just to see how he would react. Sure enough, within minutes, his shadow darkened the doorway. I pretended not to notice, swaying my hips as I chopped herbs.

Let him look.

He squeezed the doorframe until his knuckles turned white. "Ms. St. Clair."

I turned, innocent. "Yes, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

His jaw flexed. "Your hairnet is crooked."

He stormed off before I could reply, but not before I caught the way his gaze had dipped to the curve of my waist.

As the days went by, Cameron's visits to the kitchen became more frequent. At first, he'd hover, offering curt suggestions or critiques, but gradually, he started to step back, letting me take the lead. It was a subtle shift, but I understood what it meant. He was beginning to trust me.

Bridget noticed it too. "He's impressed with you, you know," she said one afternoon as we prepped ingredients.

"Really?" I asked, skepticism in my voice. "It doesn't exactly feel like it."

She chuckled, shaking her head. "Trust me, Ivy. Cameron doesn't give out trust easily. The fact that he's letting you run the kitchen without micromanaging means a lot."

I thought about her words, a small smile tugging at my lips. Maybe I was making progress after all.

The real test came a few days later, during a team meeting to discuss the upcoming FoodieCon conference. Cameron had asked me to present the new meal kit concepts we'd been working on, and I was determined to make a strong impression.

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The conference room was filled with the heads of various departments, marketing, sales, and R&D, all seated around the long glass table. Cameron sat at the head, his expression unreadable as he flipped through the agenda. Brody gave me an encouraging nod from his seat, and I took a deep breath, stepping up to the front of the room.

"Good morning," I began, my voice steady despite the butterflies in my stomach. "I'm here to walk you through the new meal kit concepts we've been developing in the kitchen. These are designed to highlight fresh, bold flavors while maintaining the convenience our customers love."

I launched into my presentation, detailing the inspiration behind each kit, the ingredients we'd chosen, and the feedback we'd received during testing. As I spoke, I could see the team nodding along, their expressions shifting from curiosity to genuine interest.

"The Spicy Thai Nights kit," I said, holding up a sample, "features a coconut curry base with notes of lemongrass, ginger, and chili. It's designed to appeal to adventurous eaters while still being approachable for those new to Thai cuisine."

I handed out samples, watching as the team tasted the dish. The room filled with murmurs of approval, and even Cameron looked intrigued as he took a bite.

"The Tuscan Sunset," I continued, "now includes a white bean soup to accompany the pasta. We've also tweaked the sauce to bring out more depth of flavor, making it a richer, more satisfying option."

Finally, I introduced the Hearty Harvest kit, a vegetarian option featuring roasted vegetables and a tangy balsamic glaze. "This one's perfect for our health-conscious customers or anyone looking for a lighter, plant-based meal," I explained.

When I finished, the room erupted into applause. Brody was beaming, and even the usually stoic head of marketing looked impressed.

"These are fantastic, Ivy," he said, setting down his fork. "I can see these doing really well in the market."

"Agreed," the head of R&D chimed in. "The flavors are bold but balanced, and the additions like the soup really add value from the customer perspective."

I smiled, feeling a swell of pride. "Thank you. I couldn't have done it without the team's support."

My eyes flicked to Cameron, who was watching me with that same unreadable expression. He hadn't said a word since I'd started, and I braced myself for his critique.

"Ms. St. Clair," he began, his voice calm but commanding. The room fell silent, all eyes on him. "These concepts, are they scalable? Can we produce these at the volume we need without compromising quality?"

I nodded, ready for this question. "Absolutely. We've already run test batches with the production team, and they're confident we can meet demand. The ingredients are all readily available as well as interchangeable depending on seasonal availability, and we've streamlined the preparation process to ensure consistency."

Cameron leaned back in his chair, his gaze never leaving mine. "And the cost?"

"It's within the projected budget," I replied, pulling up a slide on the screen behind me. "The ribollita, for example, uses ingredients we already source, so the additional cost is minimal, and by adding a side dish, we can increase the price for the meal kit. The balsamic glaze in the Hearty Harvest kit is a premium item, but we've balanced it with more affordable produce."

For a moment, he said nothing, his sharp eyes scanning the data on the screen. Then, to my surprise, he gave a small nod. "Good. These are solid concepts."

The room seemed to exhale collectively, and I felt a flicker of relief. I had a feeling that this was as close to approval as I was likely to get from Cameron.

"Thank you, Mr. Fitzgerald," I said, trying to keep the triumph out of my voice.

He stood, his presence immediately commanding the room's attention. "We'll move forward with these kits for the conference. Ms. St. Clair, you'll accompany me to FoodieCon to present them."

The room held its breath.

Brody coughed into his fist.

My pulse hammered. "Just us?" I blinked. Despite being given a heads-up from Brody, I was still caught off guard. Surely, there would be an entire entourage going to the conference. It couldn't just be me and Cameron. "Me?"

His eyes darkened. "Problem, Ms. St. Clair?"

Yes. No. God, yes.

I forced a weak smile on my face. "No problem at all."

"Good," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "This is your vision. I want you there to explain it."

There was a murmur of agreement around the table, and I nodded, trying to hide my excitement. "Of course. I'll be ready."

He gave a curt nod before turning to the rest of the team. "Let's make this our best showing yet. Dismissed."

As the room cleared, I lingered for a moment, gathering my notes and trying to process what had just happened. Brody approached, clapping me on the shoulder.

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"Nice work, Ivy," he said, grinning. "You knocked it out of the park."

"Thanks," I said, still a little dazed. "But I didn't expect Cameron to want me at the conference. I thought he'd want to take the lead himself."

Brody chuckled, shaking his head. "Cameron's a control freak, but he's not stupid. He knows you're the face of these kits now. You've got the passion and the expertise to sell them better than anyone else."

I smiled, feeling a swell of gratitude. "I just hope I don't let everybody down."

"You won't," Brody said confidently. "You've got this, Ivy. And hey, maybe you'll even be the one to make him crack."

I laughed, though the thought sent a flutter of nervous anticipation through me. "I'm not sure anyone's capable of that."

Brody winked. "You'd be surprised."

As I headed back to the kitchen, my mind was already racing with preparations for the conference. FoodieCon was a huge opportunity for Cam's Comfy Cuisine, and I was determined to make the most of it.

Bridget was waiting for me, a knowing smile on her face. "So, I hear you're going to FoodieCon with the boss."

"Looks like it," I said, still trying to wrap my head around it.

"You nervous?" she asked, handing me a cup of coffee.

I took a sip, letting the warmth calm me. "A little. But mostly excited. It's a chance to really showcase what we've been working on."

Bridget nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Just remember, Ivy. You've earned this. Don't let him intimidate you."

I smiled, feeling a flicker of confidence. "I won't. Besides, I think I'm starting to figure him out."

That night, as I locked up the kitchen, a shadow moved in the hallway. Cameron stood there, his tie loosened, sleeves rolled up to reveal those damned forearms.

"You're here late," he said.

"So are you."

He stepped closer. The scent of his cologne, spice and rain, wrapped around me. "The Thai curry," he said abruptly. "It needs more heat."

I tilted my head. "Are you giving me an order or a challenge, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

His smile was all teeth. "Figure it out."

## Chapter 5

### CAMERON

The restlessness had been building all day, creeping under my skin like a fever I couldn't shake. My wolf stirred, restless and agitated, clawing at the edges of my



control. It wasn't just the full moon, though that didn't help. It was her. Ivy.

Her scent haunted me, the faint traces of cherries and bergamot and something uniquely her that I couldn't place. My wolf clawed at my ribs, demanding that I track her down, then bury my nose in the curve of her neck and mark her until that scent was covered with mine. Her voice, her laughter, the way she'd defended her choices against my judgment in the kitchen. It all played on repeat in my head, driving me to the brink of distraction.

I paced the length of my penthouse, the city lights below blurring in the distance as I fought the tightness in my muscles. My senses were heightened, every sound amplified, every scent sharper. I could hear the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen, the distant echo of a car horn on the street below. I could smell the lingering traces of the coffee I'd abandoned hours ago, the faint musk of my own frustration, the trace of Ivy's scent mixed with the delicious meals she'd cooked. It was too much. I needed to run, to let my wolf take over and burn off this relentless energy.

Grabbing my phone, I shot off a quick text to Denver, my college roommate and best friend.

Me: "Full moon. Woods. You in?"

His reply came almost instantly.

Denver: "Always. Meet you there."

I didn't bother with a response. Shedding my suit, I stepped out onto the balcony, the cool night air a relief against my overheated skin. Closing my eyes, I let the shift take me. The change was always unpleasant, bones cracking, muscles reshaping, fur sprouting where skin had been. It was painful and exhilarating all at once, a reminder of the primal force I carried within me. When I opened my eyes, the world was

sharper, clearer. My wolf took over, and I leaped from the balcony, landing silently on the pavement below.

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The woods were calling, and I answered.

I ran, my paws pounding against the ground, the wind whipping through my fur. It didn't take long before the pavement beneath my feet transitioned to dirt and dried twigs. The forest was alive around me, the scent of crushed pine needles and damp earth filling my nostrils. I could hear the rustle of leaves, the distant call of an owl, the heartbeat of a rabbit hiding in the underbrush. But even here, I couldn't escape her. Ivy's scent seemed to follow me, haunting me like a ghost I couldn't shake.

I snarled, raking my claws through the dirt. Pathetic. Even miles away, she owned me.

The sound of another wolf approaching snapped me out of my thoughts. Denver's wolf was larger than mine, his fur a deep, dark gray that blended into the shadows. He howled in greeting, a low, rumbling sound that echoed through the trees. I responded in kind, the sound carrying my frustration, my restlessness, my confusion.

We met in the clearing at the edge of the woods, circling each other, playing at dominance, testing each other's strength. Denver's wolf cocked its head, nostrils flaring. He knew. Then, with a snarl, Denver lunged, and we crashed together in a tangle of fur and teeth. We wrestled and sparred, the physical release a welcome distraction. For a while, there was nothing but the thrill of the fight, the burn of muscles, the snap of jaws, the gleam of sharp dagger-like teeth, the rush of adrenaline.

Eventually, we both shifted back, panting and laughing as we leaned against a tree. The night was quiet around us, the only sound was the rustle of leaves in the breeze.

"So," Denver said, breaking the silence. "What's got you so wound up? And don't tell me it's just the full moon. I know you better than that."

I hesitated, running a hand through my hair. "It's nothing."

Denver raised an eyebrow, his expression skeptical. "Bull. I've never seen you this antsy. Spill. Is it that new chef you hired, Violet, or whatever?"

I sighed, leaning my head back against the tree. "Her name's Ivy."

Denver's grin widened. "Ah, so that's her name. I was close with Violet."

I shot him a glare, but there was no real heat behind it. "She's different. There's something about her."

"Different how?" he pressed, clearly enjoying himself.

I hesitated again, struggling to put it into words. "She doesn't back down. She's not afraid of me. And she's distracting with her brilliant ideas. I can't stop thinking about her. Her scent, her voice. It's like she's always here surrounding me, even when she's not."

Denver chuckled, shaking his head. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

I frowned, crossing my arms over my chest. "Care to elaborate?"

"Your wolf knows what it wants, Cam," he said, his tone more serious now. "And it's pretty clear what that is. Ivy. Question is, are you wolf enough to claim her? You're fighting it, but all you're doing is hurting yourself and her."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Denver cut me off.

"Deny it all you want, but we both know the truth. Your wolf has chosen her. You can keep pushing her away, but it's only going to make things harder for both of you. You're not just resisting her, Cam. You're resisting yourself. And trust me, that's a battle you're not going to win."

I clenched my jaw, his words hitting harder than I wanted to admit. Denver had always been the one to call me out on my bullshit, and this time was no different. Plus, as he had recently become mated himself, he would know better than anybody else the struggle I was going through. Still, I wasn't ready to face the truth. Not yet.

"It's not that simple," I said finally, my voice low. "The company's in trouble, Denver. I can't afford distractions right now. And Ivy, she's a risk I'm not sure I'm ready to take."

Denver sighed, leaning back against the tree. "Yeah, I get it. The whole recall mess has everyone on edge. But you're not going to fix anything by shutting people out, especially not someone who could actually help. Ivy's not just a distraction, Cam. She's talented, and she's got fresh ideas that could salvage the company's reputation. You said it yourself. Maybe she's exactly what you need, both for the company and for you."

I stared at him, his words sinking in. He was right, as much as I hated to admit it. Ivy wasn't just a complication. She was an opportunity. But that didn't make the knot in my chest loosen any. The thought of letting someone in, of risking that kind of vulnerability, was terrifying.

Denver must have seen the conflict on my face because he clapped a hand on my shoulder, his grin returning. "Look, I'm not saying you have to marry the woman tomorrow. Just give her a chance. Let her in a little. See where it goes. Your wolf already knows what it wants. Maybe it's time you start listening to it."

I shook my head, a wry smile tugging at my lips. "Since when did you become such a sage?"

He laughed, throwing his head back. "Hey, someone's got to knock some sense into you. Might as well be me."

I chuckled despite myself, the tension in my shoulders easing just a little. Denver always had a way of cutting through the noise and getting to the heart of things. Still, the idea of letting Ivy in, of giving her even an inch of space in my carefully controlled world, felt like stepping off a cliff without a safety net.

"I'll think about it," I said finally, my tone grudging.

Denver grinned, clearly taking that as a win. "Good. Now, come on. Let's run some more before the sun comes up. You're not getting out of this that easy."

We shifted again, the familiar transformation grounding me in a way nothing else could. For a while, we just ran, the rhythm of our paws against the earth a welcome distraction. But even as we raced through the trees, Ivy's face lingered in my mind, her scent still teasing my senses.

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Denver was right. My wolf had chosen her. The question was, was I brave enough to follow its lead?

Sleep eluded me for the rest of the night. Despite Denver's words, my mind remained restless. The sun wasn't even up yet, and I was already seated at my dining table, the glow of my tablet illuminating the dark room.

I flipped through the meal kit proposals she'd submitted, each one a testament to her creativity and skill. The Thai curry, the Tuscan Sunset, the Hearty Harvest. She'd breathed new life into my company's offerings. It was impressive, unnerving even, how she'd managed to disrupt the carefully curated balance of Cam's Comfy Cuisine.

My fingers tapped impatiently on the table as I scrolled through the reports. The numbers from the sales team were good, better than good. Sales projections for the new kits were promising, and the marketing team was already drafting campaigns to capitalize on the buzz.

The thought of Ivy, her boldness, her optimism, her undeniable talent, gnawed at me. She was a wildcard, an unpredictable force that I couldn't control. And control was everything.

I tossed the tablet aside and stood, pacing the length of the room. The city skyline stretched out before me, a reminder of all I'd built. But even the view couldn't quiet the storm brewing in my mind.

The trip to FoodieCon loomed ahead, and I was dreading it. Not the conference itself, I thrived in that environment, but the thought of spending days in close quarters with

Ivy. Everything about her unsettled me, I didn't know if I could survive multiple days in close proximity to her without caving into my wolf's primal desires.

By the time the car arrived to take me to the office, I'd already rehearsed the day's agenda in my head. Meetings, calls, preparation for the conference. It was a tight schedule, and I welcomed the distraction.

But when I stepped into the office, the first thing I saw was Ivy, standing in the lobby with Brody. Her laughter filled the space, bright and like a tinkling melody. For a moment, I froze.

She turned, catching sight of me, and her smile widened. "Mr. Fitzgerald, good morning!"

I nodded curtly, my expression neutral. "Ms. St. Clair. Brody." Brody gave me a knowing look, one I chose to ignore. "Morning, boss. We were just going over the final details for the conference. Ivy's got some great ideas for the presentation."

"I'm sure she does," I said, my tone clipped. "Let's not waste time. Ms. St. Clair, my office. Now."

I didn't wait for a response, striding past them toward the elevator. The doors slid shut behind us, the silence settling over us heavily. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ivy straighten her jacket, her usual cheerful demeanor faltering for a moment. Good. She needed to understand this was serious.

Once we were in my office, I closed the door and turned to face her. "The conference is our chance to prove we're still the leader in this industry. I expect nothing less than perfection. Are we clear?"

Ivy met my gaze, her expression steady. "We're ready. The kits are solid, and I've



been practicing the presentation. I won't let you down."

Her confidence was admirable, but it didn't quell the unease in my chest. "See that you don't."

The rest of the week passed by as we prepared for the conference. By the time we boarded the private jet to Paradise Peaks, I was exhausted. Ivy, on the other hand, seemed energized.

But her excitement wasn't what caught my attention. She wore a white silk blouse and a black knee-length skirt that hugged her generous curves and showed off her delectable legs. It was a far cry from her usual chef's whites and the effect she had on me was devastating. How was I supposed to concentrate on presenting at the conference when she looked like a walking pinup? Her ass looked as delectable as a ripe summer peach as she bent over to store her overnight bag. I could spend the rest of my life sliding my dick between those cheeks. She was a temptation come to life, and I wanted to do nothing but rip off her blouse and bend her over my seat.

I let out a growl before I could stop it. It was a sound too deep to be human. Ivy froze. Shit. I coughed as she turned around and met my gaze with those sweet curious eyes. My heart pounded as I pulled out the table from the side of my seat to cover my growing erection. If she knew the dirty thoughts in my mind, it would send her running for the hills. I had to get a grip on my lust, there was no way I could risk losing Ivy.

"The air at high altitude is so dry." I quickly pulled out a bottle of water from the cubby next to my seat and took a gulp.

Her brows furrowed. "It feels fine to me."

"Ms. St. Clair." My voice cracked. It was a warning. A plea.

"Have you ever been to Paradise Peaks before?" I asked. That's it. Banal small talk was the perfect distraction.

Ivy shook her head, filling the air with the scent of cherries. "No, it's my first time. I'm so excited." She tilted her head, exposing that long elegant unblemished neck of hers. Her pulse fluttered under her delicate skin. God, I wanted to bite it. I wrenched my gaze away.

This hour-long plane ride was going to be the end of me. Maybe we should have flown commercial, then I would have had the company of other passengers to distract me. This wasn't going to do at all.

"Well, you're in for a treat." Clearing my throat, I pulled out my tablet, putting an end to our conversation. Think about the business, future strategies, and sales projections. There was nothing like numbers and boring reports to dampen my need to claim her.

The flight was quiet, the hum of the engines the only sound. I busied myself with my tablet, reviewing the conference schedule, but I couldn't shake the awareness of Ivy sitting just a few feet away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her glance at me, her fingers fidgeting with the edge of her skirt. "Nervous?" I asked, not looking up.

"A little," she admitted. "This is a big opportunity. I just want to do well."

"You will," I said, surprising myself. She looked at me, her eyes wide, and I quickly added, "You've prepared thoroughly. Just stick to the plan."

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She nodded, her lips curving into a small smile that made my heart skip a beat.  
"Thanks. I will."

I stabbed at my tablet, but the numbers blurred. All I could see was her, the way her skirt clung when she bent over, the scent of her arousal when I'd growled. She wanted me too.

Or maybe I imagined that last part. In any case, it was a dangerous thought.

The plane hit a bump, and she let out a yelp before her hand flew to my arm, her nails digging into my flesh.

Mine. Mine. MINE.

I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth groaned.

Two days. Just two days.

Then I could lock myself in my penthouse and jerk off to the thought of her until I worked her out of my system.

## Chapter 6

### CAMERON

The conference was everything I expected, chaotic, crowded, and filled with people vying for attention. Ivy, however, was a natural. She moved through the throngs of

people with ease, her infectious energy drawing people to our booth like moths to a flame. Her presentation was flawless, and her passion for the new meal kits was evident in every word she spoke.

I stood back, watching as she answered questions with ease, her smile never wavering. She was in her element, and it was impossible not to admire her skill. Even the most skeptical attendees seemed won over by her enthusiasm.

As the day wore on, I found myself growing increasingly uncomfortable in the social setting. Networking was a necessary evil, but the constant small talk, sales pitches, and forced smiles grated on my nerves. Ivy, however, thrived in this environment. She moved effortlessly, demonstrating the new dishes in the meal kits to a group of influencers who oohed and ahed in front of their cameras. Her laughter rang out as she charmed everyone she met.

At one point, she caught sight of me standing stiffly by the booth and made her way over, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "You look like you're about to bolt," she teased, handing me a bottle of water.

"I'm fine," I said, though my tone was sharper than intended.

"Hmm." She raised an eyebrow, clearly unconvinced. "You're not a fan of these things, are you?"

"Not particularly," I admitted, taking a sip of water.

She grinned, nudging me gently with her elbow. "Come on, Mr. Fitzgerald. Loosen up a little. You might actually enjoy yourself."

I shot her a glare, but the twinkle in her eye softened the edge of my frustration. "I'm here to work, not socialize."

"And work you are," she said, gesturing to the bustling booth. "But even you deserve a break. Let me show you how it's done."

Before I could protest, she grabbed my hand and dragged me into the crowd. I stiffened at the sudden contact, but she didn't seem to notice. Her warm touch sent a shot of reassurance through my body as we made our way through the conference attendees. She introduced me to a group of industry professionals, her easy demeanor putting them at ease. Against my better judgment, I found myself engaging in the conversation, my usual reserve melting away under her influence.

As the evening approached, the conference wound down, and I suggested we head to dinner. Ivy's eyes lit up at the idea, and we made our way to Fang and Sparrow, the famous restaurant inside the Hughes Hotel.

The ambiance was elegant, the soft lighting creating an intimate atmosphere. The dark wood interior and flickering candles at the center of each table made the restaurant feel cozy and inviting. We were seated at a corner booth, away from the business of the main dining room. There was only one long seat, so I slid in next to Ivy. Despite the distance between us, I could feel the heat radiating off of her as if she were pressed against me. The Hughes Hotel was a luxury ski resort visited by foreign royalty, movie stars, and presidents. It was the perfect place for a private uninterrupted meal.

Ivy glanced around the restaurant, her eyes wide with appreciation. "This place is amazing," she said, her voice filled with awe. "I've never thought I would be dining at Fang and Sparrow. This place is legendary."

"It's one of my favorite restaurants in Paradise Peaks," I admitted, though I rarely shared that information. Something about her openness made it easier to drop my guard, even if just a little.

The waiter arrived, and I gestured for Ivy to order first. She hesitated, glancing over the menu with a mix of excitement and uncertainty. "I want to try everything. What would you recommend?" she asked.

I leaned closer to her and scanned her menu, reaching over to point at the dishes listed. "For a spicier dish, the cumin lamb is succulent and perfectly flavored. But if you want something lighter, the sea bass and lobster bisque are exceptional."

She turned to me and smiled, a light flush spreading across her cheeks as she realized how close we were. "Sea bass it is."

We placed our orders, and the waiter disappeared, leaving us in a comfortable silence. Ivy seemed to sense my discomfort with small talk and took the lead, steering the conversation toward her passion, food.

"You don't look or act like most chefs I've met," I said, genuinely curious. "What made you choose this path?"

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She picked at her fingers nervously, then leaned in, as if sharing a secret. "Growing up, my mom and I didn't have much. But she always made sure we had good food on the table, even if it was just simple dishes. Cooking became our way of connecting, you know? It was more than just food. It was love, comfort, and creativity all rolled into one. That's what I wanted to share with the world"

Her words struck a chord, stirring something deep within me. "That's an admirable goal," I said, my voice softer than I intended. "You've come a long way since then," I said simply.

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I have. And I'm proud of that. But I know I couldn't have done it without the people who believed in me along the way."

The conversation flowed easily after that, with Ivy sharing stories of her culinary journey and the challenges she'd faced. Her honesty was refreshing, and I found myself opening up in ways I rarely did.

She tilted her head. "So, what's your story, Cameron Fitzgerald?"

"My mother was a lot like yours," I said, surprising myself with the admission. "She was the one who taught me the importance of discipline and hard work. But she also believed in taking risks, in fighting for what you wanted."

Ivy's eyes softened. "What happened to her?"

"When my mom got sick, I was just a kid, but I knew I had to step up. Those were tough times, but they taught me resilience. She passed away when I was in college," I

said, the words heavy on my tongue. "Her death changed everything. My father wasn't around much in my life, and I had to grow up quickly. That's when I learned that the only person I could rely on was myself."

"I'm so sorry," Ivy said, her voice filled with genuine compassion. "That must have been incredibly hard."

"It was," I admitted, though I wasn't used to acknowledging that pain. "But it also shaped me. It taught me to be self-reliant and to build something that no one could take away from me. I wanted to create a legacy that honored my mother's memory."

She nodded, her gaze steady. "It's inspiring, really. You've built an empire, and you've done it on your own terms."

I blinked, caught off guard by her words. No one had ever described my journey as inspiring. Most people saw the success, the money, the power, but they never saw the sacrifices or the loneliness that came with it.

"And what about you?" I asked, steering the conversation back to her. "What's next for Ivy St. Clair?"

She smiled, a spark of determination in her eyes. "I want to keep creating, keep innovating."

Her ambition was infectious, and for the first time in a long time, I felt a flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe, she was exactly what I needed.

The meal passed in easy conversation, and before I knew it, the waiter arrived with dessert, a decadent chocolate lava cake. Ivy's eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands in delight.



"This looks amazing," she said, her excitement an amusing reprieve from the constant turmoil in my mind.

I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm. "It's one of the restaurant's specialties."

The waiter placed the cake between us, and Ivy immediately dug in, letting out a moan of satisfaction that went straight to my cock. Fuck. I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I would give up my empire to hear her make that sound as I pounded my dick into her.

"You have to try this," she said, her voice deep and husky as she gestured to the cake with her fork. This was doing nothing to help my rock hard bulge. The only thing I wanted to taste right now was the sweetness between her thighs. An image flashed in my mind of Ivy spread across the table, her skirt hitched up to her waist. Would the restaurant kick us out if I dropped to my knees and buried my face in her pussy?

I hesitated, then leaned forward, letting her feed me a bite. The rich, molten chocolate exploded on my tongue, and I couldn't suppress a soft hum of appreciation. Her fingers brushed against my mouth as she pulled the fork away, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

"Good, right?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. My eyes zoomed onto her mouth, everything else in the room disappearing in my tunnel vision. All I could see were those luscious pink lips that glistened in the candlelight and begged to be kissed and nipped and sucked.

I nodded, my gaze locked on hers. "Very."

The air between us grew thick with unspoken need. Her eyes dropped to my mouth and her tongue came out to wet her lips. The sudden heady aroma of her arousal surrounded us. My nostrils flared. Her body swayed closer to me, and I was helpless

as I found myself leaning toward her, drawn in like a moth to a flame. Before I lost my courage, my hand landed on her thigh. Fuck the consequences. Under my palm, her skin burned through the thin fabric of her skirt.

Her breath hitched, her eyes widening slightly, but she didn't pull away. Worse. She leaned in. The scent of her desire was sweeter than the dessert we just finished.

"Ivy," I began, my voice a rough whisper, but I didn't know what to say. The words caught in my throat, drowned out by the pounding of my heart.

And then, my control snapped. I dragged her closer. "You're killing me, Ivy," I groaned against her lips. Then, I pressed my lips to hers and claimed her mouth like a starving man. Her lips were soft, yielding, and for a moment, everything else faded away, the noise of the restaurant, the weight of my responsibilities, even the rational part of my brain that screamed this was a terrible idea. She kissed me back, her mouth falling open to let me in. Encouraged by her invitation, I claimed her mouth with a ferocious hunger that bordered on violence. Burying my hand in her hair, I tugged her closer, taking what I wanted.

Ivy sighed into my mouth as we broke apart, each of us breathing hard.

"Cameron," she whispered, her voice trembling.

My heart pounded as she said my name for the first time. Not Mr. Fitzgerald. Cameron. We had crossed a line and there was no turning back from this moment.

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When I finally pulled back, we both sat in stunned silence, our breaths mingling in the charged air. Ivy's hand flew to her lips, her cheeks flushed, and I could see the same mixture of shock and desire in her eyes that I felt coursing through my veins.

I opened my mouth to apologize, to explain, to say something, but no words came. Instead, I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers through hers.

The walk back to the hotel was quiet, with everything left unspoken between us crackling like a live wire. Every brush of our shoulders, every shared glance, sent sparks shooting through me, and I could tell that she felt it too. But when I glanced at her, she was biting her lip raw, her fingers twisting the strap of her purse like she wanted to strangle it.

Fuck. I'd done that. Put that tension in her shoulders. A momentary lapse of judgment, and I had ruined things.

When we reached our rooms, I paused outside her door, my grip on her hand tightening. "Ivy," I began.

Her breath hitched, those big brown eyes lifting to mine, hopeful.

The sight gutted me.

I dropped her hand like it burned me. "Goodnight, Ms. St. Clair." The words tasted like ash as they fell from my lips, but I had to remind both of us that there was a professional line we couldn't cross.

The way she flinched, like I'd slapped her, would haunt me for decades. Her lips parted, that smart mouth that always fought back trembling instead. But she said nothing, just pressed her spine against the door like she needed it to hold her up.

I walked away before I could ruin her further.

My mind was a whirlwind of emotions, regret, desire, confusion, and something deeper I couldn't quite name. I raked a hand through my hair, exhaling sharply as I turned and walked to my own room.

Once inside, I leaned against the door, my heart still racing. What the hell had I just done? I'd crossed a line, one I'd sworn I wouldn't cross. Ivy was an employee, a vital part of my company, and yet that kiss had felt inevitable, as though we'd been hurtling toward it since the moment she'd walked into my office.

I stripped off my jacket and tie, tossing them onto the bed as I paced the room. My wolf stirred within me, restless and agitated, its instincts screaming that Ivy was mine. Mate. The word echoed in my mind, unbidden and unwelcome. It wasn't just a word. It was the undeniable truth. Something I knew in the depths of my bones. Ivy wasn't just another woman. She was everything I longed for. That's why I had to stay away from her. I clenched my fists, fighting back the primal urge to go to her, to drag her back to my room and claim her, to make her mine in every sense of the word.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't. My life was built on control, on order, and Ivy threatened to unravel all of that. She was fire in human form, a force of nature I couldn't contain, beautiful, consuming, but destructive. And yet, I'd kissed her. I'd let myself be drawn into her orbit, and now we were both paying the price.

Then, there was a knock at the door.

"Cameron?"

I froze. Every muscle in my body ached to yank open the door. To fall to my knees and beg her for mercy.

Instead, I stayed silent.

Through the door, the sound of her breathing was as loud as a passing train. Eventually, they faded along with her footsteps.

I sank onto the bed, her taste still on my lips.

Cherries. Chocolate. Ivy.

This wasn't lust. Or even the wolf's recognition of my fated mate.

It was worse.

Somewhere, between the way she rose to every challenge I gave her, and the way she'd looked at me, she had seen the man beneath the empire. The weak mortal I worked so hard to hide away. I had fallen and let down my guard.

And now, I had to bury him again.

For her sake, and for mine.

Because love wasn't a luxury that I could afford.

## Chapter 7

### IVY

I woke up with a start, the events of last night flooding back in a rush. The kiss. Oh

God, the kiss. I could still feel the press of Cameron's lips against mine, the warmth of his hand on my face, the way my heart had leaped in my chest. My fingers brushed over my mouth as if the ghost of his lips lingered there.

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Groaning, I rolled over and buried my face in the pillow. What had I done? Scratch that. What had he done? And why hadn't I stopped him? Why had I kissed him back?

"Get it together, Ivy," I muttered to myself, sitting up and running a hand through my tangled hair. It was just a kiss. A stupid, impulsive, amazing kiss. That's all. It didn't have to mean anything. It couldn't mean anything.

Liar.

His mouth had been a brand, and I'd melted, like some blushing schoolgirl who didn't know better. But the worst part? If he walked in right now and did it again, I'd let him.

I glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 7:03 a.m. We had breakfast together in less than an hour. Great. Just great.

I dragged myself out of bed and into the shower, hoping the hot water would wash away the memory of his touch. It didn't. By the time I was dressed, in a simple blouse and slacks, nothing too flashy, I was no closer to figuring out how to act around him.

When I walked into the hotel restaurant, Cameron was already there, seated at a table by the window. He looked as put-together as ever, but there was a stiffness in his posture that hadn't been there yesterday. His eyes met mine as I approached, and for a moment, we just stared at each other, the air between us filled with everything we left unspoken.

"Morning," I said, forcing a cheerful tone as I slid into the chair across from him.

"Morning," he replied, his voice clipped and formal. He glanced at the menu in front of him, avoiding my gaze.

An awkward silence stretched between us, broken only by the clink of silverware and the low hum of conversation from the other tables. I fiddled with my napkin, my mind racing for something to say.

"So, the conference went well yesterday," I ventured, cringing internally at how awkward I sounded.

"It did," he agreed, still not looking at me. "You were great," I added, trying to inject some positivity into the conversation.

He finally glanced up, his sharp eyes meeting mine. "So were you. You handled the crowd better than I expected."

"Thanks," I said, though his words felt more like an observation than a compliment.

The waiter arrived to take our orders, and I seized the opportunity to break the tension. "I'll have the eggs Benedict and a cappuccino, please," I said, flashing a smile.

"The ham and cheese omelet, black coffee," Cameron said curtly, handing the menu back without a word.

The waiter nodded and left, leaving us in another heavy silence. I took a sip of water, trying to steady my nerves. This was ridiculous. We were colleagues, professionals. We could handle one kiss without letting it derail everything. Right?

"Look," I began, my voice firmer now. "About last night—"



"It was a mistake," he interrupted, his tone cold and final. The words hit like a slap. His coffee cup trembled slightly before he fisted his hand, the same hand that had cradled my face so gently last night. "It won't happen again."

I blinked, taken aback by his bluntness. "A mistake?"

"Yes," he said, his gaze hardening. "We're here to work. Not whatever that was. I let my guard down, and it won't happen again."

His words stung, but I refused to let it show. "Got it," I said, forcing a smile. "We have to put the company first above all, right?"

"Exactly."

The waiter returned with our drinks, and I busied myself with my cappuccino, the bitter taste a welcome distraction. Cameron's rejection hurt more than I wanted to admit, but I couldn't let it affect my performance. I had a job to do, and I wasn't about to let him sabotage it. After we successfully launched the new meal kit lines and turned CCC's reputation around, I would look for a new job and put all this behind me.

By the time we arrived at the conference center, I'd steeled myself for the day ahead. The second day of FoodieCon was just as busy as the first, with attendees flooding the booths and networking events filling the schedule. I threw myself into my work, answering questions, demonstrating the meal kits, and charming everyone I met.

Cameron stayed close, his presence a constant reminder. He was all business, his demeanor cool and detached, but I could feel his eyes on me whenever I wasn't looking. It was unnerving, but I refused to let it throw me off my game.

During a break in the afternoon, I found myself alone at our booth, rearranging the

samples and tidying up the display. The conference hall was quieter now, the buzz of the morning giving way to a more relaxed atmosphere. I was grateful for the moment of solitude, a chance to catch my breath and gather my thoughts.

But the peace didn't last long.

"Ms. St. Clair."

I turned to see Cameron approaching, his hands shoved into his pockets and his expression unreadable. My heart skipped a beat, but I kept my face neutral, determined not to let him see how much he affected me.

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"Mr. Fitzgerald," I said, my tone polite but distant.

He stopped a few feet away, his gaze sweeping over the booth before settling on me.

"You've done well today. The new kits are generating a lot of interest."

"Thank you," I replied, folding my arms across my chest. "I'm glad they're getting a positive response."

He hesitated as if weighing his next words carefully. "About this morning..."

I shook my head, cutting him off before he could continue. "It's fine. You made yourself clear. Let's just focus on the conference, okay?"

His jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought he might argue. But then he nodded, his expression softening slightly. "Alright."

We stood in silence for a moment. Finally, Cameron exhaled sharply and ran a hand through his hair.

"Ivy, I—" he began, but before he could finish, the lights in the conference hall flickered and then went out completely, plunging the space into darkness.

I gasped, instinctively taking a step back. "What's going on?"

"Power outage," Cameron said, his voice calm but edged with irritation. "Stay here. I'll find a staff member."

He disappeared into the darkness, leaving me standing alone. I reached out, feeling for the edge of the booth to steady myself, but the sudden loss of light was disorienting. Shouldn't there be emergency lights or something? Moments later, a hand gripped my arm, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"It's me," Cameron said, his voice close to my ear.

"You scared me," I said, my heart still racing.

"Sorry," he muttered. "The staff said the storm knocked out the power. It's going to take a while to fix. They're advising everyone to return to their hotels."

I nodded, even though he likely couldn't see me. "Alright. Let's go."

The darkness swallowed everything, the booths, the exit signs, even my own trembling hands. Somewhere to my left, a panicked voice yelped, followed by the crash of toppled displays. I stumbled backward, my foot catching on a loose cable.

Strong fingers closed around my wrist, yanking me upright before I could fall.

"Easy," Cameron said, his grip searing through my sleeve. "The floor's littered with debris. You'll break your neck."

I tried to pull away. "I can manage."

My foot slid on something slick. Oil? A spilled sauce? Suddenly I was falling again, but this time his arm banded around my waist, hauling me flush against him. Every hard plane of his body burned into mine.

"Christ, Ivy," he growled, his breath hot on my temple. "Stop fighting me."

I went rigid. Yesterday, that tone had melted me. Today, it was a reminder. "Ms. St. Clair. A mistake." But the conference hall was a minefield in the blackout, and his chest was a solid wall of heat at my back. I hated how my body obeyed, sagging against him like his touch was home.

His hand slid down my arm, fingers threading through mine with shocking gentleness. "Follow me."

Someone bumped into us in the dark, and Cameron let out an animalistic snarl as he pulled me close to him. As we made our way through the conference hall, Cameron guided us skillfully through a minefield of toppled chairs and spilled sample trays, as if he had secret night vision.

For a moment, I thought it was a figment of my imagination, but then, I was sure that I felt it, his thumb stroking my knuckles tenderly. What was he doing? One moment, he pushed me away, making me feel like a dirty secret he was ashamed of, and then, he was the caring protective man I thought he was underneath his cold exterior.

"Why do you keep doing this?"

"Doing what?" he bit out.

"Pushing me away, then pulling me back."

Then, the emergency lights flickered on, bathing the room in a ghostly blue glow. His eyes glowed with raw hunger. We had made it almost to the exit. I stood still, demanding an answer from him.

Cameron dropped my hand like I had burned him.

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"Because I'm a selfish bastard," he said and walked out the door, leaving me standing there, his parting gift the ghost of his thumb stroking my knuckles. A whisper of what could've been.

I followed him out onto the street, where a storm raged in full force. Rain lashed down, soaking us within seconds, and the wind howled, blowing us sideways with almost hurricane force. Cameron uttered something, but it was lost in the wind. He tightened his grip around my shoulder, pulling me closer as we hurried toward the hotel.

By the time we reached the lobby, we were both drenched and shivering. The power outage had affected the hotel as well, leaving the lobby dimly lit by emergency lights.

"Looks like we're stuck here for a while," Cameron said, his voice low.

"Guess so," I replied, glancing around. "At least we're out of the rain."

We made our way to the elevator, which was thankfully operational on backup power, and rode up to our floor in silence. The tension from earlier had returned, magnified by the close quarters and the lingering warmth of his hand in mine.

When we reached our rooms, Cameron paused outside my door, his expression unreadable. "Will you be okay?"

I nodded, though my heart was pounding. "Yeah. You?"

"I'm fine," he said, his voice gruff.

We stood there for a moment, neither of us willing to be the one to break the peace. Finally, I opened my door and stepped inside, turning back to look at him. "Goodnight, Cameron."

"Goodnight, Ivy," he replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

I closed the door behind me, leaning against it as I caught my breath. My mind was a whirlwind of emotions, confusion, longing, frustration, and something deeper I couldn't quite name.

I changed into dry clothes and wrapped a blanket around myself, sinking into the armchair by the window. The storm raged on outside, lightning streaking across the sky and thunder rumbling in the distance. It felt like the universe itself was mirroring the chaos inside me. I couldn't stop thinking about Cameron, the way he'd held my hand, the way his voice had softened, the way he'd looked at me in the dim light of the lobby.

Was this just a fleeting moment of vulnerability, or was there something more between us? I didn't know, and that uncertainty was driving me insane.

A soft knock on the door pulled me from my thoughts. My heart leapt into my throat, and I hesitated for a moment before crossing the room and opening the door.

Cameron stood there, his hair still damp from the rain, his suit jacket slung over one arm. He looked not only disheveled, but vulnerable, and it threw me off balance.

"Cameron?" I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

He didn't say anything at first, just stared at me with an intensity that made my knees weak. Then, in one swift motion, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"I dream about you." His voice cracked. "Your laugh. The way you bite your lip when you're concentrating. The fucking cherry scent of your shampoo." He raked a hand through his hair, wild-eyed. "Do you have any idea how pathetic that is? A grown man, brought to his knees by you. And I don't know what to do about it."

His admission caught me off guard, and I could only stare at him, my mind racing. "Cameron, I—"

Before I could finish, he closed the distance between us, his hands cupping my face as he kissed me with a desperation that took my breath away. It wasn't like the kiss from last night, this was deeper, more urgent, as if he'd been holding back a part of himself and finally let it go.

I melted into him, my hands gripping the front of his shirt as I kissed him back with everything I had. All the conflicted emotions and fear, it all faded away, replaced by a clarity that felt almost overwhelming. This was real. This was happening.

When he finally pulled back, we were both breathless, our foreheads resting against each other as we tried to steady ourselves.

"Ivy," he whispered, his voice trembling. "I don't know what this means, but I can't pretend it isn't there anymore."

I reached up, brushing a strand of hair from his face. "Me neither."

He hesitated, his eyes searching mine. "This complicates everything. What if we fuck everything up?"

"I know," I said softly, my heart pounding. "But maybe we could figure it out together."



He stepped back, running a hand through his hair as he paced the small room. "I've spent my entire life building walls, Ivy. Keeping people at arm's length. And you just waltz in and tear them down without even trying."

"I didn't mean to," I said, my voice trembling. "I'm just me."

He stopped pacing, his gaze locking onto mine. "That's the problem. You're you. And that's more than I've ever allowed myself to want."

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I wanted to reach out, to close the distance he'd put between us, but I stayed where I was, giving him the space he needed to process.

Finally, he sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing, Ivy. But I do know I can't walk away from you. Not now. Not after this."

My heart skipped a beat, and I took a tentative step toward him. "Then let's figure it out. One step at a time."

He stared at me for a long moment before closing the distance between us, his hands slipping around my waist as he pulled me into a tight embrace. "One step at a time," he repeated, his voice muffled against my hair.

We stood there for what felt like forever, wrapped in each other's arms, the storm outside mirroring the chaos inside. It wasn't a solution, not yet, but it was a start.

Finally, he pulled back, his hands lingering on my shoulders. "Get some rest," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "We'll deal with this tomorrow."

I nodded, feeling a mix of relief and disappointment. "Goodnight, Cameron."

"Goodnight, Ivy," he replied, brushing a kiss against my forehead before stepping out of the room.

I closed the door behind him, leaning against it as I tried to process everything that had just happened. My heart was still racing, my lips tingling from his touch, and my mind was a whirlwind of emotions.

One step at a time. That's what he'd said.

But as I climbed into bed, wrapped in the warmth of the blanket, I couldn't help but wonder where those steps would lead us.

## Chapter 8

### IVY

The flight back to Huntington Harbor was miserable and I only had the noise of the jet and the thoughts in my head to distract me. Cameron sat across from me, his attention fixed on his tablet, but I could tell he wasn't really reading. His jaw was tight, and for the next hour, we played this game, his gaze flicking to my mouth, then every time I caught him staring, he would look away like he'd been burned.

I tried to focus on my own work, reviewing the notes from the conference and brainstorming new ideas for future meal kits, but my mind kept drifting back to the hotel room, to the way he'd held me, the way he'd kissed me. The jet's hum did nothing to drown out the memory of his lips on mine. It had been raw, and unlike anything I'd ever experienced. But now, back in the real world, I wasn't sure where we stood.

The worst part of all? I missed him, missed the way he'd whispered my name against my throat in that hotel room like it was a prayer.

When we landed, Cameron insisted on driving me home. We rode in silence, the weight of what happened at the hotel hanging over us. When we pulled up to my apartment building, he finally spoke.

"Ivy," he said, his voice cracking. "About what happened—"

"It's okay," I interrupted, forcing a smile. I couldn't bear it if he called what we had another mistake. "We don't have to talk about it right now. Let's just focus on work, okay?"

He nodded, his expression unreadable. "Alright."

I barely waited for his reply before I fled from the car, not wanting him to see me break. My heart was heavy as I watched him drive away. I didn't know what I wanted him to say, but I knew it wasn't that.

During the next few days back at work, we barely had time to see each other. The success of the conference had generated a lot of interest in the new meal kits, and we were swamped with work. I threw myself into my tasks, determined to prove that I could handle whatever was thrown at me. But every time I caught a glimpse of Cameron, across the office, in a meeting, or in the hallway, the memory of his touch would come rushing back, leaving me breathless and confused.

One evening, after most of the staff had gone home, I found myself in the kitchen, testing a new recipe based on feedback I got at the conference. The kitchen was quiet, the only sound was the soft hum of the ovens and the rhythmic chopping of my knife against the cutting board. I was so engrossed in my work that I didn't hear Cameron come in.

"You're here late," he said, his voice startling me.

I turned to see him standing in the doorway, his suit jacket slung over one arm. His tie was loosened, and there was a tiredness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. Were his nights just as sleepless and tormented as mine were?

"Just testing a few tweaks to the recipe," I said, trying to sound casual. "What about you?"

"Paperwork," he replied, stepping into the kitchen. "Can't seem to escape it."

I nodded, turning back to the stove. "Want to taste this?" I asked, holding out a spoonful of the curry sauce.

He hesitated for a moment before stepping closer, his hand brushing mine as he took the spoon. Our eyes met, and for a moment, time seemed to stand still. Then he tasted the sauce, his expression softening.

"It's good," he said, his voice quiet. "Really good. Just the right amount of spice."

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"Thanks," I replied, my heart racing. "I'm glad you like it."

He set the spoon down, his gaze never leaving mine. "Ivy, we need to talk."

I swallowed hard, nodding. "I know."

I'm not good at this. Relationships and emotions, they've never been my strength. But with you, I want to try."

My heart skipped a beat, and I took a tentative step toward him. Reaching up, I brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. "Me too. We can't keep running in circles around each other. That's all we can ask of each other, to try."

He hesitated for a moment before leaning in, his lips brushing against mine in a kiss that was tender and tentative. It was different from the passion we'd shared during our trip to Paradise Peaks. This was softer, more intimate, as if we were both testing the waters of this new reality.

When he pulled away, I could see the conflict in his eyes, but also a glimmer of hope. "We'll take it slow," he said, his voice firm but gentle.

"Slow," I agreed, my heart still racing from his touch.

That evening, Cameron invited me to his penthouse to discuss my ideas for the future direction of the new meal kits.

It was the first time I'd seen his home, and it was exactly what I'd expected, cold,

minimalist, and impeccably clean. The space felt more like a showroom than a home, with its stark white walls, furniture with clean lines, and complete lack of personal touches. It was a testament to his loneliness.

"This is something," I said, trying to suppress a laugh as I looked around.

He raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching in what might have been amusement. "It's functional."

"Functional," I repeated, shaking my head. "You know, a little mess never hurt anyone. It's called living."

"I prefer order," he said, his tone dry. "It's predictable."

"Predictable is boring," I teased, setting my bag down on the stone kitchen counter. "Let me show you how to have fun."

I yanked open his fridge and looked at him in disbelief. "Who organizes their vegetables by color?"

His jaw clenched. "I like being organized."

Relax, Fitzgerald." I tossed him an onion. "Tonight, I'm teaching you how to live."

I rummaged through his fridge, pulling out ingredients for a simple pasta dish. Cameron watched me with a mix of fascination and discomfort, as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of the chaos I was creating in his pristine kitchen.

"You're just going to start cooking?" he asked, sounding slightly bewildered.

"Why not?" I said, grinning as I chopped an onion. "Cooking is therapeutic. Plus, I'm

starving."

He hesitated for a moment before rolling up his sleeves and stepping closer. "Let me help."

When his hands closed over mine to correct my grip on the knife, his chest pressed flush against my back. His growl vibrated through me.

His hands were unfairly steady for a man who didn't work in a kitchen every day.

"Slowly. As you said, it's about living, not rushing through the motions," Cameron murmured, his chest pressed against my back as he guided my hand. His fingers lingered, rough callouses scraping my wrist, before retreating.

I swallowed hard. "You're good at this."

A shadow crossed his face. "Necessity." He picked up a carrot, slicing it with military precision. "When my mother first got sick, I was nine. Someone had to feed us."

The knife stilled in my hand. Nine.

He didn't look up. "She worked doubles at the diner. I'd stand on a stool to stir the soup." A bitter chuckle. "Burned it half the time. And then, when she finally got too sick to work, I took over cooking at home. It was my way of taking care of her."

My throat tightened. No wonder his meal kits prioritized foolproof recipes.



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I reached out, placing a hand on his arm. "That's where Cam's Comfy Cuisine came from, isn't it? Your mom."

He met my gaze, his eyes filled with emotion. "Yeah. She's the reason I started this company. I wanted to make it easier for people to always have a meal at home with the ones they love."

Tears prickled at the corners of my eyes, and I squeezed his arm gently. "That's beautiful, Cameron."

He looked away, his jaw tightening as if he was trying to hold back his emotions. "It's been so long, but I like to think she'd be proud of what I've built."

"I know she would be," I said, my voice firm. "You've done something incredible."

He nodded, his expression softening as he turned back to me. "Thank you, Ivy."

As we finished cooking and sat down to eat, the atmosphere between us shifted, becoming more intimate. The conversation flowed easily, and for the first time, I felt like I was seeing the real Cameron, not the grumpy billionaire boss who had his underlings scrambling to obey his commands, but the man behind the walls he'd built so carefully. There was a vulnerability in the way he spoke about his mother, a tenderness that made my heart ache for him.

After dinner, we moved to the living room, where the city lights twinkled through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Cameron poured us each a glass of wine, and we sat together on the couch, the space between us charged with unspoken tension.

"This is nice," I said, breaking the silence. "Just being here with you."

He glanced at me, his eyes dark and unreadable. "It is," he admitted, his voice low. "But it's also dangerous."

"Why?" I asked, my heart pounding.

He set his glass down on the coffee table and turned to face me. "Because the more time I spend with you, the harder it is to remember why I shouldn't kiss you right now. Why I shouldn't carry you to my room and make love to you."

His words sent a shiver down my spine, and I reached out, placing my hand on his arm. "Maybe you shouldn't fight it."

He stared at me for a long moment, his expression conflicted. Then, in one swift motion, he closed the distance between us, his lips crashing against mine in a kiss that was both desperate and tender. I melted into him, my hands tangling in his hair as I kissed him back with everything I had.

The world around us faded away, leaving only the two of us and the heat of our connection. His hands roamed over my body, leaving trails of fire in their wake, and I gasped as he broke the kiss to trail his lips down my neck.

"Cameron," I whispered, my voice trembling.

He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching mine. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "I've never been more sure of anything."

That was all the encouragement he needed. He stood, lifting me into his arms as if I weighed nothing, and carried me to his bedroom. The room was as stark and

minimalist as the rest of the penthouse, but I barely noticed. All my attention was on him, on the way his hands felt against my skin, the way his lips moved over mine, the way he looked at me as if I were the only thing that mattered.

We fell onto the bed together, our bodies tangled and our breaths mingling. Every touch, every kiss, every whispered word deepened the connection between us, until it felt as if we were one person, one heart, one soul.

His hands were heavy and greedy as he explored every inch of my body. I gave just as good as I got, taking in my fill of the hard ridges of his muscles beneath my palms.

It was too much, the ache in my empty core making my walls clench as my heartbeat pounded in my ears. The frantic need for him to fill me was overwhelming.

"Please," I breathed, nipping his bottom lip between my teeth. "Make me yours, Cameron."

His nostrils flared at my words and his eyes darkened with lust, the tenderness in his gaze mixing with something dark and primal.

He took hold of my wrists and pinned them over my head. "You're going to be mine forever." His lips slammed down on mine, plundering my mouth with his tongue. I squirmed, spreading my thighs to cradle his hips. He responded as I presented myself, grinding his hard length against my mound.

The hand around my wrists tightened, squeezing to the point of pain. There were going to be bruises there tomorrow. A surge of heat rushed to my womb. Yes. I wanted to be his. To be owned and used by him. For the whole world to see that I belonged to him.

Cameron pulled back with a snarl. With one quick motion, he ripped my shirt off

with one tug. I gasped. Before I could catch my breath, my bra, pants, and underwear suffered the same fate, leaving me exposed with tattered strips of cloth hanging from my body.

As he removed his own clothes, I reached out for him.

"No! Be still," he commanded. A sharp slap landed on my wet puffy lips, just below my mons. I yelped and quickly put my arms over my head again.

"Good girl," he murmured.

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A fresh gush of moisture rushed out of my center at his words. In no other area of my life had I ever let a man take control before, but it was different with Cameron. I wanted him to order me around and to use me as he pleased. And when he praised me for being submitting?

Wow.

I glanced down and my pussy spasmed at the sheer size of his cock. No way. It was flared and swollen with blood, with thick ridged veins running around the shaft. My fingers clenched reflexively, wanting to see if I could wrap them around his shaft. I had a feeling they wouldn't fit.

With both hands free, Cameron found my breasts, cupping and stroking them while his mouth latched onto the hardened tips. He stroked with his tongue, and tugged lightly with his teeth, making me gasp and arch my back.

He found my center and began stroking my clit with firm circles of his thumb. His fingers slipped up and down, working down into my slippery folds.

It took every ounce of control to obey his orders and keep my hands off of him. My hips bucked and jerked against his hand as he stroked me faster and harder, spreading my slick juices along my swollen bud and cleft.

I was so close. My walls quaked and my thighs trembled as he brought me closer and closer. Then, when I was almost there, he stopped.

Wrenching my head up, I cried out in protest.

Cameron let out a low chuckle. He dropped to his knees and with two firm hands, cupped my cheeks, tugging me to the edge of the bed. With my thighs around his head, I was completely open and exposed. He examined me for a moment, as if transfixed, and took in a deep breath before letting out a long low groan. Holding me firmly in place, he buried his face in my center. With a growl that vibrated to my sensitive clit, he began to lick me, working more and more of my slick juices from my core.

"Please, don't stop," I begged. My muscles tensed as I flew higher and higher. I bunched the sheets in my fists, searching desperately for purchase so that I could grind myself against his face.

He was relentless, working my swollen bud between his lips, stroking and tapping with his tongue until light exploded behind my eyes.

I screamed as I came, tremors rocking my entire body. My pussy clenched rhythmically, but he kept licking me, even through the last waves of pleasure, leaving me a panting, helpless mess.

Crawling up my body, he kissed me, forcing me to taste my pleasure. As we kissed, I felt something hard and blunt nudge against my entrance. A moment of panic flared in my chest. What if he was too big?

"Easy," Cameron whispered. "Don't fight it. Just submit and take me in."

Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his hips, helping him push into my tight channel.

"Good girl," he growled against my lips.

Those were the magic words. With a snap of his hips, he slipped in with a burning

thrust. I cried out, my channel squeezing down on his thick shaft as he drove all the way to the hilt in one push.

He filled me to the brim, each pounding thrust nudging my clit against his hip bone. Helplessly, I rocked my hips, impaling myself over and over again on his shaft.

"More, Cameron. Fuck me," I begged.

"You're doing so well, Ivy. Keeping your hands in place." Thrust. Thrust. "Taking all of my cock." Thrust. Thrust. "I'm going to reward you. You may touch me. Then you will take every drop of my cum and keep it inside you."

My hips surged up at his words as my hands flew to his shoulders. I dug my nails into his back, relishing the hiss of pain that escaped his lips.

He rolled his hips, lifting my bottom and sinking deeper into me. It should have been impossible, but he swelled and grew even bigger inside of me.

I gasped, my eyes flying wide open as he stretched me to my limits. It couldn't be.

"You're mine now, Ivy. This is what it is like to be mated by a wolf." Then I felt his fingers stroking down my soaked cleft, coating them in my juices before he pressed them against my back hole.

My body clenched at the intense painful pleasure of being filled to the brim, with his swollen bulge in my core and his fingers in my ass.

He continued rocking into me, forcing me to take all of him. "We're going to do this again and again, until my seed spills out of every part of you. You will take it and when I am ready, I will let you come." He spoke as if we were having a normal conversation over dinner. His calm compared to my loss of control made my pussy

spasm.

Cameron pinned me in place with his arms, pounding into me as he showed me just who was in control. The bulge of his shaft stretched my walls, stroking a spot deep inside of me that made my womb clench. I shuddered as the pleasure built into a pressure that exploded. My eyes clenched shut as my orgasm crashed into me in waves, making my walls ripple around him as I rode out my ecstasy.

There was a roar, and then a sharp pain in my neck as Cameron bit down on my flesh. The pain pushed me over the edge again. "Mine," he whispered in my ear.

Acting on an unknown instinct, I latched my teeth onto his neck, biting down with all of my strength. He let out a roar that shook the walls. His shaft throbbed and jerked inside of me before a hot flood filled my core.

We rocked together as we rode out our climaxes. Spent, Cameron rolled off of me, pulling me on top of him. As he pulled out, a rush of our combined juices flowed out of me, running down along my folds and down my thighs.



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I swirled my fingers in the moisture and brought it up to paint a cross over his chest.

"Mine," I repeated.

Afterward, we lay together in the darkness, our bodies still entwined. Cameron's arm was draped over my waist, his breath warm against my skin. I could feel his heart beating in time with mine, a steady rhythm that lulled me into a sense of peace I hadn't known was possible.

"Ivy," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Hmm?" I replied, my eyes already drifting closed.

"Thank you," he said simply, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my arm.

I smiled, nuzzling closer to him. "For what?"

"For this," he said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "For you."

My heart swelled at his words, and I pressed a kiss to his chest. "You don't have to thank me, Cameron. This is where I want to be."

He didn't respond, but I could feel the tension in his body ease, as if my words had given him the permission he needed to let go. We fell asleep like that, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside forgotten.

## CAMERON

I woke to the soft warmth of Ivy pressed against me, her head resting on my chest and her arm draped across my waist. For the first time in thirty-two years, my wolf wasn't snarling at the edges of my consciousness. Instead, it was purring.

Her heartbeat thrummed against my ribs, her scent woven into my sheets, my skin, my soul. Mate. The word resonated through me like a struck bell, settling something primal I hadn't known was restless. For a moment, I allowed myself to revel in the peace of it, the steady rhythm of her breathing, the scent of her hair, the unshakable sense of rightness that came with her being in my arms.

I traced the claiming mark I'd left on her shoulder, the crescent bite marks from my teeth, still pink and healing. My chest swelled. Mine. Every cell in my body sang with it.

When I shifted to rise, Ivy made a soft noise of protest, her fingers clutching my wrist. "Stay," she mumbled, still half-asleep.

The command should've rankled. Instead, my wolf preened, nuzzling her mind through the fresh bond. I pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Five minutes," I lied.

Carefully, I disentangled myself from her, sliding out of bed as quietly as I could. Ivy stirred slightly, murmuring something incoherent, but she didn't wake. I stood there for a moment, watching her sleep, my chest tightening with affection. She looked so vulnerable, so trusting, and the thought of her being exposed to danger because I was a wolf made my stomach churn.

I dressed quickly, my movements sharp and precise, and left the penthouse without waking her. The cool morning air did little to clear my head as I made my way to the office. It was Sunday, and the city was still quiet around me.

The building was empty when I arrived, the silence almost suffocating. I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat at my desk, staring at the blank screen of my computer. My usual focus was nowhere to be found, my mind instead consumed by thoughts of Ivy and the way she'd looked at me last night as if I were the only thing that mattered.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts, and I looked up to see Brody standing in the doorway, his brow furrowed. "You're here early," he said, stepping inside. "Everything alright?"

"Fine," I said, my tone clipped.

Brody didn't look convinced, but he didn't press. Instead, he set a folder on my desk. "The updated sales projections for the new kits. Thought you'd want to see them."

I nodded, flipping through the pages without really seeing them. "Thanks."

Brody hesitated, his gaze lingering on me. "You sure you're okay? You seem off."

"I'm fine," I repeated, sharper this time.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. Just checking."

As he turned to leave, my phone rang, the shrill sound cutting through the silence. I glanced at the screen, my stomach sinking when I saw the name: Boris Tanner.

I answered, my voice cold. "What do you want, Boris?"

"Straight to the point." Boris's voice was a serrated blade down my spine. "I like that. You see, I've been keeping an eye on your little operation. That new chef of yours, she's quite the talent. Ivy, is it? Those meal kits she presented at FoodieCon were impressive. It would be a shame if something happened to derail the launch. You

should see what my men just saw at your warehouse, Fitzgerald."

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A photo lit up my screen, pallets of CCC meal kits packed and ready to go, swarming with rats. It was impossible of course, our packing warehouses were practically lab grade clean rooms. Our employees had to go through three rounds of sanitation before entering the facility. It was obvious those rats were planted by Boris's henchmen.

"Imagine this leaking out online tomorrow. It would go viral in hours. Cam's Comfy Cuisine, now with extra vermin. Your stock would crater by Monday's opening bell. That new product launch of yours is going to be as effective as pissing into the wind."

My jaw tightened. "Name your price."

"Oh, I don't want money. Not anymore. I want something much more valuable. I want you to watch your empire burn. Starting with her."

Ice shot through my veins. "If you lay a finger on her—"

"What?" Boris interrupted, his voice dripping with menace. "What will you do, Fitzgerald? You're already on thin ice. One wrong move and I'll make sure you lose everything. Including her."

My phone buzzed as I received another photo. This time, it was a zoomed-in picture of Ivy, still asleep in my bed. The detail on the photo was so crisp that I could even see my claiming bite mark on her neck.

My wolf surged forward, claws tearing through my fingertips. "If you go near her—"

The line went dead, leaving me staring at the phone, my hand trembling with rage. The threat was clear, Ivy was in danger, and it was because of me.

My vision turned black at the edges. The world narrowed to a single, blood-soaked point. I stared at the picture of Ivy sleeping in my bed her hair fanned across my pillows.

I shoved the phone into my pocket and stood, pacing the room as my mind raced. Boris had made his move, and now Ivy was a target. The thought of her getting hurt because of me was unbearable, and my wolf growled in protest, desperate to protect her.

My canines punched down, a snarl building in my throat. But where there should've been mindless rage, there was only cold clarity.

Mine to protect. Mine to lose.

I flexed my hands, marveling at the control. This was what they meant about bonded alphas. The wolf wasn't tamed. It was focused.

My phone buzzed. Ivy's name flashed with a text: "You owe me five minutes. Plus interest."

I let out a frustrated roar.

Brody didn't flinch. "We'll triple her security. Move her to the penthouse full-time."

"No." My claws ripped grooves into the edge of my desk. "Boris has eyes everywhere. Even my inner circle could be compromised."

A growl built in my chest as I pulled up the warehouse photo again. The rat photo had

been taken from inside the secured loading zone. Either my security had been defeated or someone on my payroll was working for Boris.

On my desk, my phone screen glowed with Ivy's text. She had no idea how much danger she was in.

"Call Denver," I ordered. "Tell him I'm calling in a favor as a wolf."

Brody's eyes widened. "You're invoking pack law."

"Now." My command came as Brody's alpha.

As Brody left, I opened the hidden safe behind the framed check for the first order sold by the company. There were only two things inside, a treasured photo of me and my mother at my high school graduation before the cancer ate her alive, and a gun loaded with wolfsbane-laced bullets.

I pocketed the gun and traced my mother's smile. She'd fought for me to have a better life until her last breath. I wasn't going to let her down now.

The drive home took three lifetimes. Every second Ivy was unprotected scraped my nerves raw. As soon as the penthouse door clicked shut behind me, I exhaled, rolling the tension from my shoulders. The scent of fresh coffee and something sweet, wrapped around me, a stark contrast to the storm raging in my mind.

Standing at the kitchen island, with her back to me, she hummed softly as she whisked batter in a bowl. She wore only one of my white shirts. It was so big that it hung loosely off one of her shoulders and the hem landed at mid-thigh. I growled, both from the possessiveness that roared to life in my chest, and the stark proof of her vulnerability. For a single moment, I let myself pretend everything was normal. That we were just two people in love, starting an ordinary day.

Then she turned and her smile died when she saw my face. The bowl clattered against the granite counter. "You look like you're about to declare war. What happened?"

I didn't smile. Couldn't. She was going to hate me for what I was about to do.

Her brows knit together. "Cameron?"



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"You can't go back to work." The words came out sharper than I intended, a command, not a request.

Ivy stilled. "What?"

"Boris has a target on you. He sent men to the warehouse to sabotage our orders. He's trying to ruin the company, and he's going after you to get to me." I pulled out my phone and showed her the photo of her sleeping in our bed. "He has people watching you, People inside my warehouse."

Her breath hitched, fingers tightening around the edge of the counter. For a heartbeat, she just stared at the screen, her pulse jumping in her throat. Then her jaw set.

"So what's the plan?" she asked, voice steady.

"You stay here. Full-time. No leaving the penthouse without security."

Her eyes flashed. "No."

I clenched my jaw. "Ivy."

"No." She shoved the phone back at me. "You don't get to unilaterally decide what I do. We're partners, remember? That means we figure this out together."

My wolf bristled at the defiance, the challenge in her tone. But beneath it, I caught the tremor in her hands, the way her scent shifted with something raw, fear, yes, but also something deeper.

It was the bitter smell of betrayal.

"This isn't a negotiation," I said, stepping closer. "He threatened you. Explicitly. I won't risk anything happening to you."

"And I won't be locked away like some helpless damsel!" Her voice cracked, and she swiped at her cheek before I could see the tear fall. "You don't understand what this feels like. My whole life, men have tried to control me my ex, my old boss, even some perverted food critic. They all decided what was best for me without asking. And now you're doing the exact same thing."

The words landed like a blow.

I reached for her.

She stepped back. "Don't."

The space between us widened, swallowing us. My wolf howled, claws raking at my ribs, desperate to close the distance, to fix this. But the bond between us which was still so new and so fragile, pulled taut with her pain.

I forced my claws to retract and swallowed the growl in my throat. "Ivy, please. This isn't about control. It's about protecting you, keeping you alive."

"Then talk to me." Her hands fisted at her sides. "Tell me the plan. Let me help. But don't you dare shut me out and call it protection."

I exhaled, dragging a hand through my hair. She was right. I knew she was right. But the thought of her in danger made my vision bleed red.

"Denver's coming," I said finally. "I called in a favor."

Ivy blinked. "A favor?"

"Pack law. He'll help me hunt Boris down." I met her gaze, letting her see the truth in mine. "But until he's dead, you're not safe. And I can't think straight when it comes to you."

She let out a shuddering breath. For a long moment, she just stared at me, searching. Then, slowly, she closed the distance between us, her palm pressing over my racing heart.

"Then let me be your partner," she whispered. "Not your prisoner."

I caught her wrist, pulling her closer until our foreheads touched. "If anything happens to you—"

"It won't." Her free hand cupped my jaw. "Because we're smarter than him. And we're not doing this alone."

I swallowed hard, my wolf settling at her touch, at the weight in her words. She wasn't yielding. But she wasn't pushing me away, either.

"Alright," I murmured, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Together."

"Together," she agreed. She stared up at me, holding my gaze with steel in her eyes. "But my terms too, no more decrees. We plan. We fight. Or we don't survive."

### Chapter 10

#### CAMERON

The air in the office was thick with the acrid scent of adrenaline and barely controlled violence. Ivy sat across from me at the conference table, her fingers drumming a silent, furious rhythm against the polished mahogany. The bond between us thrummed with her fury.

Denver's wolf bristled at the edges of his control, his amber eyes flickering between human and beast as he paced.

Brody shifted to my left, the leather of his jacket creaking as he rolled his shoulders. His usual easy grin was absent, replaced by a grimace that deepened the scar along his jaw. "Boris has eyes on the docks," he said, sliding a grainy surveillance photo toward Ivy. "But he's not stupid enough to show his face there himself."

Ivy didn't flinch. She picked up the photo, her thumb tracing the blurred figure in the corner, a hulking shape that could've been any of Boris's enforcers. "We can't just sit here waiting for him to burn down the company," she said, her voice low but edged like a blade. "I need to be part of this. After all, I'm the bait he wants."

"Ivy," I growled, "you're not trained for this kind of fight. Boris doesn't just want to hurt you, he wants to unmake you. In front of me."

Her chair screeched as she shoved back from the table. "And what? You think locking me in a gilded cage will stop him?" Her laugh was sharp enough to draw

blood. "I've dealt with men like Boris my whole career. They're all bullies who crumble the second someone stands up to them."

Denver chuckled darkly from his perch against the wall. He'd been silent until now, arms crossed over his chest, his amber wolf's eyes tracking every flicker of tension in the room. "She's got fire," he mused. "Pity it'll get her killed."

The growl ripped from my throat before I could stop it. Denver's smirk widened.

I slammed a fist onto the table, cracks spider-webbing through the wood. "She's not bait."

Ivy leaned over the table until her scent wrapped around me. "You said we were partners," she whispered. "Partners don't get benched when the game gets rough."

The conference room door burst open before I could respond. One of my security team staggered in, his shirt sleeve torn and dripping crimson. "They hit the warehouse again," he panted. "Tore through the guards like they were paper. Left a message."

He tossed a crumpled note onto the table. The paper reeked of gunpowder and something sickly-sweet. Wolfsbane.

"Next time, it won't be rats. It'll be her throat."

The room tilted. My wolf surged forward, fangs shredding through my gums as the shift threatened to take me. Ivy's handclamped down on my wrist, her nails biting into my flesh. "Breathe," she ordered, her voice steady despite the rapid pulse pounding in her throat.

Denver snatched up the note, sniffed it, and snarled. "He's got a traitor in your security detail. Only someone with clearance could've gotten this close."

Brody's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, then paled. "The test kitchen's security feed just went dark."

Ice flooded my veins. Ivy's grip on me tightened.

"Then we don't wait." She snatched the photo back, her eyes blazing. "We use what he wants, me. We end this tonight."

The test kitchen was quiet despite the danger that awaited nearby. In the air, the scent of onions and roasted spices mingled with wolfsbane. I had given Ivy my laced gun meant to take down any wolf, but I still worried it wasn't enough to keep her safe. Blood would follow. I could feel it in the air and taste it on my tongue.

Ivy's knife flashed, steady and sure, but her pulse was too fast and too sharp, betraying her calm. She moved through the space like a ghost, her knife flashing as she diced onions with deliberate, measured strokes. The rhythm was too perfect. A performance.

I lurked in the shadows by the walk-in freezer, every muscle coiled tight. The comms unit in my ear crackled.

"East entrance clear," Brody murmured.

Denver's voice vibrated through the line. "He'll come through the loading dock. It's where the blind spot is."

I didn't respond. My entire world had narrowed to the curve of Ivy's neck, the way her pulse fluttered just above her collar. The bond between us hummed with nervous energy.

The first alarm shattered the silence.

A blaring high-pitched screech tore through the building. It was a distress beacon from the lobby.

"Shit." Brody's curse echoed in my ear. "They're splitting us up."

The lights died.

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For one heartbeat, there was only darkness and the ragged sound of Ivy's breath. Then the emergency strips flickered on, bathing the room in hellish red.

The door exploded inward.

They came in a wave. There were six men, armed with silver-knuckled fists and jagged, wolfsbane-coated blades. I leaped into action, shifting in mid-air. Bones cracked, fur erupted, and then I was a wolf, all fangs and fury.

Chaos. My wolf form, large and monstrous, crashed into two of the men. Knives scattered. Pans clattered. Teeth met flesh. A howl. A scream. We rolled, a tangle of teeth and claws. Blood sprayed. Focus. Ivy.

Denver's snarls echoed from the hallway as he tore into the stragglers. Brody was a blur of motion near the sinks, his fists a deadly metronome. But my focus never wavered from Ivy.

She'd grabbed a cast-iron skillet from the rack, swinging it like a mace. It connected with a thug's temple with a sickening crunch. The man crumpled.

Pride flared through the bond. My mate was as fierce a warrior as any wolf.

A seventh dark figure slid through the fray. Tall. Lean. Moving slickly on all fours.

Boris.

He moved like smoke, slipping past Denver with the grace of an alpha wolf.



He lunged for Ivy.

My heart stopped.

The howl that ripped past my throat shook the walls. Her scent and her heartbeat were my compass in the chaos. I didn't think. I moved, launching myself across the room, but Boris was faster. He swiped at her, but she dove under him, rolling to her feet. She reached into her waistband and pulled out the gun I gave her. Her hands shook as she aimed the weapon loaded with wolfsbane-laced bullets.

Boris skidded. For a heartbeat, he hesitated.

I struck.

My fangs closed around his hind leg, crunching through tendon. He snarled, whipping around to slash at my eyes. Pain exploded across my muzzle, hot and wet.

Ivy screamed my name.

He wheezed and lunged at Ivy again. Ivy twisted, driving her heel down onto his leg with a snap.

A gunshot cracked.

"Chef's tip," she hissed. "Never corner a woman who's spent a decade dodging grabby line cooks."

Blood gushed from Boris's chest. He staggered, shifting back into his human form, the power of his wolf fading from him and flickering like a dying light.

My wolf didn't wait.

Imoved.

One second, Boris was reaching for Ivy. The next, my jaws closed around his throat. He screamed, the noise dying into a wet gurgling rattle.

The taste of his blood, copper and rot, flooded my mouth. I shook him like a ragdoll, his dying cries music to the predator in my soul.

"Cam, stop!" Denver's voice echoed in my ears, but it was not enough to deter the raging blood lust. I wanted Boris torn to shreds for daring to threaten my mate.

Ivy placed a hand on my nape. "Cameron, please." Her soft voice cut through the haze like a ringing bell.

I dropped Boris. He hit the ground with a wet thud, but I was already at Ivy's side, shifting back mid-stride. My hands framed her face. Her skin was warm beneath my palms, her breathing was ragged but steady. Her eyes, wide and bright in the dim red glow of the emergency lights, met mine. There was no fear in them. Only resolve.

"Are you hurt?" I demanded, my voice rough, still edged with the growl of my wolf.

She shook her head, her hands coming up to cover mine. "I'm fine." Ivy's fingers trembled against my blood-slicked cheeks as she searched my face. "But you're hurt," Ivy whispered, her thumb brushing the torn flesh where Boris's claws had raked across my brow.

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I barely felt the pain. Her touch and her concern were all that mattered. The bond between us hummed, a warm balm soothing my raw adrenaline-singed veins. I cupped her cheek, my thumb brushing lightly over her skin. "You're safe. That's all I care about."

Denver stepped next to Boris's corpse, his amber eyes flickering between human and wolf as he surveyed the carnage. "This isn't over," he said, his voice low and gravelly. "Boris had allies. And they'll come for her."

"They'll try," I growled, pulling Ivy closer. My wolf bristled at the thought of anyone daring to touch her again.

Ivy's fingers tightened on mine. "And we'll take all of them out one by one." The bond between us hummed with her conviction, her strength. It was intoxicating, infuriating, and utterly undeniable.

I exhaled sharply, my forehead resting against hers. "You're going to be the death of me," I muttered.

She smirked, the faintest hint of mischief in her eyes. "Guess you'll just have to keep up."

Behind us, Denver cleared his throat. "As touching as this is, we've got a mess to clean up and a traitor to find."

I straightened, pulling Ivy to my side as I turned to face them. "Brody, secure the building. Denver, track down whoever leaked the security details." I glanced down at

Ivy, my resolve hardening. "You stay with me. No arguments."

She rolled her eyes but didn't protest. "Fine. But I'm holding you to that partner thing."

"Deal," I said, my lips twitching upwards in spite of myself.

As we moved through the wreckage of the test kitchen, Ivy's hand stayed firmly in mine. The fight wasn't over. But with her by my side, I felt like I could take on any obstacle.

And I'd burn the world down before I let anyone take that away from me.

## Chapter 11

### IVY

The office smelled of stale coffee and gunpowder.

Brody and Cameron had been at it all night—interrogating security feeds, barking orders into phones, their wolves simmering just beneath their skin. I curled my hands around my mug, letting the heat sear my palms as I chased the last dregs of adrenaline from my veins. My body was sore, my mind racing, but the bond between Cameron and me hummed with a steady warmth that kept me grounded.

Cameron paced the length of the room, his jaw clenched and his eyes dark with barely contained rage. Every third pass, he'd glance at me, his gaze softening for a fraction of a second before hardening again. I knew that look. He was replaying the fight in his head, obsessing over every moment where I'd been in danger. I wanted to tell him to stop, to reassure him that I was fine, but I also knew he needed to process this in his own way.

The door slammed open. Brody strode in, a manila file crumpled in his fist. "We found the leak." He tossed it onto the table. Photos of grainy stills of a security guard pocketing cash, a timestamp from before FoodieCon. "Michael. Boris paid him upfront, then threatened his daughter."

Cameron's growl rumbled through the room as he snatched up the file. "Where is he?"

"In custody," Brody said, taking a step to block Cameron's advance. "I will handle it. But we need to focus on the bigger picture. Boris's men are still out there, and they're not going to let this go."

I set my coffee down, my stomach churning at the thought of more danger. Cameron's gaze locked onto me, his pupils turning into a wolf's. "What's the plan?"

He turned to me, his expression softening slightly. "Brody and I will take down anyone else who's a threat. You stay here at the office and the penthouse where it is safe."

I set my mug down with a clink. "Try again, Fitzgerald."

He hesitated, his jaw tightening. For a heartbeat, I thought he'd argue. Then his shoulders dropped. "Christ, Ivy." He raked a hand through his hair. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Partners," I reminded him, stepping closer. "Or did you mean that only when it's convenient?"

A muscle jumped in his cheek. "Fine." He caught my wrist, his thumb brushing my pulse point. "But you stick to me like a shadow. No more heroics."

I arched a brow. "Says the man who shifted mid-air to body-slam a werewolf."

Brody snorted. "She's got you there, boss."

Over the next month, Brody worked tirelessly to dismantle Boris's network, while Cameron and I focused all of our energy on rebuilding Cam's Comfy Cuisine's reputation. Despite our strong showing at FoodieCon, the stock price continued to fall to an all-time low. The numbers glowed on my laptop screen, CCC's stock price barely limping out of the grave. I slumped back in my office chair, rubbing my temples.

We launched a heavy marketing campaign, partnering with influencers and food bloggers to showcase the kits. I also found myself making my debut in front of the camera as the company's new spokesperson. After cursing Cameron out, I pasted on a cheery smile and demonstrated the new meal kit with notorious Hollywood A-list actor Levi Storm on a morning talk show. The response was overwhelming. It didn't take too long to win back investor confidence and the stock price and sales began to climb steadily. It felt good to see the company on the rise again and to know that our hard work was paying off.

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The penthouse elevator chimed. Cameron stepped out, his tie loose and two takeout bags dangling from his fingers. "You're working late."

"Someone has to keep this empire afloat," I teased, shutting the laptop.

He set the bags on the counter. Lobster risotto with foraged wild mushrooms and squid ink pasta with a saffron sauce from Amalfi, our favorite restaurant. My stomach growled.

"Seafood and carbs?" I sniffed the air. "What's the occasion?"

He uncorked a bottle of Barolo, the rich plum scent filling the kitchen.

"Do I need one to spoil my mate? To us," he said, raising his glass. "And to everything we've overcome."

Mate. The word still sent a shiver down my spine. I clinked my glass against his, a smile tugging at my lips. "To us."

"This is nice," I said, taking a sip of my wine. "A welcome break from all the business."

Cameron reached across the table, his hand covering mine. "You've been incredible through all this. I don't know what I'd do without you."

I smiled, squeezing his hand. "We're a team. We'll get through anything as long as we're together."

As we enjoyed our meal, the conversation turned to the future, both professionally and personally. "There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

I froze, a forkful of risotto halfway to my mouth. "That sounds ominous." My heart skipped a beat at the seriousness in his tone. "What is it?"

He took a deep breath, his fingers tightening around mine. "Ivy, I know your dream isn't working for a test kitchen. It's owning your own restaurant. And I want to make that happen for you."

The fork clattered onto my plate. I stared at him, my mind racing. "Cameron, I don't know what to say."

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I've seen your sketches. The menu ideas stuffed in your nightstand. You're meant for more than test kitchens, Ivy." He flashed me a smile, a rare, genuine smile that made my heart flutter. "You have a gift, Ivy. The way you connect with food and with people. It's rare. And I'll do whatever it takes to help you make that dream happen."

My throat tightened. "Cameron—"

"I'll fund it. Full creative control. No strings. Except maybe naming a dessert after me."

I felt my cheeks warm, both from the compliment and the sincerity in his voice. "That means a lot," I said, my voice soft. "But it's a big risk. I've been burned before, and I don't want to let anyone down. Including you."

He reached across the table, his hand covering mine. "You won't let anyone down. And even if you stumble, I'll be there to catch you. We're partners, remember?."



Something about the way he said it with certainty made me believe him. For so long, I'd been afraid to dream too big, to want too much. But now, with Cameron by my side, I felt like I could take on the world.

A laugh burst out of me, edged with tears. "You're serious."

"Deadly." He caught my hand, his calloused thumb tracing my knuckles. "You've spent your life building other people's dreams. Time to build yours."

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, and I blinked them away. "Okay," I said, nodding slowly. "Let's do it. Let's open a restaurant."

He stood, pulling me up with him. His lips brushed my temple. "You won't be alone." It was a soft, tender kiss that spoke of promises and a future together. When he pulled back, he kept his forehead resting against mine. "This is just the beginning, Ivy. I want to give you everything."

I fisted his shirt, breathing him in, fruity wine, crisp night air, and home. "You already have."

We lingered over dessert, the conversation light and easy. It was one of those rare, perfect moments where everything felt right. When we finally returned to the penthouse, I headed straight for the kitchen, craving a cup of tea to settle my nerves. Cameron followed, leaning against the counter as I filled the kettle.

"I can't stop thinking about it," I admitted, pulling a mug from the cabinet. "The restaurant. It's all I've ever wanted, but now that it's actually happening, it's overwhelming."

He stepped closer, his voice low and steady. "You'll handle it. You're the strongest person I know."

His words were like a balm to the fear that had been gnawing at me. I set the mug down and stepped into his arms, resting my head against his chest. His heartbeat was steady, grounding me.

"Thank you," I whispered. "For believing in me."

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He kissed the top of my head, his breath warm against my skin. "Always."

Epilogue

IVY

SIX MONTHS LATER

The scent of fresh paint hung in the air as I stepped into what would soon be Wildflower. The afternoon sun gilded the newly installed range hood, the stainless steel counters still wrapped in protective film. All it needed were the finishing touches, and in a few weeks, it would finally open its doors. My dream, my restaurant.

Cameron had been my rock through it all, helping me navigate permits, funding, and all the chaos that came with starting a business. He'd been patient, supportive, and, surprisingly, even cheerful. Well, cheerful for Cameron. It was like watching a storm cloud reluctantly make room for a bit of sunshine.

His arms encircled me from behind, his chin resting on my head. "It suits you," he murmured. "All fire and shine."

I turned in his embrace, brushing flour from his shirt collar. It was a remnant of last night's disastrous but endearing attempt at baking me croissants. "You're getting domestic, Cameron."

His nose wrinkled, but the bond between us thrummed with contentment. "Don't

spread that rumor. I have a reputation to uphold."

Tonight, he'd insisted on taking me out to celebrate the finalization of the menu. After a short trip home to get dressed, I'd expected dinner at Amalfi, but when he drove us back to the restaurant site, I was confused.

"Why are we stopping here?" I asked, glancing at him.

He just grinned, that rare, almost boyish smile that always made my heart skip a beat. "You'll see."

He led me inside, and I gasped. The space, which had been a construction zone just hours earlier, was transformed. A hundred candles flickered from strategically placed locations across the room, casting a soft, romantic glow. A table for two was set up in the center of the room, complete with a bouquet of my favorite wildflowers.

"Cameron," I breathed, turning to give him a curious look. "What is all this?"

"A celebration," he said simply, pulling out a chair for me. "For you, Chef."

As I sat down, I noticed something else, the kitchen was spotless, but not empty. There were pots simmering on the newly installed stove, the aroma of garlic and herbs filling the air. It wasn't just a dinner. He'd cooked for me.

My jaw dropped. "You cooked?"

"I may have hijacked your kitchen," he admitted, cheeks flushing as he presented slightly charred scallops. "Happy almost-opening night, Chef."

I laughed, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "You're full of surprises, Fitzgerald."

The meal was, well, it was edible. The scallops were rubbery. The beurre blanc had split. I devoured every bite because it was the best thing I'd ever tasted. Because he'd made it for me. Because he'd tried.

When he produced chocolate mousse from the fridge, which judging by the perfect quenelle, was store-bought, I caught his wrist. "You cheat."

His laugh faded as he suddenly turned serious. "Ivy," he began, his voice trembling with emotion. "These past six months have been the best of my life. You've brought light and laughter into my world, and I don't want to imagine a future without you."

My breath caught as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, velvet box. He got down on one knee, his eyes locked on mine.

"Will you marry me?"

Tears streamed down my face as I nodded, my voice barely a whisper. "Yes. Yes, of course, yes!"

He slipped the ring onto my finger, a stunning diamond that sparkled in the candlelight. Then he stood, pulling me into his arms and kissing me deeply. At that moment, everything in my life felt perfect.

## ONE YEAR LATER

The wedding was held at my restaurant, now a bustling, successful spot loved by locals and food critics alike. It was a small and intimate gathering, with Denver as his best man and Katie as my matron of honor. Only our closest friends and family were attending the ceremony. Despite my brief flirtation with fame, this event was not going to be publicized. The space was decorated with candles and wildflowers, the same as the night Cameron had proposed.

I stood in the back room, taking deep breaths as Katie adjusted my veil.

"You look stunning," she said, her eyes misty. "Cameron's going to turn feral when he sees you."

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I grinned, glancing at the mirror. The dress was simple but elegant, with delicate lace and a flowing skirt. It felt like me.

As the string quartet began playing the first notes, I walked down the aisle, my heart pounding and my hands trembling around the bouquet of wildflowers. My parents sat in the front row, with Mom dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, and Dad watching me with pride. Cameron stood at the makeshift altar, his usual grumpy expression replaced by one of pure awe.

When I reached him, he took my hands, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

The ceremony was short but meaningful. When it came time for our vows, Cameron spoke first, his voice steady but filled with emotion.

"Ivy, you've changed my life in ways I never thought possible. You've shown me that it's okay to be vulnerable, and that love is worth the risk. I promise to stand by you, to support you, and to love you for the rest of my life."

Tears streamed down my face as I began my vows. "Cameron, you've taught me that strength doesn't mean doing everything alone. You've shown me what it means to trust, to lean on someone, and to fight for what we believe in. I promise to stand by your side, to challenge you when you need it, and to love you, wolf and all, for the rest of my days."

The officiant pronounced us husband and wife, and as Cameron pulled me into a kiss,

the room erupted in applause. Brody whooped and tossed a handful of edible gold leaf confetti that stuck to Cameron's tuxedo shoulders. "Now you match your wallet!"

The reception was a blur of laughter, dancing, and toasts. At one point, Katie dragged Cameron onto the dance floor, much to his feigned reluctance.

"Come on, Cameron, dance with us! You're not allowed to be a grump at your own wedding," she teased.

He rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress a smile. "I'm not a grump. I'm selectively cheerful."

I laughed, my heart full as I watched him reluctantly join in. By the end of the night, even he couldn't resist the joy in the air. As we shared our first dance as husband and wife, I rested my head against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"We did it," I whispered.

"We did," he replied, his voice soft. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

## SIX YEARS LATER

I stood at the counter, chopping fruit for breakfast, while Cameron manned the coffee maker. The sound of giggles filled the air as our twin daughters, Lily and Iris, chased each other around the table.

"Daddy!" Iris shrieked, dangling upside down from her chair. "Lily says I can't put syrup on my eggs!"

"Because it's disgusting," Lily informed us primly, exactly like her father when critiquing under-seasoned stock.



Cameron slid a pancake onto her plate. "Your mother puts hot sauce on ice cream. We pick our battles."

They pouted but reluctantly settled down, returning to their coloring books. Cameron handed me a cup of coffee, his arm sliding around my waist as he pressed a kiss to my temple.

"Morning, sunshine," he murmured.

"Morning, grump," I teased, earning a mock glare.

Life was busy, but it was good. My restaurant had become a beloved staple in Huntington Harbor, and Cam's Comfy Cuisine continued to thrive, expanding into frozen meals. We'd found a balance between work and family, and though it wasn't always easy, it was always worth it.

That afternoon, as we watched the girls build a sandcastle at the beach, Cameron's hand found mine. His wedding band was warm from the sun.

"Wildflower got its third Michelin star this week," he said casually.

I gaped at him. "Since when do you follow food reviews?"

"Since it's yours." He kissed my knuckles, the way he had when we were just a chef and a CEO playing at being in love. "Proud of you, Mrs. Fitzgerald."

The tide rushed in, erasing the twins' castle. They barely noticed, already chasing seagulls down the shore.

"They're so different," I mused, leaning against Cameron.

"Yeah, but they're both stubborn as hell," he said dryly, though his tone was affectionate.

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I laughed, shaking my head. "Wonder where they get that from."

He smirked, his arm tightening around me. "No idea."

As we watched our daughters play, I felt a sense of contentment I hadn't known was possible.

Cameron turned to me, his expression soft. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"For what?" I asked, surprised.

"For giving me this," he said, gesturing to the girls, to us. "For not giving up on me, even when I tried to push you away."

I reached up, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. "You're my mate, Cameron. My forever. And I'm not letting anything or anyone ever come between us."

He kissed me then, his lips lingering against mine. As we pulled away, Iris's voice rang out, calling for us to watch her do a somersault.

"Come on," I said, standing and taking his hand. "Let's go cheer her on."