



Billionaire Wolf Needs a Maid

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, Paranormal

Description: He's a tech genius with a penthouse in chaos. She's the sunny maid too irresistible to ignore.

Dean isn't just a billionaire wolf shifter. He's a solitary mastermind whose strange nature breeds disorder in his high-tech penthouse. His last housekeeper fled in terror, but Nina Sorenson isn't fazed. Armed with a mop and a sparkle in her eye, she's committed to tackling his mess, and maybe reclaiming her own dreams along the way.

Nina's new to the big city and to pay the bills, she takes a summer job through an agency that specializes in serving demanding billionaire clients. Too bad she's assigned to Dean Nightfang, the infamous reclusive CEO with a monstrous temper. But as their worlds collide, the lines blur between boss and employee, and their forbidden chemistry ignites a steamy connection neither can resist. Danger lurks in the shadows, howling to dismantle Dean's empire and endanger Nina's life. As threats intensify, Dean's wolf recognizes her as his mate, and his protectiveness flares. This bad boy billionaire will destroy anyone who dares to harm her. There's no limit to the lengths he'll go to keep her safe, and he'll unleash a storm of fury that will leave a trail of destruction in his wake.

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Chapter 1

NINA

The bus hissed to a stop, and I stepped onto the bustling sidewalk, the strap of my duffel bag clutched in my fist like a lifeline. Up above, the towering steel and glass skyscrapers of downtown Huntington Harbor swallowed me whole. I coughed as the air was thick with exhaust fumes and the scent of grilled onions from the street food carts along the sidewalk. The crowd moved at a frenetic pace, everybody looking straight ahead or at their phones. They parted around me like a rushing river, in a rhythm that was disorienting to my small-town bones. In the distance, car horns blared as if in a shouting contest.

This is it, I thought. My heart pounded so hard I could feel it in my throat. The city of dreams. Or at least, the city of second chances. The air of the bustling city was electric and overwhelming. It was alive in a way that my hometown could never be. I couldn't tell if the shiver running down my spine was from excitement or fear.

A man in a suit bumped into me, muttering an apology I barely heard. I clutched my bag tighter, my fingers digging into the worn fabric. You wanted this, I reminded myself.

In my jacket pocket, my phone rang. It was my sister, Maggie, whom I had been living with in Pine Falls while I arranged for a job in the city.

"You made it!" Maggie's voice crackled through the phone. "How's the big city treating you so far?"

"It's overwhelming," I admitted, craning my neck to look up at the buildings that seemed to touch the sky. "But amazing. I can't believe I'm actually here."

Maggie's chuckle was a comforting anchor. "You're going to kill it, Nina. Just don't let the city chew you up and spit you out." She paused. "Max drew you a superhero cape. Said you'll need it."

My chest ached as I thought of my little nephew. "Tell him I'm wearing it invisibly," I said. Blinking rapidly, I cleared the wetness in my eyes. "I'll call you later after the interview."

As I hung up, I glanced at the address on my phone. The Discreet Talent Connections Agency was just a few blocks away. It was the first step toward my dream. Even if it meant cleaning up after some grumpy billionaire.

The agency's sleek interior gleamed under the city's harsh light through endless rows of glass windows. Inside, the air was cool and sterile, carrying the faint scent of chemical disinfectant. The walls were a stark white, interrupted only by abstract art that looked like a monkey threw a bunch of paint at a canvas.

"Excuse me," I said. "I have an appointment with Gladys Harper."

The receptionist sat behind a polished steel desk, her nails clicking against the keyboard as she barely glanced up before jerking her chin to the right toward.

I wandered through the open office in the direction she indicated, past rows of cubicles. The sound of typing and ringing phones filled the office. Gladys sat behind a sleek desk, her sharp eyes narrowing as I entered. "Nina Sorenson," she said, gesturing to the chair across from her.

I perched on the edge of the seat, spine straight, trying to ignore the way my palms

were sweating.

"Pine Falls, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She leaned back, arms folded. "Tell me, Nina. Why should I send you to someone like Dean Nightfang? Let's just say, he's not the easiest to work for."

The warning in her tone didn't scare me. "I'm not afraid of a challenge," I said, meeting her gaze. "And I've never met a mess I couldn't fix."

Gladys' lips twitched, like she was fighting a smile. "Fair enough." She leaned forward, her sharp eyes locking onto mine. "But you should know, Dean Nightfang's gone through more housekeepers than I can count. And trust me, I've been counting."

Her tone was light, but there was an edge to it that made me sit up straighter. "How bad can he be?" I asked, trying to sound braver than I felt.

"Let me put it this way," she said, her voice dry. "Mr. Nightfang is reclusive, messy, and has a temper that could scare off a grizzly bear. The last housekeeper we sent quit after he threw a coffee mug at the wall. Her head was inches away from where the cup landed. Don't worry. He missed her, but the wall wasn't so lucky."

I swallowed hard, my stomach twisting. "Why are you still working for him?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Because he pays triple what anyone else will. And because he's Dean Nightfang. You don't fire a client like him. You adapt and learn to survive."

Great. Just great.

As I stepped back onto the street, the keycard felt heavy in my hand, like it was weighted with more than just plastic and circuitry. A live-in job. No commuting. That's a good thing, right? It's just cleaning. How bad can it be?

But Gladys' warning words echoed in my mind as I waited for the bus to my new job and home. I squared my shoulders and gripped the keycard tighter. I'm not like the others. I'm not going to run. The city hummed around me, its energy pulsing through the pavement beneath my feet. This is my chance. I'm not going to blow it.

The penthouse door slid open before I could knock. "Welcome to the disaster zone," drawled a voice from the ceiling. Smooth, slightly sarcastic, and entirely too amused. "I'm Jenkins, Mr. Nightfang's autonomous butler. Also known as, the one who actually runs this place. Or should I say, the one who tries to prevent it from collapsing in on itself."

I stepped inside and nearly tripped over a rogue robotic arm. Standing there, I stared in shock at the mess I had gotten myself into. The penthouse was chaos incarnate, a stark contrast to the gleaming, modern exterior of the building. The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a breathtaking view of the city skyline, but the glass was smudged with greasy fingerprints and dust. Half-finished tech gadgets littered every surface, their blinking lights and exposed wires giving the room a mad scientist's lab vibe. Towers of empty coffee cups teetered on the edges of minimalist designer furniture, their contents long since dried into sticky rings.

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Carefully, I made my way through the field of junk. Tangled wires snaked across the floor like jungle vines waiting to trip me. The air smelled of burnt coffee and ozone, the sharp and metallic scent of electronics and computers. A robotic vacuum whirred past, bumping into a stack of engineering manuals and sending them crashing to the floor in an avalanche of paper.

"Let me guess," Jenkins continued, his tone dripping with mockery. "You're here to clean up this disaster zone."

I set my bag down, surveying the mess with a mix of determination and disbelief. "Something like that."

"Fresh optimism. Cute," he replied. "But don't say I didn't warn you when you find a robot head in the fridge."

Rolling up my sleeves, I got to work. Jenkins's commentary was relentless, but oddly endearing.

"That's a prototype, not trash."

"Mr. Nightfang is very particular about his collection of antique computers."

By late afternoon, the living area was almost livable. I had cleared the maze of electronics, clearing them into organized piles at the edge of the room. All of the empty takeout containers and paper cups had been put into the trash, and dirty dishes were now in the dishwasher. Maybe this won't be so bad, I thought as I wiped my hands on my jeans. If I managed to survive this madhouse, I could survive anything.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, the office door opened with a creak. The sound was sharp as a gunshot, cutting through the buzz of electronics that hummed throughout the penthouse. I froze. My breath caught in my throat as Dean Nightfang stepped into the room.

He was tall, so tall that he seemed to fill the doorway completely. His broad shoulders blocked out the light from the room behind him. He had rumpled dark hair that resembled a porcupine, probably from him endlessly raking his hands through it in frustration. The black T-shirt he wore was perfectly fitted, clinging to his frame to show the outline of his muscles. His jeans looked like they hadn't ever seen an iron. Still, I was willing to bet that his outfit cost many thousands of dollars and came from some bespoke shop that only took clients by invitation.

His hazel eyes met mine, pinning me in place from across the room. For a moment, I froze. Everything about him was overwhelming. Despite his rumpled appearance, power seemed to flow out from his form in waves, like pulses of electricity. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I had the overwhelming urge to take a step back.

"Who are you?" He spoke slowly and deliberately, forcing out each syllable with an edge of irritation.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, trying to ignore the way my heart was suddenly racing. "Nina. Your new housekeeper."

His gaze swept the room, starting from the tidied desk, then down to the vacuumed floor. He paused on the absence of coffee rings on the edges of the cleaned bookshelf. A muscle jumped in his jaw. "I didn't ask you to do that."

"I know," I said, forcing a smile even as my pulse fluttered. "But I thought it might help."

For the next three seconds, which seemed like they went on forever, he just stared at me with an unreadable expression. I fought the urge to fidget or to fill the silence with nervous chatter, somehow, I had a feeling that would irritate him even more. My palms grew sweaty and slick, but I held his gaze.

Just when the silence grew unbearable, he turned without a word and slammed the door behind him.

I let out a breath of relief, and my shoulders sagged as the adrenaline faded. My hands trembled slightly as I wiped them on my jeans.

Jenkins let out a low, amused hum. "See? And that was just the greeting."

I rolled my eyes, wiping my palms down my thighs. "So he's not an afternoon person. I can work with that."

Jenkins's mechanical chuckle was drier than the abandoned coffee stains. "Oh, sunshine, Mr. Nightfang isn't an any-time-of-day person. And trust me, coffee won't fix that."

I blew a loose strand of hair out of my face, surveying the room.

Game on, Nightfang.

Because no messy billionaire, however intimidating he was, was going to scare me off that easily.

Chapter 2

DEAN

The sound of her humming tickled my ears like a persistent itch I couldn't scratch. I glared at the door to my office, willing the noise to stop.

It didn't.

The changes began subtly, so subtle I barely noticed them at first. A hint of lemon in the air where there had only been the sterile scent of metal and ozone. A warmth in the penthouse that hadn't existed before her arrival, magazines and manuals that were now neatly stacked and organized, tabletops that were free of dust, and windows that now gleamed spotlessly as they displayed the skyline of downtown Huntington Harbor. Her presence was everywhere, invasive and inescapable, like a thread I couldn't pull free from the fabric of my life.

She'd been living here for three days now. Three days. I'd agreed to it without thinking. The recruiter, Gladys, made it sound so convincing. She had said something about convenience, efficiency, and productivity. It was a mistake. A colossal mistake.

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Her scent clung to every surface, seeping into the walls, the furniture, and the very air I breathed. It was maddening. Lemon and something sweet, like strawberries. It reminded me of sunshine on a summer morning back when I was a young boy. I couldn't escape it. Her scent followed me wherever I went, haunting me like a ghost I couldn't expel.

Nina.

Her name felt familiar, yet foreign in my mind, like a word I hadn't used in years. I didn't want to think about her, but her presence was everywhere in my home.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms as I tried to silence the growl rising in my chest. She's just a housekeeper, I repeated in my mind, the words sharp and deliberate. But my wolf didn't listen. It prowled beneath my skin, restless and insistent, drawn to her scent.

The thought of claiming her, of marking her as mine, sent a shiver down my spine. I wasn't some primal beast, ruled by instinct. I was Dean Nightfang, a man who'd built an empire from nothing, who'd clawed his way out of the shadows of my family's legacy. I didn't need anyone. Especially not her. But the way she hummed, soft and carefree, as she scrubbed my floors, it was like a siren's call, pulling at something deep inside me. Something I'd buried long ago.

I'd just returned from LA, my head still pounding from the relentless sunshine and the fake glitz and glamour of Levi's world. Saving my best friend from being framed for his co-star's murder had drained me. Not just physically, but mentally. All I wanted now was the silence and peace of my messy inventor's cave, to hide away in my

sanctuary amid the chaos of the world. The last thing I needed was a maid humming and messing up my home.

I leaned back in my chair, rubbing a hand over my face. My penthouse was supposed to be my safe haven, a place where I could shut out the world and focus on what mattered. Code, algorithms, the endless hum of my computers.

"You're brooding again," Jenkins's voice cut through the silence, smooth and irritatingly perceptive. "Should I alert the media? Or just Nina? I'm sure she'd love to add 'cheer up the grumpy billionaire' to her to-do list."

"Shut it, Jenkins," I muttered, my eyes narrowing at the ceiling where the AI's hidden speakers were located.

"Ouch. Someone's cranky. Did your coffee run out of caffeine? Or is it the fact that your housekeeper is actually competent this time? I bet you're not going to send this one running back to the employment agency."

I glared at the ceiling.

"She's rearranged your coffee station," Jenkins said. "Selection of coffee beans on the left, filters in the middle, mugs on the right. It's actually efficient."

I glanced at the counter, my jaw tightening. The coffee station was pristine, everything in its place. Even the mugs were lined up in a perfect row, their handles all facing the same direction. It was annoyingly organized. "Efficient?" I muttered. "That's high praise coming from you."

"Next thing you know, you'll be complimenting her on her ability to arrange your sock drawer by color."

"I don't have a sock drawer," I snapped, though the corner of my mouth twitched despite myself.

"Exactly. Maybe she'll invent one for you. Along with a personality."

I glared at the air, my hands curling into fists. "You're insufferable."

"And you're predictable. But hey, at least one of us is entertaining."

I pushed away from the desk, my chair scraping against the floor. The melodic sound of Nina's humming grew louder as I approached the kitchen.

I paused in the doorway and watched her. She stood at the sink, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows with her hands submerged in soapy water. Her auburn hair was tied back in a loose ponytail, and some of the strands at her temples escaped to frame her face.

Freckles dusted her cheeks, and her lips curved in a soft, absent grin as she worked. I wondered what she was thinking about that made her smile like that. She was a radiant source of warmth and light in a world that had always felt cold and dark.

A growl rumbled in my chest, low and filled with possessiveness. I clenched my teeth and clamped down on my wolf. Stop it. She's the housekeeper, I reminded myself. Nothing more. But as I watched her, the words felt like a lie.

Her room was down the hall, just two doors away from mine. I hadn't been in there. And I never would be in there. But sometimes, late at night, I'd hear her. The soft creak of the floorboards as she moved around. The faint rustle of sheets as she settled into bed. The sound of her humming as she worked or read or did whatever it was she did in there.

It was torture. She triggered all of my wolf's most base instincts. The beast was restless and agitated, clawing at my insides to get closer to her. It was impossible to think, to even breathe. My penthouse, which was supposed to be my sanctuary, now felt like a cage.

Suddenly, the humming stopped. The water splashed in the sink, and she turned, catching me in the doorway. Her green eyes widened slightly, and a flush crept up her cheeks. "Oh! I didn't see you there," she said, her voice soft and breathless.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. For a moment, the world narrowed to just her.

"I was just finishing up," she stammered. She dried her hands on a towel with quick and nervous movements. Her eyes flicked to mine, then away, a flush creeping up her cheeks. "Is there anything else you need?"

Yes, my wolf growled. You. I shook my head, clearing my throat. "No. That's all."

She nodded, her gaze lingering on me for a moment longer. "Oh, okay. I'm almost done here, and I'll be out of your hair," she said before she turned back to the sink.

I stood there, rooted to the spot, my heart pounding in my chest. Say something, you fool. But the words wouldn't come out. And I knew, deep down, that she was anything but just a housekeeper.

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Chapter 3

NINA

The alarm on my phone went off, its tinkling melody pulling me out of my dreams. I stretched, wincing at the faint ache in my muscles from yesterday's cleaning marathon. It was now day four, and I was still here. Still alive and standing. And, if the faint hum of Jenkins's system was any indication, I was starting to win over the penthouse's resident snarky AI.

"Good morning, sunshine," Jenkins' voice echoed from the ceiling, dripping with his usual sarcasm. "Ready for another day of futile attempts to domesticate the beast?"

I rolled my eyes, but a smile tugged at my lips. "Good morning to you, too, Jenkins. And for the record, I'm not trying to domesticate anyone. Just civilize him a little."

"Good luck with that," he muttered, though there was a hint of amusement in his tone.

I padded into the kitchen, the cool tile floor soothing against my bare feet. The faint scent of coffee grounds lingered in the air, and I breathed it in, letting it ground me. One step at a time, Nina. Jenkins turned on the overhead lights as I walked in, the soft glow of the recessed lighting making the stainless steel appliances in the room gleam. Pausing, I held my breath as I listened for noise from the direction of Mr. Nightfang's bedroom or his office. Nothing. He was still asleep. By the typing sounds coming from behind his office door last night, he was probably exhausted from his late-night coding session.

I brewed a fresh pot of coffee, letting the rich smoky fragrance rise around me in a warm embrace. As I sipped at my cup, I leaned against the concrete kitchen island and watched as the sun began to rise over the top of Huntington Harbor's skyline. After I finished my coffee, I pulled out his mug from the cupboard. It was a sleek black cup which I had found buried under a mountain of technical manuals and dusty discarded circuit boards. The thing was stylish and foreboding, just like its owner. I set the cup on the counter next to the pot of coffee. Next to it, I placed a small sticky note, the neon yellow paper stark against the gray concrete counter.

Grabbing a pen, I scribbled a short note. "Good morning. Don't forget to eat something other than coffee." I added a smiley face for good measure. My pen paused over the paper for a moment before I decided it wasn't too much. He could learn to lighten up a little.

"You're going to make him choke on his coffee," Jenkins quipped. "He's not used to kindness."

I rolled my eyes, setting the note beside the mug. "Maybe he just needs a little reminder that he's human."

"Debatable," Jenkins muttered, but there was a hint of amusement in his tone.

I moved on to the living area, where it seemed like Mr. Nightfang had a late-night tinkering session. After tidying up the scattered tech manuals, I organized the tangled wires on the ground into neat coils. The penthouse was still unconventional, a mad scientist's lab, but it was starting to resemble a home more than a disaster zone. I cheerfully hummed a tune as I worked, letting the rhythm guide my body.

When he emerged from his office, I was in the middle of dusting the bookshelves. He looked as though he'd wrestled with sleep and lost. His dark hair stuck up in unruly tufts, as if he'd spent the night running his hands through it in frustration. His T-shirt

was wrinkled, the fabric clinging to his broad shoulders in a way that suggested he'd slept or tossed around in it. Dark shadows hung under his eyes, which were dulled by exhaustion. Still, he swept his gaze across the room like a predator assessing the situation. It made me feel like he was cataloging every change I had made. He paused on the pile of manuals. Something flickered across his face, maybe annoyance, but it could have been appreciation. It was hard to tell with him.

"Morning," I said, keeping my tone light and cheerful. "Coffee's ready."

He grunted in response, his gaze sweeping across the living area to the kitchen before landing on the mug and the note for a moment. He grabbed it and retreated back to his office. The door clicked shut behind him, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Charming as ever," Jenkins said dryly.

I shrugged, turning back to the bookshelves. "Baby steps."

But as I dusted, I couldn't help the small pang of disappointment in my chest. Why does he have to make everything so hard? Would it kill him to simply be civil? I shook my head, forcing myself to focus. Patience, Nina. He's not going to change overnight.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of cleaning and organizing. Jenkins kept up a steady stream of commentary, his sarcasm oddly comforting in its familiarity. By midday, I was just finishing up in the kitchen when I heard the soft creak of Dean's office door.

He stepped out, his expression unreadable. I wiped my hands on a towel, offering him a smile. "Lunch?"

He shook his head, his gaze flicking to the kitchen counter where I'd left a plate of BLT sandwiches. "I'm not hungry."

"You should eat," I said, my tone gentle but firm. "You can't live on coffee and takeout."

His jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought he might snap at me. But then he sighed, rubbing his hand across his face. "Fine."

He grabbed a sandwich, his movements quick and deliberate, and turned to leave. But I wasn't ready to let him retreat just yet.

"So," I said, leaning against the counter. "What are you working on? Anything exciting?"

He paused, his back to me. "Just work."

"Cryptic," I teased, my smile widening. "Must be top secret."

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression unreadable. "Something like that."

I laughed. "Well, if you ever need a test subject, let me know. I'm great at breaking things."

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For a moment, he just stared at me, his hazel eyes narrowing slightly, like he was trying to decipher a puzzle he wasn't sure he wanted to solve. Then, the corner of his mouth twitched, just barely, a ghost of a smile that vanished almost as quickly as it appeared. My heart skipped a beat, the small surge of victory warming me like a sudden burst of sunlight breaking through the clouds.

He actually smiled. It wasn't much, but it felt like a crack in the armor he wore so tightly around himself. Progress. Real progress.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. His voice carried a flicker of something I hadn't heard before. Amusement. There was a lightness to them that hadn't been there before.

Before I could respond, he turned and disappeared back into his office. I stood there for a moment, my cheeks warm and my pulse racing. Did he just joke with me?

I stared at the closed door, listening to the faint click-clack sound of him typing on the keyboard audible through the wood. Why does he shut me out like this? I wondered. It wasn't just the coldness, it was the way he seemed to carry this weight, this unspoken burden that made the air around him feel heavy. I wanted to ask, to dig deeper, but the fear of overstepping kept me rooted to the spot.

Patience, I reminded myself. You can't force someone to open up.

Jenkins's voice interrupted my thoughts. "You're wasting your time, you know. He's not the type to let people in."

"Everyone needs someone," I said softly, more to myself than to him. "Even him."

Jenkins didn't reply, and the silence that followed felt almost like agreement.

Later that afternoon, I took a break to call Maggie. Her voice was a welcome comfort, grounding me in the chaos of the city.

"So, how's the grumpy billionaire?" she asked, her tone teasing.

"Still grumpy," I said with a laugh. "But I think I'm making progress. He almost smiled today."

"Almost?" Maggie echoed. "You're a miracle worker, Nina."

I smiled, leaning back against the couch. "I'm trying. How's Max?"

"He's good. He drew you another superhero cape. Said you're going to need it to fight off the evil coffee mugs."

I laughed, letting thoughts of my nephew chase away my worries. "Tell him I'll wear it proudly."

We chatted for a few more minutes, Maggie's encouragement giving me the boost I needed to finish the day strong.

"You're doing great, Nina," she said. "Just keep being you. That's all anyone can ask for."

I smiled, leaning back against the couch. "Thanks, Mags. I needed that."

"Anytime. And hey, if he's still a grump by the end of the week, I'll send Max over."

He'll have Dean wrapped around his little finger in no time."

"I'll keep that in mind." By the time I hung up, I felt ready to tackle whatever the penthouse, or Dean, threw at me. One step at a time, I reminded myself. One smiley face at a time.

As the evening settled in, I finished my work, leaving the penthouse feeling more organized and welcoming than ever. Before I retreated to my room for the day, something came over me, spurring me to pull out the sticky note pad. I hesitated, the pen hovering over the bright paper.

What do I say this time? My mind raced through the possibilities. I wanted to remind him he wasn't alone, that I was there to lend a friendly ear if he wanted to talk to somebody, but the words felt too big and heavy.

In the end, I settled for simplicity.

"You're human, even if you try not to be."

As I stuck it to the fridge, I felt a strange mix of vulnerability and determination. This is me, reaching out. Whether you take it or not is up to you.

"You're relentless," Jenkins said, his tone a mix of admiration and exasperation.

"It's called persistence," I corrected, grabbing my bag. "Goodnight, Jenkins."

"Goodnight, sunshine."

Since I didn't feel like another meal of cold sandwiches for dinner, I made up my mind to scope out the neighborhood to see what interesting restaurants I could find. I was just about to leave Dean's apartment building when the elevator doors opened to

an elderly woman who barely came up to my chin.

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"Oh! You must be Dean's new housekeeper. What perfect timing!" The woman cornered me as I exited the elevator and hooked her arm in mine. "I'm Mrs. Abernathy, I live downstairs in 29C." Her silver hair was perfectly coiffed despite the late hour. She was wearing a floral housecoat that somehow managed to look elegant rather than frumpy. "I just pulled a batch of snickerdoodles from the oven. Won't you join me for tea?"

My first instinct was to politely decline. I was exhausted from wrestling Dean's chaos into submission all day. But there was something in her warm smile that made me pause. "I suppose I could spare a few minutes."

"Wonderful!" She ushered me into her apartment, which was the polar opposite of Dean's technological fortress. The walls were covered in soft floral wallpaper, delicate porcelain figurines decorated every table and shelf in the living room, and the heavenly scent of fresh-baked cookies created an atmosphere of cozy comfort.

"You know," Mrs. Abernathy said as she poured tea into delicate china cups. "That boy, Dean. He wasn't always so..." she waved her hand vaguely, searching for the right word.

"Antisocial?" I supplied.

She chuckled. "I was going to say prickly. But yes. Would you believe he once helped me catch Mr. Whiskers when he escaped onto the balcony?"

I nearly choked on my cookie. "Dean? Dean Nightfang?"

"Oh yes. It was quite the sight. This tall, serious young man was crawling on all fours, making little kissing sounds to lure mycat back inside." Her eyes twinkled with mischief. "Of course, he swore me to secrecy. Said it would ruin his reputation."

I couldn't help but giggle at the mental image. "I can't imagine him doing that now."

"He's still in there, dear. That kind boy who helps little old ladies rescue their cats." She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Just last month, when my grocery delivery was mixed up with someone else's, he had that clever computer of his track down my proper order and had it delivered within the hour."

"Jenkins helped with that?"

"Oh no, dear. Dean did it himself. Showed up at my door with the groceries and everything." She smiled softly. "He tries so hard to pretend he doesn't care, but his actions betray him."

I sat back, processing this new information. It was like putting together a puzzle, but all the pieces showed a different picture than I'd expected.

"You know what I think?" Mrs. Abernathy continued, refilling my teacup. "I think he's lonely. All that success, all that money, but what good is it without someone to share it with?" She gave me a meaningful look that made me blush.

"Mrs. Abernathy, I'm just his housekeeper."

"Mmhmm," she hummed, clearly unconvinced. "And I'm just a nosy old woman who makes too many cookies." She pressed a paper bag full of snickerdoodles into my hands. "Take these to him, won't you? Tell him they're from his favorite neighbor."

As I left her apartment, clutching the warm bag of cookies, I couldn't help but smile.

Dean Nightfang, grumpy techbillionaire, secretly had a soft spot for little old ladies and their cats. It was oddly endearing.

With my stomach full, I went back to Dean's apartment and left the cookies on the kitchen counter, as well as adding a new note.

"From your favorite neighbor. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about Mr. Whiskers."

When I checked the next morning, the cookies were gone, and there was a new note in Dean's precise handwriting: "Mrs. A talks too much." But underneath, in smaller letters: "The cookies were delicious. Thank you."

It wasn't much, but it was something. Another crack in the armor.

Chapter 4

DEAN

The hum of my computer was the only sound in the room, a steady, mechanical white noise that usually grounded me. But tonight, it wasn't enough. I leaned back in my chair, the glow of five monitors casting blue shadows across my office. Lines of code blurred before my eyes, useless against the storm in my mind.

Nina.

Her name whispered in my thoughts, an echo I couldn't silence. Her presence invaded every corner of my penthouse. From her scent in the air, to her constant cheerful humming as she worked. It was an intoxicating, heady mix that made my lungs tighten and my wolf growl in approval. The faintest trace of her scent drifted into my office, wrapping around me like a warm embrace I couldn't escape. My enhanced senses picked up the soft pad of her feet against the wooden floor, the whisper of

fabric as she moved, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat two rooms away. She was everywhere, and yet nowhere near close enough.

My wolf stirred, restless and insistent, its presence a burning ache beneath my skin. It paced behind my ribs, claws scraping against the cage of my control. A low growl rumbled in my chest, a sound I barely managed to suppress. Mate, it whispered, the word a primal command that reverberated through my bones, demanding surrender.

She's just a housekeeper, I reminded myself. But my wolf didn't listen. It prowled beneath my skin, its instincts urging me to claim her, to mark her as mine. The thought sent shockwaves down my spine, desire warring with iron control.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard, trembling slightly before I slammed them down, the harsh clack echoing through the room. Lines of encryption code filled the screen. My code. My legacy. Not the blood money my father had built his empire on, but something I'd created with my own hands. The latest security patch for the Department of Defense glowed on the monitor, a testament to how far I'd come from the dark corners of my family's world. Let them keep their threats and violence. I'd found power in ones and zeros, in firewalls that could withstand armies of hackers. The wolfish smile that curved my lips had nothing to do with my nature and everything to do with pride. I'd done this alone. I'd always been alone. And that was exactly how it should stay.

But in the library, she hummed while she worked, soft and carefree. It pulled at something buried deep inside me. Something I'd locked away years ago.

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I grabbed my phone, scrolling to Levi's name. He answered on the second ring.

"Dean. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I need to talk," I said, my voice rough.

A pause, then his knowing chuckle. "This about the housekeeper?"

I gritted my teeth. "How did you? Nevermind."

Levi's voice carried years of friendship and mockery. "What's the problem? She's not cleaning to your standards? Messing up your piles of junk?"

"She's too... her," I muttered, the words escaping before I could stop them.

"Too her?" His tone sharpened with interest. "Elaborate."

My jaw tightened as I stared at the monitor to my right, as the security feed showed Nina organizing my library. She moved with a quiet grace, her hands gentle as they brushed against the spines of my books. Her fingers traced the titles, as if she were learning my collection by touch. The soft rustle of pages and the faint hum of her voice filled the room, a melody that seemed to resonate in my very soul. Each movement was purposeful, as though she were trying to bring order not just to my library but to the chaos inside me. "She's everywhere. Her scent, her voice, her light. It's like she's invaded every corner of my life."

The silence stretched before Levi spoke, unusually serious. "Dean, you're a wolf

shifter. You know what this means."

My heart slammed against my ribs. "No."

"Yes," he said firmly. "Your wolf's recognized her as your mate. Fighting it is pointless."

"I'm not some animal," I snarled, my voice dropping to a dangerous register. "I control my instincts, not the other way around."

"You're not just a man either," Levi countered. "I fought it too, with Krista. Trying to ignore it only made things worse. Your wolf knows what it wants."

I watched Nina through the feed, my fingers hovering over the screen as if I could reach through and touch her. She moved with that maddening grace of hers. The soft yellow cardigan she wore made her glow like a ray of light.

"She's my employee, Levi," I growled, but the words tasted like ash in my mouth. "It's inappropriate."

His laugh cut sharply. "Inappropriate? You're a billionaire wolf shifter from a crime family. Since when do you care about proper?"

Nina reached up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, the simple gesture sending a jolt through my system. My claws dug into my palm, drawing pinpricks of blood. "Since everything about her makes me lose control."

His voice softened. "Look, I get it. But fighting your nature will only hurt you both in the end. Trust me on this."

"And what happens when she finds out what I am?" I growled. "When she learns

about the family business, about the blood on my hands?"

"You mean when she discovers you're a brooding billionaire wolf with a hero complex who turned his family's criminal empire into a legitimate business? Yeah, sounds terrifying."

"This isn't a joke, Levi."

"No, it's not. But neither is denying your mate. You think you're protecting her, but all you're doing is torturing yourself. And her."

I ended the call, his words echoing in my mind. The penthouse walls seemed to contract with each breath I took, the familiar scents of leather and mahogany now suffocating. My shirt collar felt too tight, each inhale bringing her scent deeper into my lungs. Sweat beaded at my temples as I paced, my footsteps echoing off the wooden floorboards.

"Sir," Jenkins interrupted. "Your heart rate has increased by thirty percent in the last minute."

"Shut. Up." I yanked at my collar, the top buttons flying off and hitting my desk with a satisfying plink.

But as I stepped into the hallway, her humming stopped me cold. The sound drew me to the kitchen, where she stood at the sink with her sleeves rolled to her elbows as she worked. Freckles dusted her cheeks like constellations, and her lips curved in that eternal smile that made my wolf pace restlessly.

"Your vital signs suggest elevated stress levels, sir. Shall I adjust the room temperature?"

I growled. "Stay out of it, Jenkins."

"Of course, sir. Though I feel compelled to point out that Ms. Sorenson has improved the organizational efficiency of the penthouse by 47% in just these few days. Perhaps your discomfort stems from other factors?"

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"Mute," I snarled, stalking back to my office. The door slammed behind me with a satisfying bang, but it did nothing to block herscent. I dropped into my chair, pulling up the code for my latest project. The cursor blinked accusingly.

"Initiate debug sequence," I muttered, trying to focus. But the letters swam before my eyes, transforming into her smile, her laugh, the way her hand had brushed against mine when she'd handed me coffee yesterday. A growl of frustration ripped from my throat as I deleted an entire block of perfectly good code.

"Dammit," I hissed, running both hands through my hair. "Get it together, Nightfang."

A soft knock shattered my resolve. "Mr. Nightfang? I made some coffee, if you'd like some."

Her voice was gentle and warm, wrapping around me like a caress. I pressed my forehead against the cool wood of my desk.

"I'm busy," I managed, hating the way my voice cracked.

"Oh." A pause. "Well, I'll just leave it here then. It's the special blend you keep in the top cabinet. I noticed it was your favorite."

Of course she had. She noticed everything, this maddening woman who'd invaded my life with her cheerful smile. Who'd somehow managed to find my favorite coffee beans when even I couldn't remember where I'd stored it.

"Fine. Leave it," I bit out, not trusting myself to say more.

I listened to her retreat, counting her steps until they faded. When I finally opened the door, the coffee waited on a small tray, arranged with precise care. The rich aroma hit me the moment I stepped closer, dark and earthy with hints of chocolate and spice. Next to the cup lay a small sticky note, its edges slightly curled, her handwriting neat and precise:

"Even grumpy bosses need caffeine. - Nina"

In the corner, she'd drawn a little angry face, its expression a caricature of my perpetual scowl. The absurdity of it made something in my chest tighten, a strange warmth spreading through me despite my best efforts to resist.

I stared at the note, the stupid little doodle mocking me with its accuracy. Her care was infuriating. Why did she have to be so thoughtful? So observant? She'd noticed my coffee, prepared it perfectly, and left it here with a note that somehow managed to be both playful and kind. Her handwriting was like her, precise yet somehow playful, each letter carefully formed but flowing with natural grace. The little doodle should have been insulting. Instead, it awakened a strange sensation, so foreign that it took me a moment to recognize it. Joy. When was the last time anyone had dared to tease me? To see past the power and the money and the carefully maintained facade of control? My wolf huffed in satisfaction. She saw us, truly saw us, and wasn't afraid.

I took a sip, closing my eyes as the familiar taste rolled over my tongue. Perfect. Of course it was perfect. Everything she did was infuriatingly, wonderfully perfect.

I glanced at the security feed one last time. My wolf stilled, wholly focused on her, its intensity a fire that threatened to consume me. My heart pounded, a relentless drumbeat that drowned out the hum of the monitors. My skin felt too tight, my breaths coming in shallow bursts. I was in serious trouble.

The realization hit me like a punch in the stomach. When had I become so weak? Years of carefully constructed walls, of keeping everyone at arm's length, and this slip of a woman had managed to crack my defenses with nothing more than a coffee and adrawing. My father wasted no time in teaching me that feelings were a vulnerability that needed to be squashed. But for the first time, I wondered if he'd been wrong. If this ache in my chest wasn't weakness at all, but something else entirely.

Chapter 5

NINA

As I wiped the last window, I caught my reflection in the gleaming surface, my hair was neatly pulled back, and I was wearing my usual uniform, a gray T-shirt and comfortable jeans. It had been one week since I started working here and not only had I not broken anything yet, but I still hadn't run out of the building crying. I allowed myself a small smile.

After my latest overture with coffee and another handwritten note, Dean had finally granted me access to his office. I felt a small surge of victory when I found his own note in the kitchen this morning, requesting that I tidy up his private domain. Progress with Dean Nightfang was measured in microscopic steps, but I'd learned to celebrate even the smallest wins.

I hummed under my breath as I navigated the controlled chaos of Dean's desk. Mysterious gadgets blinked and whirred at me, their purposes as enigmatic as their owner. A sleek silver device pulsed with blue light when my feather duster came near it.

"Careful with that one," Jenkins warned. "It's sensitive to static electricity. Mr. Nightfang spent three days recalibrating it last time someone disturbed it."

I pulled back quickly. "Thanks for the heads up. Any other temperamental tech I should know about?"

"You missed a spot," Jenkins claimed, his artificial voice tinged with what I swore was amusement.

I rolled my eyes, warmth spreading through my chest at our familiar banter. "You know perfectly well I didn't, Jenkins."

"Perhaps. But watching you double-check is oddly satisfying." There was almost a fondness in his tone that made me smile.

As I moved a strange-looking device, something caught my eye. There was a small symbol etched into its base, like a stylized wolf's head. A shiver ran down my spine, though I couldn't say why. Before I could examine it closer, the elevator dinged.

I turned, expecting Dean's familiar brooding presence, but instead found myself face-to-face with a stranger who had the same strong jaw and tall frame. He had Dean's eyes, but they were dark as the midnight sky instead of light. This person had to be related to Dean. Where Dean radiated controlled power, this man's energy was wild, dangerous. His smile was too sharp, too practiced, like a predator sizing up its prey.

"Well, well," he drawled, stalking forward with fluid grace. "What do we have here?"

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, but I forced myself to stand tall. "I'm Nina Sorenson, Mr. Nightfang's housekeeper. And you are?"

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"Rafe Nightfang." His grin widened as he circled me, close enough that I caught the scent of expensive cologne tinged with something bitter. "Dean's baby brother. Though he probably hasn't mentioned me."

My heart pounded against my ribs, but I kept my voice steady. "No, he hasn't."

"That's my brother for you. Always so secretive." Rafe leaned against Dean's desk, invading my space with casual menace. "Tell me, Nina, has my dear brother been treating you well?"

The temperature in the room seemed to drop as Dean's voice cut through the air like a knife. "What are you doing here, Rafe?"

Dean stood in the doorway. His black T-shirt was slightly rumpled as usual, but his expression was thunderous. Something shifted in the atmosphere, and the animosity between the two brothers made my skin prickle with goosebumps.

"Can't a brother drop by for a friendly visit?" Rafe's smile didn't reach his eyes, which glittered with dangerous intent.

"Nothing about you is friendly." Dean moved closer, positioning himself between me and Rafe. The protective gesture made my breath catch.

"Now, now. Is that any way to treat family?" Rafe's gaze raked over me like a physical touch, making my skin crawl beneath my clothes. His smile widened, showing too many teeth. His nostrils flared as if he was scenting the air.

"Especially, in front of such charming company. Tell me, Nina, has my brother mentioned anything about our family traits?" he purred, taking a deliberate step closer.

A low sound rumbled through the room, not quite a growl, but something wild and dangerous. It took me a moment to realize it had come from Dean.

"You always did have an interesting taste in employees, brother." Rafe's words dripped with double meaning. "This one smells like sunshine." He inhaled deeply, making me step back. "And determination. No wonder you're keeping her close."

"That's enough." Dean's voice had dropped an octave, resonating in the room like distant thunder.

My heart pounded against my ribs. There was something happening here, something beyond normal sibling rivalry. The way they moved, the strange intensity in their eyes, the almost animal grace of their confrontation. It all added up to something I couldn't quite grasp.

Dean's entire body went rigid beside me, the muscles in his jaw working as he clenched his teeth. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees, and the hair on my arms stood up in response to the crackling tension. His fingers twitched at his sides, and for a moment, I could have sworn his eyes flickered with an otherworldly gleam.

"Nina." His voice was velvet over steel, softer than I'd expected but vibrating with barely contained fury. "Please give us a moment."

The plea in those four words didn't match his commanding tone, and something in my chest tightened at the contrast. I'd never heard him say please before. Whatever was happening between these brothers, it was serious enough to crack Dean's usually

impenetrable control.

"Of course." I turned to leave, but Rafe caught my wrist, his grip firm enough to make me wince.

"Don't rush off on my account, sweetheart."

Dean's growl filled the room. "Let. Her. Go."

The sound sent shivers down my spine, not entirely from fear. Rafe released me, holding up his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes promised trouble.

I stumbled into the kitchen, my steps faltering unevenly as I sought refuge among the gleaming appliances and familiar scents of lemon cleaner and coffee. My hands trembled so badly I had to grip the edge of the countertop, its cool surface anchoring me to reality.

Through the walls came the rise and fall of their voices. Dean's was low and dangerous, Rafe's taunting and sharp. I leaned against the cool stainless steel of the refrigerator, straining to make out the words.

"Mother expects—" Rafe's voice rose briefly.

"I don't care what she expects!" Dean's response was a booming shout that made me jump.

"The family business isn't something you can just walk away from, brother." Rafe's tone dripped with menace. "You know what happens to people who try."

My stomach churned at the implications. What kind of family business involved threats like that?

"Ms. Sorenson?" Jenkins' voice was unusually gentle. "Perhaps you should take an early lunch?"

I shook my head, fighting to steady my nerves. "I'm fine."

"Your elevated heart rate suggests otherwise." The AI's concern was oddly touching.

Before I could respond, Rafe appeared in the kitchen doorway, his presence filling the space with subtle menace. "We haven't even discussed Mother's offer. Be careful with this one, sweetheart." Rafe's eyes glittered with dark knowledge. "He's not what he seems."

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"That's enough!" Dean grabbed Rafe's arm, but his brother shrugged him off with practiced ease.

The elevator doors closed behind him, leaving a heavy silence. Dean stood rigid, his hands clenched into fists, raw tension radiating from his powerful frame.

"Are you alright?" he asked, not looking at me.

"I'm fine." I drew in a shaky breath. "Dean, what was that about? What did he mean?"

"Don't." His voice was rough with emotion. "Just... stay away from him. Please."

"But—"

"Nina." He finally met my eyes, and something in his expression made my heart stutter. "Promise me."

I nodded slowly, unable to look away from the intensity in his gaze. "I promise."

He left without another word, leaving me with more questions than answers. The kitchen felt too quiet, too empty in his wake.

"Jenkins?"

"Yes, Ms. Sorenson?"

"What do you know about the Nightfang family?"

The AI was silent for a long moment. "I am programmed to protect Mr. Nightfang's privacy. However..." He paused meaningfully. "I would advise caution."

I sank into a chair, my mind racing. My fingers shook as I pulled out my phone, muscle memory finding Maggie's number. The line rang twice before my sister's warm voice filled my ear.

"Maggie? You got a minute?" I tried to keep my voice steady, but the slight tremor gave me away.

"Nina?" All traces of her usual teasing disappeared. "What's wrong? You sound shaken. Is it that boss of yours? Did he do something?"

"No, no, it's not Dean." I sank into one of the kitchen chairs, twisting a loose thread on my uniform skirt. "It's his brother. He showed up today." I swallowed hard. "Remember how you always say you can tell when someone's dangerous, like that sixth sense you got after what happened with Travis?"

"Yeah?" Her voice sharpened with concern.

"Well, Rafe Nightfang? He set off every alarm bell I have." The words tumbled out as I described the encounter, everything from the predatory way he'd moved, Dean's explosive reaction, the cryptic warnings about family business. I hesitated. "And when Dean stepped between us, Maggie, he was different. Almost inhuman."

"Different how?"

I struggled to find the words. "Like he was barely containing something inside him. Something powerful." The memory sent a shiver down my spine.

"Nina." Maggie's mom-voice came out, the one she usually reserved for when Max

was about to do something dangerous. "I know that tone. You're intrigued instead of scared, aren't you?" She paused. "Trust your instincts," she said finally. "But be careful, okay? Sometimes the things we don't know about people can hurt us the most. You learned that the hard way with Travis."

"I know." I looked around the kitchen, at the space I'd worked so hard to organize and make my own mark. "But I can't just walk away."

"Because of the job?"

I thought of Dean's almost-smile, of the way he'd positioned himself between me and his brother, of the raw concern in his eyes when he'd asked me to stay away from Rafe.

"No," I admitted softly. "Not just because of the job."

After hanging up, I stood and straightened my shoulders. Whatever secrets Dean was keeping, whatever darkness lurked in his past, I wasn't giving up. Not yet.

Jenkins hummed to life. "Ms. Sorenson? The office needs attention."

I smiled, grateful for the normalcy. "On it."

I attacked the office with my dusting cloth, trying to lose myself in the familiar routine. The leather-bound books, the sleek monitors, the strange devices that hummed with mysterious purpose. Everything in this room spoke of Dean's brilliant, ordered mind. But now, after Rafe's visit, I saw the hidden edges. The way certain drawers were reinforced. The subtle security cameras in the corners of the room. The strange symbols that kept appearing in unexpected places.

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"Jenkins?" I paused, holding up an ornate paperweight with another wolf design. "These wolves, they're everywhere. Are they some kind of family crest?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss Mr. Nightfang's personal matters." The AI's response was oddly evasive.

"Right." I set down the paperweight, noting how its eyes seemed to catch the light. "But they mean something, don't they? Just like Rafe's visit meant something."

Dean's secrets wouldn't stay buried forever. And I wanted to be here when they emerged.

I wasn't sure any of us were ready for what that meant.

Chapter 6

DEAN

My muscles coiled with each turn across the office, Rafe's earlier smirk burning in my mind. The way his fingers had lingered on Nina's wrist, how he'd leaned in too close, breathing in her scent. My wolf thrashed beneath my skin, its claws scratching to get out. The beast's rage manifested in rippling muscles and burning skin, my shoulder blades aching where they wanted to reshape themselves. Each breath brought the bitter scent of barely contained violence, my gums throbbing where fangs pushed against flesh.

Crack!

I glanced down at my desk. Deep grooves now marked the dark wood. The tips of my claws had broken skin.

My wolf's protective instincts raged at Rafe's transgression. He'd touched what was mine. No, not mine. Nina wasn't mine. She could never be mine. But the primal part of me didn't care about that logic. It only knew that Rafe's scent near her was wrong. The worst part was knowing he'd done it deliberately, playing on my instincts like a maestro conducting chaos.

"Sir," Jenkins' voice cut through the red haze. "Might I suggest some breathing exercises?"

"Mute," I growled, then immediately regretted it. Jenkins was only trying to help, in his analytically precise way. "Sorry, old friend. Override mute. I can't have him here. Can't have him anywhere near..."

"Near Miss Sorenson?" Jenkins finished. "I've noticed your protective instincts seem particularly triggered where she's concerned."

I barked out a harsh laugh. "Am I that obvious?"

"Only to those who know you well, sir. Though I must say, your heart rate does show marked elevation whenever she—"

"Jenkins."

"Shutting up, sir."

I looked out the window at the cityscape below. Suddenly, the office that used to be my safe haven felt too sterile, too confining. I was a predator caged in a glass tower, rendered fangless by my life choices.

"Jenkins, increase security protocols. No one gets in without my explicit approval."

"Already done, sir." A pause. "Though I should warn you—"

The elevator chimed.

"Your mother has override access."

Violet Nightfang stepped into my office like she owned it, elegant in a charcoal Chanel suit.

The sharp click of her Louboutin heels against the wooden floorboards echoed like the beat of a drum. Her silver-streaked dark hair was perfectly coiffed, and her red lipstick immaculate. She looked every inch the successful businesswoman she pretended to be, but I caught the predatory gleam in her eyes, the same eyes I saw in the mirror.

"Dean, darling." Her smile didn't reach those eyes. "No hello for your mother?"

"Still hiding in your office," she observed, running a finger along my desk. "Like a prince in exile. Or should I say, a wolf without a pack?"

"I have everything I need here." The words came out clipped.

"Do you?" Her knowing smile made my skin crawl. "That little human girl down the hall would disagree. I can smell your interest in her, darling. The way your scent changes when she's near."

"Leave her out of this." My voice dropped to a dangerous growl.

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"Oh, but she's already in it. The moment you let her cross your threshold, she became part of our world. Whether you wanted her to or not."

I kept my distance, knowing she'd read any physical contact as submission. My wolf remembered too well the brutal lessons of pack hierarchy. "What do you want?"

"Such hostility." She settled into my chair and studied me with the focus of an apex predator. The scent of her designer perfume couldn't mask the underlying wolf musk.

"Can't a mother check on her son?"

"You never just check on anyone." The wolf in me bristled at her presence in my territory. "Rafe was here earlier. I assume that wasn't a coincidence."

"Nothing is coincidence with this family, as you well know. The Nightfang empire needs its heir."

"I have my own empire."

"Ah, yes. Your little tech company." Her lip curled. "Playing with computers and doo-dads while real power slips through your fingers. Your grandfather would be ashamed."

"My legitimate tech company helps people." The words came out sharp, defensive.

"Help people?" She laughed, the sound like breaking glass. "The Nightfang name was built on taking what we want. Your father—"

"My father is in prison." The words tasted like acid. "Along with half the family pack. Because they deserve to be."

"Details." She waved a hand dismissively, the gesture at odds with the steel in her voice. "The point is, darling, you can't run forever. The blood in your veins is Nightfang blood."

A soft gasp from the doorway made us both turn. Nina stood frozen, cleaning supplies in hand, eyes wide as a doe in headlights. The subtle tremor in her fingers made the bottle she was holding quiver, and I could hear her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. A flush crept up her neck, staining her cheeks pink as her green eyes darted between us, trying to process the predatory tableau before her. My heart stopped. She looked so vulnerable in the doorway. Nina was everything my mother would see as prey.

The fear in her eyes cut deeper than any wound. Not just fear of interrupting, but a deeper unease of prey sensing predators in their midst. I wanted to rush over and comfort her. But my mother was waiting on her haunches, watching for the first moment she could strike. I couldn't risk showing any sign of weakness. Any hint of my feelings for Nina would paint a target on her back.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't know. I'll come back later."

"No need to leave on my account." Violet's smile was razor-sharp as she scented the air. "I was just having a chat with my son about family matters."

Nina's gaze darted between us, and I saw the moment understanding clicked. The way Violet sat in my chair. The tension crackling through the air. The predatory gleam in my mother's eyes. I could hear Nina's pulse race from across the room.

"Actually," I said as I moved to put myself between them. "My mother was just

leaving."

"Think about what I said, darling." Violet rose with fluid grace. "Blood calls to blood. You can't deny what you are forever."

She brushed past Nina, pausing to inhale deeply. My wolf snarled at the threat implicit in the gesture.

"Interesting choice," Violet murmured, just loud enough for my enhanced hearing to catch. "She smells pure. Innocent. Like prey."

I held my breath until the elevator doors closed behind her, but her stench still lingered in the penthouse.

The elevator doors closed behind her, but the air still crackled with tension. Nina's fingers were white from gripping the bottle. The sharp metallic smell of adrenaline and fear rolled off her in waves, making my wolf claw at my chest restlessly.

"I didn't mean to," she whispered, taking a half-step back. The rapid flutter of her pulse echoed in my ears.

My wolf whined, desperate to comfort her, to nuzzle the spot behind her ear where her scent was strongest. But the predator my mother had awakened in me made that impossible.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I should have knocked."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed. The message made my blood run cold.

SECURITY BREACH DETECTED. FIREWALL COMPROMISED.

"Damn it." I dashed to my desk and pulled up terminal windows, my fingers flying over the keyboard. Lines of code scrolled past as I traced the intrusion, my enhanced vision catching every detail of the malicious attempts that battered our primary firewall while a more subtle attack probed our backend servers.

"What's wrong?" Nina stepped closer, concern overriding caution. Her presence behind me made it hard to focus.

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"Someone's trying to hack our systems." I didn't look up as I typed, building defensive walls of code. "They're good, but I'm better."

A familiar digital signature caught my eye. Sean. The bastard was getting bolder.

"Jenkins, activate Protocol Alpha. Lock down all sensitive data."

"Already in progress, sir." The AI's voice was clipped, focused. "Shall I initiate countermeasures?"

"Not yet." I smiled grimly as I laid a trap in the code. "Let's see where this leads." Everything faded away as I battled against the intruder in my systems until a rich, dark aroma cut through my tunnel vision. Nina set a steaming mug beside me, the ceramic quietly scraping against my desk.

"You looked like you needed it," she murmured. A warmth bloomed in my chest that had nothing to do with coffee.

"How did you know how I take it?" I asked, noting the exact shade of caramel that meant the perfect ratio of cream.

She shrugged, a slight smile playing at her lips. "I pay attention."

My wolf preened at her care, while something dangerously close to tenderness threatened to crack my carefully maintained walls.

For a moment, I allowed myself to imagine a different life. One where I could accept

this simple gesture without fear. Where I could pull her close, bury my face in her neck, and let her gentle presence soothe the storm inside me. Where my family's legacy didn't threaten everything and everyone I dared to care about.

But that wasn't my life. It would never be my life. The Nightfang blood ensured that.

With the security breach contained, I leaned back, catching the movement from the corner of my eye. Nina was organizing files on the shelf at the other end of the room, but her movements were too slow, too hesitant. The screen of her phone glowed on the shelf beside her, and my enhanced vision caught the search results before she could close the tab.

NIGHTFANG FAMILY EMPIRE: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

MAFIA DYNASTY: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE NIGHTFANG NAME

BRUTAL MURDERS LINKED TO NOTORIOUS CRIME FAMILY

My stomach dropped. "Nina." My voice came out harder than intended. "What are you doing?"

She startled, nearly dropping the files. Guilt flashed across her face as she glanced at her phone. "After Rafe and your mother, I wanted to understand."

"Stop." I stalked toward her, my wolf too close to the surface. Her back hit the wall as I invaded her space, caging her with my arms on either side. "Whatever you think you're looking for, whatever you think you'll find, don't."

Her breath hitched as I leaned closer, drawn by the rapid pulse fluttering at her throat. Heat radiated between us, electric and dangerous.

"This isn't a request." My voice dropped to a rough whisper. She was so close I could count each freckle scattered across her nose, see the way her pupils dilated as she met my gaze. "Stay out of my personal business. For your own safety."

"I'm not afraid of you." Her chin lifted defiantly, even as her pulse quickened. The gesture exposed the delicate line of her throat, and my wolf growled in approval. Her small hands came up to rest against my chest, whether to push me away or pull me closer, I couldn't tell. The touch burned through my shirt like a brand.

"You should be." The words came out as a growl. My fingers ached to trace the curve of her jaw, to tangle in her hair and claim her mouth. She smelled like temptation itself, like home and desire and everything I couldn't have.

"Dean." Her voice was barely a whisper, but it hit me like a physical blow. She swayed toward me, unconsciously seeking contact, and I caught a hint of her arousal mixed with the sunshine of her natural scent.

With miraculous effort, I pushed away from the wall, putting precious space between us. My hands shook with the need to touch her, to claim her, to protect her from everything, including myself.

"Just stay away from anything involving my family." I couldn't look at her, knowing that one glance at those green eyes would shatter my resolve. "Please."

She left quietly, but her scent lingered, desire and hurt that made my wolf whine in distress. I fought the urge to chase after her, to explain everything, to beg her forgiveness.

But I couldn't let her get involved in this darkness. Couldn't let my family's poison touch her light. Not if I wanted to keep her safe.

Even if denying our attraction felt like ripping out my own heart.

Chapter 7

NINA

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 6:54 am

Pine Falls welcomed me back like a warm hug, its familiar streets a soothing balm after the cold steel and glass of Huntington Harbor. Wind chimes tinkled in the distance, and garden ornaments glistened under the sun. The air smelled like fresh-cut grass and backyard barbecues. The quiet suburbs were a far cry from the city's noise and constant buzz.

Maggie's house sat at the end of Clementine Drive, a cozy two-story with fading blue paint that needed touching up and cheerful yellow curtains that always made me think of sunshine. Max's red bike with its training wheels lay tipped over in the front yard, exactly where it had been during my last visit. The concrete path leading to the door was cracked, with dandelions pushing through.

The screen door burst open before I reached the porch.

"Aunt Nina!" Max came flying out, a blur of Marvel t-shirt and untied sneakers. I caught him mid-leap, spinning to absorb the impact as he wrapped his arms around my neck. The scent of baby shampoo and fruit snacks filled my nose, and the tightness in my chest loosened. "You came back!"

"Of course I did, superhero." I buried my face in his hair, soaking in his warmth. "I promised, didn't I?"

"Nina!" Maggie appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on a flour-dusted dish towel. Her smile was warm, but I caught the concern in her eyes. "You're just in time for cookies."

Inside, the house was its usual cheerful chaos. Crayons and action figures littered the

coffee table, and a half-finished puzzle of dinosaurs sprawled across the dining room floor. The air was thick with the smell of chocolate chip cookies and coffee, making my mouth water. It felt worlds away from Dean's sterile penthouse with its chrome and glass and lingering secrets.

"So," Maggie said once Max had dragged me to the kitchen table and presented me with his latest artistic masterpiece, a crayon drawing of me in a flowing purple cape, brandishing what looked like a glowing mop at shadowy monsters. "How's the city treating you?"

I traced the wobbly lines of Max's drawing, buying time. The monster shapes in the corners were darker than his usual style, almost ominous. "It's different."

"Different good or different bad?" She set a steaming mug of coffee in front of me, the ceramic warm against my palms.

"Both?" The coffee was perfect. "The job is challenging, but interesting. Dean is..."

"Still throwing things?" Her eyebrow arched.

"No, no, nothing like that." I struggled to find the right words. How could I explain the way he shifted between arctic distance and scorching focus? The electricity that crackled between us in quiet moments? The glimpses of vulnerability I caught when he thought no one was looking? The dark past he didn't want me to look into? "He's complicated."

"Complicated." Maggie's voice flattened. "Nina, please tell me you're not developing feelings for your boss."

"Of course not!" The denial came too quickly. Heat crept up my neck as Maggie's knowing look pierced right through me.

"Aunt Nina's turning red!" Max announced helpfully, looking up from his new drawing. "Like a tomato!"

"Thanks, buddy." I ruffled his hair, grateful for the distraction. "What are you drawing now?"

"It's you fighting the bad guys!" He held up the paper proudly. "With your super mop powers! See? The monsters can't get near you 'cause you're too bright!"

The crayon figure wore a flowing cape that seemed to radiate light, keeping the dark shapes at bay. Something about it made my throat tight. Was that how Max saw me? A light in the darkness?

"Can I keep this one?" I asked softly.

Max beamed. "Yeah! You can hang it up in the big tower where you work!"

My heart squeezed. If only he knew how much darkness that tower held.

"Sometimes late at night, when the penthouse was silent except for Dean's restless pacing, I could feel the oppressive weight of secrets pressing down, making the air thick and heavy. The way shadows seemed to gather in corners despite the modern lighting, as if drawn to whatever pain Dean carried. Max's innocent belief in my ability to fight monsters made my chest ache. How could I explain that some monsters weren't crayon drawings, but memories that haunted people until they built walls so high even they couldn't escape?"

"Nina." Maggie's voice pulled me back. She waited until Max had turned his attention to adding more monsters to his drawing. "I know that look."

"What look?"

"The one that says you're about to do something stupidly brave." She reached across the table to squeeze my hand. "You've always had a thing for fixing broken things, but some people don't want to be fixed."

"He's not broken." The words came out sharper than intended. "He's just guarded."

"And you think you can get past those guards?" She sighed. "I've seen this before, remember? With Travis?"

The name hit like a slap. "Dean's nothing like Travis."

"No?" Her eyes drifted to where Max sat drawing, blissfully unaware of the conversation. "Travis seemed complicated too, until he wasn't. Until he was just cruel."

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"That's not fair." But my voice wavered. "Dean wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what? Hurt you? Break your heart?" Maggie's eyes softened. "You see the best in everyone, Nina. It's what I love about you. But sometimes people are exactly who they seem to be."

I stared into my coffee, watching the light play on its surface. "And sometimes they're not."

Later, as I hugged them goodbye, Maggie pulled me close. "Just be careful, okay?" she whispered, her arms tight around me. "I can't watch you get hurt."

"I know what I'm doing," I assured her, even as doubt gnawed at my stomach.

"Do you?" She pulled back to study my face. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're falling for someone who's already told you to keep your distance."

I couldn't meet her eyes. "It's not like that."

"It never is, until it is." She squeezed my shoulders. "Just remember you have people who love you, okay? People who'll be here no matter what."

Max's goodbye hug was easier, all enthusiasm and sticky kisses. "Don't forget your superpowers!" he called as I headed for my car. "You gotta keep the monsters away!"

If only it were that simple.

The city welcomed me back with its usual soundtrack of horns and sirens. Gone were the cheerful gardens and quiet streets, replaced by steel and glass towers that blocked out the sun. The familiar tension crept back into my shoulders as I made my way to Dean's building, Max's drawing tucked safely in the bag slung across my shoulder. The doorman nodded as I passed, and the elevator whispered upward with its usual efficiency.

"Welcome back, Miss Sorenson," Jenkins greeted as the penthouse doors slid open. "I trust your day off was rejuvenating?"

"It was nice to see family." As soon as I stepped inside, I was already scanning for tasks. The coldness of the penthouse was stark after the warmth of Maggie's house. "Anything urgent need attention?"

"Mr. Nightfang has been in his office since dawn," Jenkins reported. "He's consumed approximately three pots of coffee and has not eaten since yesterday evening. His vital signs suggest increasing irritability."

I sighed. "I'll make something."

The kitchen was spotless, my doing, but the coffee maker showed signs of recent abuse. Dark drops stained the area around the counter. The hopper, which was refilled with coffee beans when I left, was now half empty. I started a fresh pot and assembled a sandwich, adding extra tomatoes because I'd noticed Dean seemed to like them. The scent of fresh coffee filled the air, a poor substitute for chocolate chip cookies but comforting in its own way.

As I worked, Max's drawing fell from my bag, bright colors stark against the monochrome floor.

"What's that?" Jenkins asked as I bent to retrieve it.

"My nephew's artwork." I smiled at the crayon figure, its cape flowing with childish enthusiasm. "He thinks I'm some kind of superhero maid."

"How charmingly optimistic." Jenkins' tone was dry. "Though given your success rate with Mr. Nightfang's chaos, perhaps not entirely inaccurate. You do seem to have a certain calming effect."

I laughed, setting the drawing aside to plate the sandwich. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Dean's office door was closed, the heavy oak a barrier between worlds. Through it came the angry staccato of keyboard strikes, too fast, too harsh, like rainfall turning to hail. My stomach tightened at the familiar sound. This was his spiral pattern. He would work until exhaustion, then work harder. I adjusted the plate in my hands, drew in a steadying breath, and knocked softly.

"What?" The word was sharp and distracted.

I pushed the door open. "You need to eat something."

He looked up, and the full weight of those hazel-gold eyes slammed into me. My breath caught. Dark circles colored the skin beneath them, making the sharp angles of his face even more pronounced. His hair stuck up in wild peaks. A muscle ticked in his jaw, and his shoulders were tense enough to snap steel. His black t-shirt was rumpled, sleeves pushed up to reveal corded forearms. Something about seeing him like this, rumpled and focused and somehow vulnerable, made my heart twist.

As I balanced the plate and coffee, my mind raced with contrary impulses. Part of me wanted to retreat, to maintain the professional distance he so clearly preferred. But the part that noticed how his hands shook slightly from too much caffeine and too little food, the part that caught those rare unguarded moments when he looked almost

lost, that part couldn't step back. Maggie's warnings echoed in my head, but they were drowning under the steady drum of my heart.

"You look like you've been wrestling with your keyboard," I said, aiming for lightness. "I think the computer's winning."

"I'm busy." But his gaze lingered on the sandwich, and something in his expression softened infinitesimally.

"You're always busy." I set everything on his desk, careful not to disturb the organized chaos of papers and tech. "But you still need food."

He opened his mouth, probably to argue, but his stomach growled traitorously. A hint of color touched his cheeks, and for a moment, he looked almost human instead of the untouchable CEO or the man with dangerous secrets, just someone who'd forgotten to eat lunch.

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"Eat," I said firmly. "Doctor's orders."

His lips twitched. "You're not a doctor."

"No, but I am the one who has to deal with you when you're hangry."

That startled a laugh out of him. It was a real one, warm and rich. The sound did funny things to my insides, like butterflies taking flight. His eyes crinkled at the corners, a rare glimpse at the man behind the stressed CEO exterior.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of routine tasks. I was elbow-deep in mopping the balcony when Jenkins spoke.

"Miss Sorenson? Mr. Nightfang would like to see you in his office."

My stomach dropped. Maggie's warnings echoed in my head as I wiped my hands on my jeans.

But when I entered his office, Dean wasn't at his desk. He stood by the window, silhouetted against the city lights. Max's drawing was in his hands, held with surprising gentleness.

The blood drained from my face. I had forgotten all about the drawing I left in the kitchen. Dean must have seen it when he went to refill his coffee.

"Your nephew drew this?" His voice was soft, almost contemplative.

"Yes, he's always drawing. Says art helps him fight the scary things." I shifted my weight, watching Dean's face carefully. "Kids have their own way of processing fear, I guess."

"And what about adults?" He looked up. "How do we process it?"

"Some build towers," I said before I could stop myself. "Others try to face it head-on."

His jaw tightened. "And which am I?"

"I think you know the answer to that." I twisted my fingers together. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to leave it."

He turned, and something in his expression made my heart leap. The usual sharp edges had softened, replaced by something almost wistful. "No, it's good. He has talent."

"He thinks I'm a superhero." I smiled despite my nervousness. "Fighting monsters with my magic mop."

Dean's lips curved slightly. "Smart kid." He traced one of the shadowy figures in the corner. "He sees things clearly."

The city lights painted shadows across his face, casting him in gold and shadow. He looked younger somehow, more approachable. Almost lonely.

"Nina." He set the drawing down carefully. "About yesterday—"

"It's okay." I cut him off, not ready to hear whatever walls he was about to rebuild. "I understand. Your family is off-limits."

He studied me for a long moment, with an unreadable expression in his eyes. "It's not that I don't trust you."

"I know." And somehow, I did. Whatever darkness lurked in his past, whatever secrets he was protecting, it wasn't about me. Not really.

He took a step closer. "You're good with him. Your nephew."

"Max makes it easy." I smiled, remembering sticky hugs and endless questions. "He sees the best in everything."

"Like his aunt." The words were so quiet I almost missed them. They hit me like a physical touch, warming places inside that I'd tried to keep cold. It was dangerous, this softening between us. Every small crack in his armor revealed something that made me want to break down the rest of his walls, even as my self-preservation instinct screamed to run. It was the same feeling that led me to my disastrous relationship with Travis. But this felt different. Dean's darkness didn't feel like cruelty waiting to explode. It felt like pain waiting to heal.

Before I could process that, he cleared his throat and turned away. "You should go home. It's late."

"I live here now, remember?" I tried to keep my tone light. "Part of the job description."

He stiffened slightly. "Right." A pause, then he spoke, so softly that I almost missed it. "Thank you. For the sandwich."

I went back to the living room to grab my messenger bag.

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As I turned to leave, my bag caught on the edge of the coffee table, spilling its contents across the floor. Among the scattered items, my wedding planning journal fell open, pages of carefully collected photos, color swatches, and neatly written notes on display.

I scrambled to gather everything, heat rushing to my face, but Dean was faster. He picked up the journal, his eyes scanning the pages with interest.

"These are good," he said, surprising me. His fingers traced over a detailed layout I'd drawn for a garden ceremony. "You have an eye for design."

"It's nothing," I mumbled, reaching for the journal. "Just dreams."

He held onto it for a moment longer, studying a page of venue research. "Dreams matter, Nina. These aren't just sketches, they're business plans. Thorough ones." His eyes met mine, and for once, there was no wall between us. "Why aren't you pursuing this?"

The question caught me off guard. "I don't have the connections. The top firms won't even look at my portfolio without industry experience or references."

"Sometimes the best businesses start from scratch." He handed the journal back, his fingers brushing mine. "You have talent. And determination. Those are harder to find than connections."

Something warm unfurled in my chest at his words. "You really think so?"

"I built my company from nothing but code and caffeine." A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Sometimes all it takes is one person believing it's possible."

For a moment, something blossomed that felt dangerously like hope. It wasn't much, but it was progress. Like maybe, beneath all his walls and warnings and family secrets, there was someone who just needed a little light in his darkness.

"Don't work too late," he said before disappearing behind his office door.

"You too," I whispered.

As I cleaned up the kitchen and packed up the day's garbage, I caught my reflection in the window. There was no cape, no superpowers, just me. But maybe Max was right. Maybe sometimes fighting monsters didn't require magic at all.

Just patience, understanding, and maybe a little faith.

The service elevator hummed as it descended to the underground parking garage. I balanced the day's garbage bags, still mulling over Dean's words about my wedding planning dreams. The garage was eerily quiet at this hour, my footsteps echoing off concrete walls.

"Nina, dear! What perfect timing!"

I turned to find Mrs. Abernathy emerging from her parking spot, her floral housecoat swished as she walked.

"I just pulled a lemon cake from the oven," she said. "It's far too much for one person. Won't you join me for a slice?"

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Nonsense!" She waved away my protest. "You look like you could use a friendly ear. And my Arnold always said there's no problem that can't be improved by cake and conversation."

Before I knew it, I was settled in her cozy apartment, watching her pour tea into delicate china cups.

"Now then," Mrs. Abernathy said, setting a generous slice of cake in front of me. "What's troubling you, dear? And don't say nothing. I've been reading people longer than you've been alive."

I poked at the cake with my fork, the buttery, rich aroma making my stomach growl. "It's complicated."

"Ah." She smiled knowingly. "Matters of the heart usually are."

My head snapped up. "I didn't say any such thing."

"You didn't have to." She settled into her armchair, teacup balanced perfectly.

Her eyes twinkled. "Dean reminds me of my Arnold, actually. When we first met, he was the grumpiest bear you'd ever seen. Wouldn't say two words unless they were complaints."

Despite myself, I leaned forward. "What changed?"

"Persistence, dear. And understanding." She sipped her tea. "You see, Arnold had been hurt before. Built walls so high he forgot how to let anyone in. But I knew, deep down, there was a gentle soul behind all that growling."

"How did you know?"

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"The little things." She smiled at a photo on the mantel. In the brass picture frame, a younger version of herself smiled at the camera while a tall man looked at her like she hung the moon. "The way he'd leave fresh flowers on my doorstep but never admit to it. How he'd check my car's oil without being asked. His walls came down brick by brick, not all at once."

I thought about Dean's small gestures. The way he noticed when I was tired, how he encouraged me to pursue my dreams, his gentle handling of Max's drawing.

"But weren't you scared?" I asked softly. "Of getting hurt?"

"Terrified." Mrs. Abernathy reached over to pat my hand. "Love is always a risk, dear. But sometimes the ones who seem the hardest to love are the ones who love the deepest, once they let themselves."

"Dean's complicated."

"The best ones usually are." She winked. "And I've noticed he barks considerably less since you arrived. Used to hear him stomping around at all hours, muttering to himself. Now? Much more civilized."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm not sure 'civilized' is the word I'd use."

"Progress takes time." She cut another slice of cake. "And patience. And occasionally, really good lemon cake."

As if to prove her point, she wrapped up several thick slices. "Take these up with you."

That boy's too thin anyway."

Later, as I rode the elevator back up to the penthouse, I thought about Mrs. Abernathy's words. About walls coming down brick by brick, and the courage it takes to be patient with someone else's healing.

The cake felt warm in my hands, like it was infusing me with the fire and strength to take a leap of faith. Maybe some risks were worth taking, even if they might break your heart.

Chapter 8

DEAN

Red warning messages flooded my screens, the harsh glowing letters burning my retinas. Every shrill alert, every digital alarm screaming that Sean was inside our systems pierced my ears like ice picks. The bastard's code slithered across my systems like poisonous snakes, each line a potential death strike to everything I'd built. Rage burned in my chest as I watched him methodically dismantle our outer defenses.

"Come on, come on," I muttered, as my fingers flew across the keyboards. The mechanical clicks echoed my racing heartbeat. Lines of my own code flowed back, digital walls rising to meet his attack. But for every breach I patched, three more appeared. Sean had definitely upgraded his team of hackers. The thought made my wolf snarl, territorial anger bleeding into my technical focus.

Jenkins's warning indicators pulsed an angry crimson. "Sir, unauthorized access detected in the client database."

"Not happening." I bared my teeth at the screen, feeling fangs start to descend. "Not

my clients, you bastard."

My vision blurred at the edges, dark spots dancing across the screens as I deployed defense after defense. Every muscle trembled with the suppressed urge to shift. The familiar ache started in my joints, as my bones threatened to reshape themselves. Sweat soaked through my designer T-shirt, the fabric clinging uncomfortably as my temperature spiked.

"Sir." Jenkins's voice cut through my concentration. "Your blood pressure is rising to dangerous levels."

I growled, eyes scanning endless streams of data. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I typed. I heard her familiar footsteps as she approached my office. Nina's scent drifted through the closed door. My wolf surged, recognizing our mate. The beast's energy exploded beneath my skin, eager to end this so I could get to her.

Breathing deeply, I let her scent fill my nose. Beneath the floral shampoo she used, her own essence, fresh lemons and strawberries, was like a drug to the wolf. The steady rhythm of her heartbeat echoed in my enhanced hearing, slightly elevated with concern. Even through the closed door, I could detect the subtle changes in her breathing that indicated worry.

"Dean?" Her voice was soft with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Not now." The words came out harsh, almost a snarl. My hands shook violently as I tried to type. "Please."

She hesitated. The scent of her worry made my wolf whine. Every instinct screamed to comfort her, to bury my face in her neck and breathe in her calming presence. But I couldn't risk losing control. Not with her so close. Not with the beast so near the surface. The cyber attack had triggered something primal, bringing the wolf too close

to the surface. "Damn it." This couldn't go on any longer.

An hour later, I sat in Dr. Sabrina Wu's private office, still trembling with unreleased energy. The sterile examination room reeked of antiseptic and anxiety of each patient in the building, including myself. I recoiled at the stench, wishing that I had a normal human's dull sense of smell.

The room's stark white walls seemed to close in, made worse by the harsh fluorescent lighting that highlighted every shadow. All around me, medical equipment hummed at frequencies that set my teeth on edge. Down the hall, there was a high-pitched whine from an ultrasound machine. In the room next door, a patient's monitors beeped steadily. Up overhead, the air filtration system whooshed as it sucked out the stale air inside. Chrome and steel surfaces reflected my agitation back at me, while the leather exam table creaked ominously under my restless movements. Sabrina's office felt too small.

"Sit down before you wear a hole in my floor." Sabrina didn't look up from her tablet, but her voice held that familiar mix of concern and exasperation

"I'm fine." The words came out as a growl.

"Really?" Now she did look up, one elegant eyebrow arched. "Because your blood pressure disagrees. 190 over 120, Dean. You're a wolf shifter in peak condition. You shouldn't be anywhere near these numbers."

I ran a hand through my hair. It's just stress. I just fended off another cyber attack from Sean."

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"Don't." She held up a hand, her rings catching the fluorescent light. "I've known you too long for that bullshit. Look at these readings." She thrust the tablet at me. Cortisol is through the roof. Hormone levels are so out of balance, I haven't seen something like this since Will rejected his mate bond."

Her words were like a bucket of ice water doused on my head. "This isn't the same thing."

"No?" She stepped closer, her lab coat rustling. "The aggression, the loss of control, the physical symptoms, all of these are signs your wolf is literally tearing you apart, trying to get to her. To your mate."

"I can't." My voice cracked. "Sabrina, you know what the Nightfang pack would do to her."

"I know what denying this bond will do to you. And that might be worse." Her expression softened. "I've been your doctor since you first shifted. These readings are textbook mate bond rejection. It's killing you, Dean."

Each mention of the mate bond sent electric jolts through my body, like lightning seeking ground. My skin felt too tight, my chest hollow and aching where the mate bond should have been.

"I can't have a mate." The words tasted like ash on my tongue. "Not with my family, not with their threats."

"Your wolf has already chosen." Sabrina's voice softened with understanding. "You

can't fight biology. The longer you deny the bond, the worse your symptoms will become."

I paced the length of her office, unable to stay still. The wolf's energy thrummed through my veins like rushing water seeking release. "What symptoms?"

"You're already experiencing most of them. Insomnia. Mood swings. Difficulty maintaining control during stress." She listed them clinically. "But it will progress. Organ damage from prolonged heightened stress levels. Mental deterioration. In extreme cases, complete loss of ability to maintain human form."

My stomach lurched. "There has to be a way to suppress it."

"There isn't." She stepped into my path, forcing me to stop. "The mate bond exists for a reason. It's not just about reproduction, it's about balance. Your wolf has recognized something in her that you need. Something that completes both sides of your nature."

"What I need is to keep her safe." The words came out raw, scraping my throat. "You don't know what my family is capable of. What they'd do to her."

"And you don't know what denying your nature will do to you. You're literally tearing yourself apart."

My phone buzzed. I glanced at the screen, it was Levi. I ignored it.

"The attack today?" Sabrina continued. "That loss of control wasn't just about stress. Your wolf is fighting harder because it senses its mate is near. The closer she is, the harder it becomes to maintain distance."

As if summoned by her words, Nina's scent drifted through my memory. I snarled, my fangs puncturing my gums before I could stop them.

"Exactly." Sabrina noted my reaction. "You can't keep fighting this, Dean. Either accept the bond or—"

"Or what? Send her away?" The thought made me want to rip the room apart. "I won't put her in danger."

"She's already in danger." Sabrina's voice was gentle but firm. "The longer you fight this, the more unstable you'll become. And an unstable wolf is a threat to everyone, including her."

I stumbled into my penthouse, fingers fumbling with the biometric lock three times before Jenkins finally overrode it. The tremors started in my hands first, then seized my entire body. My bones burned like molten metal trying to reshape themselves.

"Sir, shall I call Dr. Wu?" Jenkins's voice held an edge of concern I hadn't programmed into him.

"No." I gritted through clenched teeth, staggering to my office. Even the sight of my normally chaotic desk, now arranged in neat stacks with color-coded sticky notes, made my chest ache. She'd organized my chaos, brought light into my darkness. Another tremor ripped through me. The wolf thrashed against my control, desperate to track her scent, to find its mate."

My phone buzzed again. Levi.

This time I answered.

"You sound like shit," he said by way of greeting.

"Thanks." I slumped in my chair, running a shaking hand across my face. "Always good to hear from you too."

"Jenkins called. Said you're having control issues." A pause filled with understanding.
"It's the mate bond, isn't it?"

I didn't answer. Didn't need to.

"You can't fight it forever, man." His voice softened with memory. "Trust me, I tried with Krista. Nearly drove myself insane before I accepted it. The wolf knows what we need, even when we're too stubborn to admit it."

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"This is different." But even as I said it, my wolf stirred at Nina's approaching footsteps. "You don't have a psycho family that wants to kill you."

"They will always be a threat." Levi cut me off. "But you're stronger with her than without her. That's the whole point of mate bonds. They complete us, balance us. Make us better than we are alone."

"How can I risk it?"

"You can't risk not accepting it." His tone grew serious. "You remember what happened to Mark? The alpha who rejected his mate?"

I did. The story was infamous in shifter circles. It was a cautionary tale of a wolf driven mad by denying the mate bond. He'd lost control completely, shifted in public, exposed our kind to humans. The cleanup had taken years.

"Just think about it," Levi said softly. "Before you destroy yourself trying to protect her."

Nina's knock came just as I hung up. "Dean?" She opened the door cautiously, and my breath caught. She looked soft in the fading daylight, all gentle curves and worried eyes. A strand of hair had escaped her ponytail, and my fingers ached to tuck it back. "I brought dinner. Jenkins said you missed lunch again."

Every cell in my body yearned toward her, like a plant seeking sunlight. The beast whined, desperate to close the distance between us, to touch and claim and protect.

"You should go." My voice came out rough, almost pleading. "It's late."

"Not until you eat something." She set a plate on my desk, grilled chicken and roasted vegetables. It was exactly what I needed but hadn't asked for. The simple gesture of care hit me like a punch. "Doctor's orders, remember?"

My wolf whined, desperate to accept what she offered, not just food, but compassion. Connection. Pack. The mate bond hummed between us, a silent song of belonging that grew harder to ignore with each passing day. "Nina," I began.

"You don't have to explain." She smiled, gentle and understanding in a way that made my chest ache. "Just take care of yourself, okay? There are people who," She hesitated, then finished softly, "Who care about you."

She left before I could respond, but her words echoed in my mind. People who care. When was the last time someone had genuinely cared about my well-being? Not my company, not my power or position, just me?

My wolf knew. It had recognized in Nina what I'd been trying so hard to deny. She offered the possibility of connection. Of healing. Of pack. Of home.

Another tremor wracked my body. Sabrina's warnings echoed in my mind, mixing with Levi's advice and the wolf's constant howl of need.

But as my family and Sean's earlier attack proved, danger lurked everywhere. My enemies would use any weakness, any connection, to destroy what I'd built. And I wouldn't forgive myself if my world destroyed her light.

Even if denying our bond destroyed me first.

The food she'd brought sat untouched, her lingering scent a sweet torture. I pressed

my forehead against the cool glass of my window and watched her small figure exit the building far below. Even from this height, my enhanced vision caught every detail, the way she hugged her coat tighter against the evening chill, how she glanced back up toward my window, the slight drag in her steps that spoke of reluctance to leave.

"She deserves better," I whispered to my reflection, watching my eyes flash between hazel and gold. "Better than a monster who can't control his shift. Better than living in fear of assassins and mafia enforcers. Better than waiting up nights wondering if I'll come home alive."

I pictured Nina's smile lighting up my dark world, her gentle hands smoothing my fur after a shift, our pups running through moonlit fields. It was the future my wolf desperately wanted, the happiness I couldn't risk destroying with the violence that followed the Nightfang name.

I clenched my eyes and forced myself to picture instead what could happen, Nina's blood staining her wedding planner sketches, her green eyes wide with terror as Rafe used her against me, her light dimming as she was dragged into my darkness. The mate bond throbbed like an open wound, punishment for even imagining such horrors.

"I won't be the reason her light goes out," I growled, even as my wolf's anguish threatened to tear me apart. "I won't."

Chapter 9

NINA

I knew something was different immediately when I woke up. By the time I stepped out of my room and began my morning routine, Dean had been long gone. His office

stood empty. When I opened the door, there were no broad shoulders hunched over the computer, no dark eyes tracking my movements while pretending not to. The silence felt wrong.

"Jenkins, where's Dean?" I asked as I set down my cleaning supplies.

"Mr. Nightfang is attending an emergency board meeting, Miss Sorenson. He left quite agitated this morning." Jenkins's digital voice held an unfamiliar note of concern.

My stomach knotted as I moved to straighten Dean's desk. A scattered stack of papers caught my eye, there were internal memos, security reports, and what looked like evidence of sabotage. One name kept appearing. Sean Mitchell.

"Jenkins, who's Sean Mitchell?"

"I am not authorized to discuss Mr. Nightfang's business matters, Miss Sorenson."

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Of course not. I gathered the kitchen trash, humming to mask my unease as I headed for the service elevator. The doors opened to dim fluorescent lighting in the underground garage and the echo of voices. My blood turned to ice when I recognized Rafe's distinctive drawl.

"The security system's been upgraded," he was saying, his voice bouncing off concrete walls. "Dean's paranoid as ever. Yeah, Sean, I know the timeline's tight."

I ducked behind a pillar, heart hammering so loud I feared he'd hear it. The musty garage air felt thick in my lungs.

My fingers trembled against the rough concrete pillar as sweat trickled down my spine. Each word Rafe spoke sent another wave of dread through my body. The lights buzzed overhead, casting strange, shifting shadows that seemed to reach for me with ghostly fingers. My chest tightened until each breath came in silent, shallow gasps. The weight of the trash bag felt like an anchor, threatening to rustle and give me away with every tiny movement. The cold from the concrete seeped through my shirt, but I barely noticed it over the icy fear spreading through my veins.

"The board meeting should keep him distracted. Once the evidence is planted, they'll have no choice but to force him out. Dean won't see it coming, not from his own brother."

A tiny gasp escaped before I could stop it. The trash bag rustled against my leg.

Rafe's voice cut off mid-sentence. "Someone there?"

Footsteps echoed closer, each one making my pulse spike higher. I pressed myself against the pillar, willing myself to disappear. But Rafe rounded the corner, his predatory smile sending chills down my spine.

"Well, well. The little maid's been eavesdropping." He advanced with fluid grace, backing me against the wall. "Such a shame. Dean really should teach his pets better manners."

"Stay away from me." My voice quivered despite my attempt at bravery.

"Or what?" Rafe leaned closer, his cologne suffocating. "You'll tell Dean? Good luck with that. By tomorrow, he'll be too busy fighting fraud charges to worry about one disposable employee."

A low, inhuman growl cut through the garage. "Get away from her."

Dean stood at the elevator, his normally controlled expression twisted with fury. Something wild and ancient flickered in his eyes as he stalked forward, his movements fluid like a predator's.

"Brother." Rafe's smile turned sharp. "Just getting acquainted with your staff."

"Leave. Now." Dean's voice rumbled with barely contained violence.

Rafe held up his hands in mock surrender, though tension thrummed between them. "No need to get territorial. I was just leaving." He winked at me. "See you around, sweetheart."

The moment Rafe disappeared into the stairwell, Dean was at my side. His warm hands cupped my face, eyes scanning for injury with an intensity that made me shiver. "Did he hurt you?"

I shook my head, still trembling. "No, but Dean, he's working with Sean Mitchell. They're planning to frame you."

"Shh." His thumb brushed my cheek, leaving tingles in its wake. "I know. I've been gathering evidence against them both."

"Let me just," I gestured weakly to the forgotten trash bag. "I should take care of this."

Dean nodded but stayed close, his protective presence wrapping around me like a shield. His eyes constantly scanned our surroundings as I quickly disposed of the garbage, as if expecting threats from every dark corner.

The elevator hummed as we ascended, each floor marked by a soft ding that seemed to echo my racing pulse. He stood closer than ever before, his warmth radiating through the space between us.

Dean's shoulder brushed mine with every breath, sending sparks across my skin. I stared straight ahead at our reflections in the polished doors, catching the way his jaw clenched and unclenched, the slight tremor in his usually steady hands.

"Are you okay?" I whispered, unable to bear the silence.

His dark eyes met mine in the reflection. "I should be asking you that."

When we reached the penthouse, I headed straight for the kitchen sink, needing to do something normal to distract myself. Dean followed, leaning against the counter beside me.

"Why didn't you tell me about Sean and Rafe?" I asked, drying my hands on a dish towel.

"To protect you." The words came out rough, almost pained. His expression cracked, revealing something vulnerable I'd never glimpsed beneath his controlled exterior. "Every time I thought about telling you, I imagined Rafe's hands around your throat, or worse." He ran a hand through his hair, something I learned he did when he was frustrated. "I can't let anything happen to you, Nina. The thought alone," His voice broke. "I've lost too much already."

"I'm stronger than you think," I said. Reaching for his hand, I intertwined our fingers.

"That's what terrifies me." His thumb traced circles on my palm. "You make me want things I can't have. Things that could get you killed."

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The intensity in his gaze made my breath catch. He was so close now, his presence enveloping me. When his eyes dropped to my lips, my eyes shot to his. My heart leaped in my chest.

"Dean." His name escaped my lips like a secret, breathless and full of longing.

He closed the distance between us, his hand cupping my cheek, thumb brushing my lower lip. "Nina, I've wanted this for so long." He groaned softly, a sound that sent shivers down my spine. His touch sent a surge of anticipation through me, and I felt my body respond on instinct, growing warm and pliant under his hands.

"Then take it," I whispered, my voice so husky it was barely recognizable. I reached up, tangling my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. His eyes darkened and his pupils dilated with desire.

He leaned in, his lips claiming mine with a ferocity that made my knees weak. His kiss was hungry, demanding, as if he wanted to devour me. I clutched his shoulders, my body arching into his, feeling the hard planes of his chest against my soft curves. Heat pooled between my legs, leaving my body aching with need.

"You taste so sweet," he murmured against my lips. He slid down to grip my waist. The feeling of his strong hands on my body sent waves of pleasure coursing through me. I could feel the edge of the counter pressing into my back, supporting me as I lost myself in his touch.

His mouth moved to my neck, and his teeth grazed my sensitive skin, biting gently, not enough to break skin, just enough to mark me as his. I gasped. Each nip, each kiss

sent liquid heat straight to my core. I could feel the dampness between my thighs, my body ready and wanting. His masculine scent filled my senses, a heady mix of sandalwood and musk that made me dizzy with desire.

"Dean, please." I wasn't sure what I was asking for, only that I needed more. My fingers dug into his shoulders, my breath coming in quick, shallow gasps.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with raw hunger. "Tell me what you want, Nina." His hand slid down, cupping my ass, pulling me hard against him. I could feel his arousal, the length of him pressing against my stomach. A moan escaped me, my body throbbing with anticipation.

"I want you," I managed to say, my voice a deep whisper. "I want all of you."

He claimed my mouth again, his tongue delving deep, mimicking the act my body craved. His hands roamed my body, possessive and eager, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I wrapped one leg around his hip, opening myself up to him, feeling the friction of his thigh against my heated center. Desire pulsed through me, my body so aroused that each touch, each kiss sent me spiraling higher.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathless, our chests heaving with exertion. His eyes were wild, his lips swollen from our kisses. I could feel my own lips, tender and tingling, my body humming with desire.

"Nina," he whispered, my name a prayer and a warning. A muscle jumped in his jaw, his hands trembling as he tried to regain control. "You don't understand what you're getting into."

"Then help me understand," I interrupted, my voice steady despite the storm of sensations raging through me. "I'm already involved, Dean. You can't protect me by pushing me away."

His forehead rested against mine, his breath warm against my lips. "We shouldn't," he whispered, even as his thumb traced my lower lip.

"Why not?" My voice was a soft challenge.

"Because once I start, I won't be able to stop," he admitted, his voice raw and honest. The promise in his words sent another wave of heat through me. My body was ready and willing to surrender to whatever he demanded of me.

I knew he was right. It would change everything. But as I looked into his eyes, I caught a glimpse of something wild and beautiful beneath his careful control. I realized I didn't want to stop. Whatever chaos was coming, whatever dangers lurked in the shadows, I wanted to face them with him.

Chapter 10

DEAN

I watched her from the kitchen, my fingers drumming an anxious rhythm on the polished counter. How had this happened? Three months ago, my sanctuary had been a fortress of solitude, exactly how I wanted it. Now? Now it felt empty without her laughter echoing off the walls, without her gentle presence filling the spaces I hadn't even realized were vacant. My wolf whined whenever she left, counting the minutes until her return. We'd both grown addicted to her, and that terrified me more than any threat my family could devise.

The light caught the soft highlights in Nina's hair as she sat cross-legged on my Italian leather couch, transforming her mousy brown locks into a warm honey color. The spicy aroma of pad thai and green curry still lingered in the air, mixing with her intoxicating natural scent. The remains of our takeout dinner littered the coffee table, forgotten as I watched her laugh at something Jenkins had said. Her presence in my

space made my wolf restless, eager to claim what we both knew was ours.

"Jenkins, dim the lights thirty percent," I said, settling beside her. The AI complied, and soft jazz began playing through the speakers.

"Trying to set a mood, Mr. Nightfang?" Jenkins quipped. "Might I suggest some romantic—"

I groaned. "Mute audio interface."

Nina's laugh was musical. "Poor Jenkins. He's just trying to help."

"You're defending my AI now?" I raised an eyebrow at her. "Should I be jealous?"

"Well, he does clean up after himself," she teased. Her eyes sparkled at me. "And he never leaves coffee mugs in weird places."

"That was one time."

"I found three mugs in your server room yesterday."

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"I was coding! And they were from different days," I protested, but her laugh made my heart skip. Even my wolf loved that sound, perking up like a puppy at the mere hint of her joy.

She shifted on the couch, tucking her feet under her like a contented cat. Her shoulder brushed mine, and my nostrils flared involuntarily. Each inhale made my canines ache, and the urge to mark and claim her grew stronger with every heartbeat.

The instinct to claim warred with a deeper, more unsettling emotion. Fear. Not of her, never of her, but of what she represented. Hope was dangerous in my world. Hope made you vulnerable, gave your enemies leverage. I'd spent years building walls, creating systems, protecting myself from exactly this kind of attachment. But Nina had walked through every defense like they were made of mist, and now I couldn't imagine rebuilding those walls even if I wanted to.

"You're doing that thing again," Nina said, tilting her head.

"What thing?"

"That intense stare, like you're trying to solve a puzzle." She poked my chest playfully. "It's a little unnerving."

I forced myself to blink, to look away from the pulse point at her throat that beckoned my wolf. "Just thinking."

"You know, for someone who created such a snarky AI, you're awfully serious."

"I wasn't always." The words escaped before I could stop them. Something about her presence made me want to share the darkness I'd kept locked away.

The warmth in her eyes undid me. There were no calculations, no hidden agendas. Just pure, genuine care that made my practiced defenses crumble. My wolf recognized what my human side struggled to accept. She saw us, truly saw us, and stayed anyway. That simple acceptance was more addictive than any drug.

"Tell me?" She reached for my hand.

I stared at our joined hands, her delicate fingers interlaced with mine. How could something so simple feel so right? "My family, they're not good people, Nina. The Nightfang name carries weight in certain circles, but not the kind anyone should be proud of."

"Is that why you hide away up here?" Her voice held no judgment.

"Partly." I traced patterns on her palm, gathering my courage. My wolf urged me to trust her, to let her in. "I built this company to be everything they're not. Legitimate, beneficial to society. But they see it as a betrayal."

Nina shifted closer, her warmth seeping into my side. "Is that why Rafe was trying to sabotage you?"

"Rafe always wanted to be our father's favorite." Bitterness crept into my voice. "When I left, it should have been his chance." I swallowed hard against old pain. "But our mother still thinks I'll come back and take my rightful place in the family business."

"Which is?"

"Nothing legal." I met her eyes, searching for fear, but finding only curiosity. "They're organized crime, Nina. The kind that makes headlines when things go wrong. I couldn't be part of that."

She squeezed my hand. "So you chose a different path."

"I chose to be alone." The words tasted like ash. "Safer that way. For everyone."

"And how's that working out for you?" A hint of challenge colored her voice as she shifted to face me fully. In the dim light, her green eyes sparkled with determination.

My lips twitched despite myself. "Not as well as planned, apparently."

She smiled, the sight making my wolf strain against the chains of my self-control. "Good."

My muscles coiled tight with restraint, every fiber of my being hyper-aware of her presence. The slight shift of her weight made the leather creak, the sound unnaturally loud to my sensitive ears. Her breathing had grown shallow, her pulse jumping visibly at the delicate hollow of her throat. Heat radiated from her skin, calling to me like a beacon.

Nina's cheeks flushed pink. The sweet scent of her arousal mingled with her natural fragrance, hitting me like a shot of whiskey, intoxicating and dangerous.

"Dean?" Her voice came out husky, uncertain.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Give me a minute."

"No." Her hand found my jaw, surprisingly steady. "Let me see."

"You should be afraid of me," I whispered, even as I leaned closer. My wolf's instincts screamed to claim her, mark her, make her ours.

"I'm not."

"You should run."

Her hand came up to cup my cheek, her touch burning through me. "I'm done running."

The last thread of my control snapped. I pulled her into my lap, claiming her mouth in a desperate kiss. She melted against me, her soft curves fitting perfectly against my hard planes. My wolf howled in triumph as she threaded her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer.

"Nina," I groaned against her lips, my voice rough with need. "You don't know what you do to me."

She rocked against me, drawing a growl from deep in my chest. "Show me."

I stood, lifting her with me. Her legs wrapped around my waist as I carried her to my bedroom. She looked up at me with trust and desire in her eyes, and something in my chest cracked open.

"Let me take care of you," I whispered, bending to kiss her neck where my mark would go.

She arched into my touch, sighing my name. "Please."

As I laid Nina down on my bed, and removed her clothes, every inch of her skin seemed to glow under the city lights filtering through the windows. Her hair spread out around her like a halo, and her eyes, those captivating green eyes, looked up at

me with trust and desire.

I leaned over her, devouring her mouth with mine. Her lips were soft and yielding, her taste addictive. She moaned into the kiss, her hands sliding up my chest, fingers sinking under my T-shirt and tracing the lines of my muscles. I growled low in my throat, shucking off my top. I wanted to be skin to skin with her. Needed it.

Breaking the kiss, I trailed my lips down her jaw, her neck, lingering at the pulse point. Her heartbeat quickened, and the scent of her arousal filled the air, intoxicating me. I continued my journey down, nipping at her collarbone, then lower, until I reached the swell of her breasts. I sucked a nipple into my mouth, my fingers teasing the other. Nina arched into me, her breath coming in gasps.

"Dean," she whispered, her voice thick with need.

I smiled against her skin and moved lower, kissing every inch of her as if it were sacred ground. When I reached her hips, I gripped them firmly, holding her in place. Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn't protest. She was mine now, and I was going to claim her pleasure as my own. "I want to taste you, Nina."

She bit her lip, a flush spreading across her cheeks, but she nodded. I slid my hands under her, squeezing her ass, and lifted her to me. She gasped in surprise, then let out a moan as I buried my face between her thighs. I dove between her thighs, my tongue finding her clit with unerring accuracy.

She cried out, her body bucking against my hold, but I didn't let go. I licked and sucked, my tongue circling that sensitive bud relentlessly. Her hands fisted in my hair, trying to pull me away even as her hips pressed closer.

"Oh God, Dean," she panted, her body trembling as I hit a particularly sensitive spot. She was close, her muscles tensing, her breath coming in short gasps. "Dean, it's too

much," she panted. Her body tensed and quivered, but I didn't stop. I growled against her, the vibration sending shudders through her body. Her protests turned to moans, then screams as I forced her over the edge, her orgasm crashing through her like a storm.

But I didn't release her. I continued to lap at her, my grip on her hips unyielding. She thrashed against me, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "Dean, please, I can't. Not again," she begged, her voice hoarse.

I lifted my head just enough to meet her gaze, my eyes fierce with determination. "Yes, you can," I growled. "You're mine, Nina. Your pleasure is mine to control."

She bit her lip, her eyes glazed with a mix of desire and disbelief. But she didn't fight me as I lowered my head again, my tongue delving into her folds, tasting her release. She was swollen and sensitive, her body trembling with every touch. I didn't relent. My tongue circled her clit as my fingers slid into her, stroking her inner walls.

Her protests turned to whimpers, then moans, then screams once more as I forced her over the edge a second time. Her body convulsed, her release flooding my tongue. I drank her in, my wolf howling in satisfaction.

Only then did I release her hips, my body moving up to cover hers. Her eyes were closed, her breath coming in slow, deep gasps. I kissed her, letting her taste herself on my lips. She moaned into the kiss, her arms wrapping around me, holding me close.

"Your turn," she whispered, pushing at my shoulders until I was sitting up. She sat up with me, her lips trailing down my chest, her fingers tracing the lines of my abs. When she reached the waistband of my pants, she looked up at me, a mischievous grin on her face.

"May I?" she asked, her fingers playing with the button. I nodded, my breath catching

in my throat as she slowly undid my pants, her fingers brushing against my hard cock. She slid my pants down, licking her lips as she looked at me, hunger in her eyes.

Her hand wrapped around my shaft, stroking me gently. I groaned, my head falling back as she began to explore, her fingers tracing the veins, her thumb circling the head. Wrapping her hand around me, her fingers didn't even touch. "You're sobig," she murmured, her voice filled with awe and a hint of worry. "I don't know if I can take all of you."

I looked down at her, my eyes dark with lust. "You will," I growled. "You'll take every inch of me, Nina. You'll stretch for me, and you'll love it."

She looked up at me, her eyes wide, but she leaned forward, taking the head of my cock into her mouth. I hissed, my hands fisting in her hair as she began to suck, her tongue swirling around me. She took me deeper, her mouth stretching wide to accommodate my size. I could feel the back of her throat, and I pushed gently, wanting to feel her take all of me.

She gagged slightly, her eyes watering, but she didn't pull back. She looked up at me, tears streaming down her cheeks as she pushed herself to take more. I groaned, the sight of her struggling to take me sending waves of pleasure through me.

"That's it, baby," I rasped, my voice rough with desire. "Take it all. Take every inch of me."

She choked slightly, her body convulsing as she fought to take me deeper. I could feel her throat constricting around me, the sensation sending bolts of pleasure through me. She pulled back slightly, gasping for breath, before diving back down, taking me even deeper.

I began to fuck her throat, my hands holding her head in place as I thrust into her. She took it, took all of me, her eyes watering, her breath coming in ragged gasps. I imagined filling her mouth with my cum, pictured pearly white drops of my seed running from the corners of her lips and dripping onto her breasts.

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"Fuck, Nina," I groaned, my body tense with pleasure. "Your throat is so tight. How am I going to fit inside your pussy if you're this snug?" But I didn't want to come like this. I wanted to be inside her, to feel her heat around me. I pulled her off me, my breath coming in sharp breaths. She looked up at me, her lips swollen and wet, a question in her eyes.

"Not yet," I growled, flipping her onto her back. I leaned over her, grabbing a small bottle of lube from the drawer beside the bed. Her eyes widened as she saw the silver plug in my hand, but there was curiosity there too, and trust.

"Trust me?" I asked, rubbing the lube onto the plug. She nodded, her breath coming faster. I smiled, leaning down to kiss her deeply. "Good girl," I murmured against her lips.

I moved back, lifting her legs until her knees were at her chest. I rubbed the lube onto her, my fingers circling her tight hole. She gasped, her body tensing slightly, but she didn't pull away. I slipped a finger in, working her slowly until she relaxed around me. Then, I slipped the plug in, her body tensing for a moment before accepting it.

"Oh God," she moaned, her eyes closed, her body shaking slightly. I kissed her inner thigh, then moved up, kissing her deeply.

"You're so beautiful like this," I whispered, positioning myself at her entrance. Her eyes opened, locking onto mine as I slowly pushed into her. She was tight, her body adjusting to the feel of me and the plug inside of her at the same time. She gasped, her nails digging into my arms as I filled her completely.

I began to move, my strokes slow at first, giving her time to adjust. But as her body relaxed, and her moans grew louder, I picked up the pace. I could feel the plug inside her, the fullness intensifying every sensation. She clung to me, her body writhing beneath mine.

I shifted my angle, driving into her harder, deeper. She cried out, her hands fisting in the sheets. I growled, my wolf surging to the surface, the need to dominate her overwhelming. I lifted my hand, bringing it down on her ass with a sharp smack. She gasped, her body clenching around me, increasing my pleasure.

"Dean," she moaned, her eyes wide with surprise and desire. I smacked her again, the sound echoing through the room. Her walls squeezed around me again, her cries growing louder.

I began to fuck her harder, my hand coming down on her ass again and again. Each smack sent a shot of pleasure through me. I could feel my control slipping, my wolf demanding more.

I reached down, my fingers finding the plug. I twisted it, pushing it deeper into her. She screamed, her pussy bearing down on my shaft. I could feel her getting close, her body tensing, her breath coming in short gasps.

Faster and faster, I fucked her, my body slamming into hers, the plug hitting with each thrust. I twisted it again, sending her over the edge. She came hard, her entire body seizing and convulsing, her screams of pleasure filling the room.

As she came back down, she stared at me with surprise. "Dean, what's happening?" she whispered, her body tensing slightly as she felt the swell beginning to form at the base of my cock.

I kissed her deeply, my tongue delving into her mouth. "It's my knot, Nina," I

growled against her lips. "It's how my wolf claims you fully."

Her eyes widened, but there was no fear, only curiosity and trust. I began to move inside her again, my thrusts slow and steady, giving her time to adjust to the growing pressure.

She moaned, her pussy pulled to the limits to accommodate the swelling, her inner walls clamping down on me.

"Oh God, Dean," she gasped, her nails digging into my shoulders. "It's so big. I don't know if I can take any more."

I growled, the sensation of her tight heat enveloping my knot sending waves of pleasure through me. "That's it, baby," I rasped. "Take it all. Take my knot."

She whimpered, her body squirming beneath mine as I pushed deeper, the knot growing larger, locking us together. She was so snug, so hot, her sheath gripping me like a vice. I could feel every ripple of her inner walls, every pulse of her heartbeat.

"Dean," she moaned, her body tense with pleasure and pain. "It's too much. I can't."

"You can," I growled, my voice fierce with possession.

I began to thrust harder, my body slamming into hers, the knot stretching her wide. She screamed, her orgasm crashing through her. I could feel her release, her sex milking my cock, pulling me deeper.

The pressure in my knot was overwhelming, the swelling and burning intensifying with each thrust. I could feel the ropes of cum building, ready to explode, ready to claim her completely. My wolf howled in my mind, the need to possess her, to fill her with our seed, all-consuming.

"Mine," I growled, my voice barely human. "You're mine, Nina. Mine to fuck. Mine to fill. Mine to claim."

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with love and trust. "Yours," she whispered. "I'm yours, Dean."

Those words sent me over the edge. With a roar, I slammed into her one last time, swelling to my full size, locking us together completely. I snarled, my wolf surging to the surface, the need to claim her overwhelming. My canines lengthened, and I leaned down, my teeth scraping against her neck. She tilted her head, giving me access, trusting me completely. I bit down, marking her as mine forever. She cried out one last time as she came hard, pulling me over the edge with her.

Ropes of thick, hot cum burst out, bathing her womb, claiming her as mine. I could feel it, the moment my seed hit her inner walls, the moment my claim took root. My wolf howled in triumph, the bond between us strengthening, snapping into place. I could feel her, her pleasure, her pain, her love. It was overwhelming and exhilarating.

As we came down from our high, I slowed my thrusts, my body still throbbing with pleasure. I could feel my knot pulsing, the pressure slowly easing as I filled her completely. I could feel the heat of my release, the scent of us mingling. It was the most intoxicating aroma in the world.

"Mine," I growled, my voice a possessive rumble. "You're mine, Nina. Forever."

She wrapped her arms around me, holding me close. "Forever," she whispered, her voice filled with love and contentment. She was mine, now and forever. And I was hers.

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I rolled us, pulling her onto my chest. She snuggled into me, her breath coming in slow and deep. I could feel her heartbeat, steady and strong against mine. I reached down, gently pulling the plug from her. She gasped, fluttering around me one last time. My knot deflated, and I finally slipped out of her channel. Our combined pleasures rushed out of her, spilling onto our thighs. I reached down, my fingers tracing the edges of her folds, gathering our mixed essence. She looked up at me, her eyes widening as I brought my fingers to her lips.

"Taste us," I growled, my voice rough with desire. She hesitated for a moment, then parted her lips, her tongue darting out to lick my fingers clean of our milky slickness. The sight sent a fresh wave of desire through me.

"I love you, Nina," I whispered, the words slipping out before I could stop them. But I didn't want to take them back. I wanted her to know, to understand how much she meant to me.

She looked up at me, her eyes soft with love and tears. "I love you too, Dean," she whispered, snuggling back into my chest.

As we lay there, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside faded away. Moonlight painted silver streaks across the rumpled sheets. Nina's finger traced idle patterns across my chest, following the silvery scars that marked old battles. Each gentle touch sent ripples of contentment through my body. The wolf, now satiated, purred in contentment. The usual restlessness, the constant war between man and beast, settled into peaceful coexistence for the first time in my life.

"What are you thinking about?" she murmured, her breath warm against my shoulder.

"How quiet it is." The words came slowly as I tried to explain this new sensation. "In here." I tapped my temple.

She propped herself up on an elbow, moonlight catching the amber highlights in her hair. "Is that unusual?"

"Unprecedented." I caught her wandering hand, pressing it flat against my heart. "You quiet the storm."

Her lips curved. "The big bad billionaire, tamed by little old me?"

A growl rumbled in my chest as I rolled us, pinning her beneath me. "I wouldn't go that far."

"No?" She arched an eyebrow, a challenge glinting in her eyes. "Because from where I'm lying..."

I silenced her with a kiss, drinking in her laughter. When I pulled back, her eyes were soft with something that made my chest ache.

"Is that your solution to winning all arguments?" she asked, breathless.

"Only with you." I nuzzled her neck, inhaling our mingled scents. "Only ever you."

She propped herself up on an elbow, her hair falling in a curtain around her face. "What happens now?"

I brushed a strand behind her ear, savoring the silky texture. "Now I protect what's mine." My wolf pushed the words out, fierce and certain.

She settled against my chest, her heartbeat steady against mine. My arms tightened

around her instinctively.

A text notification buzzed on my phone, but I ignored it. It was probably Levi with more smartass commentary about falling for my housekeeper. It could wait. Nothing existed outside of the miracle of Nina choosing to stay.

"Sleep," I murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. My wolf settled, content to guard her rest. "I've got you."

She mumbled something unintelligible, already drifting off. I stayed awake, watching the rise and fall of her chest, memorizing every detail of this perfect moment before reality crashed back in. The soft curve of her cheek, the fan of her lashes, the way her hand curled trustingly against my chest, all of it seared into my memory.

Tomorrow, we'd face Rafe, Sean, and whatever else the world threw at us. My enemies would see her as a weakness to exploit. They didn't understand that she was my strength. My wolf growled at the thought of anyone threatening her. Let them try. They'd learn exactly how dangerous a lone wolf could be when protecting his mate.

Chapter 11

NINA

I stretched languidly in Dean's massive bed. Everything ached in the most delicious way, a sweet reminder of our passionate night together. The silk sheets whispered against my skin, carrying his scent that made my heart flutter.

But when I caught my reflection in the mirrored closet doors, my contented smile faltered. There, stark against my pale skin, was a mark on my neck. It wasn't quite a bruise, not quite a bite, but something otherworldly. The raised pink edges seemed to shimmer slightly in the morning light in a way that wasn't quite normal.

"Jenkins?" I whispered, suddenly aware of how alone I felt in the massive bedroom.
"Where's Dean?"

"Mr. Nightfang is in his office taking an urgent call," the AI responded smoothly.
"Though I must say, you look rather marked this morning."

Was it my imagination, or did Jenkins sound amused? I pulled one of Dean's dress shirts from the closet around me, the expensive fabric swimming around my petite frame. "I'll bring him some coffee."

In the kitchen, I prepared Dean's coffee exactly how he liked it. The familiar routine helped settle my nerves, even as my fingers kept straying to that strange mark on my neck.

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As I approached his office, Dean's voice drifted out, tense and urgent.

"Levi, I didn't mean to mark her, it just happened. My wolf took over and claimed her as my mate."

I froze, coffee cup trembling in my hand.

"Yes, I know what it means!" Dean's growl held an inhuman quality that sent shivers down my spine. "She's human. How am I supposed to explain that I'm a wolf shifter? That I've bound her to me forever with that bite?"

The cup slipped from my numb fingers, shattering on the floor. Coffee spread like dark blood around my bare feet.

"Nina?" Dean appeared in the doorway. The phone was forgotten in his hand, his face pale with shock. His hazel eyes held a wild, almost feral quality I'd never noticed before. Or maybe I had, but I'd dismissed it as a trick of the light.

Now, I remembered all those little moments. From his growls of frustration, to his uncanny ability to sense when I was nearby, to the way his eyes seemed to glow when he was angry. Everything clicked into terrifying clarity. All those times I'd joked about him being an animal when he worked through the night, or teased him about his territorial nature over his office space, I hadn't known how right I was.

"Wolf shifter," I whispered, backing away from the spreading coffee. My bare feet left damp footprints. "You turned me into—"

"No!" Dean stepped toward me, then stopped when I flinched. Raw pain flashed across his face. "Please don't look at me like that," he whispered, his voice cracking. "Like I'm a monster."

"I'm not." But wasn't I? The way I'd backed away. He must have felt the fear that must be radiating from me. I forced myself to take a steady breath. "I'm looking at you like someone who just discovered everything they thought they knew about the world was wrong."

"The mark doesn't turn you. It just connects us."

"Connects us?" My hand flew to my neck, to that strange, raised mark that now felt like it was pulsing with heat. "What does that mean exactly?"

Jenkins chose that moment to interrupt. "Shall I clean up the coffee, sir? Though I must say, dramatic revelations are better suited to the living room. The wooden floor is quite porous."

"Not now, Jenkins," Dean snapped, running a hand through his disheveled dark hair. His movements were agitated, and for the first time, I recognized it as predatory. "Nina, please. Let me explain."

I squared my shoulders, channeling every ounce of optimism I'd ever possessed. "Yes, let's explain. Starting with why you waited until after you'd marked me to mention you're not human."

His jaw clenched, muscles working beneath his skin. "I never planned to mark you. My wolf recognized you as mate as soon as we met, and last night, when we were together, I lost control." He growled in frustration, and this time I couldn't dismiss the animalistic sound.

"Your wolf?" I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly very aware that I was wearing nothing but his shirt. "You talk about it like it's separate from you."

"It is. And it isn't." Dean took a careful step closer, his movements measured like he was afraid of spooking me. "It's part of me, but sometimes it has its own impulses. Especially regarding mates."

"Mates," I echoed faintly. "Like werewolf mates? Forever mates?"

He nodded, and despite my fear and confusion, I couldn't help but notice how vulnerable he looked. The powerful, grumpy CEO I'd come to know was gone, replaced by a man who seemed terrified I might run screaming.

I should run. Any sane person would.

But my mind flashed to the moments when he had been vulnerable, and the times he hovered whenever I worked too long and had forgotten to eat. The way he pretended to work while keeping an eye on me. Now I wondered, had his wolf been worried about me even then?

Even his grumpiness had become endearing. And hadn't I always sensed something wild and untamed beneath his controlled exterior?

"Does it hurt you?" I asked finally. "Being what you are?"

Surprise flickered across his face, followed by a wave of emotion so strong I felt it echo in my chest. Relief. Hope. And something deeper. That must have been the connection he was talking about.

"No," he said softly. "It's just part of who I am. Who I've always been."

Something in his tone made me pause. How lonely must it have been, carrying this secret his whole life? How many people had he trusted with this truth, only to have them run away? The mark on my neck tingled, as if responding to my thoughts. Maybe that's why the wolf chose me, because deep down, it knew I would understand what it meant to be different, to hide parts of yourself from the world.

I nodded slowly as I processed everything. "And this mark, what does it really mean for us?" My fingers traced the slightly raised skin, which seemed to warm at my touch.

Dean moved closer, and this time I didn't back away. "It means we're mate bonded. You'll be able to sense my emotions, especially strong ones. I'll be able to sense yours. It's a tie that can't be broken."

"Forever," I whispered, remembering his words from the phone call.

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"Yes." His voice was rough with emotion. "I'm sorry, Nina. I should have told you everything before."

"Before you claimed me as your mate?"

He flinched at my blunt words. "Yes."

I studied him carefully, seeing him with new eyes. The predatory grace I'd attributed to his athletic build, the intensity I'd blamed on his genius. It all made sense now. He wasn't just a billionaire with a temper. He was literally part wolf.

I studied the sharp angles of his face, the tension in his jaw. He looked simultaneously more human and less than I'd ever seen him, vulnerable and powerful all at once. My heart ached with the complexity of it all, with the weight of this moment that would forever divide my life into before and after.

"Show me," I said suddenly.

"What?"

"Your wolf. If I'm going to be bound to you forever, I want to see all of you."

Dean stared at me for a long moment, and I watched in fascination as his hazel eyes changed, gold spreading from his pupils like honey in warm tea. My heart pounded, not from fear, but from the raw power radiating from him. The mark on my neck pulsed in response.

"Not here. Not like this," he said, voice rough with restraint. His fingers flexed at his sides, and I sensed he was holding something back. "When the time is right, I'll show you everything. I don't want to overwhelm you more than I already have."

"You think seeing your wolf form would be more overwhelming than finding out I'm supernaturally bound to you for eternity?" I asked, trying to lighten the moment.

His lips twitched. "Point taken."

I let him pull me close, breathing in his familiar scent that now held new meaning. "I'm processing," I admitted. "It's a lot to take in. But I'm not running away screaming, if that's what you're worried about."

His arms tightened around me, and I felt his relief wash through our new bond like a warm wave. "I can feel your confusion, your fear." He pressed his face into my hair, inhaling deeply in a way that seemed distinctly wolf-like. "But also your acceptance. How are you so calm about this?"

I laughed softly, the sound slightly hysterical. "Maybe I'm in shock." I pulled back to look at him, really look at him. "Maybe I'm just tired of normal. My whole life has been about playing it safe, doing what's expected. Moving to the city was the first real risk I'd ever taken. Then I met you, and everything changed. Finding out you're a wolf shifter is just one more extraordinary thing about you."

A warm, glowing sensation flowed through my chest, liquid gold threading through my veins and settling in my bones. It was as if someone had wrapped my soul in velvet. It was soft, warm, and impossibly intimate. Each pulse of the connection brought new awareness, from the steady rhythm of his heartbeat echoing in my mind, to the fleeting ghosts of his emotions coloring my thoughts in shades I'd never known existed. It wasn't my feeling, or at least, not entirely. Through this strange new connection, I could sense Dean's relief washing over me.

"Oh," I gasped, pressing a hand to my heart. "Is that it?"

"The bond," Dean confirmed softly. "You're feeling what I feel. And I feel what you feel. It takes some getting used to."

"It's like a warm blanket on a cold day," I tried to explain, "but the warmth starts in my heart."

"That's a surprisingly accurate description." His eyes softened, and a wave of tender affection rippled through our connection. "Nina," he breathed my name like a prayer, his voice carrying a growling undertone that made me shiver. "My mate."

Part of me wanted to lose myself in his arms again, but there were still things we needed to discuss. "You have to tell me everything," I said firmly, channeling some of that determination that had gotten me through my first day in his chaotic penthouse. "No more secrets. If I'm going to be bound to a wolf shifter for eternity, I need to know what I'm getting into."

Dean nodded solemnly. "Everything," he promised. "But first, let me get Jenkins to clean up this coffee, and then we should probably put on some actual clothes."

I glanced down at his shirt barely covering my thighs and blushed. "Right. Clothes first, life-altering supernatural revelations second."

His laugh was rich and warm, rumbling through his chest where I was pressed against him. For the first time since I'd overheard his conversation, I felt truly at peace with what had happened. Whatever being Dean's mate meant, whatever challenges lay ahead, I knew in my heart I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Even if where I was meant to be was bound forever to a grumpy billionaire wolf shifter who'd failed to mention that rather important detail before biting me.

"Jenkins," Dean called out, still holding me close. "Clean up this mess, and hold all my calls. My mate and I need to talk."

"Of course, sir," Jenkins replied dryly. "Shall I also research couple's counselors who specialize in supernatural relationships? I hear communication is key, especially when one partner has failed to mention their species before mating."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing. Dean growled at his AI's sass, but I felt his amusement through our bond.

This wasn't how I'd expected my morning to go, but then nothing about Dean Nightfang had ever been expected.

Chapter 12

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DEAN

After our talk about the mate bond, I insisted that Nina take the day off to process everything. She needed time with her sister, who always seemed to ground her. Even through our new bond, I could sense her emotional exhaustion.

"Go see Max," I told her, brushing my thumb across her cheek. "Let him show you his latest superhero drawings. Clear your head."

Nina started to protest, but I silenced her with a kiss. "The penthouse will survive one day without you. Jenkins will make sure I eat."

"Indeed," Jenkins chimed in. "Though I cannot guarantee the organizational systems will remain intact in Ms. Sorenson's absence."

That earned a laugh from Nina. She left shortly after, promising to return tomorrow with a clearer perspective on everything. From the security feed, I watched her get into my car and my driver take off, all the while trying to ignore the wolf's displeasure at letting our newly marked mate out of our sight.

I threw myself into work, attempting to distract both man and wolf from Nina's absence. Everything was fine until mid-afternoon, when the security alerts flashed across my monitors, each one sending fresh waves of rage through my system.

"Jenkins, status report," I growled, trying to focus through the red haze of fury.

"Multiple breach attempts detected across all major servers, sir. The attack pattern

suggests insider knowledge." Jenkins paused, his artificial voice carrying genuine concern. "Sir, you have an incoming call from Lars."

My heart dropped to my stomach. There was no reason for Nina's driver to call me unless something had happened. "Patch him through," I commanded.

"Mr. Nightfang, we have a situation," Lars said, his voice tense. "Ms. Sorenson's car was intercepted en route to her sister's. I tried to intervene, but they took her, sir."

My blood ran cold. Through our newly formed bond, I reached for Nina, seeking that warm, comforting sensation of her presence. Instead, I found fear, sharp and metallic, like blood on my tongue.

"Who took her, Lars?" I snarled, my fangs already threatening to emerge.

"It was your brother, sir. Mr. Mitchell seems to be involved as well, sir," Lars continued. "I overheard them mentioning a plan to use Ms. Sorenson to force your hand in some business matter. I'm sorry, sir."

"You did well, Lars," I managed to snarl, even as the wolf fought for control. "Get back here. We need all hands on deck."

I ended the call and turned to my monitors, pulling up the GPS tracker I'd installed in Nina's phone. "Signal lost near Mountain Creek Road," Jenkins said. A map appeared, but I could barely focus through the red haze of fury. My fangs had fully descended, cutting into my lip as I fought to maintain enough human consciousness to think. They were taking her to an old hunting cabin up in the mountains near Paradise Peaks. It was an old Nightfang family property, a place I knew all too well.

A roar of pure, murderous rage tore from my throat.

My mate. They took my mate.

The wolf was beyond reason now, clawing to get out, to hunt, to slaughter. The mahogany conference table lay split in two, papers scattered like fallen leaves across the marble floor. My computer monitors were broken and cracked on the floor. My designer chair had become a twisted heap of leather and chrome in the corner. The wolf's rage still thundered through my veins, turning every heartbeat into a war drum demanding vengeance.

"Jenkins, prepare the chopper. I'm going after her."

"Sir, your heart rate is dangerously elevated. Dr. Wu's protocols—"

"Damn the protocols!" I roared, my voice barely human. "They have my mate, Jenkins. Nothing will stop me from getting her back."

My phone buzzed, and Sean's message with the photo of Nina tied up was nearly my undoing. The screen shattered in my grip, glass shards embedding in my palm as my vision went completely red. The wolf's bloodlust merged with my own rage until there was no separation between man and beast. Only the all-consuming need to destroy everyone who had dared to harm what was mine remained.

The phone buzzed again with a new message. "Your company or your mate. Choose wisely."

My roar shook the windows. Glass cracked beneath the force of my fury as I fought to maintain human form. They would die screaming. I would paint the mountains with their blood.

I stormed to the elevator, the wolf clawing at my insides, desperate to break free. It wanted out, to hunt, to kill. But I couldn't lose control. I had to think clearly. Nina's

life depended on it.

As the elevator ascended, I reached out through our bond, trying to send Nina comfort, reassurance. I'm coming, Nina. Hold on.

The helicopter was ready on the rooftop landing pad, blades already spinning. The chopper lifted off, the city skyline shrinking beneath us as we headed for the mountains.

I felt Nina's fear, her determination, and her trust in me. It fueled my resolve, pushing the chopper faster, harder. The landscape below blended into a green blur as we tore through the sky.

As we approached the cabin, I saw two SUVs parked outside. I landed the chopper a safe distance away, out of Rafe's range of hearing. I jumped out, the wolf's predatory instincts taking over as I ran towards the cabin.

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I could scent them all. Rafe, Sean, and Nina. Their emotions hung heavy in the air. It was a mixture of greed, anger, and fear. My mate's fear was a razor slicing through my heart.

I crept closer. Through the trees, I caught fragments of conversation.

"Your brother's gotten soft," Sean said. "All that technology, all that power, and he falls for a human maid?"

"The mighty Dean Nightfang, brought low by a pretty face." Rafe's laugh held no warmth. "Though I have to admit, she is delectable."

Fury built in my chest as I crept closer. Nina sat exactly as she had in Sean's photo, but her expression wasn't one of defeat. Even bound and surrounded by enemies, she held herself with quiet dignity. Her eyes scanned the cabin, taking in details, looking for weaknesses. My clever, brave mate.

"He'll come for me," she said, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "And when he does, you'll regret this."

"Oh, we're counting on it, sweetheart." Rafe dragged a claw down her cheek, drawing a thin line of blood.

The scent of Nina's blood shattered the last threads of my control. Sean's next words froze me in place.

"The moment he shows up, the virus I planted will activate. Everything he's built will

crumble. His precious technology will become a weapon against the very people he swore to protect." Sean's smile was cruel. "And it's all thanks to your security clearance, my dear. Amazing what access a maid has these days."

Nina's eyes widened in horror. "No."

"Yes," Rafe purred. "Big brother's fatal flaw, caring too much. About his company, about protecting humans." He grabbed Nina's chin roughly. "About you."

The building pressure in my chest reached critical mass. My humanity warred with the wolf, each second of forced control an agony.

Nina's voice cut through my turmoil, clear and strong despite her fear: "You're wrong about him. Caring isn't weakness. It's what makes him stronger than either of you will ever be."

Pride and love surged through me, strengthening rather than weakening my resolve. She believed in me. Not just the wolf, not just the billionaire, but all of me. And I would not let her down.

The emotions coursed through our bond like liquid fire, burning away doubt. My mate truly saw me, not as separate halves but as one being worthy of her trust. The wolf, usually so intent on violence, purred at her acceptance. So many of our kind had spent centuries viewing our dual nature as a curse, yet she made it feel like a gift.

I stopped into view. "Let. Her. Go."

"Right on schedule," Sean smirked, pulling out his phone. "One message, and everything you've built burns."

"Did you really think I'd leave my systems vulnerable?" I took another step forward,

feeling the change ripple beneath my skin. I held my thumb on my phone screen, activating it. "Jenkins, execute Protocol Phoenix."

Through our bond, I felt Nina's confusion shift to understanding. She'd spent months organizing my files - she knew what Protocol Phoenix meant. Everything backed up, everything locked down, everything Sean thought he could access reduced to ashes and reborn somewhere secure.

"You think you can win this?" Sean's voice wavered slightly. "One woman's life against your entire empire?"

"You never understood, Sean," I replied, letting my fangs show. "Everything I built, every system and safeguard, it was always to protect people like her. Without that purpose, the empire means nothing."

"No!" Sean's phone sparked and died in his hand.

"You're not the only one who can plant a virus." My smile was all fangs. "The moment you accessed our systems, you gave us access to yours. Everything you own, everything you've stolen, it's already being transferred to federal authorities."

"Always the hero, aren't you, brother? Always thinking you're better than us?" Rafe snarled as he shifted into his wolf form. The words came out slurred and garbled as his mouth changed. His fur was darker than mine, but he was smaller. Weaker.

"Not better." My voice distorted as bones began to crack and reform. "Just done letting you hurt the people I love."

The rage erupted from my core like molten steel, my spine cracking and elongating as the change ripped through me. Tendons snapped and reformed, muscle fibers tearing apart to restructure around a new skeletal frame. My jaw dislocated with a wet pop,

teeth pushing through bleeding gums as they elongated into deadly fangs.

Claws burst from my fingertips, my hands contorting and crushing inward as paw pads emerged from splintering bones. My ribcage expanded with sickening cracks, lungs reforming as my internal organs shifted and realigned. Fur pushed through my skin like thousands of needles, each hair burning as it erupted in waves across my transforming body. The pain was excruciating, yet welcomed. Each broken bone and torn muscle brought me closer to the form I needed to protect my mate. My shoulders split and reformed, front legs twisting as my spine curved.

When the transformation was completed, I stood, towering over Rafe, silver fur bristling along my massive frame. My jaws, powerful enough to crush bone, dripped saliva as I fixed my amber eyes on my brother's throat. Time to end this.

Through red-tinted vision, I saw Nina's eyes widen, not in fear, but in awe. Even now, facing my most primal form, she didn't look away. Through our connection, I felt not revulsion at my changing form, but a fierce pride and determination. Her fear remained, yet it wasn't for herself. She feared for me, for what my brother's betrayal must be doing to my heart.

"My God," she whispered. Wonder colored her voice. "You're magnificent."

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Sean sneered. "Don't be impressed, sweetheart. He's still the same weak loser." He held a gun up to her temple.

Nina's glare could have cut him to pieces. "The only weak one here is the coward who had to kidnap someone because of his shady business dealings."

With a roar that shook the cabin's walls, I lunged for my brother's throat.

Chapter 13

NINA

The cabin trembled around me as the two massive wolves collided. Each impact between the massive wolves sent tremors through the floorboards beneath my feet, making the rustic light fixtures overhead swing wildly.

Dean's silver coat shimmered in the dim light, rippling over muscles that could tear a man apart. His massive form moved with a deadly grace that seemed impossible for something so large. Amber eyes blazed with an otherworldly intelligence that marked him as far more than mere beast.

The sickening crack of bodies colliding echoed off the walls. Rafe's midnight black fur bristled as he snapped and snarled, his teeth flashing like daggers. Dean dodged, but not fast enough. Rafe's fangs found purchase, tearing into muscle. My stomach lurched at the wet sound of flesh rending. The metallic scent of blood was so strong I could taste it on my tongue, making bile rise in my throat. Each new wound opened with a wet, tearing sound that would haunt my nightmares. Blood sprayed in arcs

with every shake of their massive heads, painting grotesque patterns across the cabin's rough-hewn walls. My heart stopped as Rafe's massive jaws clamped onto Dean's throat, threatening to tear out his jugular. Dean twisted, barely escaping, but Rafe's teeth left deep puncture wounds that matted his silver fur crimson.

"See that?" Sean pressed the gun harder against my temple, his breath hot on my ear. "Your precious protector's about to die. Just like you."

I worked desperately at the ropes, feeling skin tear as the fibers bit deeper. Every crash and snarl made me flinch. Through our mate bond, Dean's pain lanced through me like lightning. A particularly vicious bite from Rafe tore into Dean's flank, making him stumble. My wolf was losing.

"Stop!" I screamed as Rafe's claws raked Dean's face, barely missing his eye. "You're killing him!"

"That's the point." Sean grabbed my hair, yanking my head back. "Watch carefully. This is what happens to those who defy the Nightfang family."

Dean slammed into the fireplace, stones cracking under the impact. He tried to rise, but his leg gave out. Something was broken. Rafe's darker form loomed over him, victory gleaming in his cruel eyes.

The rope finally gave way with a sharp snap that sent hope surging through my chest. Don't think, just move. I channeled every self-defense class I'd ever taken, every warning Maggie had drilled into my head about staying safe in the city. My elbow shot backward, finding its target with a solid crunch that vibrated up my arm. Sean's howl of pain sent a vindictive thrill through me.

"You little bitch!" he sputtered, warm blood spraying from his ruined nose.

His grip on the gun loosened just enough. Now or never. The cold metal scraped against my palm as I made my grab. The barrel swung wildly as we grappled.

BANG!

The shot deafened me. White-hot pain blazed across my ribs as the bullet grazed me. Sean used my shock to slam me into the wall. Stars exploded behind my eyes.

His hands closed around my throat. "I'm going to enjoy this," he snarled, squeezing.

His fingers dug in like steel bands, each desperate breath I sucked in burning like fire in my chest. Black spots danced at the edges of my vision. My pulse pounded in my ears, a frantic drumbeat growing fainter with each passing second. My vision blurred and darkened, the world narrowing to pinpricks of light as consciousness began to slip away. Through our bond, I felt Dean's desperation. He tried to reach me, but Rafe blocked his path.

With fading strength, I groped blindly along the wall. My fingers brushed cold metal - one of the iron fireplace pokers that scattered when Dean slammed into it. I grabbed it and swung. The points caught Sean's face, opening deep gashes. He howled, releasing me.

I collapsed, gasping for air. The gun lay between us. We both lunged for it. Sean's fingers closed around the grip first. I grabbed his wrist, forcing the barrel up as he pulled the trigger. The shot punched through the ceiling, sending splinters raining down.

Dean's agonized yelp split the air. Rafe had him pinned, jaws closing on his exposed throat. No no no. Through our bond, I felt Dean's strength failing.

"Say goodbye to your mate," Sean laughed, wrestling the gun toward my head.

Something inside me snapped. With strength born of pure desperation, I slammed my forehead into Sean's broken nose. He screamed. The gun clattered free. I snatched it up and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The bullet took Sean in the chest. His eyes widened in shock as he staggered back. But he wasn't finished. His hand went to his ankle holster, drawing another weapon.

Dean roared. He lunged at Sean and swiped his claws. Before Sean could even turn around, Dean has shredded him to ribbons. Blood dripped on the floor into a pool, before Sean collapsed on his knees and fell face first onto the floor.

A terrible cry of pain drew my attention back to the wolves. Rafe had Dean's throat in his jaws, ready for the killing bite. Without thinking, I aimed the gun at Rafe's massive form.

"Let him go or you're next!"

Rafe's eyes found mine, calculating. The gun shook in my blood-slick hands but my voice was steel. "I said let him go!"

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The darker wolf hesitated a crucial second too long. My finger tightened on the trigger just as Dean's massive paw caught Rafe's underbelly, throwing him off. The bullet caught Rafe's shoulder instead of his heart. He howled in rage and pain.

Dean's jaws closed on his brother's throat, forcing him down. Blood matted both of their coats, turning the floor into a stickyred lake. But this time, Dean didn't let go until Rafe's struggles weakened into submission.

"Jenkins!" I shouted, praying Dean's AI could hear through my phone. "Call the police!"

"Already done, Ms. Sorenson." Jenkins's calm voice emerged from my pocket. "Local authorities are six minutes out."

When it was over, Dean stood over Sean's broken body, his silver fur stained crimson. His amber eyes found mine, glowing with otherworldly intensity. I felt his fear of how I'd react to his lethal violence.

I crossed the bloody floor without hesitation, burying my face in his thick scruff. His fur was impossibly soft despite the blood, his massive body trembling slightly as he curled protectively around me. Through the bond, I sent all my love, acceptance, and gratitude.

You saved me. You're not a monster. You're mine.

Rafe whimpered from his corner, still in wolf form but thoroughly subdued. Police sirens wailed in the distance, growing closer. Dean's massive form shuddered against

me, muscle and bone beginning their brutal reformation. His shoulders contracted under my hands, bones grinding as they shifted from wolf to man. I could feel every crack and pop beneath my palms as his body fought to reshape itself. The silver fur rippled like mercury before sinking back into human skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. I held him tighter, trying to steady him through the change that I knew caused him such agony. I felt echoes of his pain pulse into my mind, but I refused to let go. I had to let him feel my strength, my acceptance. Let him know he never had to hide this part of himself from me.

A low groan escaped him. The sound was caught between a growl and a human cry. I pressed my forehead to his temple, my fingers threading through hair that moments ago had been fur.

"I'm here," I whispered. "I've got you."

"Nina." His voice was rough, pained. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

I silenced him with a kiss, tasting blood and wolf and man. "Never apologize for protecting me."

Blue and red lights flooded the cabin as police cars surrounded us. Dean pulled me closer, his body still thrumming with protective energy.

"Mr. Nightfang?" A woman's calm, authoritative voice called from the doorway. An elegant Asian woman in her forties stepped through the splintered door, medical bag in hand. Her sharp eyes took in the scene with clinical detachment. "Jenkins alerted me. Is everyone okay.?"

"Dr. Wu," Dean acknowledged, his posture relaxing slightly though he kept me tucked against him. "Nina's hurt."

"I can see that." Dr. Wu's expression sharpened as she took in my injuries. "Let's get her stabilized."

I tried to protest but swayed on my feet, the adrenaline crash hitting hard. Dean caught me, easing me down onto a relatively clean patch of floor.

"I need to examine her properly," Dr. Wu said firmly. "Dean, give us some space."

Dean growled low in his throat, his wolf still too close to the surface to accept separation.

"Your mate needs medical attention," Dr. Wu said, unprovoked by his display. "The sooner you let me work, the sooner I can ensure she's properly cared for."

Dean reluctantly stepped back, though he remained within arm's reach, his eyes never leaving me.

"The bullet wound first," Dr. Wu murmured, cutting away the fabric around my ribs. I hissed as she cleaned the graze. "Thankfully it's superficial, but it'll need stitches. The throat bruising concerns me more. Any difficulty breathing?"

"A little," I admitted, wincing as she probed the tender skin.

Dean's growl deepened. I felt his fury at my pain warring with his trust in Dr. Wu.

"I'll need to monitor you for potential swelling," she said, shining a light in my eyes. "The head wound isn't serious but you may have a concussion. And these rope burns will need treatment to prevent infection."

She worked efficiently, stitching the bullet graze and applying antiseptic to my various wounds. When she pressed on my ribs, I couldn't suppress a gasp of pain.

"Bruised, possibly cracked ribs," she diagnosed. "We'll need X-rays to be certain."

The sound that escaped Dean was barely human. Dr. Wu shot him a quelling look.

"She'll heal," she assured him. "But she needs rest and careful monitoring. I'm admitting her to my private clinic where I can keep an eye on her."

I started to object but Dean's hand found mine, squeezing gently.

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"Okay," I whispered, too exhausted to argue. "But you stay with me."

"Wild wolves couldn't drag me away," he promised, and I felt the truth of it in my bones.

As the police swarmed the scene, I leaned into Dean's chest, feeling his heart beat against my cheek. The violence should have changed how I saw him. Instead, it only confirmed what I already knew, that I loved all of him, wolf and man, protector and predator.

His lips brushed my hair. "I thought I'd lose you."

"Never." I turned to face him, touched his blood stained cheek. "We're bound now, remember? Where you go, I go. No matter what form you take."

The last of his tension melted away as he pulled me into a fierce kiss. His chest rumbled as he purred in contentment. We were safe. We were together. We were whole.

Chapter 14

DEAN

The sterile antiseptic and chemicals couldn't mask Nina's sweet essence. I paced restlessly as I watched her sleep in Dr. Wu's clinic, each slow beep of the heart monitor both reassuring and a source of torment. Bruises darkened her throat, each mark a stark reminder of how close we'd come to losing her. My wolf threatened to

emerge every time I looked at those bruises. Even though Sean was already dead, I howled for revenge.

"The throat swelling has decreased significantly," Dr. Wu murmured, checking Nina's vitals with practiced efficiency. "No complications from the concussion, and the bullet graze is healing cleanly."

A warning growl rumbled in my chest when she touched the bandage on Nina's ribs.

Dr. Wu's steady gaze met mine, unimpressed. "If you're quite finished posturing, I need to check her stitches."

I forced my wolf back, though its protective instincts still stirred beneath my skin. "Sorry."

"She's strong," Dr. Wu said, gentler now. "Stronger than you give her credit for."

"I know." Pride and love swelled in my chest. "Believe me, I know."

Nina's fingers twitched against the sheets, her brow furrowing as consciousness returned. My heart leaped when her eyelashes fluttered, desperate for that first glimpse of green. The mate bond, which had been a dull ache while she slept, burst into vibrant life as her gaze found mine.

"Dean?" Her voice was rough, but it was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard.

I was beside her instantly, carefully taking her hand. Her fingers were warm now, nothing like the terrifying coldness I'd felt after the fight. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Like I went ten rounds with a wolf," she said with a weak smile, then winced. "Oh wait, I did."

My throat clenched. I brought her hand to my lips, kissing each knuckle like a prayer.

"I dreamed," she whispered, a tremor in her voice.

"I'm here," I assured her, pressing my forehead to hers. "We're both here. We made it. Rest, Nina."

While Nina slept, Jenkins updated me on the penthouse situation. Apparently, my AI had made an executive decision during the crisis.

"I took the liberty of contacting Mrs. Abernathy," Jenkins informed me. "Given the extensive redecoration you performed in your office, sir, I calculated she would be the most efficient solution."

I winced, remembering the destruction my wolf had unleashed. "You called my elderly neighbor to clean up after a wolf rampage?"

"Mrs. Abernathy proved surprisingly capable," Jenkins replied, a hint of admiration in his artificial voice. "She arrived with industrial cleaning supplies and three decades of experience removing what she termed unfortunate stains from various surfaces. She was also quite discreet."

I watched the security feed in disbelief as Mrs. Abernathy, all four-foot-eleven of her, marched through my destroyed office like a general inspecting troops.

"No, no, that won't do at all," her crisp voice carried through the feed. "The blood has already set into the grain. We'll need the industrial enzyme cleaner for that section. Maria, be a dear and fetch my special kit."

She paused at my shredded desk, clicking her tongue. "Werewolves," she muttered, pulling out her phone. "Always so dramatic. Antonio? Yes, I need that mahogany

piece we discussed. The one from Milan. Rush delivery, if you please. And send extra polish, the good stuff."

My wolf's jaw dropped. Just how many supernatural cleanup jobs had my elderly neighbor handled?

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"She left fresh cookies in the kitchen," Jenkins added. "And strict instructions for Ms. Sorenson to rest properly when she returns home."

Perhaps I'd underestimated the fierce little woman who always smelled of baking and lavender.

"Remind me to send her something nice," I muttered, turning back to watch Nina sleep.

"Already done, sir. A year's supply of her favorite Ceylon tea and those Danish butter cookies she covets. I took the liberty of signing the card from both you and Ms. Sorenson."

I smiled despite myself. Between Jenkins and Mrs. Abernathy, the penthouse would be perfect for Nina's return. My mate deserved nothing less.

Later that afternoon, Sabrina spent almost an hour drilling us on care instructions, rest, medication schedules, and wound care. Each instruction felt etched into my bones. I memorized the precise angle to help her sit up, the exact timing of medications, and which movements to avoid. My wolf catalogued every detail with an intensity that surprised even me. This wasn't just about healing her body. It was about proving we could protect her, care for her, be worthy of the trust she'd placed in us. Never again would we let her suffer like this. Finally, we were cleared to leave.

The elevator doors opened to reveal our sanctuary transformed. Fresh air tinged with mint and citrus replaced the bitter scent of violence that had haunted my nightmares. My keen nose detected the subtle layers of cleaning agents beneath. Jenkins and Mrs.

Abernathy had been thorough.

My wolf's thoughts tumbled between amusement and embarrassment. Our neighbor, this tiny human who smelled of butter cookies and determination, had seen our territory at its worst, witnessed the aftermath of our rage, and responded by ordering specialized cleaning supplies. The wolf in me wasn't sure whether to be impressed by her efficiency or mortified that our loss of control had been so thoroughly managed by someone who barely reached our chest height.

Nina's fingers tightened on mine as she took in the space.

"Welcome home, Ms. Sorenson, Mr. Nightfang," Jenkins greeted. "All security protocols have been upgraded and verified. The residence has been prepared to Dr. Wu's specifications."

Nina's relief at being home washed through our bond as she looked around the familiar space. "Thanks, Jenkins. It's good to be back."

Home. The word resonated through me. This place had been my sanctuary, my wolf's private den. Now it was transformed by Nina's presence. It was warmer, brighter, and truly a home for the first time.

I helped her settle on the couch, arranging pillows to support her injured ribs. "Do you need anything? Water? Pain meds?"

"Just you." She patted the space beside her. "Hold me?"

As if she needed to ask. I gathered her against me with utmost care, my chest rumbling as she relaxed into my embrace. Her scent wrapped around me like a balm, soothing the last of my battle tension.

"We should talk about what happened," she said after a while, her fingers tracing patterns on my arm.

"Nina."

"No, listen." She shifted to face me, wincing slightly at the movement. "I need you to understand something important. What I saw you shifting, fighting, and protecting me, it didn't frighten me. It made me love you more."

"What happened, Sean—"

"Was going to kill us both." She touched my face, her green eyes fierce. "You did what you had to do. Just like I did."

The image of my mate firing that gun flashed through my mind. I was filled with pride, even as my heart ached.

"I'm sorry you were put in that position," I said.

Before I could say more, Jenkins interrupted us. "Ms. Violet Nightfang is requesting entrance to the penthouse."

My wolf exploded beneath my skin, fangs threatening to descend as rage and terror collided. The mere thought of my mother anywhere near Nina sent protective fury racing through my veins. My muscles coiled, ready to shift at a moment's notice.

"Dean." Nina's voice, still raspy from her injuries, cut through the red haze. "Your eyes are glowing." She paused as she scanned my face for my reaction. "Let her in," Nina said quietly.

"You don't have to face her." I cradled her closer. "Not now, not ever."

"Yes, we do." She squeezed my hand, her determination flowing through our bond.
"This needs to end. Today."

My mother's entrance was as cold and filled with disappointment as I had expected. Her silver-streaked hair was swept into an immaculate chignon, not a strand daring to escape its place. The cut of her charcoal suit was razor-sharp, every crease a weapon. Even her perfume was a calculated assault, just strong enough to irritate my wolf's sensitive nose without being obviously aggressive.

My wolf bristled as she crossed into my penthouse territory, every step a deliberate invasion. Her designer heels clicked as she took in Nina's injuries with calculating eyes. I felt Nina tense beside me, her heart rate accelerating slightly, though her expression remained calm.

"Well," she said. "I see Rafe wasn't exaggerating the dramatics."

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My muscles coiled as I stood, positioning myself between her and my mate. The wolf's growl vibrated in my chest, remembering every cold word, every manipulative scheme she'd used to control us. "Why are you here?"

"To clean up your mess, as usual." She sighed with practiced martyrdom, adjusting her platinum bracelet in a gesture I'd seen thousands of times. It was her tell when she was preparing to deliver a particularly cutting blow. "Really, Dean. A human mate? And now Sean Marshall's death to explain away."

The casual dismissal of Nina's near-death experience sent rage coursing through my veins. "No." The word came out more wolf than human, my fangs threatening to descend. "You don't get to come here and act like this is my fault. Your schemes, your precious family business. It ends now."

Mother's manicured fingers tightened on her handbag. "You're being ridiculous."

"Rafe nearly killed him," Nina's quiet voice cut through the tension like a blade. Through our bond, I felt her fierce protectiveness warring with genuine bewilderment at my mother's coldness. "Your son. Your own blood. And you're worried about appearances?"

Something cracked in her perfect mask. A flash of something almost like pain in her eyes before the ice returned. "You don't understand our world, girl."

"I understand family." Nina's hand found mine, our bond humming with shared strength. "And this isn't it. Family protects each other. Family chooses love over power. What you've built is just a prison of obligations and fear."

"Choose," I told my mother, drawing on Nina's courage. "Either accept that I'm done with the family business, and that Nina is my mate and my future, or leave. Permanently."

Violet's eyes narrowed to slits. "You would choose her over your own blood?"

"Every time."

"Very well." Violet's spine stiffened to steel. "I see you've made your choice."

"I have." I met her gaze steadily, my wolf calm and certain. "Goodbye, Mother."

She left without another word, taking the last shadows of my past with her. The moment the elevator doors closed behind my mother, the tension I'd carried since childhood began to unravel. My wolf, which had been coiled tight with protective fury, slowly settled as the scent of her perfume dissipated. Each breath came easier, like finally breaking through water and breathing air after a lifetime of drowning.

Nina tugged me back down beside her, curling into my arms despite her injuries. I hadn't realized how much of my life had been spent bracing for her disapproval, measuring every decision against her exacting standards. Now, with Nina warm and real in my arms, those old chains felt meaningless.

I searched for words, my fingers absently stroking Nina's hair. "I feel lighter. Like I've been carrying this weight for so long that I forgot what it was like without it."

Nina's hand found my heart. She didn't try to fill the silence with platitudes or judgments. She simply held space for whatever emotions needed to surface.

A laugh bubbled up out of my throat, surprising us both. It was not bitter or angry, but genuinely free. My wolf stretched luxuriously, reveling in the simple joy of being

exactly who and what we were meant to be. No more pretense. No more sacrificing pieces of ourselves to fit someone else's vision.

For the first time in my life, I was completely, unequivocally free to choose my own path. And I'd chosen love.

"You okay?" she whispered against my neck.

I buried my face in her hair, breathing in honeysuckle and mate and home. "Yeah. I really am."

"What happens now?"

"Now?" I smiled against her skin, finally at peace. "Now we heal. Together. And maybe plan that wedding empire you've been dreaming about."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that." She yawned, nestling closer. "Stay with me?"

"Always." I pulled her carefully against my chest, my wolf curling protectively around our mate's sleeping form. "Always."

A gentle knock interrupted our peaceful moment. Before Jenkins could announce our visitor, the unmistakable scent of homemade chicken soup and butter cookies wafted through the door.

"Mrs. Abernathy," Jenkins announced, a touch of fondness in his artificial voice. "Bearing sustenance."

The diminutive woman bustled in, a tiny stout tornado of activity despite the late hour. She carried a large covered pot that steamed promisingly.

"There's my favorite couple!" she declared, setting her burden on the coffee table. "I brought my famous healing chicken dumpling soup, it's the same recipe that brought my Arnold back from pneumonia in '82." She winked at Nina. "Though I suspect your young man's unique constitution might speed things along."

I tensed, but Nina let out a small smile, careful not to jostle her ribs. Of course, Mrs. Abernathy knew. She probably knew everything that happened in this building.

"Now then," she continued, ladling soup into bowls with practiced efficiency. "I must say, it's about time you two sorted things out. The unresolved sexual tension was getting absolutely ridiculous."

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"Mrs. Abernathy!" Nina squeaked, blushing furiously.

"Oh please, dear. I may be old, but I'm not blind. The way you moped every time you took the elevator downstairs." She gestured at us with her soup spoon. "And you!" she said, pointing the ladle at me, "You have been like a lovesick puppy at every condo board meeting. Or wolf, as the case may be."

My wolf huffed indignantly at being called a puppy, but I couldn't hide my smile. "Was I that obvious?"

"Painfully so." She patted my cheek. "But then, the best ones usually are. You reminded me of my Arnold, all gruff on the outside, but pure marshmallow when it comes to matters of the heart."

Through our bond, I felt Nina's delight at this revelation. Great. I'd never live this down.

"I knew from the moment she stepped into this building," Mrs. Abernathy continued, pressing cookies into Nina's hands. "Such a spark about her. Exactly what this gloomy tower needed. And what you needed too, dear," she added, fixing me with a knowing look. "Though I must say, you could have skipped the dramatic rearrangement of your furniture."

I didn't know whether to be mortified or impressed by her matter-of-fact handling of supernatural drama.

"Thank you," Nina said softly. "For everything. Jenkins told us how you helped fix

everything."

"Nonsense, dear. What are neighbors for?" She stood, smoothing her immaculate skirt. "Now then, you two need rest. Real rest," she added with a pointed look. "Those ribs won't heal properly otherwise, no matter how quick wolf magic might be."

She gathered her things, pausing at the door. "Oh, and Dean? Next time you feel the need to redecorate, give me a heads up. I know an excellent supplier for claw-resistant furniture."

With that parting shot, she swept out, leaving behind the comforting scent of soup and the distinct impression that we'd been adopted whether we liked it or not.

Nina's laughter, though careful of her ribs, filled the room like music. "I love her."

"Yeah," I admitted, pulling Nina close again. "Me too."

Chapter 15

NINA

Dean's dark lashes cast shadows on his sleeping face, softening the sharp angles that usually made him look so intimidating. I traced a finger along the curve of his jaw, across the morning stubble on his cheeks, remembering how that same face had transformed into a fierce wolf just days ago to protect me. The memory should have frightened me, but instead, warmth bloomed in my chest.

This was my mate, both man and wolf, protector and partner. Even relaxed in sleep, he kept one protective arm draped across my waist, his predator's instincts never fully at rest.

"Your sister's car just entered the parking garage," Jenkins announced softly.

Dean's eyes flew open, instantly alert. His anxiety rippled through me, though he tried to mask it with a grumpy morning scowl.

"Breathe," I reminded him, pressing a kiss to his jaw. "They're going to love you."

"Maggie's very protective of you," he muttered, rolling out of bed with predatory grace. "And after everything that happened, I don't blame her."

"Hey." I caught his hand, tugging him back. "No more dwelling on that. We're safe. We're together. And you, Mr. Nightfang, are about to be ambushed by the world's most enthusiastic five-year-old."

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "At least Max can't be scarier than my mother."

"Don't bet on it. He's fueled by sugary cereal and superhero cartoons."

Dean's nervous energy manifested in constant adjustments to his appearance. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught him smoothing non-existent wrinkles and fixing his already perfect tie. For someone who regularly commanded boardrooms and faced down rival wolves, he was adorably flustered by the prospect of meeting my family.

The elevator chimed. My heart skipped as Dean's fingers tightened around mine.

"Last chance to run," I whispered, trying to lighten his mood.

The elevator doors whooshed open with a musical chime, and Max burst out like a tiny tornado of excitement, his Spider-Man sneakers lighting up with each bouncing step. His backpack, stuffed with what looked like every action figure he owned, rattled behind him as he spun in circles, mouth open in awe at the penthouse's soaring

ceilings and gleaming surfaces.

My heart swelled at the sight of my nephew, his enthusiasm so pure and untainted by the darkness we'd faced. Through our bond, I felt Dean's wolf stir with protective instinct, but also curiosity. This was a side of my life he'd only heard about, and now it was bursting into his carefully controlled world with flashing sneakers and endless questions.

"Aunt Nina! Aunt Nina! Mom said your new house is in the sky and you have a robot butler."

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"Jenkins, security protocols alpha-three," Dean started automatically.

I elbowed him. "He's five, not a corporate spy."

"Right. Sorry." Dean's cheeks actually flushed pink. "Force of habit."

"Aunt Nina!" Max barreled into me, and I caught him with only a slight wince. My ribs were mostly healed, the sharp stabbing pain reduced to a dull ache, thanks to Dr. Wu's careful monitoring and whatever supernatural healing boost I'd gotten from Dean's mating bite. The bruises had faded from violent purple to yellowish-green, but I still caught Dean watching me when I moved, his protective instincts warring with his respect for my independence. Dr. Wu had promised I'd be back to normal in another week, though she'd rolled her eyes when Dean demanded hourly daily check-ups on my progress.

His hands twitched forward before he forced them still, respecting my silent signal to let me handle my nephew. But his eyes tracked every movement, ready to intervene if needed.

"Max," I said when he finally paused for breath, "I want you to meet someone very special. This is Dean."

Max tilted his head back, way back, to take in Dean's full height. "Whoa. You're like a superhero! Are you as tall as Iron Man? Can you fly? Do you know Batman?"

Dean crouched down to Max's level, and I felt something in my heart melt at how carefully he controlled his usually intimidating presence.

The mighty CEO of Nightfang Securities, who could silence a boardroom with a glare, was practically holding his breath as he faced down a kindergartener. His usual dominance softened into something gentler, more cautious. I caught flickers of his thoughts. Memories of his own cold childhood, a desperate desire to be nothing like his own father, and fear of frightening this small, precious piece of my family.

"I can't fly," he admitted. "But I do know something about technology. Want to see something cool?"

Max's eyes widened as Dean gestured to Jenkins. The AI understood immediately, projecting a holographic superhero that soared around the room. Light and color danced through the air as the figure performed increasingly elaborate stunts.

"That's so awesome!" Max bounced on his toes. "Can you make more? Can they fight bad guys? Can they shoot lasers?"

"Easy there, buddy," Maggie laughed, finally catching up to her son. Her eyes met mine, communicating volumes in that sisterly way we'd perfected over years of shared secrets and silent support.

Dean's shoulders relaxed incrementally as Max chattered away, his rigid posture softening. His eyes, usually sharp with calculation, grew warm and crinkled at the corners when Max laughed. I caught Maggie watching him, noting how his large hands were infinitely gentle as he guided Max's smaller ones over the holographic controls.

"Nina." Maggie pulled me into the kitchen while Dean kept Max entertained. "Tell me the truth about the accident. Those weren't normal injuries. I saw how you winced when Max hugged you. I've been going crazy imagining what really happened."

I hesitated, weighing how much to reveal. "It's complicated."

"Complicated?" Her voice sharpened. "Nina, you disappeared for days. Your phone was off. I filed a police report! Then suddenly you call from a penthouse, engaged to one of the richest men in the city, with some vague story about a car accident?"

"Mags—"

"I'm your big sister. It's my job to protect you." Her eyes welled with tears. "After what happened with your ex, I promised myself I'd never let anyone hurt you again."

I caught her hands. "Dean isn't Travis. He's the one who saved me from something bad. He risked everything to protect me."

She raised a hand and brushed my hair aside. "Those bruises are awful."

"They're from the people he saved me from," I said firmly. "Dean would die before hurting me. What we have is real, Maggie. More real than anything I've ever known."

She studied my face for a long moment. Through the kitchen doorway, we could hear Max's delighted laughter as Dean's holographic creatures danced through the air.

"He's different with you," she finally said. "I've seen him in the news, the cold, ruthless CEO. But the way he looks at you, it's like you're his whole world. And he's so patient with Max." She shook her head, smiling. "Most men like him wouldn't give a child the time of day. But he's so gentle."

"That's who he really is," I said softly. "Under all the corporate armor. He builds his companies to protect people, Mags. Everything he does is about keeping others safe."

"Including you?"

"Especially me." I touched the mating mark on my neck unconsciously. "But not

because he thinks I'm weak. He supports my dreams and helps me be stronger. That's what real love should do."

Maggie's expression softened as we watched Dean teach Max a simple coding sequence, his large hands carefully guiding my nephew's smaller ones. My nephew sat perched on a specially cleared workbench, face scrunched in concentration as he followed Dean's instructions. "Okay," she said finally. "He passes the big sister inspection. I haven't seen you this happy since, well, ever."

"He does make me happy," I whispered. "So incredibly happy."

"Then he's family now." She squeezed my hand. "But I still reserve the right to threaten him if necessary. It's in the big sister handbook." She turned back to me. "And what about your dreams? The wedding planning business you've talked about since we were kids?"

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I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. "Actually, Dean's helping me start my own company. He's developing specialized software for event planning and running the business."

"Of course he is." Maggie's knowing look said it all. "Because he loves you."

"Mom!" Max's excited voice interrupted our conversation. "Look what Dean taught me!"

A small, slightly wobbly holographic puppy materialized beside him, wagging its tail before dissolving into sparkles.

"Very impressive," Maggie praised. "But maybe we should take a lunch break? Growing programmers need fuel."

Dean's relief at the suggestion flowed through our bond. He'd been worried about entertaining Max, despite doing an amazing job. His stoic self still struggled with uncertainty around children. Max's childlike glee was so different from the cold, formal upbringing he'd endured.

Lunch became an interactive story session, with Dean using his tech to illustrate Max's increasingly wild tale about knights, dragons, and robot ninjas. Even Maggie got drawn in, suggesting plot twists that had Max giggling and Dean's eyes crinkling with genuine mirth.

"Mom!" Max turned to Maggie with his best pleading expression. "Can Dean come to my show and tell? Please? Everyone else's uncles are boring!"

The word uncle sent a cascade of emotions through our bond, surprise, joy, a touch of fear, but mostly acceptance. Dean beamed at being accepted into our family pack, even as his human side processed the magnitude of Max's casual inclusion.

"We'll see, buddy." Maggie's eyes twinkled. "Eat your lunch before the dragon steals it."

The holographic dragon immediately perked up, eyeing Max's sandwich hopefully.

Later, after Maggie and Max left with promises of weekly dinner visits, I found Dean in his office. He stood at the windows, looking at the city skyline.

"You're incredible with him," I said, sliding my arms around his waist.

"He makes it easy. Smart kid."

"Mmm. Gets that from his aunt."

"Modest too," he teased, then grew serious. "Nina, about your wedding planning business."

"Dean."

"Let me help." His thumb traced my cheekbone. "Not just financially, though that's part of it. But think about it, AI-powered planning systems, virtual reality venue tours, security protocols for high-profile events. We could revolutionize the industry together."

Hope bloomed in my chest, bright as sunrise. "You'd do that?"

"Of course," he murmured, "I'd do anything for you. Partners?"

I rose on tiptoe, kissing him softly. "Partners. In everything."

His chest rumbled as he deepened the kiss. The endless well of love he had for me still took my breath away. Dean's arms around me felt like home, his warmth seeping through my sweater.

Who would have thought a grumpy billionaire wolf would turn out to be my happily ever after?

But then again, sometimes the best love stories start with a mess that needs cleaning up.

Epilogue

NINA

SEVEN YEARS LATER

"Mrs. Nightfang, the Princess of Monaco is on line two." My assistant's voice crackled through the intercom, competing with the subtle hum of the state-of-the-art security system Dean had installed. "And Noah just reprogrammed Jenkins to speak in pirate voices again."

Through the windows of my corner office, boats bobbed in the waves off the shore of Huntington Harbor. The scent of fresh flowers from today's client meeting still perfumed the air.

I glanced at my six-year-old son, who grinned unrepentantly from his blanket fort under my custom-designed desk. His dark curls and hazel eyes were pure Dean, but that mischievous smile was all me. Already, I could sense the faintest hint of wolf in him, though he was too young to shift.

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"Arrr, matey!" Jenkins's normally crisp British accent had indeed gone full buccaneer. "The young master has quite the talent for coding, if I do say so meself. Takes after the alpha, he does."

"Just like his daddy," I murmured, reaching down to ruffle Noah's hair. The silk of my designer suit whispered with the movement. It was such a far cry from my old cleaning uniform. "Sweetie, what did we say about hacking Daddy's AI?"

"Only on weekends?" He batted those long lashes at me, yet another trait from Dean. His tiny fingers flew over the tablet he'd "borrowed" from Dean's office.

"Speaking of pirates," Jenkins interrupted, "Miss Savannah appears to be staging a hostile takeover of the break room. She's demanding cookie tributes from your employees. Rather reminiscent of her father's board meeting tactics, I must say."

I couldn't help laughing. Our daughter had inherited Dean's commanding presence and my negotiation skills. It was a terrifying combination in a child. She also had my green eyes, but they could flash gold when excited, just like her father's.

"Tell Monica to hold the princess," I said, standing to admire the view of my empire. "And activate Protocol Tiny Terror."

"Aye aye, cap'n!"

I paused at the window, pressing my palm against the cool glass. Seven years ago, I would have been pressing my cleaning cloth to these same windows, dreaming of something more. Now I stood on the other side of that glass, watching my team of

twenty planners coordinate events worth millions.

Sometimes I still had to pinch myself, hardly believing this was real. The girl who'd once counted quarters for bus fare now managed multi-million dollar accounts.

On the wall behind me, magazine covers featured my work.

ELITE DREAMS: HOW NINA NIGHTFANG REVOLUTIONIZED WEDDING PLANNING

FROM CLEANER TO CEO: THE WEDDING INDUSTRY'S RISING STAR

Besides the magazine covers, rows of photos lining the wall told our story. Me adjusting Levi Storm's bowtie at his and Krista's vow renewal ceremony while paparazzi helicopters circled overhead, Dean scowling at security feeds during the Sultan of Brunei's daughter's wedding, our team coordinating three simultaneous celebrations across different time zones.

"Mrs. Nightfang?" My intern's voice crackled over the phone. "George Clooney's people are asking about Christmas availability."

"Tell them we're booked through next spring," I said, catching sight of the thank-you note from last week's royal wedding. The crown letterhead still made me smile. "But we might be able to work something out for summer if they're flexible."

"Incoming," Jenkins warned, just before the door burst open.

"Mommy!" Savannah barreled in, brandishing a stapler like a weapon. "The cookie monsters are coming!"

"Is that my little CEO?" Dean's deep voice followed her, and my heart did that

familiar flutter.

He filled the doorway in his usual impeccable fitted black T-shirt, but his hair was slightly mussed, probably from wrangling our daughter. His eyes met mine, washing over me like a soothing hot drink.

"Daddy!" Noah exploded from his fort, launching himself at Dean's legs.

Dean scooped him up effortlessly, raising an eyebrow at the holographic parrots now circling the room. "Teaching Jenkins new tricks again, pup?"

"He needed more pizzazz," Noah declared.

"Pizzazz," Dean repeated solemnly, but I caught his pride through our bond. "And you, princess? Starting labor negotiations already?"

Savannah jutted out her chin. "They want snacks."

"Ah, but did you file the proper requisition forms?" His lips twitched. "We are a legitimate business, after all."

"I made pictures," she announced, producing a crayon masterpiece from her activity table in the corner of my office.

"Very professional," he praised. "Though perhaps we should leave the stapler negotiations for next quarter."

I watched them, my heart so full it ached. My fierce husband, once so solitary and closed off, now tamed by our children's love. Our twins, the perfect blend of his strength and my spirit. This life we'd built together, exceeding every dream I'd ever dared to have when I first stepped into his chaotic penthouse.

Every day I watched him soften a little more, his formerly rigid edges worn away by sticky kisses and bedtime stories. The man who once hid away in his dark dungeon of an office now built blanket forts and let sticky fingers mess up his hair.

"Mrs. Nightfang?" My assistant's voice crackled again. "The princess is still holding."

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"Go," Dean said, already herding the twins toward his private office next door. His wolf's protective instincts still showed in the way he positioned himself between them and the door. "I've got this. Though fair warning, there may be a hostile merger of snack time and story time."

"My big bad wolf," I teased, stretching up to kiss him. "Brought down by a pair of pups."

His arm snaked around my waist, pulling me closer. "Best surrender of my life."

"After surrendering to me, you mean?"

"Always." His kiss was soft but full of promise. "Now go plan some royal nuptials. I'll keep our little pirates occupied."

"I love you," I whispered against his lips, breathing in his familiar wild scent.

His eyes gleamed golden. "I love you more. Always have, always will."

As I settled in to call the princess, I heard Dean's voice from next door, crafting an elaborate tale about brave wolf warriors and the sunshine queen who tamed them. Jenkins's pirate voice provided sound effects, while our children's giggles created the perfect soundtrack to our happily ever after.

Who would have thought that walking into a messy penthouse would lead to all this? In chaos, Dean and I had ended up with everything finally, perfectly, in its place.